Ethics

Ethics begins with the "ethical point of view," which approaches situations from a disinterest as opposed to a selfish perspective. The ethical point of view holds others' interests to be as meritorious as your own. A person who acts in his/her own self-interest may do the right thing but not for ethical reasons. "The disinterested point of view is the key to asking the right ethical questions." To ask "What should I (ethically) do in this situation?" is to put one's own stake in the situation on hold, trying instead to view it as an impartial observer.

There are four fundamental ethical ideals that figure prominently in current ethical thinking. These ethical ideals provide a practical foundation for finding ethical answers. The ideals are:

1. UTILITY. The ideal of UTILITY tells us always to act so as to bring about the most favorable possible balance of benefit over harm for the largest number of individuals (counting all affected individuals as equally important) for the long run as well as the immediate future. Simply expressed, UTILITY is "the greatest good for the greatest number." For example, the ideal of UTILITY would require that a population be taxed to support a school whether members of that population have a child or not because the entire population benefits from the education of children.

   Questions for reflection: Does the choice of action:
   C appear to bring about the most benefit or the least harm?
   C avoid harm or risk of harm to others?
   C lead to improvement of both the individual and the whole of society?
   C solve a problem in the short term or long term, or both?

2. JUSTICE. The principle of JUSTICE holds that we must treat all individuals equally, granting no one rights or privileges that are not granted to all. An economic contrast makes the distinction between justice and utility clear; utility might favor maximizing production of a particular type of goods whereas JUSTICE would emphasize equalizing individuals' rights within the system even if that results in lower output. Justice demanded freeing the slaves, not because they would be better off (utility), but because they had the same right to freedom as everyone else.

   Questions for reflection: Is the choice of action:
   C fair or does it serve some better than others?
   C impartial, irrespective of race, creed, color, sex, age, sexual orientation, physical or mental handicap, marital or family status, or ancestry?

3. RESPECT FOR PERSONS. RESPECT FOR PERSONS requires us to treat individuals as ends in themselves, never solely as means to our own ends, and to treat them as rational, autonomous (self-governing) agents, not merely as things that can be manipulated. If we adhere to this rule, we will tell the truth, respect the privacy of others and support their autonomy. We will not manipulate others even to bring about worthy goals.

   Questions for reflection: Does the choice of action:
   C tell people the truth?
   C respect their privacy?
   C support their autonomy (self-governance)?
4. **FIDELITY.** FIDELITY tells us to live up to commitments that we have made both explicitly and implicitly. It requires that we keep promises, and less obviously, it state that our choices often commit us to responsibilities we may not be aware of. For example, becoming a parent exposes us to a range of responsibilities, some of which can be most difficult, even though those responsibilities were not considered in deciding to become a parent.

Questions for reflection: Does the choice of action:

C live up to commitments or promises we've made?
C expose us to additional responsibilities which we may have not considered but must be willing to accept?

**Conflicts**

Conflicts can arise as a result of adhering to these ethical ideals. For example, it is not difficult to envision circumstances in which one can keep a promise only by telling a lie or in which one can treat everyone equally only at the cost of accomplishing less total good than otherwise. Other examples: affirmative action may advance members of an ethnic minority by providing them with unequal opportunities because treating everyone equally may accomplish less good than unequal treatment would; allocation of scarce medical resources may require a decision be made with regard to which life is to be saved; technological advancements may require a decision about when it is permissible to cease heroic measures to keep someone alive.

**Ethics and the Law**

What to do in a given situation? Laws often mandate what is deemed morally right, but the law and ethics may not coincide. Laws may be unjust and dictate a course of action that is ethically wrong. Actions are legal or illegal because of decisions made by legislators, public officials, and judges; they are ethical or unethical independent of any such actions. In law, we avoid doing only what is prohibited; in ethics, we choose the best from among all possible alternatives.

**Guidelines for Making Ethical Decisions** (From: Rushworth Kidder - How Good People Make Tough Choices: Resolving the Dilemmas of Ethical Living)

1. Recognize there is an ethical issue--this helps to identify the problems that need attention--and adopt an ethical point of view.
2. Look at the situation objectively--assume an ethical or disinterested point of view.
3. Determine the actor. Are you responsible? Are you obligated and empowered to do anything?
4. Gather the relevant facts. Examine the details to help determine the motive involved. Assess the future potential of the situation.
5. Apply ethical ideals and ethical principles to your profession and determine what actions they dictate.

a. In Right vs. Wrong issues: If an action is illegal, what's right and what's wrong are obvious. If the answer is less obvious, consider your gut reaction: How would you feel if your actions were revealed on the front page of a newspaper?

b. In Right vs. Right issues: To resolve right vs. right issues, outline the two sides; look at the line of reasoning that seems relevant to the issue; try to honor all principles to some degree; consider which principle it is more acceptable to disobey.

3 principles (Kidder):
what's the greatest good (utility)
what is your highest sense of inner conscience or highest rule (rule-based)
the golden rule philosophy (care-based)

4 principles (Lowenstein & Grites):
- utility
- justice
- respect for persons
- fidelity

7. In the presence of conflict among principles,
   a. Seek to honor each of the conflicting principles to some extent.
   b. Compare the case at hand with other cases (real or imaginary) to identify salient features and determine which principles seem more acceptable to disobey.
   c. Compare prospective solutions, each of which will violate an ethical principle, to try to identify differences in the extent or degree of violations such that one seems less problematic.

7. Consider Trilemma options. Consider a third way out or a middle ground instead of locking yourself in an “either–or” decision.

8. Make a decision.

9. Revisit the decision. After the situation is over, review your actions. This helps to build your expertise. It helps you to reevaluate your moral standards.

Discussion

Review the appropriate scenario as instructed and discuss the following questions.

1. What are the ethical issues for the professional?
2. Given these ethical issues, what would you do (how would you deal with the issues) and why?
3. What are possible consequences of your actions/decisions?
**Scenario 1**

You are working in a social services program that services families whose incomes fall below a particular limit. When a participating family's income exceeds this limit, the family is dropped from the program. Your years of experience working in this program have shown you that it is very difficult for families to try to improve their situations. If they earn more, they lose support services provided by your program that they cannot otherwise afford.

Your clients have come to respect and trust you because of your willingness to do all you can for them. One of your clients confides in you that she is being paid for doing some housekeeping-type of work. Neither she nor her employer is reporting her earnings. The amount she is earning is enough to cause her family to be ineligible for continued participation in your program.

**Scenario 2**

You are an inspector with the department of agriculture. You grew up in a small community in which many of the residents relied on their family-owned farms and/or related businesses for economic survival. Your parents still maintain such a family business.

It has come to your attention that crops in a small, isolated rural community in the state have been infected with a virus for which there is no treatment other than destruction of the plants. The farmers in the community claim that they will be economically ruined if their crops are destroyed. There is concern, however, that the damage could be much worse if the virus should spread.

**Scenario 3**

You are a Registered Dietitian in an extended care facility. One of your patients is a nonterminally ill, competent individual who has suffered from rheumatoid arthritis for the past 40 years (age 56). The patient has lost the use of her hands. She does not have any close family members. Although many treatments/drugs have been tried, the pain is constant and unbearable. She wants nutritional support to be withheld to hasten her death.

**Scenario 4**

It is common knowledge that employees of various retail clothing establishments across the country are given discounts on clothing items sold by the establishment. In general, the higher your position in the establishment/company, the larger your discount. Discount privileges are extended only to the employee and his or her spouse, if married. Employees are always cautioned that employee discounts are for their personal use and for bona fide gifts only.

Kalani Whitman is a store manager for a store in Pearlridge Center named The Puka. The store is part of a large island-wide chain which has mid-price point stores in every major shopping center in the state, including large resort hotels. Kalani is well-liked by those he supervises and by management. The sales people in his store are a "team," with the best sales figures in the state. Kalani is fair and hardworking. He was made manager of the store after only 12 months with the company. He's a man expected to go far in the company when he graduates in May. Some of the sales people in Kalani's store are his friends from high school, including Don Isobe.

Like many other retail establishments, The Puka stores offer their employees discounts on clothing purchased at The Puka. the policy for employee discounts is well-defined. Employees and their spouses may purchase clothing only for themselves. Anyone who violates the policy by using their discount to buy for others is to be terminated immediately. Employees acknowledge their acceptance of the policy by signing a statement to that effect as part of their employment processing.

In many of the Puka stores around the islands, store managers "look the other way" when they know that employees are using their discounts to buy for their friends. One day, Kalani's friend, Don Isobe comes into the store with some of his cousins from Japan. Don talks story with Kalani as his three cousins shop in the store. When the cousins have made their selections, Don gathers the clothing selections and takes them to the cash register where he pays for them, minus his cash discount. Don tells Kalani good-bye, and as Don and his cousins walk towards the store entrance, each of the cousins gives Don some money.
Scenario 5

You have just been hired by a fast food restaurant and have been assigned to work the evening and weekend shifts (30 hours a week). The hours are ideal and the pay is excellent. Additional benefits are that you can fix yourself a meal for the week day shift and they will give you three meals a day for the weekend shift. The money you earn will thus make it easy to pay your room and board and help support you through school.

During the first several days of work, you notice that sanitation is not what it should be. Employees don’t wear hair netting or a cap, don’t wash their hands after using the restrooms, make sandwiches with their bare hands and then collect money from customers, lick the barbeque sauce off their fingers while making sandwiches, etc.

After watching all this, you decide that this is not a restaurant where you would want to eat the food prepared by your fellow employees. You also decide to call it to the attention of the night manager. The manager tells you that none of the customers have complained or have gotten sick, and it takes too much effort to have separate training sessions for each new employee. He tells you that he will not make any changes at this time.