

Nine theories of ethics that rule the world

1. ***Consequentialism*** maintains that the majority of an action depends on the nonmoral consequences that the action brings about. Morality of an action consists of the ratio of good to evil that the action produces. We should perform right and only right action in terms of good and evil, as each individual defines good and evil, and right and wrong. There is no objective right and wrong or good and evil. The person defines these.

You bump into a car at the mall. You could leave a note, but since there were no witnesses and the owner is not around, you decide not to because you recognize that the damage is low (probably only a couple of hundred dollars). The car owner probably has insurance, and it would be such a hassle for the owner to contact you and your insurance company. You may have to end up paying higher premium, the owner may think ill of you—all of which are nonmoral reasons that may be unpleasant for you.

Ethical egoism states that you should always act so that your actions produce what is in your own best long-term interests.

Personal egoism states that an individual should always act in his or her own best long-term interests, but that does not say how others should act.

Impersonal egoism states that an individual should always act in his or her own best long-term interest.

2. ***Values Clarification (Philosophical Relativism)*** teaches that the most important aspect is not what one believes, but being aware one's own feelings, beliefs, and values systems. People thus consider alternative models of thinking and acting. By acting thusly and making one's own choices, one develops one's own values.

In this setting, a value is what a person likes to do. It is NOT an *ought-to-do*, but rather a *want-to-do*. Values clarification puts a heavy emphasis on feelings—so much so that it virtually equates values with feelings. It also reflects a philosophical relativism—the belief that there are no moral or ethical absolutes—everything is relative. Concluding what is right or wrong is basically anybody's guess. Proponents of this systems say that they use the Socratic method—every ethical question is a question of either this or that choice. Unfortunately, Socrates and Plato had distinct beliefs about truth and ethics which the proponents of this methodology do not possess.

3. ***Utilitarianism*** states that the moral standard should be promotion of the best long-term interests of everyone concerned. Many utilitarianists say that which is intrinsically good is pleasure and happiness (known as the hedonistic calculus). Others say there are other things which are intrinsically good such as beauty, power, knowledge, etc.

Act Utilitarianism states that the right utilitarian act is the one that produces the greatest ratio of good to evil for all concerned. *Rule utilitarianism* teaches us that certain actions almost always have a great utilitarian value and thus general rules are formulated to help us see that we follow these rules of action.

A few doctors decide that a number of experiments on a few people, even if most of them died, would be worth it if they could find a cure for a disease that would relieve the suffering of millions of people. Utilitarianism would give the approval for such because it produces the greatest good for the greatest number of people.

4. Legalistic Moralism (Moral Absolutism) states that there are pluralities of absolutes (or norms) with each one covering an area of human experience. These absolutes never conflict with each other. An action that is evil under one absolute is evil under every other absolute and could never be seen as good under any absolute.

Some call this the ethic of absolute ends because we do what is right and trust God or fate or destiny or the forces of good to work things out. There is no personal responsibility for the consequences of morally right acts. We do them, not because they bring us pleasure, but because they are “right”...this is called the “categorical imperative”.

A madman shows up at your door with a weapon raving, asking where your loved one is, that he intends to kill the person. You answer truthfully because it would be wrong to lie. You trust that since you have told the truth, things will work out. Perhaps the neighbors have called the police, or someone will intervene, or something will happen.

5. Situation Ethics shows that since legalistic Moralism is encumbered with a bundle of predetermined rules and regulations and while antinomianism says that there are no absolutes, then decision making must be based on a “middle ground”. That middle ground then says the guidelines for decision-making must be 1) absolute love (agape) 2) general guidelines of helpfulness (sophia) 3) particular moment (kairos).

Love and justice are the same. If love is the end result, then the ends justifies the means. This is not a selfish love, but a love that desires the neighbor’s best good at all times. There are four working principles involved—a) Pragmatism (love gives concrete practical, workable answers) b) Relativism (everything is relative to love) c) Emotivism (each person desires his or her own values) and d) Personalism (persons are the ultimate value).

A man finds himself in an unfulfilled marriage, looking for a person with whom he can deeply connect. A woman is trapped in a marriage that is abusive and filled with pain. They find each other and after a while one things lead to another until they are in love. Love being the ultimate goal, they being consenting adults, then they are morally right in having an affair.

6. Ethical Realism (as espoused by Reinhold Neibuhr)(the lesser of two evils) states that when absolute norms come into conflict (as they will eventually do) one must decide which to follow. Each solution offers limited alternatives, so the solution which produces the less of two evils is the one to be chosen.

Unavoidable moral dilemmas occur because our world is not perfect. Neibuhr’s theory, The Origin of Moral Dilemma, comes from a Christian perspective stating that we live in a “fallen” world since sin entered it. Thus there is an excusable and pardonable sin because people did not cause that dilemma by their own acts. Every decision will have some sinful consequence of which God will forgive. Thus people must make the choice that is the lesser sin and then ask God’s forgiveness.

Neibuhr talked of a world. War. The Soviet Union was an evil and brutish dictatorship over millions of people, forcing them into horrific, hellish conditions. Yet to oppose them in an outright war would bring massive destruction through nuclear weapons. Instead of direct opposition, we chose indirect opposition (the cold war)

through economics and alternative means.

7. Ethical Hierarcicalism (Graded Absolutism) is the view that there are many universal norms, but they are not all intrinsically equal. Thus when a conflict takes place, we must obey the “higher” norm...we choose the greater of the two goods.

Geisler Hierarchical Calculus is:

- Persons are more valuable than things
- God is more valuable than an incomplete person
- A complete person is more valuable than an incomplete person
- An actual person is more valuable than a potential person
- Potential persons are more valuable than actual things (fetus vs appendage)
- Man persons are more valuable than a few persons
- Personal acts which promote personhood are better than those which don't

Why should a person be held responsible for committing a crime if the crime was a lesser norm? Is it wrong for a man to steal money to purchase a life-saving machine for his child who is dying? Perhaps the system is at fault and not the person.

8. Principle Ethics states that principles are merely value states or guidelines to actions (as opposed to rules or laws). Thus when principles encounter each other in conflict it is not a conflict of norms, but rather an exercise in reasoning and logic.

Principle ethics is the most difficult to study because it demands the area test study and the most incisive analysis of principles and cases with the goal of determining which principles apply to which case. The decision that is made is based upon test of logic, reasoning, and rationale.

9. Cognitive Moral Development (as espoused by Lawrence Kohlberg) states that ethics education is possible. Just as people develop mentally, physically, and emotionally, they develop a moral cognizance. Using critical thinking tactics such as the Socratic method, people can solve their ethical dilemmas.

Kohlberg taught that there were six stages of ethical thinking, each stage being of greater maturity than the previous one. By delineating these levels, we are allowed to know and test each our own thinking. This helps us know ourselves better and challenges us to move on to a higher level of thinking. This assumes a sort of natural goodness and integrity in the child whereby he or she will always want to do the right thing—if only they had the time to reason tings out. This is the idea that people suffer from a character defect if they are void of logical thinking.