



Lecture 6

Workable Ethical Theories I

Addison-Wesley
is an imprint of

PEARSON

Based on slides © 2011 Pearson Education, Inc. Publishing as Pearson Addison-Wesley

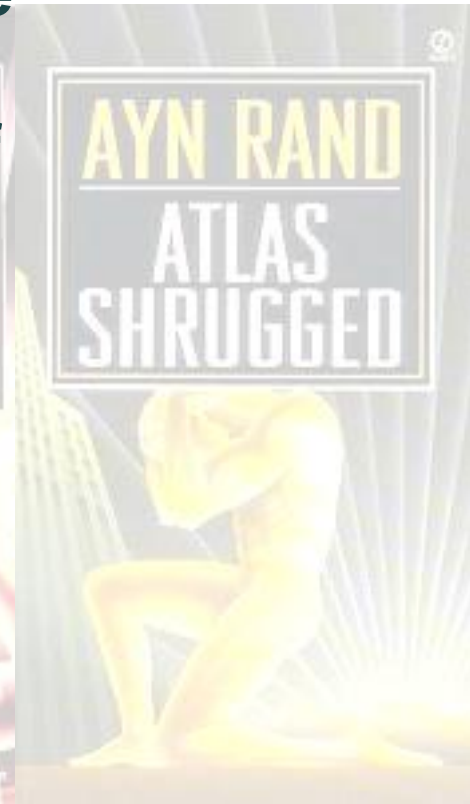
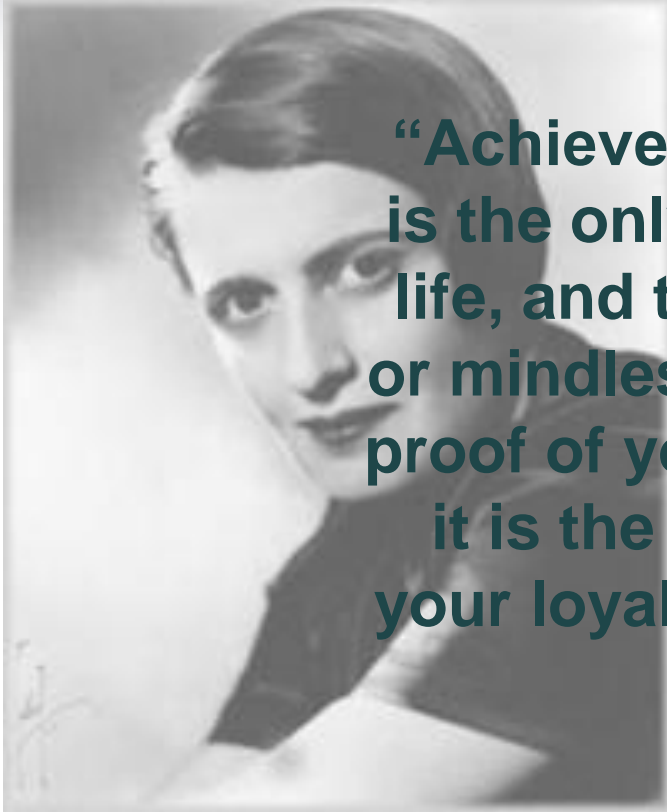
Participation Quiz

Pick an answer between A – E at random.

(thanks to Rodrigo for suggesting this quiz)

Ethical Egoism

“Achievement of your happiness is the only moral purpose of your life, and that happiness, not pain or mindless self-indulgence, is the proof of your moral integrity, since it is the proof and the result of your loyalty to the achievement of your values.”



Self interest

Psychological egoism: We act in our own self-interest

Ethical egoism: We *ought* to act in our own self-interest. It is morally right

- Each person should focus exclusively on his or her self-interest
- Morally right action is the action that provides self with maximum long-term benefit not instant gratification (misunderstanding of ethical egoism)

The case for ethical egoism

- It is practical since we are already inclined to do what's best for ourselves
- The community can benefit when individuals put their well-being first
- Some other moral principles are rooted in the principle of self-interest
- If you are rational and really understood your self-interest, you would act in a way that would do no harm to others as you would see it would do harm to you

The case against ethical egoism

- An easy moral philosophy may not be the best moral philosophy
- Not true that people naturally act in their own long-term self-interest (criticism of rationality assumption)
- Social injustices have occurred when individuals have put their own interests first
- Altruism before self interest?
- Other moral principles are superior to principle of self-interest
- **Ethical egoism is a form of bigotry—what makes my interests more important than yours?? Does not acknowledge social obligations**

2.6 Kantianism

- Key goal: derive morality from more basic principles
- Is anything good regardless of its consequences?
- Immanuel Kant: Only thing in the world that is good without qualification is a good will (desire to do the right thing)
 - other things we might call good (e.g., giving to charity) really depend on consequences
- Reason should cultivate desire to do right thing. Make this precise?



Categorical Imperative (1st Formulation)

Act only from moral rules that you can at the same time will to be universal moral laws.

Illustration of 1st Formulation

- Question: Can a person in dire straits make a promise with the intention of breaking it later?
- Proposed rule: “I may make promises with the intention of later breaking them.”
- The person in trouble wants his promise to be believed so he can get what he needs.
- Universalize rule: Everyone may make & break promises
- Everyone breaking promises would make promises unbelievable, contradicting desire to have promise believed
- The rule is flawed. The answer is “No.”

Categorical Imperative (2nd Formulation)

**Act so that you treat both yourself
and other people as ends in themselves
and never only as a means to an end.**

**“This is usually an easier formulation to work
with than the first formulation of the
Categorical Imperative.”**

...but watch out for the “only”.

Second formulation follows from the first

From Wikipedia (“Categorical Imperative”):

The free will is the source of all rational action. But to treat it as a [means to an end] is to deny the possibility of freedom in general. Because the autonomous will is the one and only source of moral action, it would contradict the first formulation to claim that a person is merely a means to some other end, rather than always an end in themselves.

Exercise

- In groups of four, identify two ethical issues at the intersection of computers and society:
 - One that is ethical from a Kantian perspective
 - One that is not
- Be prepared to explain your reasoning, using the categorical imperative.

Plagiarism Scenario

- Carla
 - Single mother
 - Works full time
 - Takes two evening courses/semester
- History class
 - Requires more work than normal
 - Carla earning an “A” on all work so far
 - Carla doesn’t have time to write final report
- Carla purchases report and submits it as her own work

Kantian Evaluation (1st Formulation)

- Carla wants credit for plagiarized report
- Rule: “You may claim credit for work performed by someone else”
- If rule universalized, reports would no longer be credible indicator’s of student’s knowledge, and professors would not give credit for reports
- Proposal moral rule is self-defeating
- It is wrong for Carla to turn in a purchased report

Kantian Evaluation (2nd Formulation)

- Carla submitted another person's work as her own
- She attempted to deceive professor
- She treated professor as a means to an end
 - End: passing the course
 - Means: professor issues grade
- What Carla did was wrong

Exercise

- Work in groups of two to consider the following scenario according to the categorical imperative:
- Google Books aims to digitize a vast number of books and put them online. Many books have unclear copyright status (e.g., the owner may have died without transferring the rights, or might just be hard to find). In these cases, Google treats the book as though it was out of copyright, but allows copyright holders to appeal, in which case they take the scans offline. Google argues that they provide a valuable service, because no other company has the technology to scan these books, and hence many works that would be inaccessible or lost are now available to all. Is Google's behavior ethical from a Kantian perspective?

Case for Kantianism

- Rational
- Produces universal moral guidelines
- Treats all people as moral equals
- Workable ethical theory

Perfect and Imperfect Duties

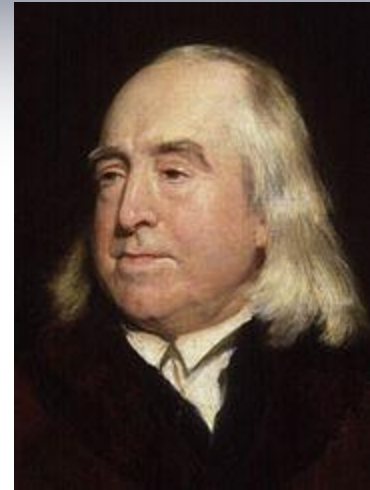
- Perfect duty: duty obliged to fulfill without exception
 - Examples: Telling the truth
- Imperfect duties are still duties that can be inferred by the application of “pure reason”: i.e., the first or second formulations of the categorical imperative. But they’re:
 - Activities you couldn’t keep doing forever; never “done”
 - Cause for praise if you do it; not cause for blame if you don’t.
- So what *are* imperfect duties?
 - Examples: helping others; developing your talents.
- More generally:
 - Furthering the ends of ourselves and others.
 - Not following maxims that lead to undesirable states of affairs (as distinct from logical contradictions) when universalized
- Not everything we think of as “good” is even an imperfect duty (e.g., doing my chores)

Case Against Kantianism

- Sometimes no rule adequately characterizes an action
- Sometimes there is no way to resolve a conflict between rules
 - In a conflict between a perfect duty and an imperfect duty, perfect duty prevails
 - In a conflict between two perfect duties, no solution
- Kantianism allows no exceptions to perfect duties

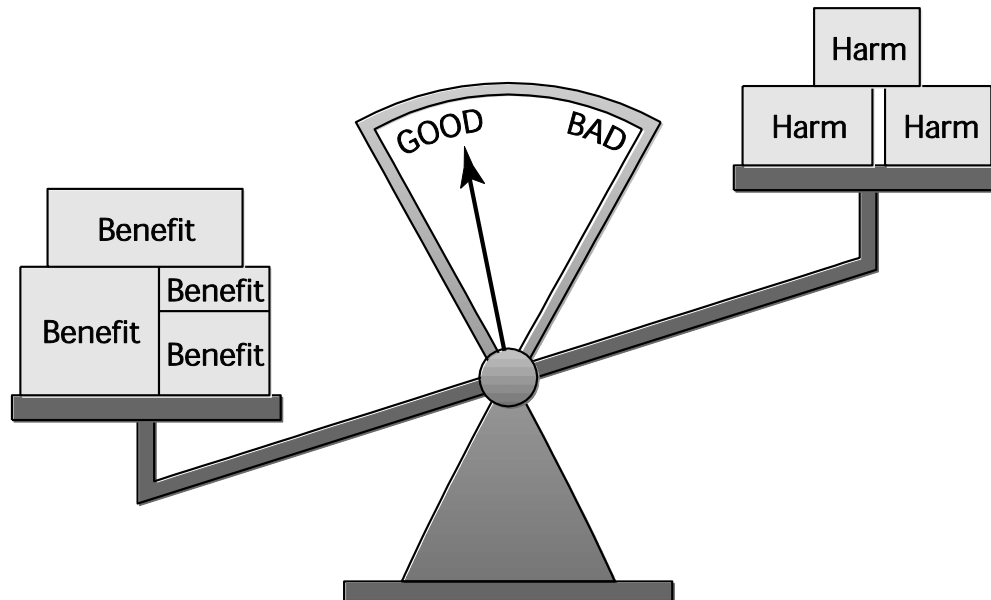
Principle of Utility

- Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill
- An action is good if it benefits someone
- An action is bad if it harms someone
- Utility: tendency of an object to produce happiness or prevent unhappiness for an individual or a community
- Happiness = benefit = good = pleasure
- Unhappiness = cost = evil = pain



Principle of Utility (Greatest Happiness Principle)

An action is right (or wrong) to the extent that it increases (or decreases) the total happiness of the affected parties.



Act Utilitarianism

- Utilitarianism
 - Morality of an action has nothing to do with intent
 - Focuses on the consequences
 - A “consequentialist” theory
- Act utilitarianism
 - Add up change in happiness of all affected beings
 - Sum > 0 , action is good
 - Sum < 0 , action is bad