

Chapter 6. Ethics

This chapter introduces you to ethical reasoning as it pertains to your studies now and to your future professional work. The chapter was largely developed by Santa Clara University's Markkula Center for Applied Ethics. For almost ten years the Center has worked with the local and national communities, as well as the University, in the search for ways to approach practical ethical dilemmas. The Center's website is an outstanding source for study materials in applied ethics.

(<http://www.scu.edu/ethics/>)

The field of ethics is the study and practice of standards of moral conduct. As such, ethics is not something that only philosophers and theologians think about. Ethics is for everyone – all human beings including engineers! All of us think ethically whenever we face an issue of right and wrong. Moreover, ethics does not pertain alone to the more private realms of our lives – to such issues as whether to cheat on a test or lie to a friend. Rather, ethics pertain to all aspects of our lives – from the more private and personal to the professional and political. Accordingly, it is essential to consider the many ethical issues and questions that are always present in the study and work of an engineer.

One of the major contributions of the Markkula Center over the years has been to develop and evolve a way of addressing formally ethical problems. It is called A Framework for Thinking Ethically. We begin this chapter with some introductory ideas, then move on to a discussion of the Framework, and then finish with a more detailed look at a number of important concepts. Here is what we will look at.

- An introduction to ethics
- A Framework for Thinking Ethically
- Rights
- Fairness and Justice
- Utility
- The Common Good
- Virtue
- Compassion
- Conscience and Authority
- Some Websites

6.1 An Introduction to Ethics

This section is designed as an introduction to thinking ethically. We all have an image of our “better selves” – or of how we are when we are “at our best.” We probably also have an image of what an ethical community, an ethical business, or an ethical government is – and maybe even an ethical society as a whole. Ethics really has to do with all three levels – acting ethically as individuals, creating ethical organizations and governments, and making our society as a whole ethical. But, just what is ethics?

Simply stated, ethics gives us standards of behavior that tell us what human beings **ought** to do in the many situations in which we find ourselves – as friends, parents, children, citizens, businesspeople, teachers, professionals, and so on.

It is helpful to identify what ethics is NOT.

Ethics is not our feelings. 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 types of problems we face.

Ethics is not 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 designed to serve the interests of narrow groups. Law may have a difficult time designing or enforcing standards in some important areas.

Ethics is not following socially accepted norms. Some societies 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 sufficient ethical standard.

There are two fundamental questions that we face in identifying the ethical standards we are to follow:

- On what do we base our ethical standards?
- How do these standards get applied to specific situations that we face?

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

The Rights Approach: Some philosophers and ethicists suggest the ethical action is the one which best protects and respects the moral rights of those affected. This approach starts from the belief that humans have a dignity based on their ability to choose freely what they do with their lives, and have a right to be treated as ends and not merely as means to other ends. The list of “moral rights” – to make one’s own choices about what kind of life we will lead, to be told the truth, not to be injured, to a degree of privacy, and so on – is widely debated. Also, it is often said that rights imply duties – in particular, the duty to respect others’ rights. And so we must ask, what if my rights and yours are in conflict?

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 inequality 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 “unfair.” And what shall we do about situations in which fairness is not possible. Where shall we build that freeway, near your house or near mine?

The Utilitarian Approach: Some ethicists emphasize that the ethical action is the one that provides the greatest good for the greatest number, or produces the most good or does the least harm. The ethical corporate action, then, is the one that produces the greatest good for all who are affected – customers, employees, shareholders and the community. Ethical warfare is the one that balances the good achieved in ending terrorism, for example, with the harm done in such warfare in injuries and deaths to all parties, and to disrupted lives and destroyed property. The utilitarian approach tries to increase the good that is done, and at the same time reduce the harm.

The Common Good Approach: The Greek philosophers have also contributed the notion that every society needs “common conditions” which are important to the goodness of everyone. This may be a system of laws, effective police and fire departments, guaranteed health care, a public educational system, or even public recreational areas. The ethical action under this consideration is the one that serves the common good of creating these “common conditions” and enhancing these common relationships. This also involves the network of human relationships that run throughout every society.

The Virtue Approach: A very ancient approach to ethics is that ethical actions ought to be consistent with certain ideal virtues which provide for the full development of our humanity. These virtues are dispositions and character traits that enable us to be and to act with our highest potential, traits that are commonly admired by society. Honesty, courage, compassion, generosity, 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?”

The Compassion Approach: Some ethicists separate out one of the virtues, compassion, as a standard for ethical behavior of central importance. This approach suggests that relationships are the basis of all human society and that compassion and concern for others – especially the vulnerable -- are essential to relationships and to the functioning of society. Therefore, ethical actions should always serve the interests of others, and should serve to deepen the relationships one has with family, officemates, community, and people in all parts of our earth.

Each of these six 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 what constitutes the common good. We may not even agree 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 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 which 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.

6.2 A Framework for Thinking Ethically

This section introduces a formal process for addressing ethical issues, an approach developed by Santa Clara University’s Markkula Center for Applied Ethics. There are five steps in the process.

- Recognize an ethical issue.
- Get the facts.
- Evaluate alternative actions from various ethical perspectives.
- Make a decision.
- Act, then reflect on the decision later.

And so to the details.

RECOGNIZE AN ETHICAL ISSUE

We need to recognize ethical problems as such. If we don’t notice the ethical content to the situation then we cannot proceed.

1. Is there something wrong personally, interpersonally, or socially? Could the conflict, the situation or the decision be damaging to people or to the community?
2. Does the issue go deeper than legal or institutional concerns? What does it do to people as persons who have dignity, rights, and hopes for a better life together?

GET THE FACTS

3. What are the relevant facts of the case?

4. What individuals and groups have an important stake in the outcome? Do some have a greater stake because they have a special need or because we have special obligations to them?

5. What are the options for acting? Have all the relevant persons and groups been consulted? If you showed your list of options to someone you respect, what would that person say?

EVALUATE ALTERNATIVE ACTIONS FROM VARIOUS ETHICAL PERSPECTIVES

6. Which option will produce the most good and do the least harm? (The Utilitarian approach: the ethical action is the one that will produce the greatest balance of benefits over harms.)

7. Which option is fair to all the stakeholders? Even if not everyone gets all they want, will everyone's rights and dignity still be respected? (The Justice or Fairness approach: the ethical action is the one that treats people equally, or if unequally, that treats people proportionately and fairly.) (The Rights approach: the ethical action is the one that best respects the human and civil rights of all who are affected.)

8. Which option would help all participate more fully in the life we share as a family, community, society? (The Common Good approach: the ethical action is the one which contributes most to the achievement of a quality common life together.)

9. Would you want to become the sort of person who acts this way? (The Virtues approach: the ethical action is the one which invites performance of key attitudes and character traits which represent humans at their best.) (The Compassion approach: the ethical action is the one which demonstrates concern for the impacts of situations and actions on specific human beings with whom we have or might have a relationship.)

MAKE A DECISION

10. Considering these perspectives, which of the options is the right or best thing to do?

11. If you told someone you respect why you chose this option, what would that person say?

ACT, THEN REFLECT ON THE DECISION LATER

12. How did it turn out for all concerned? If you have to do it over again, what would you do differently?

That's our framework for making ethical decisions. Later we will apply it to some cases or problems. But first let's take a closer look at our six approaches to ethics.