**COMBINING THE GREAT HISTORICAL TRADITIONS**

**INTO A UNIFIED PROCESS**

Consideration of these theories can be confusing. They all differ, but they all seem strong in some respects while wanting in others. Deciding among them may be great fun for academicians, but we have the more pressing task of discovering among the theories something that can help us in making ethical decisions. Perhaps rather than choose among them, we should acknowledge that each has valuable insights that we can use. We may compare the differing ethical theorists to the proverbial group of blind people each trying, from a different stand-point, to discover the nature of an elephant. Each sees a different part, but the whole might be better understood if all the parts were combined into an overall description. Even then, the understanding of the whole may be incomplete but would, nevertheless, be much better than that of one standpoint, e.g., teleology or deontology, or no standpoint at all, e.g., relativism. In combining the different ethical standpoints, we may compile the questions that each theory would ask. In preparing for such a compilation, a brief comparison of the theories on the basis of their main points, as represented in the list below, may be helpful.

•Teleology: Act in order to produce the greatest happiness as a consequence.

•Deontology: Act according to the proper principle, and be consistent in applying it.

•Intuitionism: Act according to your inner sense of what is right or wrong.

•Virtue theory: Act as a person of good character, and set a good moral example for others to follow.

This list enables us to construct another that compares the questions that each theory, as we have previously discussed it, would have us ask.

Teleology:

•What are the consequences of my action?

•What are the long-term effects of my action?

•Does my action promote the greatest happiness?

Deontology:

•What principle applies in this case?

•Can this principle be applied consistently in this case and in all similar cases?

•Can this principle be considered as a possible universal principle of behavior?

•Which course of action best exemplifies the ideal of treating all people as ends in themselves?

•Which course of action best exemplifies and most fully promotes the ideal of a society of free, responsible people whose ends promote each other rather than conflict with each other?

Intuitionism:

•What does my conscience tell me about this action?

•Do I feel good about this action?

Virtue theory:

•What character traits does this action express?

•What effect will this action have on my character?

•What effect will this action have on the character of other people?

•Is this the action of a person whose character I would admire?

The list of questions is not intended to be complete but forms a strong foundation for moral decision making. Additional factors may include one’s ethnic, cultural, and religious values, and the ethical codes of one’s profession.

Moral decision making would be easy if the answers to all of the questions led, in all instances, to the same conclusion. For example, let us consider the question, “Should I lie on my income tax return to save myself thousands of dollars?” Although the lie may make me happy in the short run, the tax system is devised to promote the greatest social happiness. To cheat would therefore, in all likelihood, produce negative answers to the teleological questions “What are the consequences of my action?”

What are its long-term effects? Does my action promote the greatest happiness?

The deontological questions would also refute cheating on the tax form. When one asks, “What principle applies in this case?” the answers may include, “One should be honest,” “The society must collect taxes in order to exist,” and “All must pay their fair share.” The policy “I lie in order to place my interests above the general public” is not a moral principle. With respect to the second and third questions, “Can this principle be applied consistently in this case and in all similar cases?” and “Can this principle be considered a possible universal principle of behavior?” the tax cheater’s policy would fail on both counts. If everyone were permitted to cheat on taxes, there would be no tax system on which to cheat. The cheater would also fail the test of “Which course of action best exemplifies the ideal of treating all people as ends in themselves?” because the cheater is using the honest taxpayers to pay his or her share. And it is obvious that cheating is not the course of action that “best exemplifies and most fully promotes the ideal of a society of free, responsible people whose ends promote each other rather than conflict with each other.” The cheater is setting up his own financial interest in contrast to the interests of the other members of the society. Answers to the intuitionist’s and virtue theorist’s questions align with those of the teleologist and deontologist. Only in perverse cases would someone feel good about lying on income taxes or suggest that such behavior exemplifies good character. It would be unrealistic to suppose that all cases would be so simple. There are many instances in which the answers to all of the above questions will not, at least initially, imply the same course of action. There is no foolproof formula for deciding such cases, but there is a general process to apply to them. The first aspect of that process is to determine if the apparent conflict can be reconciled. In many cases, reconciliation is possible when the questions are examined in depth. Let us suppose, for example, that, in attempting to garner public support for a project, a public agency is tempted to overstate its benefits and understate its likely costs. The rationale for this deception includes the familiar refrains: It is a good project whose benefits the public cannot understand; when the project succeeds, everyone will forget our initial assessment; every agency is deceptive, so we must be deceptive in order to compete. The deception, however, appears to present a conflict among the ethical factors in our list of questions. The teleological considerations appear to favor the deception on the basis of its consequences, but the deontological considerations seem to favor a more honest approach on the basis of the principle that one always ought to tell the truth. In this case, reconciliation of teleology and deontology is possible. The teleological considerations, which seem to favor the deception, might oppose it when the consequences are examined more closely. Even if the deception is temporarily successful, it is likely to be discovered eventually, and, as happy as the society may be with the results, it will tend to distrust the agency’s word in the future. When considered together with the common deception of other agencies, the society will find ample evidence to distrust government in general, and the consequences of that distrust are certain to be harmful. Yet even if the deception is never discovered, the consequences may be negative. The need to perpetuate the deception throughout the agency is likely to cause its members stress and distrust. Furthermore, a successful deception, like a successful day at the race track, is likely to encourage future similar activities with less fortunate results. For the teleologist, honesty is still, in the long run, the best policy. The possibility of a unification of the ethical standpoints may lie in human nature itself. The considerations of the teleologist, deontologist, intuitionist, and virtue theorist are all natural to human beings. As the teleologist suggests, they value happiness in themselves and in others. But they are also rational beings with a respect for rules, as the deontologist asserts. People, furthermore, have a moral sense evident not only in their seemingly intuitive ethical judgments, but also in conscience and feelings of guilt. People also admire human virtues and disrespectvices, as the virtue theorist argues. As the authors have maintained in another work, it is unlikely that those aspects of a hu- man being would exist in conflicting, disunified form (Garofalo and Geuras 1999):

Humanity could not have evolved so successfully over thousands of years if all of those aspects were independent. The physical parts of a human being have evolved to work together in mutual dependence. Human beings would be strange evolution-defying natural enigmas if their inherent mental functions were naturally in conflict rather than in unity. Human reasoning, love of happiness, benevolence, respect for moral character, and intuitive reactions are almost certainly parts of a unified, evolved human nature. If so, deontology, teleology, character theory, and intuitionism must be in a unified harmony. (125) Nevertheless, there may still be cases in which the different aspects of ethics may seem in inescapable conflict. Pontius Pilate was faced with a choice between justly freeing an innocent person and preventing a revolt. Whether one agrees with his action or not, one must sympathize with his dilemma. In a less dramatic but more common case, a manager may be faced with the option of firing, for the sake of productivity, older, loyal employees, who are more expensive, in order to hire younger, cheaper ones. The manager must choose between treating people as a means or sacrificing the best interests of the organization and those whom it serves. Conflicts can occur not only between ethical standpoints but also within them. The deontologist may be faced with a conflict between principles. Public administrators as well as private citizens in Nazi Germany were often forced to choose between the principle that one ought always to tell the truth and the principle that innocent people should not be murdered, even if one must lie to protect them from a beastly government. The more civilized world of the contemporary United States is not immune to conflicts of principle, though they may be less dramatic. In hiring, one must often balance the conflicting principles of equality with the principle that historically abused or deprived groups should be favored over slightly better qualified, advantaged groups. We will consider such cases of conflict more fully in later chapters, but, for now, it is sufficient to recognize that they exist. Unfortunately, there is no formula to resolve them. One must consider the issues implicit in our list of ethical questions and reach some reasonable balance among them. Since Kant’s ideal realm of ends does not currently exist, it is impossible to always find a clear solution to every moral dilemma. One must use judgment. Justices on the United States Supreme Court must use their best judgment in applying the ideals of the Constitution when those ideals are in apparent conflict. Similarly, the moral actor must use judgment to best interpret and apply varied moral ideals. The judgment need not be made in isolation. Ethical issues involve an entire organization, and should be discussed among colleagues. The advantages of such discussions are obvious: They provide the benefit of the opinions of others; they emphasize the importance of group participation in decision making; and they increase awareness of ethical concerns. Organizations may attempt to formalize the process of ethical discussion in numerous ways. An ethics committee may be appointed. The entire organization or divisions within it may convene periodically to discuss ethical issues. An ethics officer may be available for consultation. In addition to such formal structures, discussions with trusted colleagues are invaluable. Dialogue on ethics must be part of the entire culture of an organization. But even after an ethical matter has been fully discussed, its ambiguity may still remain. The decision maker must take all opinions into account, but must reach his or her own judgment. Those who bear the responsibility for the judgment may often disagree with the majority of their colleagues, no matter how enlightened they may be. Likewise, members of a group who disagree with the final decision must acknowledge that, while their opinions must be taken into consideration, they must accept contrary but seriously considered conclusions, even on matters as vital as ethics. In keeping with the Kantian notion of people as ends in themselves, one must accord the ultimate decision maker with the right to make his or her own judgments, so long as they are reached in an honest, well-intended manner. The absence of any formulaic solution to moral dilemmas does not preclude the attainment of reasonable solutions. If one answers all of the questions on the ethics list, conscientiously attempts to reconcile them, and uses one’s best judgment when they cannot be reconciled, one still has no absolute guarantee that he or she will find the most ethical solution. But even if one does not reach the ideal ethical conclusion, one would have reached it in the best possible way. If a mistake is made, it will be the result not of one’s ethical intent or diligence, but of the difficulty of the issue at hand. The aim of ethical decision making is not the impossible goal of always performing the finest action but of always deciding in the most ethical manner. If decision makers use the process that we have outlined, their ethics cannot be faulted even if their decisions ultimately prove wrong. One of the stated aims of this chapter was to combat EAS (ethics aversion syndrome). We cannot do so by promising that all ethical decisions will be carefree or easy. However, a major step toward overcoming EAS is taken when one realizes that, no matter how intractable an ethical problem may be, it can be managed properly, even if not perfectly.

REFERENCES:

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