

# Thinking Straight Ethical Reasoning Workshop 4-2 (April 25, 2008)

## I In small group

A. Discuss Rachel's characterization of the idea of a social contract and its classical form in the ideas of Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) and Jean Jacque Rousseau (1712-1778). Does this view seem initially plausible to you?

B. Rachels introduces the Prisoner's dilemma on p. 145-6 fill in the following "decision matrix" to indicate each of the four "payoffs," that the penalty if any you would face in each of the four possible situations

	Smith Confesses	Smith Doesn't Confess
You Confess		
You Don't Confess		

Fill in the following blank table to reflect the application of the prisoner's dilemma to the choice to be benevolent or egoistic.


C. Rachel's suggests that the prisoner's dilemma type reasoning exhibited in the choice to be benevolent or egoistic might to an account of morality. Does it provide a basis for spelling out classical contractarianism be spelled out as a conceptual theory of the form. If so, how?

An action is morally right if and only if \_\_\_\_\_

**D. Plenary discussion.**

## II In small group

A. Discuss what Rachels takes to be the three major advantages of the social contract theory of morals (contractarianism). Do you find them to be major assets that provide reasons for you to accept the contractarian theory

B. Rachels provides a "justification for punishment" (p. 150-151) compare or contrast it with rehabilitative, deterrence, and retributivist justifications we discussed on Tuesday.

C. Rachels claims that civil disobedience provides a possible problem for the contractarian approach. Why might it create a problem? Discuss how Martin Luther King's argument in the passage from *Letter from the Birmingham City Jail* applies according to Rachels.

D. Rachel's ends the chapter with a discussion of difficulties for contractarian theory. What are they. Do you buy Rachels' argument? In particular, do you see the issue of moral obligation to animals as a problem that "does not concern some minor aspect of the theory:" but "goes right to the theories heart." (p. 159)

E. Plenary discussion.

### III Rawlsian Contractarianism

A. **Plenary** discussion John Rawls presents a modern version of contractarianism in his text *A theory of Justice* and discussed in the handout

Contemporary Contract Theory (Rawls)

.Fulfill you "natural duties" (Ideal Agreements) as well as obligations ( to which you explicitly or implicitly agree) or more formally

An action is *morally right* if and only if it is compatible with our obligations and natural duties

These duties: required of us because they would be agreed to by parties in the idealized original position (behind the veil of ignorance). The original position is an ideal situations that is completely hypothetical. In this position people select rules for a society without knowing what role they would play in the society

*Permissive Version:* We are morally bound to all agreements that don't conflict with the basic rules of just society (This permits us to try to get people to agree to arrangements that are to our own advantage)


*Restrictive Version:* The agreements themselves must be fair-- they would have to be agreements that would be approved of by parties in the original position. (This is a variation on Rawls)

#### Basic Rawlsian Principles

- (1) Provide the most extensive system of equal liberties possible
- (2) Society should be organized so that
  - a) the basic goods are distributed in in such a way that those at the bottom are benefited as much as possible
  - (b) everyone has equal opportunity to hold all positions and offices

**B. In small group** discuss features of Rawls approach and how it differs from the simpler version presented by Rachels Discuss how Rawls approach might guide you in the following situations

1. You are an engineer working in the office of a large construction company. One of the vice presidents asks you to stay after hours to help with an important project that has come up suddenly. Your contract with the company clearly specifies your working hours and doesn't require you to work overtime. You are tired and would rather go home. Your family is expecting you. What should you do?
2. The Martin Luther King situation. What do you think the Rawlsian would say about King's decision to commit civil disobedience. How, if at all, would it differ from what Rachel says about the case.

 **Assignment for next Tuesday, No new ethics reading but read Ch 7 in *Critical Reasoning* on conceptual theories. Review Rachels discussion on Utilitarianism, Kantian Ethics, and Social Contract theory. If any view particularly interests you, you can explore it more (for extra credit) by looking at entries in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy or other web sources. (a link to SEP is on our web site).**