

COLLEGE ETHICS SYMPOSIUM

THINKING ETHICALLY: A FRAMEWORK FOR MORAL DECISION MAKING

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Having the facts in analyzing a moral or ethical issue is not enough. Facts by themselves only tell us what is; they do not tell us what ought to be. In addition to getting the facts, resolving an ethical issue also requires an appeal to values. Philosophers have developed five different approaches to values to deal with moral issues:

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 and harm 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.

The Rights Approach. Emphasizes the individual's right to choose for herself or himself. It is based upon the ability of people to choose freely what they will do with their lives, and they have a fundamental moral right to have these choices respected. It is a violation of human dignity to use people in ways they do not freely choose. Below are some of these rights.

The right to the truth. We have a right to be told the truth and to be informed about matters that significantly affect our choices.

The right to privacy. We have a right to do, believe, and say whatever we choose in our personal lives so long as we do not violate the rights of others.

The right not to be injured. We have a right not to be harmed or injured unless we freely and knowingly do something to deserve punishment or we freely and knowingly choose to risk such injuries.

The right to do what is agreed. We have a right to what has been promised by those with whom we have freely entered into a contract or agreement.

The Fairness or Justice Approach. Equals should be treated equally and unequals unequally. Basic question is "How fair is the 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 different from those on whom burdens are not imposed.

The Common Good Approach. This approach 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. In this approach, we focus on ensuring that the social policies, social systems, institutions, and environments on which we depend are beneficial to all. Example: public safety.

The Virtue Approach. This approach assumes that there are certain ideals toward which we should strive, which provide for the full development of our humanity. These ideals 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. Honesty, courage, compassion, generosity, fidelity, integrity,

fairness, and self-control are examples of virtues. In this approach, we might ask “What will promote the development of character within myself and my community?”