Ethical Theories

Deontological vs. Teleological

Two primarily ethical theories have evolved that have as their primary focus two different ways to arrive at doing the right thing. The means used to achieve a particular good is one approach. A focus on what good can be produced, or what harm can be reduced—the end result—is another way to justify what is right. The following discussion provides further distinction between these ethical theories.

Deontological: Our Duty to Act Rightly. The word deontological is derived from the Greek root, “deontos,” which means “of the obligatory.” This approach is based on the philosophy that actions are inherently right or wrong, apart from any consequences to which they might lead (Frankena, 1973). Ethical rules can be formulated and hold under all circumstances because they are inherently right. Further, a person who is motivated by duty is motivated by something beyond their own self-interest, that of universal law. A universal law is something all people ought to live up to whether they want to or not. The motivation, or good will, to act is the respect for obligations that one would be willing to have everyone else act on as well, thus a universal law. Deontologists profess that the means, or certain duties, principles, and rules, must be adhered to in all circumstances, regardless of the end result.

Teleological: The Greatest Good. Teleological is derived from the Greek root, “teleios,” which means “brought to its end or purpose.” This is the classic utilitarian approach. The founder of modern utilitarianism was Jeremy Bentham. John Stuart Mill further developed this approach. Their policy was to seek “the greatest good for the greatest number.” Teleologists justify ethical decisions in terms of the consequences of the decision or the ends achieved. A given course of action should not be chosen only because it is inherently good, but because it leads to desired results. The Principle of Utility states that the moral ends to be sought in all we do is the greatest possible balance of good over evil in the world as a whole. The morally right course of action would be the one “… that produces the greatest balance of benefits over harms for everyone affected… utilitarianism does not care whether the benefits are produced by lies, manipulation, or coercion” (Markula, 2000). The most serious difficulty with a utilitarian approach is that it does not include a consideration of justice and fairness. The focus on the end result can justify immoral practices because they result in a positive gain for an organization or for a society.
Deontological vs. Teleological (continued)

Consider the following activity and think about your own reaction to the situation.

**Activity:** Imagine that you are on a spelunking (cave exploration) expedition. You have entered a cave and traveled deeper into the caverns for several hours. The group has entered a small room with only one entrance, the one used to enter the cavern. The entire group except for the leader has entered. As the leader crawls through the entrance, a cave-in occurs. The way out is blocked by her body, which is covered by tons of rubble. She is alive, determined by a pulse in her wrist, which is sticking out of the rubble. It isn’t possible to assess the degree of injury (for example, broken neck, internal injuries, and so forth) and moving her may cause more serious injury or death. Time passes, and no help has arrived. Further, the air in the small room is getting stale, and there is less oxygen to breathe.

Would you remove her body by any means possible, and in the process, sacrifice her life in order to exit the cavern?

Would you decide not to do anything to cause injury or possibly death?

What is the rationale for both responses? Integrate the reasons with the means versus the ends arguments that support the two ethical theories (Abrams, 1989).

In the previous story, a decision based on *deontological theory* would be focused on the means, or duty. Individuals who approach the dilemma based on their motivation to use moral rules and principles to arrive at a decision would treat the leader, who is blocking the way out, as an end, not as a means to an end (escape). The duty to prevent harm to the leader would require that the group refrain from causing this person further injury or death, even at the risk of losing other lives. In contrast, *teleological theory* would require a calculation of what would provide the best end result. If the object was to save lives, the leader’s life could be sacrificed in order to save the group, the greatest good for the greatest number.

References


