Ethics and Film combine in so many delicious ways to achieve multiple student learning outcomes: Introduce ethical theory through film; introduce ethical analysis as a stream of film criticism; ground students in the social responsibilities of the filmmaker and artist; demonstrate how ethical conflict and resolution enhance character development in screenwriting and define the "moral center" of a script.

A wealth of theoretical and applied ethical knowledge can be learned "in the dark" through film viewings, analysis, discussion, and writing (and, of course rewriting).

Millennial students tend to come to the classroom with underdeveloped social value systems. Combined with limited life experiences, their film preferences and film imagination are
equally limited and underdeveloped. Immersive exposure to character-driven narratives that struggle with ethical dilemmas not only widens their knowledge of film forms, but also allows them to vicariously participate in life experiences that can lead to greater self-analysis, awareness, and growth. They subsequently increase their abilities to create more nuanced, complex, and textured characters and film stories of their own.

Through a greater practice and appreciation of ethical analysis of the films they experience, students also become sharper observers, critics, and writers about film. Like film, applied ethics lay at the nexus of theory, practice, writing, and professional skills.

This paper discusses multiple approaches used in a highly rated Ethics and Film capstone course that challenges, builds, and polishes students' analytical, writing, and creative skills. The usefulness of specific films, ethical theories, sample assignments for both study and application, and a rubric for measuring student learning outcomes are included.

The approach is particularly valuable in employing the "flipped classroom" or "upside down" movement in student learning where the classroom becomes the locus of application through active learning, rather than passive attention to the traditional lecture.

**Freshman Fifteen: Encountering Weighty Issues**

Contemporary students come to the university “ethics ambivalent” on a number of levels. As documented in numerous “millennial” studies, the bulk of decisions have been made for them throughout their childhood and youth, often including the choice of university. Unlike previous generations who arrived on college doorsteps searching for a “philosophy of life,” contemporary students are more careerists out of the starting gate with a focus decidedly absent of traditional arts and humanities where the richer veins of philosophy and ethics are mined.
This is not to say contemporary students are beyond reach for a grounding in a traditional liberal arts education or in philosophic/ethical inquiry. They are actually quite ready and ripe for it. They have been shaped to this point more by peer identification and media influences. Although they have a preference for more simplistic and relativist answers to contemporary ethical issues (which generally amount to no answer at all), they also express a sense of inadequacy and incompleteness in their reflectively stunted approach. In informal entering classroom surveys, ethics is usually defined as individual conscience, following the mores of the social group (mostly identified as peers), and whatever one can get away with. It takes only a touch of Socratic dialogue (or simple role-playing exercises) for the realization to emerge that this trio of thought is mutually unsupportable. Many can draw from their own lives examples of when their individual conscience led them in one direction, but peer mores reversed it. They admit a frustration at the thwarting of conscience-driven action by pressure to conform to group norms, or by the simple “rewards” of being able to get away with behavior they wouldn’t necessarily subscribe to as a way of life.

Film and Film Study courses are a prime resource to address this ambivalence, ambiguity, and generally amoral outlook. We see it often enough when we direct students with the standard: Write what you know. We discover they really don’t know much at all. Much of what they know is via media sources and their film (including online video, gaming, etc.) diet is lacking in essential nutrients of what constitutes the “human dimension” as opposed to the superhuman, paranormal, car chase, explosion, slasher, and revenge-driven dimension. They have certainly faced and can construct dilemmas, but come up short with resolutions that are not clichéd media-standards that privilege power over humanism. Here is where we can capitalize - as film professors and mentors in life-long learning - on their familiarity, and discomfort, with confronting ethical dilemmas in life.
Constructing the Ethical Design

Following a discussion of differences between ethics and law, and externally driven rule behavior v. inwardly driven ethical behavior, we arrive at what constitutes an ethical dilemma: A conflict in values that presents multiple options in behavior/action. Examples are given and solicited from the class, such as:

- Truth v. Loyalty
- Short-term pleasures v. Long-term consequences
- Justice v. Mercy
- Self v. Community
- Doing what we should v. doing what we want
- Wanting two things (outcomes) that preclude each other

The first assignment is to write a personal ethical dilemma the student has faced and what resolution, if any, she/he might have pursued. Two pages, double-spaced. Confidentiality is assured. No one will see this assignment other than the student and professor. An acknowledgement of completion is given, but the assignment is not returned nor the dilemma commented upon. This is because it will be used again as a summative assignment.

Although individual dilemmas are not identified with the student author or detailed before the class, it is instructive to group them by general description into categories (relationship dilemmas, workplace dilemmas, academic dilemmas, social dilemmas, etc.) and present the categories to the class as a reminder that many of us face similar dilemmas, as they are human and so connect us in ways that all good stories do. They can also be brought together as illustrative of the “Ethical Triumvirate:”

- Virtue – Who we should be; our ideal selves
- Duty – How we should act; our societal and role obligations
- Consequences – What (and whose) good will be served

From this “Triumvirate” come ethical tests for assessing the adherence of action to traditional principles:
Learning Ethics Though Film I: The Basics

Films are a handy way to teach traditional ethical philosophy, whether or not an instructor wants to immerse the class in the “naming of the parts” of individual philosophies (Deontology, Teleology, etc.) or philosophers (Aristotle, Mill, Kant & Jung, as I’ve often joked to little reaction). There are several valuable websites where students can find easily digestible explanations of these basic principles and thinkers:

- Ethics Update <http://ethics.sandiego.edu>. University of San Diego

There is an excellent, but pricey, textbook that recognizes the value and special role story telling plays in both our learning of social ethics and the setting of social mores. It utilizes synopses of film stories to illustrate its major points:


A good starting point in the learning of traditional ethical principles is a discussion of egoism v. altruism, or selfishness v. selflessness. An excellent film – in fact it could be considered an entire ethics course in a box – to explore these concepts is Return to Paradise (dir. Joseph Ruben, 1988), starring the now uber-popular (but then just emerging) Vince Vaughn, Joaquin Phoenix, Anne Heche, and Jada Pinkett-Smith. From the synopses provided on IDMB.com:

- Universality: Is this the way we would want everyone to act? Is this the way we would handle all similar situations?
- Reversibility: If we were on the receiving end of the action, would we agree (regardless of whether we “liked it”) that it was justified?
- Transparency: Are we willing to make our actions and decision-making publicly known? Are we willing to discuss them freely and openly?
Lewis (Phoenix), Sheriff (Vaughn) and Tony (David Conrad) are three American guys who meet and hang out one summer at the beach huts of Malaysia. There they enjoy the luxuries of women, rum and hashish. As the summer ends, Tony and Sheriff go back to New York, but Lewis decides to go to Borneo to help save the orangutan. But before he got the chance to leave, police came to investigate a missing bicycle that Sheriff destroyed and in the course of their search, Lewis was arrested for possession of the leftover hash and sentenced to death because he was considered to be trafficking. Two years later, a lawyer (Heche) comes to New York and hunts down the other two friends and confronts them: Lewis is set to be put to death in 8 days, and the only way the charges can be decreased is if the two friends come back to paradise and take their share of the responsibility. If they do, they both will spend three years in prison. If only one does, he will spend six years behind bars. Although neither want Lewis to die, they do not know him well enough to really want to sacrifice three or six years of their lives to a Third-World prison. "Return to Paradise" watches Sheriff and Tony as they struggle to decide in the short period of time.

A side-plot involves Pinkett-Smith as a prize-in-her-eyes journalist eager to break the story, and the consequences of her hubris. Also drawn into the morass of questions are the motivations and methods of the lawyer, who later is revealed to be Lewis’ sister.

<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0124595/?ref_=nv_sr_1>

The theme of altruistic action (assuming responsibility for Lewis’ circumstances) v. selfish denial of action is felt viscerally by the students. The film can be stopped at several points for discussion of how the characters are responding to the ethical dilemmas they are facing (and have caused). Students are reminded that they are able to vicariously “try on” the multiple reactions via character identification to appreciate, rather than judge, each character’s motives and pressures as they shift through the story. (Occasionally I assign students a particular character and ask them to retell the story in a page or less from that character’s perspective.) Considering the essential dignity of even the most undignified characters can assist students in constructing fewer one- and two-dimensional characters in their own screenplays, as well as evaluating ethical character development as an angle of film criticism. Although the ending has been tarted up some from the original French production Force Majeure with the obligatory Hollywood romance and promise of hope, the fundamental issues reap hours of rewarding discussion around such questions as:
Where do the characters fit on this scale, and how do they shift as the story progresses?

Egoism . . . . . . . . . . . . . . Altruism
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

How would you define the characters’ actions in terms of:
- Virtue
- Duty
- Consequence

Did they change? If so, how?

How do the characters’ actions measure up to the “3 Tests:”
- Universality
- Reversibility
- Transparency

Is Sheriff’s statement:
- “Just because you do something good doesn’t mean there’ll be a happy ending”
- A rationale for NOT being altruistic when the outcome is unknown or unpredictable?

At this point students are getting a feel not only for applying some principle-based ethical reasoning (as opposed to knee-jerk pre-reflective reactions), but also for the value of a rich and textured “moral center” to a film and character development. To help along their thinking about character complexities and to integrate their viewing, thinking, and discussion with their writing, this final question is presented, which lends itself nicely to a small-group discussion/writing/editing session:

Write a sketch for the sequel: It’s 2 years later, the anniversary of Lewis’ hanging. What has happened to the other characters? What are they doing now?

(Some may see the reflection of the classic “Prisoner’s Dilemma” in the plot, which can be added to enhance role-playing and group discussions as an illustration of the tension between preserving self-interests and acting toward a greater social good. An illustration is included in the sample course resource section. For further reference, see: <http://ingrimayne.com/econ/IndividualGroup/PrisDilm.html>.)
Learning Ethics Through Film II: Digging Deeper

Having become conversant with the ideas and application of some ethical terminology and tests, students are prepared to integrate some simple statements of ethical principles into their thinking, analyses, and writing. In a stand-alone course on Ethics and Film, it would be relevant to identify these statements with the philosophies from which they are derived, and the philosophers who introduced them. As a unit in a broader film studies course, it would not be necessary, as students might feel bogged down with additional memorizations. Either way, it is the application of the principles that is truly key. (I confess to some bursts of pride when a former student tells me there was a discussion of ethics in her workplace and she exclaimed: “We learned about that in FILM class!”)

- Act in ways you would want all people to act.
- Don’t act as an exception to your own rule.
- Don’t use other people as a means to your ends.

---Immanuel Kant: Categorical Imperative and Principle of Self-Determination

- Act in ways that will bring the greatest good to the greatest number – and harm to the fewest.
- Any harm your actions bring to individuals must be clearly and overwhelmingly outweighed by good to the general society.

---John Stuart Mill: Utilitarianism

- Treat all equally. Put yourself in the place of the person whom your actions will affect.

---John Rawls: Justice as Fairness

Selected films to illustrate these philosophic approaches might include High Noon (dir. Fred Zinnemann, 1952) as an illustration of Kantian Duty or Obligation; and Million Dollar Baby (dir. Clint Eastwood, 2004) as illustrative of both Obligation and Social Utility, and the tensions that can arise between them. Discussion questions/writing assignments for these films follow in the Course Resource section. Writing assignments can be completed individually, or in collaborative small groups. At this point students are learning that an
Ethical Analysis of Film can be as valuable and revealing as other approaches to Film Studies and Criticism. As Filmmakers, they can also study the films for the ways in which the director used film language and technique to isolate and emphasize the dilemma and its path to resolution; and how the outward acting reflected (or in some cases deflected) the inner tensions and turmoil of the dilemma.

With this basic understanding of ethical principles, how as human principles they are reflected as the “moral center” in the better character-driven dramas, students are ready to tackle some higher-order professional issues of social responsibilities as filmmakers, such as Representation and Stereotypes.

Smoke Signals (dir. Chris Eyre, 1998) and Better Luck Tomorrow (dir. Justin Lin, 2002) are two films against which they can measure their own stereotypical perspectives against the Representation presented when the camera is now in the hands of “the Other.” Both films use familiar genres (the road film, the high school social world) to take the viewers into new perspectives, including indigenous story-telling styles and an existential twist on a “model minority” becoming anything but.

The non-traditional ending of Better Luck Tomorrow tends to leave students dissatisfied, as it lacks the usual closure they have come to expect in films (and is drilled into them through the teaching of the three-act-character-arc screenwriting template). This presents an opportunity for them through a writing assignment to create a treatment for a sequel occurring at the 10th reunion of the former high school classmates that outlines what has become of each of the characters. This affords the students the opportunity for both creativity, and to draw on their newly acquired ethical knowledge to search out a “principle-based” resolution for the unresolved dilemmas of the original.

This exercise leads naturally to a final assignment where their original personal ethical dilemmas, written at the beginning of class, are dusted off for their review. They are instructed to re-evaluate their dilemmas and actions in the light of what they have learned
over the term, and then to draft a film treatment about a character facing that, or a similar dilemma, and the steps the character takes toward a resolution. If nothing else, they are truly “writing what they know.”

Course Resources

Films & Discussion/Writing Assignments. Note that the discussion/writing assignments become less directed allowing students to comment on what seems most important to them, rather than what they think will be most important to the instructor. They also embrace group writing, editing, and rewriting. A shifting-group strategy is used in later assignments so that each member of the re-formed groups brings the perspective of her/his previous group to the writing, further spreading – but not diluting – the intellectual collaboration.

High Noon

- Group 1: Discuss in your group and each member write a clear and concise paragraph on your impressions of High Noon as a film.
- Group 2: Discuss in your group and each member write a clear and concise paragraph on what you learned about filmmaking from watching High Noon.
- Group 3: Discuss in your group and each member write a clear and concise paragraph on what you learned from your research about the making of High Noon.
- Group 4: Discuss in your group and each member write a clear and concise paragraph on how High Noon illustrates the differences between Deontology (Kantian or duty ethics) and Utilitarianism (Consequential Ethics).
- Group 5: Discuss in your group and each member write a clear and concise paragraph on these questions re: the film “High Noon:”
  a. Are the townspeople of Hadleyville likely to change because of Marshal Kane’s solo stand?
  b. Why or why not? If they don’t, does that make Kane’s actions meaningless?
Million Dollar Baby

Briefly describe the things you learned about ethics, films, and filmmaking, from watching MILLION DOLLAR BABY.

1. Something about the film’s theme or statement
2. Something about filmmaking
3. Something from your research on the film and/or director
4. Something about ethics – how can Frankie’s actions be described in terms of Virtue, Duty, and Consequences (the “Ethical Triumvirate”)?
5. Something about ethics – how can Frankie’s actions be described in terms of Utilitarianism?

Smoke Signals

Group Essay – Smoke Signals

Instructions:

1. Small groups: Each group member selects a different paragraph to write. Before writing, everyone in the group discuss their thoughts for each paragraph. Help each other with ideas.
2. Write
3. Large group: Discussion of ideas
4. Small group: Further discuss each paragraph. Help each other with ideas and expression. Put the paragraphs together in a group essay.
5. Put the paragraph sheets in order. Write each group member’s name on the first sheet. Turn in all sheets.

A. Write 1-2 clear and concise paragraph(s) on how the image of Native Americans in Smoke Signals differs from others you’ve seen on film.
B. Write 1-2 clear and concise paragraph(s) on what you learned about filmmaking from watching Smoke Signals.
C. Write 1-2 clear and concise paragraph(s) on what you learned from your research about the making of Smoke Signals.
D. Write 1-2 clear and concise paragraph(s) on how you think images of Native Hawaiians would differ in a film made by Native Hawaiians.
Better Luck Tomorrow

Part 1 – 1st Group

Ten years have gone by. It’s the high school 10-year reunion. In your group, describe how the characters have changed, or haven’t. What traits would help define them in a short film about the reunion?

Your character is: Daric Loo (or Ben Manibag, Virgil Hu, Han, Stephanie Vandergosh)

Part 2 – 2nd Group

In your 2nd group, do some collective free writing on these questions:

1. Something new you learned from the film
2. Something new you learned from the filmmaking style
3. Something new you learned from researching the film & filmmaker
4. Describe (on the back) the reunion.

Final Assignment

After a semester of studying ethics and practicing some critical thinking and self-reflection, you should have a different take on your own ethical dilemma you wrote at the beginning of the term. Different how? That’s up to you. Perhaps it’s a more mature outlook. Perhaps it’s a change in the way you frame and think about problems. Perhaps it’s an additional courage of your convictions. The one thing we should see is change.

Revisit your dilemma and ask yourself: Knowing what I know now, what do I think about my dilemma and any solution I might have arrived at? How do I think about my dilemma? What knowledge of ethical theories, tests and principles – from the textbook, films, outside reading, earlier commentaries, lectures & discussions – can I bring to bear on this dilemma? How do they help in finding a solution?
Part I
1. Briefly summarize your dilemma (2-3 sentences)
2. How does your dilemma and/or its resolution reflect the ethical principles we’ve studied?
3. How do the three tests lead to a more critical understanding and perhaps suggest possible resolutions to your dilemma?

Part II
4. (Think About): If you took the “original position,” (removing your own self-interests) what would be the ideal resolution to your dilemma?
5. (Write): To illustrate #4, write a short film treatment (you can use the Act1, Act2, Act3 structure if you like) about a character going through your, or a similar dilemma. What do they encounter in resolving it?

Other Films to Consider:

- Brokedown Palace (dir. Jonathan Kaplan, 1999) – a story similar to Return to Paradise involving American tourists (this time two young women), drugs, and a Southeast Asian prison.
- A Simple Plan (dir. Sam Raimi, 1998) – Family, friendship, and basic values recede and vanish in the face of greed.
- Abandon Ship (dir. Richard Sale, 1957) / Lifeboat (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1944) – Two films set on overcrowded lifeboats following a ship’s sinking. Who decides who will go overboard so the others can be saved?
- 3:10 to Yuma (dir. James Mangold, 2007) – Another Western focused on duty and obligation in the face of personal danger.
- The Simpsons (var.) – Deals surprisingly with many ethical issues, such as The Boy Who Knew Too Much (Season 5), about withholding truth that would save another to avoid punishment to self; or Bart’s Inner Child (Season 5), on the effects of rampant egoism infecting Springfield; or Lisa the Iconoclast (Season 7), where Lisa decides whether truth or myth benefits the town.
- The Dark Knight (dir. Christopher Nolan, 2008) – This iteration of the Batman series is a treatise on Hume-Hobbes concepts of inner good and evil.
Prisoners’ Dilemma

(As an optional assignment, students could use the dilemma as a template for a short film treatment that explores options and consequences.)

Two members of a criminal gang are arrested and imprisoned. Each prisoner is in solitary confinement with no means of speaking to or exchanging messages with the other. The police admit they don’t have enough evidence to convict the pair on the principal charge. They plan to sentence both to a year in prison on a lesser charge. Simultaneously, the police offer each prisoner a Faustian bargain. Each prisoner is given the opportunity either to betray the other, by testifying that the other committed the crime, or to cooperate with the other by remaining silent.

Here’s how it goes: If A and B both betray the other, each of them serves 2 years in prison. If A betrays B but B remains silent, A will be set free and B will serve 3 years in prison (and vice versa). If A and B both remain silent, both of them will only serve 1 year in prison (on the lesser charge).

Although the best outcome for both would be to remain silent (1 year each), self-interest will lead each to confess in the hopes of parole, even though if both are acting in their own self-interests, they will serve 2 years.
A Rubric for Assessment

### CONTEMPORARY ETHICAL ISSUES RUBRIC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORY</th>
<th>1</th>
<th>2</th>
<th>3</th>
<th>4</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identifies ethical issue(s)</td>
<td>- Does not identify the ethical issue(s) or realizes something is not “right” but does not clearly identify the professional and/or contemporary ethical issues at play</td>
<td>- Identifies some of the professional and/or contemporary ethical issues or identifies what is legal/illegal or acceptable/unacceptable</td>
<td>- Identifies/names the ethical choices and implications involved in the professional and/or contemporary situation</td>
<td>- Clearly identifies the ethical choices and implications involved in a professional and/or contemporary situation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Sees issues mostly in “black and white” terms</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Recognizes relevant ethical ambiguities/ dilemmas but does not clearly describe them</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deliberates responsibly using ethical tools, processes, and/or frameworks</td>
<td>- Unclear about the frameworks, principles, and/or code of ethics to be applied</td>
<td>- Describes the frameworks, principles, and/or code of ethics that can be applied</td>
<td>- Draws upon frameworks, principles, and/or code of ethics to develop pertinent arguments and/or positions</td>
<td>- Draws upon frameworks, principles, and/or code of ethics to develop pertinent arguments and/or positions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Fails to acknowledge multiple viewpoints or embraces contradictory viewpoints</td>
<td>- Comfortable discussing ethical issues from own point of view, but may have difficulty seeing different points of view</td>
<td>- Debates and/or discusses ethical issues with sensitivity to others’ points of view and different perspectives</td>
<td>- Develops and presents alternate arguments/positions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- May discuss ethical issues but unclear on own position and/or the effects of different perspectives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Discusses and/or debates ethical issues with sensitivity to others’ perspectives and the context while also defending own position with logic and fact</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forms sound ethical judgments</td>
<td>- Does not specify a resolution or judgment or decision</td>
<td>- Makes a judgment/decision but may not take into account multiple perspectives</td>
<td>- Makes a judgment that considers and is sensitive to multiple perspectives</td>
<td>- Makes a reasoned judgment that takes into account an array of arguments and perspectives</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Partial or flawed use of a systematic decision-making process</td>
<td>- Evidence of a logical, systematic decision-making process</td>
<td>- Evidence of a logical, systematic decision-making process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uses professional code of ethics (ONLY for course instructor)</td>
<td>- Does not correctly reference sections of the professional code of ethics</td>
<td>- Cites applicable sections, but may not correctly use in decision-making process</td>
<td>- Correctly cites applicable sections of the professional code and explains how they guide forming a judgment</td>
<td>- Correctly cites applicable sections of the professional code and explains their meaning and/or implications on forming a judgment</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
A Framework for Thinking Ethically
From the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics
http://www.scu.edu/ethics/practicing/decision/framework.html

This document is designed as an introduction to thinking ethically. We all have an image of our better selves—of how we are when we act ethically or are "at our best." We probably also have an image of what an ethical community, an ethical business, an ethical government, or an ethical society should be. Ethics really has to do with all these levels—acting ethically as individuals, creating ethical organizations and governments, and making our society as a whole ethical in the way it treats everyone.

What is Ethics?

Simply stated, ethics refers to standards of behavior that tell us how human beings ought to act in the many situations in which they find themselves— as friends, parents, children, citizens, businesspeople, teachers, professionals, and so on.

It is helpful to identify what ethics is NOT:

• Ethics is not the same as feelings. Feelings provide important information for our ethical choices. Some people have highly developed habits that make them feel bad when they do something wrong, but many people feel good even though they are doing something wrong. And often our feelings will tell us it is uncomfortable to do the right thing if it is hard.

• Ethics is not religion. Many people are not religious, but ethics applies to everyone. Most religions do advocate high ethical standards but sometimes do not address all the types of problems we face.

• Ethics is not following the law. A good system of law does incorporate many ethical standards, but law can deviate from what is ethical. Law can become ethically corrupt, as some totalitarian regimes have made it. Law can be a function of power alone and designed to serve the interests of narrow groups. Law may have a difficult time designing or enforcing standards in some important areas, and may be slow to address new problems.

• Ethics is not following culturally accepted norms. Some cultures are quite ethical, but others become corrupt— or blind to certain ethical concerns (as the United States was to slavery before the Civil War). "When in Rome, do as the Romans do" is not a satisfactory ethical standard.

• Ethics is not science. Social and natural science can provide important data to help us make better ethical choices. But science alone does not tell us what we ought to do. Science may provide an explanation for what humans are like. But ethics provides reasons for how humans ought to act. And just because something is scientifically or technologically possible, it may not be ethical to do it.
Why Identifying Ethical Standards is Hard

There are two fundamental problems in identifying the ethical standards we are to follow: 1. On what do we base our ethical standards? 2. How do those standards get applied to specific situations we face?

If our ethics are not based on feelings, religion, law, accepted social practice, or science, what are they based on? Many philosophers and ethicists have helped us answer this critical question. They have suggested at least five different sources of ethical standards we should use.

Five Sources of Ethical Standards

The Utilitarian Approach Some ethicists emphasize that the ethical action is the one that provides the most good or does the least harm, or, to put it another way, produces the greatest balance of good over harm. The ethical corporate action, then, is the one that produces the greatest good and does the least harm for all who are affected—customers, employees, shareholders, the community, and the environment. Ethical warfare balances the good achieved in ending terrorism with the harm done to all parties through death, injuries, and destruction. The utilitarian approach deals with consequences; it tries both to increase the good done and to reduce the harm done.

The Rights Approach Other philosophers and ethicists suggest that the ethical action is the one that best protects and respects the moral rights of those affected. This approach starts from the belief that humans have a dignity based on their human nature per se or on their ability to choose freely what they do with their lives. On the basis of such dignity, they have a right to be treated as ends and not merely as means to other ends. The list of moral rights—including the rights to make one's own choices about what kind of life to lead, to be told the truth, not to be injured, to a degree of privacy, and so on—is widely debated; some now argue that non-humans have rights, too. Also, it is often said that rights imply duties—in particular, the duty to respect others' rights.

The Fairness or Justice Approach Aristotle and other Greek philosophers have contributed the idea that all equals should be treated equally. Today we use this idea to say that ethical actions treat all human beings equally—or if unequally, then fairly based on some standard that is defensible. We pay people more based on their harder work or the greater amount that they contribute to an organization, and say that is fair. But there is a debate over CEO salaries that are hundreds of times larger than the pay of others; many ask whether the huge disparity is based on a defensible standard or whether it is the result of an imbalance of power and hence is unfair.

The Common Good Approach The Greek philosophers have also contributed the notion that life in community is a good in itself and our actions should contribute to that life. This approach suggests that the interlocking relationships of society are the basis of ethical reasoning and that respect and compassion for all others—especially the vulnerable—are requirements of such reasoning. This approach also calls attention to the common conditions that are important to the welfare of everyone. This may be a system of laws, effective police and fire departments, health care, a public educational system, or even public recreational areas.
The Virtue Approach  A very ancient approach to ethics is that ethical actions ought to be consistent with certain ideal virtues that provide for the full development of our humanity. These virtues are dispositions and habits that enable us to act according to the highest potential of our character and on behalf of values like truth and beauty. Honesty, courage, compassion, generosity, tolerance, love, fidelity, integrity, fairness, self-control, and prudence are all examples of virtues. Virtue ethics asks of any action, "What kind of person will I become if I do this?" or "Is this action consistent with my acting at my best?"

Putting the Approaches Together

Each of the approaches helps us determine what standards of behavior can be considered ethical. There are still problems to be solved, however.

The first problem is that we may not agree on the content of some of these specific approaches. We may not all agree to the same set of human and civil rights. We may not agree on what constitutes the common good. We may not even agree on what is a good and what is a harm.

The second problem is that the different approaches may not all answer the question "What is ethical?" in the same way. Nonetheless, each approach gives us important information with which to determine what is ethical in a particular circumstance. And much more often than not, the different approaches do lead to similar answers.

Making Decisions

Making good ethical decisions requires a trained sensitivity to ethical issues and a practiced method for exploring the ethical aspects of a decision and weighing the considerations that should impact our choice of a course of action. Having a method for ethical decision-making is absolutely essential. When practiced regularly, the method becomes so familiar that we work through it automatically without consulting the specific steps.

The more novel and difficult the ethical choice we face, the more we need to rely on discussion and dialogue with others about the dilemma. Only by careful exploration of the problem, aided by the insights and different perspectives of others, can we make good ethical choices in such situations.

We have found the following framework for ethical decision making a useful method for exploring ethical dilemmas and identifying ethical courses of action.

A Framework for Ethical Decision Making

Recognize an Ethical Issue

1. Could this decision or situation be damaging to someone or to some group? Does this decision involve a choice between a good and bad alternative, or perhaps between two "goods" or between two "bads"?
2. Is this issue about more than what is legal or what is most efficient? If so, how?
Get the Facts

3. What are the relevant facts of the case? What facts are not known? Can I learn more about the situation? Do I know enough to make a decision?

4. What individuals and groups have an important stake in the outcome? Are some concerns more important? Why?

5. What are the options for acting? Have all the relevant persons and groups been consulted? Have I identified creative options?

Evaluate Alternative Actions

6. Evaluate the options by asking the following questions:
   - Which option will produce the most good and do the least harm? (The Utilitarian Approach)
   - Which option best respects the rights of all who have a stake? (The Rights Approach)
   - Which option treats people equally or proportionately? (The Justice Approach)
   - Which option best serves the community as a whole, not just some members? (The Common Good Approach)
   - Which option leads me to act as the sort of person I want to be? (The Virtue Approach)

Make a Decision and Test It

7. Considering all these approaches, which option best addresses the situation?

8. If I told someone I respect—or told a television audience—which option I have chosen, what would they say?

Act and Reflect on the Outcome

9. How can my decision be implemented with the greatest care and attention to the concerns of all stakeholders?

10. How did my decision turn out and what have I learned from this specific situation?

This framework for thinking ethically is the product of dialogue and debate at the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University. Primary contributors include Manuel Velasquez, Dennis Moberg, Michael J. Meyer, Thomas Shanks, Margaret R. McLean, David DeCosse, Claire André, and Kirk O. Hanson. It was last revised in May 2009.

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