

# Theories of Ethics

- Four major theories of ethics in the Western world
  - Utilitarianism: net benefits
  - Rights: entitlement
  - Justice: fairness
  - Egoism: self-interest



# How does this work?

## What makes an act right or wrong?



# Ethical Theory 1: Utilitarianism



- Famous Proponents: Jeremy Bentham, J.S. Mill
- What makes something good or bad, right or wrong, is that it produces the greatest amount of pleasure (or lack of pain) for the greatest number of people
- Basic Principle: Greatest Happiness Principle
  - ✓ Maximizing positive outcomes for the largest number of people, negative outcomes for lowest number of people
  - ✓ One should chose the action which will lead to the greatest happiness (i.e. pleasure, lack of pain) overall
  - ✓ One's own pleasure and pain only count **as much as** any other person's affected



# Rule utilitarianism



- It asks a person to assess actions according to a set of **rules** designed to yield the greatest net benefit to all affected
- Compares act to rules
- Does not accept an action as right if it maximizes net benefits only once

- Example: lying is **always** wrong or “thou shalt not lie”

# Example



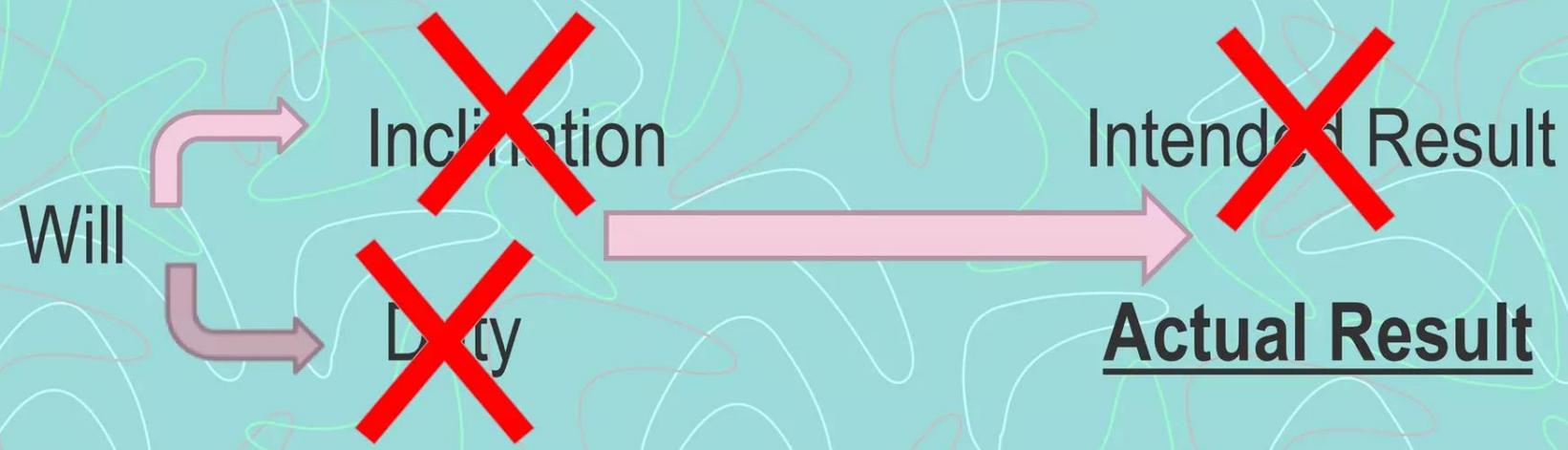
- A few doctors decide that a number of experiments on a few people, even if most of them died, would be worth it if they could find a cure for a disease that would relieve the suffering of millions of people. Utilitarianism would give the approval for such because it produces the greatest good for the greatest number of people.



# Utilitarianism



What makes an act right or wrong?





# Ethical Theory 2: Justice

- Looks at the balance of benefits and burdens distributed among members of a group
- Can result from the application of rules, policies, or laws that apply to a society or a group
- Just results of actions override utilitarian results
- Rejects view that an injustice is acceptable if others benefit the action



# Ethical Theory 3: Rights



- **Right:** a person's just claim or entitlement
- Focuses on the person's actions or the actions of others toward the person
  - ✓ **Legal rights:** defined by a system of laws
  - ✓ **Moral rights:** based on ethical standards
- Purpose: let a person freely pursue certain actions without interference from others



# Rights (contd)



- Features
  - Respect the rights of others
  - Lets people act as equals
  - Moral justification of a person's action
- Examples
  - Legal right: right to a fair trial in the United States
  - Moral right: right to due process within an organization

# Rights (contd)



- Rejects view of assessing the results of actions
- Expresses moral rights from individual's view, not society's. Does not look to the number of people who benefit from limiting another person's rights
- Example: right to free speech in the United States stands even if a person expresses a dissenting view

# Types Of Rights



- **Negative rights:** do not interfere with another person's rights
- **Positive rights:** A person has a duty to help others pursue their rights

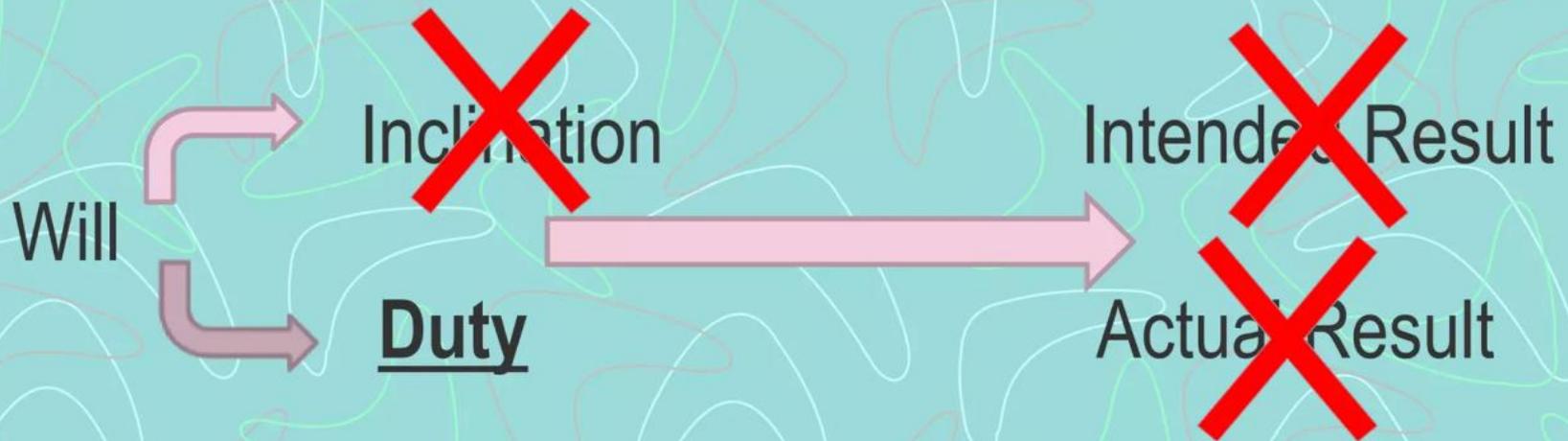
Negative: do not stop a person from whistleblowing

Positive: coworker helps another person blow the whistle on unethical actions

# Right-based Theories

#3

What makes an act right or wrong?



# Ethical Theory 4: Egoism

 #4

- Famous Proponents: Ayn Rand, Adam Smith
- What makes something good or bad, right or wrong, is that it satisfies one's desires, or meets one's needs
- Basic Principle: Self-interest of person doing, considering, or affected by the action
- One should chose the action which most realizes or conduces to one's own self-interest
- Important Variation: should the person look simply to self-interest, or to **enlightened** or **rational** self-interest?
- Conception of **Rational Self-Interest** is basic component of capitalist economy and business models



# Types of Egoism

#4

## Individual Ethical Egoism

- Judges actions only by their effects on one's interests
- Usually rejected by moral philosophers as a defensible basis of ethics

## Universal Ethical Egoism

- Can include the interests of others when assessing one's actions
- Still self-centered: pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain
- “Enlightened self-interest.” Considers the interests of others because the person wants others to do the same toward him or her

# Objections regarding Egoism Theory

 #4

- Does not resolve conflicts in people's interests
- One party would always have the pursuit of his or her interests blocked