

Class Activity 1 – unpacking an ethically contentious scenario:

A organization dedicated to reducing spam tries to get Internet service providers (ISPs) in an East Asian country to stop the spammers by protecting their email servers. When this effort is unsuccessful, the antispam organization puts the addresses of these ISPs on its blacklist. Many ISPs in the U.S. consult the blacklist and refuse to accept email from the blacklisted ISPs. This action has two results. First, the amount of spam received by the typical email user in the U.S. drops by 25%. Second, tens of thousands of innocent computer users in the Easy Asian country are unable to send email to friends and business associates in the U.S.

Questions:

- a) Did the antispam organization do anything wrong?

- b) Did the ISPs that refused to accept email from the blacklisted ISPs do anything wrong?

- c) Who benefited from the organization's action?

- d) Could the organization have achieved its goals through a better course of action?

Class Activity 2 – Kantian scenario – discussing limitations:

During World War II, Dutch fishermen smuggled Jewish refugees to England in their boats, and sometimes they would be stopped by Nazi patrols. The Nazi captain would call out and ask the Dutch captain where he was going, who was on board, and so forth. The fishermen would lie and be allowed to pass. Clearly, the fishermen had only two options: either they lie, or they let everyone on their boat be killed. No third alternative was available; they could not, for example, remain silent or outrun the Nazis.

What would a Kantian perspective ask the fishermen to do? Note that applying Kantianism is tricky because in this scenario because there is a conflict of two moral laws here -- “It is wrong to lie” and “It is wrong to facilitate the murder of innocent people”.