

ETHICAL THEORIES

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SLIDE 1 – INTRODUCTORY SLIDE

Ethical theories provide part of the decision-making foundation for *Decision Making When Ethics Are In Play* because these theories represent the viewpoints from which individuals seek guidance as they make decisions. Each theory emphasizes different points – a different decision-making style or a decision rule—such as predicting the outcome and following one’s duties to others in order to reach what the individual considers an ethically correct decision. In order to understand ethical decision making, it is important for students to realize that not everyone makes decisions in the same way, using the same information, employing the same decision rules. In order to further understand ethical theory, there must be some understanding of a common set of goals that decision makers seek to achieve in order to be successful. Four of these goals include beneficence, least harm, respect for autonomy, and justice.

SLIDE 2 - ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

Beneficence

The principle of beneficence guides the decision maker to do *what is right and good*. This priority to “do good” makes an ethical perspective and possible solution to an ethical dilemma acceptable. This principle is also related to the principle of utility, which states that we should attempt to generate the largest ratio of good over evil possible in the world. This principle stipulates that ethical theories should strive to achieve the greatest amount of good because people benefit from the most good. This principle is mainly associated with the utilitarian ethical theory discussed later in this set of notes.

Least Harm

Similar to beneficence, least harm deals with situations in which no choice appears beneficial. In such cases, decision makers seek to choose to do the least harm possible and to do harm to the fewest people. Students might argue that people have a greater responsibility to “do no harm” than to take steps to benefit others. For example, a student has a larger responsibility to simply walk past a teacher in the hallway rather than to make derogatory remarks about that teacher as he/she walks past even though the student had failed that teacher’s class.

Respect for Autonomy

This principle states that decision making should focus on allowing people to be autonomous—to be able to make decisions that apply to their lives. Thus, people should have control over their lives as much as possible because they are the only people who completely understand their chosen type of lifestyle. *Ask students if they agree. Are there limits to autonomy?* Each individual deserves respect because only he/she has had those exact life experiences and understands his emotions, motivations, and physical capabilities in such an intimate manner. In essence, this ethical principle is an extension of the ethical principle of beneficence because a person who is independent usually prefers to have control over his life experiences in order to obtain the lifestyle that he/she enjoys.

Justice

The justice ethical principle states that decision makers should focus on actions that are fair to those involved. This means that ethical decisions should be consistent with the ethical theory unless extenuating circumstances that can be justified exist in the case. This also means that cases with extenuating circumstances must contain a significant and vital difference from similar cases that justify the inconsistent decision. *Ask students if they describe what extenuating circumstances might be.*



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SLIDE 3 – FORMS OF ETHICAL THEORIES

For individuals, the ethical theory they employ for decision making guidance emphasizes aspects of an ethical dilemma important to them and leads them to the most ethically correct resolution according to the guidelines within the ethical theory itself. Four broad categories of ethical theory include deontology, utilitarianism, rights, and virtues.

Deontology

The deontological class of ethical theories states that people should adhere to their obligations and duties when engaged in *decision making when ethics are in play*. This means that a person will follow his or her obligations to another individual or society because upholding one’s duty is what is considered ethically correct. For instance, a deontologist will always keep his promises to a friend and will follow the law. A person who adheres to deontological theory will produce very consistent decisions since they will be based on the individual’s set duties.

Deontology contains many positive attributes, but it also contains flaws. One flaw is that there is no rationale or logical basis for deciding an individual’s duties. For instance, a businessperson may decide that it is his/her duty to always be on time to meetings. Although this appears to be something good, we do not know why the person chose to make this his duty. *Ask students what reasons they might provide for this behavior.* Sometimes, a person’s duties are in conflict. For instance, if the business person who must be on time to meetings is running late, how is he/she supposed to drive? Is speeding breaking his/her duty to society to uphold the law, or is the businessperson supposed to arrive at the meeting late, not fulfilling the duty to be on time? *Ask students how they would rectify the conflicting obligations to arrive at an a clear ethically-correct resolution. Also ask students to bring into play the consideration of the welfare of others as a result of the business person’s decision.*

Utilitarianism

Utilitarian ethical theories are based on one’s ability to predict the consequences of an action. To a utilitarian, the choice that yields the greatest benefit to the most people is the one that is ethically correct. There are two types of utilitarianism, *act utilitarianism* and *rule utilitarianism*. Act utilitarianism subscribes precisely to the definition of utilitarianism—a person performs the acts that benefit the most people, regardless of personal feelings or the societal constraints such as laws. Rule utilitarianism takes into account the law and is concerned with fairness. A rule utilitarian seeks to benefit the most people but through the fairest and most just means available. Therefore, added benefits of rule utilitarianism are that it values justice and includes beneficence at the same time.

Both act and rule utilitarianism have disadvantages. Although people can use their life experiences to attempt to predict outcomes, no one can be certain that his/her predictions will be accurate. Uncertainty can lead to unexpected results making the utilitarian decision maker appear unethical as time passes, as the choice made did not benefit the most people as predicted.

Another assumption that a utilitarian decision maker must make concerns his/her ability to compare the various types of consequences against each other on a similar scale. But, comparing material gains, such as money, against intangible gains, such as happiness, is very difficult since their qualities differ to such a large extent.

An act utilitarian decision maker is concerned with achieving the maximum good. Thus, one individual’s rights may be infringed upon in order to benefit a greater number of people. In other words, act utilitarianism is not always concerned with justice, beneficence or autonomy for an individual if oppressing the individual leads to the solution that benefits a majority of people.



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Still another source of challenge with act utilitarian decision makers occurs when an individual faces one set of variable conditions and then suddenly experiences changes in those conditions. The change in conditions may lead to a change in the original decision—being nice to someone one moment and then dislike them the next moment because the situation has changed, and liking the person is no longer beneficial to the most people.

In rule utilitarianism, there is the possibility of conflicting rules. Recall the example of the business person running late for a meeting. Suppose the business person happens to be the CEO, who may believe that it is ethically correct to arrive at important meetings on time as the members of the company will benefit from this decision. The CEO may encounter conflicting ideas about what is ethically correct if he/she is running late. Yet, the CEO believes that he/she should follow the law because this benefits society. Simultaneously, he/she believes that it is ethically correct to be on time for his meeting because it is a meeting that also benefits the society. There appears to be no ethically correct answer for this scenario.

Rights

In ethical theories based on rights, the rights established by a society are protected and given the highest priority. Rights are considered to be ethically correct and valid since a large population endorses them. Individuals may also bestow rights upon others if they have the ability and resources to do so. For example, a person may say that her friend may borrow her laptop for the afternoon. The friend who was given the ability to borrow the laptop now has a right to the laptop in the afternoon.

A major complication of this theory on a larger scale is that one must decipher what the characteristics of a right are in a society. The society has to determine what rights it wants to uphold and give to its citizens. In order for a society to determine what rights it wants to enact, it must decide what the society's goals and ethical priorities are. Therefore, in order for the rights theory to be useful, it must be used in conjunction with another ethical theory that will consistently explain the goals of the society. For example in America people have the right to choose their religion because this right is upheld in the Constitution. One of the goals of the Founding Fathers' of America was to uphold this right to freedom of religion.

Virtue

The virtue ethical theory judges a person by his/her character rather than by an action that may deviate from his/her normal behavior. It takes the person's morals, reputation, and motivation into account when rating an unusual and irregular behavior that is considered unethical. For instance, if a person plagiarized a passage that was later detected by a peer, the peer who knows the person well will understand the person's character and will judge the friend accordingly. If the plagiarizer normally follows the rules and has good standing amongst his colleagues, the peer who encounters the plagiarized passage may be able to judge his friend more leniently. Perhaps the researcher had a late night and simply forgot to credit his or her source appropriately. Conversely, a person who has a reputation for academic misconduct is more likely to be judged harshly for plagiarizing because of his/her consistent past of unethical behavior.

One weakness of virtue ethical theory is that it does not take into consideration a person's change in moral character. For example, a scientist who may have made mistakes in the past may honestly have the same late night story as the scientist in good standing. Neither of these scientists intentionally plagiarized, but the act was still committed. On the other hand, a researcher may have a sudden change from moral to immoral character may go unnoticed until a significant amount of evidence mounts up against him/her.



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SLIDES 4-6 - SELECTED PRINCIPLES OF ETHICAL CONDUCT

When individuals find themselves in a decision-making situation when ethics are in play, there are a variety of ethical theories (decision rules) which provide decision-making guidance as individuals strive to make ethically correct answers. Each ethical theory attempts to adhere to the ethical principles that lead to success when trying to reach the best decision. Most individuals adopt a preferred decision-making style (e.g. do unto others ...), but might adjust it depending on decision circumstances. As decision makers, they soon discover that others have adopted different decision rules. Thus, a team of decision makers must first understand the decision-making styles and decision rules of all members of the team.

SLIDES 7 - 9 - A TAXONOMY OF ETHICAL TYPES

There are three different approaches to examining how ethical theories (differing decision-making styles and decision rules) impact decision making. The first group, entitled, "Selected Principles of Ethical Conduct," present different ethical theories or decision making styles. The second group, entitled "A Taxonomy of Ethical Types" also provides a look at different decision-making styles, presenting some of the positives and negatives associated with each. The third group, entitled "Models of Personal and Organizational Development," also deals with decision-making styles but presents them in a hierarchy from simple to more sophisticated.

SLIDES 10-12 - MODELS OF PERSONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

From *Cognitive Moral Development* (as espoused by Lawrence Kohlberg in *The Philosophy of Moral Development: Moral Stages and the Idea of Justice*, 1981, HarperCollins Publishers)

Cognitive Moral Development asserts that ethics education is possible. Just as people develop mentally, physically, and emotionally, they develop a moral cognizance. Using critical thinking and decision-making tactics such as the Socratic method, people can solve their ethical dilemmas. Kohlberg taught that there were six stages of ethical thinking, each stage being of greater maturity than the previous one. By delineating these levels, we are allowed to know and test our own thinking and decision making. This helps individuals know themselves better and challenges them to move on to a higher level of thinking.

To examine how different ethical theories (decision-making styles and decision rules enter into team decision making, the following questions are presented.

1. **Ask students to play the role** of a hospital administrator who has been asked to set up an Ethics Task Force in the hospital. The task force will deal with ethical dilemmas that may confront hospital staff and advise in establishing ethical guidelines for the treatment of patients. (a) What kind of persons would you look for to fill this position? What values would you want them to hold? What types of ethical sensitivity would you be looking for? (b) What basic ethical principles would you advise the task force to follow?
2. Now tell students they are charged with the same task described in Question #1, but this time for a **market research firm** instead of a hospital. What would the differences be? If there are any differences, what conclusions would you draw about the way we define the moral ballpark?
3. An undergraduate student published *A Students' Guide to Good Grades 10*. This book was written to help students learn how to cheat. **You can ask students many questions about this:** What ethical issues do you see associated with publishing such a book? Should the campus bookstore carry it? Why or why not? Should the campus



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newspaper carry advertisements for the book? Similarly, should the campus newspaper carry advertisements for companies that will write students' research papers for them? Again, what are the relevant ethical considerations here? Are these issues in the ethical ballpark? Why or why not? What is the ethical issue that you are most undecided about? Describe the pros and cons relating to this issue. How do you go about arriving at a decision when it is unavoidable?

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