

Ethical Approaches

An Overview of:

- (1) Consequential,
- (2) Nonconsequential, and
- (3) Virtue Ethics Theories

What is Ethics?

Ethics is the study of those values that relate to our moral conduct, including questions of good and evil, right and wrong, and moral responsibility.

Consequentialist Theoretical Approach:

- Consequentialist theories claim that the morality of an action depends only on its consequences.
- It only considers the result of actions and not principles or rules in determining morality.

Three (3) Types of Consequentialist Theories:

- Ethical Egoism** argues that each person should act in his/her own self-interest.
- Act Utilitarianism** argues that each person should act in a way that produces the greatest happiness for everyone.
- Rule Utilitarianism** argues that each person should follow rules that tend to produce the greatest happiness for everyone.

Weaknesses of Consequentialist Theories

- Requires person to predict the future and all possible outcomes.
- Can easily be used to justify questionable actions (the ends justifies the means).

Nonconsequentialist Theoretical Approach:

Nonconsequentialist theories claim that the morality of an action depends on principles or other factors that are not related to consequences.

Two (2) Types of Nonconsequentialist Theories:

-Divine command theory argues that we should obey the laws of God.

-Kant's Categorical Imperative states that we should always act in a way that is based on reason, duty, and would be considered ethical if everyone acted in the exact same way. Also, people should be treated as an end and not as a means.

Weaknesses of Nonconsequentialist Theories: Self-Challenge Question:

Question: What might prove a problem in a country so diverse as the U.S. with regards to Nonconsequentialist theories?

When you are ready check the [expert's response](#).

Virtue Ethics Theoretical Approach:

- Virtue ethics seeks to identify character traits of a moral person and develop those with the idea that the virtuous person will act in a virtuous manner. It does not look to principles or consequences.
- Virtue ethics was developed among the ancient Greek philosophers such as Aristotle and the Chinese teacher and philosopher Confucius.
- Virtue ethics enjoys modern support as an approach that avoids many of the problems with Consequential and Nonconsequential ethical theories.

Weaknesses of Virtue Theory

- Difficulty in determining just which characteristics are virtues
- Justification for respecting a virtue usually brings one back to either consequences or principles.
- Difficulty in applying it to specific situations

Example of all Three Theoretical Ethical Approaches:

Scenario: The air quality in a particular city Y is so polluted, people are getting physically ill and are on antibiotics (for those that can afford it). People have taken to wearing masks when out of their homes. Children attend school with masks on. The rulers however live at a higher altitude where the pollution does not penetrate as readily. Thus the rulers themselves are not sick from the pollution. However, scientists have corroborated that the predominant causes of the air pollution in the country are leaded gasoline and coal fire power plants.

Here are examples of applying the three theoretical ethical approaches to the same scenario to support a person's recommendations.

A leading executive council member addresses the Prime Minister and other council members with the following recommendation:

Proposed changes: Since there are sufficient alternatives to leaded gasoline, (1) we should immediately enact legislation that will make it illegal to sell leaded gasoline and (2) we should also state that all coal-fired power plants must put scrubbers on their smoke stacks until alternative forms of energy can be mandated to be substituted.

Virtue Ethics:

These proposed changes are important because this would demonstrate the virtue of compassion for our citizens and their health concerns, as well as showing courage in facing these problems. It may take a long time to reverse the damage to our environment, but small steps are better than none at all.

Consequentialist Theoretical Approaches:

Ethical Egoism: You state that you have been feeling ill lately when you enter the city, and you will feel much better if these changes are implemented.

Act Utilitarianism: You state that these changes will make everyone happier since they will not be as sick, and maybe the children can attend school without masks.

Rule Utilitarianism: You state that the law of the land says that the council should rule in the best interests of the entire populace. Clearly, this is in the best interests of the citizens.

Nonconsequentialist Theoretical Approaches:

Divine command theory: You support the changes citing the golden rule, do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Kant's Categorical Imperative: You support the changes on the grounds that it is the council members' duty to attend to the greater welfare of the people and these are reasonable actions in light of the circumstances.

Challenge Question 2:

What might you conclude from this presentation regarding the three ethical approaches presented?

See the next page for the expert's response.

Conclusion:

Question: What might you conclude from this?

Expert's Response:

- One theory or approach is not enough to cover all possible choices.
- Theories can be synthesized to fit one's philosophy of life.
- One approach or theory's weakness is another's strength.