

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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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



