

ISyE 3104 Ethics Primer

Ethical decision-making methodology

- Step 1: Identify stakeholders in the decision
- Step 2: Formulate potential solutions to the ethical dilemma
- Step 3: Determine how the stakeholders will likely be affected by each alternative
- Step 4: Identify trade-offs that must be managed
- Step 5: Make the decision and explain why other alternatives are rejected

A sound ethical reasoning process begins with identifying the stakeholders who will be affected by the decision. If some of these stakeholders' interests are in conflict, the decision maker can easily identify the trade-offs that define an ethical dilemma. Even the situations that seem the simplest and clear cut at first glance will often have competing stakeholders.

The next steps in the reasoning methodology are to determine potential conclusions to the ethical dilemma and consider the ways that these stakeholders will likely be affected by each possible course of action. Any conflicting interests will be evident after this step. By considering the likely outcomes of each alternative conclusion, the decision maker implicitly identifies the important factors and trade-offs that should be balanced when making the decision.

The final step is to make the decision after considering all of the potential alternatives and their likely effects on the stakeholders. A well-reasoned decision clearly explains why it rejects other viable alternatives in favor of the selection. The preceding steps in the decision-making process are largely objective; this step is where the subjectivity comes into the methodology, giving ethics a "soft" connotation in some people's minds. The actual conclusion made is dependent on the decision maker's personal morality, but most of the reasoning process is objective and systematic. The decision maker's values can often be categorized into a particular ethical theory that identifies the most important considerations and questions that she asks when making an ethical decision.

Ethical theories

Ethical theories provide a framework through which individuals faced with ethical dilemmas can explain and justify their decisions or conclusions. The theories distinguish themselves from each other in two major characteristics: *the focus of the analysis* and *the decision criteria* (Weber 2000). The focus of the analysis consists of the groups and individuals the decision maker considers most important for the outcome of the decision. She may only consider herself and how the decision affects her; while most of us might say that this would be a selfish outlook, this is an ethically defensible one in light of the ethical theory of egoism. Conversely, the decision maker may adopt a universal focus and consider the impact of the potential decision on everyone who could possibly be affected. She could also focus on any group in between these two extremes, choosing to consider the effect of the decision on her coworkers, the local community, or the entire global corporation.

The second characteristic in which ethical theories differ is the decision criteria that the decision maker uses in analyzing the dilemma. Most often she considers either the projected outcomes or consequences of the decision or some principles or standards that are deemed to outweigh the consequences (Weber 2000). Examples of such principles are justice, honesty, trust, and fairness. The question that the decision maker must answer for herself is whether there are some values that must be upheld regardless of the negative consequences.

Classic ethical theories

Egoism. An egoist focuses solely on her own self interests and the consequences of the decision to herself. The bottom line question that she would ask is, “What decision produces the best results for *me*?”

Relativism. A relativist focuses on the social group which she uses as a reference. This group could be as narrowly defined as a family or clique of friends, or it could be as wide as a local or state community. The decision criteria could be either the consequences of the decision or some principles. She would argue that there is no “right” answer to an ethical dilemma because the decision depends on the reference group’s code of conduct.

Utilitarianism. A utilitarian has a universal focus, but this focus is only on the consequences of the decision. She strives to find the conclusion that provides the greatest good for the greatest number.

Justice or fairness. A decision maker adopting the justice theory has a universal focus, but unlike the utilitarian, this focus is on principles and standards. In making a decision, she would ask, “Does this action treat everyone in the same way or does it favor one person or group over another?”

Rights. The rights theory of decision making is similar to the justice theory. The focus again is universal and is on principles and standards. The main tenet is that humans have the innate dignity to choose freely how they live their lives, and this (and other rights) must be upheld at all costs. The decision maker would ask, “Does this decision respect the rights of everyone?”

*An important note is that different ethical theories often lead to the same conclusion to an ethical dilemma, but they provide different justifications for the decision.

References

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- Weber, J. 2000. A brief presentation of ethics theory types. Working Paper. Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, PA.