Four Ethical Approaches by Buie Seawell, Daniels College of Business

Four Ethical Approaches- By Buie Seawell, Daniels College of Business,
University of Denver
There are many ways to define "ethics," almost as many as there are ethicists.
For our purposes, let's use this definition:

Ethics is the discipline and practice of applying value to human behavior (as
well as to the constructs of human culture particularly to morality, customs
and laws) resulting in meaningfulness.

From the earliest moments of recorded human consciousness, the ethical
discipline has exhibited four fundamental "approaches" These four
approaches are often called "ethical decision-making frameworks:" Utilitarian
Ethics (outcome based), Deontological Ethics (duty based), Virtue Ethics
(virtue based) and Communitarian Ethics (community based). Each has a
distinctive point of departure as well as distinctive ways of doing the
fundamental ethical task of raising and answering questions of value. It is also
important to understand that all four approaches have both overlaps and
common elements.

Some of the "common elements" of all four approaches are the following:

· Impartiality: weighting interests equally
· Rationality: backed by reasons a rational person would accept
· Consistency: standards applied similarly to similar cases
· Reversibility: standards that apply no matter who "makes" the rules

These are, in a sense, the rules of the "ethics game", no matter which school or
approach to ethics one feels the closest identity.

The Utilitarian approach is perhaps the most familiar and easiest to
understand of all the four approaches to ethics. Whether we think about it or
not, most of us are doing utilitarian ethics much of the time, especially those
of us in business. The Utilitarians asks a very important question: "How will
my actions affect others?" And they go on to attempt to "quantify" the impact
of their actions based on some "least common denominator," like happiness,
pleasure, or wealth. Therefore, Utilitarians are also called "consequentalists"
because they look to the consequences of their actions to determine whether

any particular act is right or wrong.

"The greatest good for the greatest number" is the Utilitarian motto. Of course, defining "good" has been no easy task, and what some people think of as good, Ethical Approaches others think of as worthless. When a businessperson does a "cost benefit analysis," he/she is doing Utilitarian ethics. The least common denominator is usually money. Everything from the cost of steel to the cost of a human life must be given a dollar value, and then one "just does the math." The Ford Pinto was a product of just such reasoning thirty years ago at the Ford Motor Company. Fixing the gas-tank problem Ford reasoned would cost more than human lives were worth. Stuff (like rear-end accidents) happens. Folks die.

The most familiar use of "outcome based reasoning" is in legislative committees in representative democracies. How many constituents will benefit from a tax credit vs. how many will be diminished is the question before the Revenue Committee at tax rectification time. Representative democracies depend on most decisions being decided on the greatest good for the greatest number. Democratic governments are naturally majoritarian. But in constitutional democracies there are some things that cannot be decided by "doing the math", i.e. adding up the votes. Some questions should not even be voted on. The founders of our nation expressed this fundamental concept with three words: certain unalienable rights.

Enter the Deontological Ethicists. Immanuel Kant is the quintessential deontological (duty based) ethical theorist. Kant, who lived in 18th Century Prussia (1724-1804), was one of the most amazing intellects of all time, writing books on astronomy, philosophy, politics and ethics. He once said, "Two things fill the mind with ever new and increasing admiration and awe . . . the starry heavens above and the moral law within." For Kant there were some verities as eternal as the stars.

"Deontological" simply means the study (or science) of duty. Kant did not believe that humans could predict "outcomes" (future consequences) with any substantial degree of certainty. Ethical theory based on a "guess" about future consequences appalled him. What he did believe was that if we used our unique (unique among the higher animals) facility of reason, we could determine with certainty our ethical duty, but whether or not doing our duty would make things better or worse (and for whom), he was agnostic.

Duty-based ethics is enormously important for, though consistently ignored by, at least two kinds of folks: politicians and business people. It is also the key to understanding better our responsibilities as members of teams. Teams (like workgroups or political campaign committees) are narrowly focused on achieving very clearly defined goals: winning the election, successfully introducing a new product, or winning a sailboat race. Sometimes a coach or a boss will say, "Look, just do whatever it takes." Ethically, "whatever it takes" means the ends justify the means. This was Kant's fundamental criticism of the Utilitarians.

For Kant, there were some values (duties) that could never be sacrificed to the "greater good." "So act", he wrote, "as to treat humanity, whether in thine own person or in that of any other, in every case as an end withal, never as a means only." Fellow team members, employees, campaign staffs, customers, partners, etc. are always to some extent "means" to our various goals (ends), but they are also persons. And persons, Kant believed, cannot be "just used," they must also be respected in their own right whether or not the goal is achieved. He called this absolute respect for persons a "Categorical Imperative."

In any team situation, the goal is critical, but treating team-members with respect is imperative. Teams fall apart when a team-member feels used or abused, that is, treated as less important than the overall goal itself. Great leaders (coaches, bosses, presidents) carry the double burden of achieving a worthwhile end without causing those who sacrifice to achieve the goal being trashed as merely expendable. Persons are never merely a means to an end. They are ends in themselves! We owe that understanding to Immanuel Kant.

It is one thing to understand that there are duties which do not depend on consequences; it is quite another to develop the character to act on those duties. This is where Aristotle (384-322 B.C.) comes in. Aristotle wrote the first systematic treatment of ethics in Western Civilization: The Nicomachean Ethic. Today we call this approach to ethics today "virtue ethics."

For Aristotle "virtue" meant (as it did for other Greek thinkers) "the excellence of a thing." The virtue of a knife is to cut. The virtue of a physician is to heal. The virtue of a lawyer is to seek justice. Ethics in this sense is the discipline of discovering and practicing virtue. Aristotle begins his thinking

about ethics by asking, "what do people desire?" And he discovers the usual things - wealth, honor, physical and psychological security - but he realizes that these things are not ends in themselves; they are means to ends.

The ultimate end for a person, Aristotle taught, must be an end that is self-sufficient - "that which is always desirable in itself and never for the sake of something else." This end of ends, Aristotle designates with the Greek word "eudemonia", usually translated by the English word "happiness." But happiness does not do Aristotle or his ethics justice. Yes, eudemonia means happiness, but really so much more. "Fulfillment" or "full flourishing" or "being all that you can be" are the sort of words needed to understand the concept contained in the Greek word eudemonia.

And that is where virtue and character come in. Aristotle thought that one discovers virtue by using his/her unique gift of human reasoning, that is, through rational contemplation. "The unexamined life is not worth living," wrote Socrates almost 100 years before Aristotle. And like Aristotle and Aristotle's teacher Plato, Socrates knew that we two legged creatures need to engage our brains before we open our mouths or spring into some decisive action. For Aristotle, the focus of that brainwork was chiefly about how to balance between the fears and excesses in which the human condition always abounds. Between our fears (deficits) and exuberances (excesses) lies a sweet spot, a "golden mean," called virtue.

An example. At times of physical peril, say in a big storm on a small sailboat, one may be immobilized by fear and unable to function putting at risk not only his life, but that of crewmates as well. Or the opposite could happen. A devil-may-care attitude in the face of real danger can as easily lead to disaster. Courage is the virtue located at the mean between cowardness and rashness. But identifying such a virtue and making that virtue a part of one's character are two quiet different things. Aristotle called one "intellectual virtue" and the other "practical virtue." Practical virtues were characteristics - a part of a person's character - developed by practice.

Practice is how one learns to deal with fear; practice is how one learns to tell the truth; practice is how one learns to face both personal and professional conflicts, and practice is the genius of Aristotle's contribution to the development of ethics. Virtues do not become a part of our moral muscle fiber because we believe in them, or advocate them. Virtues become characteristics

by being exercised. How does one learn to be brave in a storm at sea? "Just do it."

And the ultimate goal of developing characteristics of virtue: eudemonia, a full flourishing of self, true happiness. Many of us from the Judaic-Christian tradition tend to think of ethics (or morality) as the business of figuring out how to be good rather than bad. That was not the true end of ethics so far as Aristotle was concerned. The end, the ultimate goal, of developing character was fulfillment, becoming who you truly are, being your best in every sense.

Just as the virtue of the knife is to cut, or the virtue of the boat is to sail, the virtue of yourself is becoming who you essentially are. This is happiness (eudemonia). Just as the well-trained athlete talks about "being in the zone," that state of perfect performance, achieved by practice, so Aristotle wrote about a truly virtuous life. To use a sailing metaphor, when you get a sailboat perfectly trimmed, in the grove, you'll feel it, and that's the boat's eudemonia.

All three of the approaches to ethics described above are principally focused on the individual: the singular conscience, rationally reflecting on the meaning of duty or responsibility, and in the case of Virtue Ethics, the ethical athlete practicing and inculcating the capacity to fulfill that duty. Communitarian Ethics has a quite different point of departure, not the individual, but rather the community (or team, or group, or company, or culture) within which the individual places him/herself is the critical context of ethical decision-making.

The Communitarian asks the important question, "What are the demands (duties) that the community(ies) of which I am a part make on me?" The Scottish ethicist W. D. Ross (himself a student of Aristotle) focused his own ethical writings on the question of, "Where do duties come from?" And his answer was that they come from relationships. We know our duties toward our fellow human beings by the nature and quality of our relationships with them. The duty we owe a colleague in the workplace is different from the duties we owe a spouse, and those duties different from the duties we owe our country. The Communitarian asks us not simply to look within to understand how values should be applied to human conduct, but to look out, and to face up to the duties of being a creature for whom social interactions are definitive. We define ourselves and our responsibilities by the company we keep.

Communitarians are quite critical today of the attitude of so many in our

society who while adamant about their individual rights are negligent of their social duties. The "me, me, me generation" has given rise to a new breed of ethicists who insist that from family and neighborhood to nation and global ecosystem, the communities in which we live require of us substantial responsibilities. Environmentalists, neighborhood activists, feminists, globalists are some of the groups loosely identified today with the Communitarian Movement.

Amitai Etzioni (Spirit of Community: Rights, Responsibilities and the Communitarian Agenda, Crown Publishing 1993) is a leading spokesperson for this somewhat disorganized "movement." Etzioni's thesis is that we need to pay more attention to common duties as opposed to individual rights. Our neighborhoods, he believes, can be safe again from crime, without turning our country into a police state. Our families can flourish again without forcing women to stay home and otherwise violating their rights. Our schools can provide "essential moral education" without indoctrinating young people or violating the First Amendment's prohibition of "establishing religion."

The key to this social transformation the communitarian believes is the balancing of rights and responsibilities: "Strong rights presume strong responsibilities." In a long, but single sentence, Etzioni states the Communitarian Agenda:

Correcting the current imbalance between rights and responsibilities requires a four-point agenda: a moratorium on the minting of most, if not all, new rights; reestablishing the link between rights and responsibilities; recognizing that some responsibilities do not entail rights; and, most carefully, adjusting some rights to the changed circumstances.

Here, if nothing else, is a frontal attack on the Libertarian mindset of our age.

But Communitarianism is not new, at least if one defines it as an approach to ethics and value referencing significant communities of meaning. Most of the world's great religions -- clearly Judaism and Christianity -- are in this sense "communitarian." It is the "community of faith" out of which the faithful person develops a sense of self and responsibility. Ethics cannot be separated from the ethos of the religious community. The new communitarian -- the feminist, the environmentalist, the neighborhood rights advocate -- may or may not be religiously inclined, but each is clearly a part of a tradition of

ethical approach as old as time.

In the context of teams, the communitarian approach to ethics has much to commend itself. How much of your own personal agenda are you willing to sacrifice for the overall goal of winning a sailboat race? Under what conditions are you willing to let the values or culture (spirit?) of the team alter your own ethical inclinations? To what extent do the relationships you have with team members give rise to duties that you are willing to honor? How willing are you to share the credit when the team succeeds? How willing are you to accept the blame when the team loses? Under what conditions would you break with the team?

All of the above are questions asked by communitarians. If Ross is correct (and I suspect he is to a greater extent than most of us are willing to admit) that duties come from relationships, paying attention to the "company we keep" may be more than a social obligation. It is perhaps our ethical duty.