

Five Basic Approaches to Ethical Decision-Making
(from The Markkula Center for Applied Ethics, www.scu.edu/ethics)

The Rights Approach

An important approach to ethics has its roots in the philosophy of the 18th-century thinker Immanuel Kant and others like him, who focused on the individual's right to choose for herself or himself. According to these philosophers, what makes human beings different from mere things is that people have dignity based on their ability to choose freely what they will do with their lives, and they have a fundamental moral right to have these choices respected. People are not objects to be manipulated; it is a violation of human dignity to use people in ways they do not freely choose.

Of course, many different, but related, rights are thought to exist — besides this basic one. These other rights can be thought of as different aspects of the basic right to be treated as we choose. Some other rights might include such things as rights to the truth, privacy rights, a right not to be injured, and a right to what is agreed (i.e., we have a right to what has been promised by those with whom we have freely entered into a contract or agreement).

In deciding whether an action is moral or immoral using this approach, then, we must ask, Does the action respect the moral rights of everyone? Actions are wrong to the extent that they violate the rights of individuals; the more serious the violation, the more wrongful the action.

- Identifies certain interests or activities that our behavior must respect, especially those areas of our lives that are of such value to us that they merit protection from others.
- Each person has a fundamental right to be respected and treated as a free and equal rational person capable of making his or her own decisions.
- This implies other rights (e.g., privacy free consent, freedom of conscience, etc.) that must be protected if a person is to have the freedom to direct his or her own life.
- Keep in mind that is often difficult to agree on exactly which rights we have.
- The principle states: "An action or policy is morally right only if those persons affected by the decision are not used merely as instruments for advancing some goal, but are fully informed and treated only as they have freely and knowingly consented to be treated."

The Utilitarian Approach

Utilitarianism was conceived in the 19th century by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill to help legislators determine which laws were morally best. Both Bentham and Mill suggested that ethical actions are those that provide the greatest balance of good over evil.

To analyze an issue using the utilitarian approach, we first identify the various courses of action available to us. Second, we ask who will be affected by each action and what benefits or harms will be derived from each. And third, we choose the action that will produce the greatest benefits and the least harm. The ethical action is the one that provides the greatest good for the greatest number.

- Focuses on the consequences that actions or policies have on the well-being ("utility") of all persons reasonably foreseen to be directly or indirectly (but rather immediately) affected by the action or policy.
- Keep in mind, that different people often identify benefits and harms differently.
- The principle states: "Of any two actions, the most ethical one will produce the greatest balance of benefits over harms."

The Virtue Approach

The virtue approach to ethics assumes that there are certain ideals toward which we should strive. These ideals provide for the full development of our humanity, and are discovered through thoughtful reflection on what kind of people we have the potential to become.

Virtues are attitudes or character traits that enable us to be and to act in ways that develop our highest potential. They enable us to pursue the ideals we have adopted. Honesty, courage, compassion, generosity, fidelity, integrity, fairness, self-control, and prudence are examples of virtues frequently cited throughout the world.

Virtues are like habits; that is, once acquired, they become characteristic of a person. Moreover, a person who has developed virtues will be naturally disposed to act in ways consistent with moral principles. The virtuous person is the ethical person.

In dealing with an ethical problem using the virtue approach, we might ask, What kind of person should I be? What will promote the development of character within myself? within my community? Etc.

- Focuses on attitudes, dispositions, or character traits that enable us to be and to act in ways that develop our human potential.
- Examples might be: honesty, courage, faithfulness, trustworthiness, integrity, etc.
- Keep in mind, different communities may identify differing virtues.
- The principle states: "What is ethical is what develops moral virtues in ourselves and our communities."

The Fairness (or Justice) Approach

The fairness or justice approach to ethics has its roots in the teachings of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, who said that "equals should be treated equally and unequals unequally." The basic moral question in this approach is: How fair is an action? Does it treat everyone in the same way, or does it show favoritism and discrimination?

Favoritism gives benefits to some people without a justifiable reason for singling them out; discrimination imposes burdens on people who are no different from those on whom burdens are not imposed. Both favoritism and discrimination are unjust and wrong.

- Focuses on how fairly or unfairly our actions distribute benefits and burdens among the members of a group.
- Fairness requires consistency in the way people are treated.
- The principle states: "Treat people the same unless there are morally relevant differences between them."

The Common Good Approach

This approach to ethics assumes a society comprising individuals whose own good is inextricably linked to the good of the community. Community members are bound by the pursuit of common values and goals.

The common good is a notion that originated more than 2,000 years ago in the writings of Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero. More recently, contemporary ethicist John Rawls defined the common good as "certain general conditions that are...equally to everyone's advantage."

In this approach, we focus on ensuring that the social policies, social systems, institutions, and environments on which we depend are beneficial to all. Examples of goods common to all include affordable health care, effective public safety, peace among nations, a just legal system, and an unpolluted environment.

Appeals to the common good urge us to view ourselves as members of the same community, reflecting on broad questions concerning the kind of society we want to become and how we are to achieve that society. While respecting and valuing the freedom of individuals to pursue their own goals, the common-good approach challenges us also to recognize and further those goals we share in common.

- Presents a vision of society as a community whose members are joined in a shared pursuit of values and goals they hold in common.
- The community is comprised of individuals whose own good is inextricably bound to the good of the whole.
- The principle states: "What is ethical is what advances the common good."

Five Corresponding Questions to Consider

1. **Which of the available options treats people with more dignity and respect?**
All human beings should be treated with dignity simply because they are human. People have moral rights, especially the fundamental right to be treated as free and equal human beings, not as things to be manipulated, controlled, or cast away. Ask things like How do our actions respect the moral rights and the dignified treatment to which every person is entitled?
2. **Does any one of the available options do more good than harm?**
Or can we at least try to do more good than harm with our choice? Consider the short term and long-term consequences of your actions.
3. **Which of the available options develops virtues most effectively?**
In *The Book of Virtues*, William Bennett notes that virtues are "habits of the heart" we learn through models—the loving parent or aunt, the demanding teacher, the respectful manager, the honest shopkeeper. They are the best parts of ourselves. Consider such questions as, Does any option cross a line that gives up one of those parts? Or which option, at least somewhat, best demonstrates integrity, trustworthiness, honesty, compassion, or any of the other virtues we honor?
4. **Is any one of the available options more fair and just?**
Are we treating each party the same unless there is some relevant moral reason to treat one differently? Justice requires that we be fair in the way we distribute benefits and burdens. What parties does the option benefit, and which does it burden?
5. **Does any one of the available options make our community better as a result?**
Consider your primary community; however it is reasonable to define it. Now ask something like, Can we get beyond our own interests to make that community stronger? Are we able to draw on our community's strengths to help in our own process of becoming a better business?

How some differing approaches might work in an example.

Imagine that you have an elderly aunt who is very wealthy. While she has no children of her own, you are her favorite among all her nieces and nephews. As a result, she plans to leave all her wealth to you. Recently, your wealthy aunt was taken ill, and you received a phone call that she is now in the hospital; furthermore, it would be good if you could come home to visit her in the hospital this weekend. Unfortunately, you have two expensive tickets to a concert this weekend. The concert is being performed by your favorite band, who you've been waiting almost a year to see perform live, and you bought the tickets for you and your partner to share the experience together. Because of the travel time involved, you cannot both attend the concert and travel home to visit your sick aunt in the hospital. You decide to forgo the concert and instead you travel home to visit your ailing aunt in her sickbed.

Different approaches sometimes recommend different courses of action; other times they recommend the same (or similar) courses of action, but for very different reasons.

The Utilitarian Approach

For a utilitarian, the decision might turn on such considerations as 'how much fun the concert will be,' 'can I visit auntie another week?' 'If I don't visit, will she remove me from the will?' 'If I cancel the concert and tell auntie that she's more important, I'm sure to get all her inheritance,' etc. In none of these situations is a utilitarian being selfish. My own happiness is important, but it must be put into the mix with everyone else's happiness as well. So if auntie will be only a little disappointed that I don't visit and I'll be very happy at the concert, then it works out for me to go to the concert. However, if auntie will be very disappointed that I don't visit, and if I'll feel guilty about going to the concert, then it's bad for me to choose the concert. Of course, if you factor in the likely effects on my inheritance, my "happiness-quotient" goes way up if I visit auntie in the hospital. In fact, my happiness goes up so much that it virtually guarantees that I should forgo the concert and visit my sick aunt in the hospital.

The Rights Approach

The basic idea here is that people have a right to be treated with respect and dignity. While it might be a bit strong to say that my aunt has a right to have me visit, it is less unusual to say that I have a general duty to visit ailing elderly relatives in the hospital. So, it is not obvious that the rights approach would command me to visit my aunt. However, certain considerations are clearly out. For example, if I do visit my sick aunt, I must not choose to do so in order to ensure that I obtain her inheritance. Rights theorists say that this kind of thinking (or the utilitarian ethical approach) does not treat my aunt as a person, but instead looks at her as a bag of money. When I choose to visit my sick aunt, I should be motivated out of respect for her as a sick, elderly lady with no children of her own; I should try to understand her loneliness and vulnerability, and I should visit her because of my respect for her and my willingness to see her treated well. So, the money I might get from inheriting her wealth or the fun I might have at the concert simply do not count to a rights theorist. In short, even if she weren't wealthy, I would drop the concert and go visit her.

The Virtue Approach

Of course, you might read these two perspectives and think that my proposed choices reveal important aspects of my personal character. What sort of person would visit his elderly aunt just to get her inheritance? What sort of person would put his own fun-time aside in order to visit his ailing aunt in the hospital? So, when I'm trying to decide what I should do, I could just ask myself questions like these directly. Do I want to be the sort of person who only visits his sick elderly aunt to get her money? If I am thinking about traditional virtues such as honesty, courage, faithfulness, integrity, etc., then I will ask myself which course of action best embodies these virtues. Here, the answer may not be so cut and dry. If I am honest, will I tell my sick aunt that I have these great concert tickets and I've been waiting to see the show for months? If I am faithful in general, to whom should I show the greatest faithfulness? Myself? My partner? My family? In virtue ethics, the balancing act is often more difficult because there are many virtuous character traits we should try and embody, and each may have different targets. In the end, we must strive to achieve the greatest harmony of virtues. So I should probably be faithful to my family and visit my aunt in the hospital, while also being honest with myself in facing the temptation that I really wanted to go to the concert (so maybe I'm not so nice in my heart), I should be courageous enough to tell the bad news to my partner, etc.

The Common Good Approach

Here, my focus is on community whose members are joined in a shared pursuit of values, and I often get to define the relevant community. However, a family is an obvious example of a 'community'. So, when I think about what to do this weekend, I do not focus on happiness (like utilitarianism), nor do I focus on building a virtuous character for myself, nor on respecting my aunt's needs. Rather, I ask myself which course of action would be the best for the family overall. So I might need to know more information, such as 'Will other family members be with auntie this weekend?' or 'If other family-members will be there this weekend, would it be better for me to visit next weekend?' Is it better for me to visit her in the hospital, or stay with her over Spring Break, once she's back at her home? Either of these last two would mean I can go to the concert this weekend, but my motivation is doing what best helps the family. The idea is that I am making myself available as a "team-member" to work with other family-members in ensuring that auntie, and everyone else in the family, get the assistance needed.

Summation

So, in the end, the various ethical approaches represent methods used to evaluate situations and recommend ethical courses of action. The various approaches often disagree on the best thing to do. Even when they agree on what to do, they do so for very different reasons. As a result, each approach often needs certain questions answered that are irrelevant to another approach. It is handy to know which approach we tend to use for our personal decisions. In business, it is important to know what the company values are and how they integrate into policies guiding our actions as employees. And when our company is Multi-National, it is vital to understand any aspects of differing approaches used in the various host-countries in which we operate. Even when two approaches would come to the same result, you should not ignore features that are relevant to the other approach, if for no other reason to not insult your friends, colleagues, family members, hosts, etc. Try always to appreciate the fact that many methodologies can work together well, if first we take the time to understand and integrate them.