Ethical Perspectives

Markkula Center for Applied Ethics

http://www.scu.edu/ethics/practicing/decision/framework.html

The Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University is a nationally recognized resource for people and organizations wanting to study and apply an ethical approach to the crucial issues facing our world. The Center supports research, assists faculty in integrating ethics into their courses, and helps businesses, schools, hospitals, and other organizations put ethics to work.

Ethics or morality poses questions about how we ought to act and how we should live. It asks, "According to what standards are these actions right or wrong?" It asks, "What character traits (like honesty, compassion, fairness) are necessary to live a truly human life?" It also asks, "What concerns or groups do we usually minimize or ignore? And why might that be?" Admitting our blindness is the beginning of vision.

There are five Ethical Perspective associated with decision making.

1. The Utilitarian Perspective

   - Focuses on the consequences that actions or policies have on the well-being ("utility") of all persons directly or indirectly affected by the action or policy.
   - The principle states: "Of any two actions, the most ethical one will produce the greatest balance of benefits over harms."

When Oliver North was asked to explain why he lied to congressional committees about his role in the Iran-Contra affair, he replied, "Lying does not come easily to me. But we all had to weigh in the balance the difference between lies and lives." Elsewhere in his testimony, North was asked about the false chronology of events he fabricated when preparing a summary of the government's involvement in arms sales to Iran:

   **Questioner:** You have indicated that...in your own mind...it was a good idea to put forth this false version...[But] there were reasons on the other side, were there not?

   **North:** Reasons on the other side?

   **Questioner:** First of all, you put some value, don't you, in the truth?

   **North:** I've put great value in the truth. I came here to tell it.

   **Questioner:** So...that would be a reason not to put forward this [false] version of the facts?

   **North:** The truth would be reason not to put forward this [false] version of the facts, but as I indicated to you a moment ago, I put great value on the lives of the American hostages...and I put great value on that second channel [an intermediary used by the U.S. to deal with the Iranians], who was at risk.

   **Questioner:** By putting out this false version of the facts, you were committing, were you not, the entire Administration to telling a false story?

   **North:** Well, let, let--I'm not trying to pass the buck here. OK? I did a lot of things, and I want to stand up and say that I'm proud of them.
North's method of justifying his acts of deception is a form of moral reasoning that is called "utilitarianism". Stripped down to its essentials, utilitarianism is a moral principle that holds that the morally right course of action in any situation is the one that produces the greatest balance of benefits over harms for everyone affected. So long as a course of action produces maximum benefits for everyone, utilitarianism does not care whether the benefits are produced by lies, manipulation, or coercion.

Many of us use this type of moral reasoning frequently in our daily decisions. When asked to explain why we feel we have an amoral duty to perform some action, we often point to the good that will come from the action or the harm it will prevent. Business analysts, legislators, and scientists weigh daily the resulting benefits and harms of policies when deciding, for example, whether to invest resources in a certain public project, whether to approve a new drug, or whether to ban a certain pesticide.

Utilitarianism offers a relatively straightforward method for deciding the morally right course of action for any particular situation we may find ourselves in. To discover what we ought to do in any situation, we first identify the various courses of action that we could perform. Second, we determine all of the foreseeable benefits and harms that would result from each course of action for everyone affected by the action. And third, we choose the course of action that provides the greatest benefits after the costs have been taken into account.

The principle of utilitarianism can be traced to the writings of Jeremy Bentham, who lived in England during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Bentham, a legal reformer, sought an objective basis that would provide a publicly acceptable norm for determining what kinds of laws England should enact. He believed that the most promising way of reaching such an agreement was to choose that policy that would bring about the greatest net benefits to society once the harms had been taken into account. His motto, a familiar one now, was "the greatest good for the greatest number".

Over the years, the principle of utilitarianism has been expanded and refined so that today there are many variations of the principle. For example, Bentham defined benefits and harms in terms of pleasure and pain. Today utilitarians often describe benefits and harms in terms of the satisfaction of persona preferences or in purely economic terms.

Utilitarians also differ in their views about the kind of question we ought to ask ourselves when making an ethical decision. Some utilitarians maintain that in making an ethical decision, we must ask ourselves: "What effect will my doing this act in this situation have on the general balance of good over evil?" If lying would produce the best consequences in a particular situation, we ought to lie. Others claim that we must choose that act that conforms to the general rule that would have the best consequences. In other words, we must ask ourselves: "What effect would everyone's doing this kind of action have on the general balance of good over evil?" So, for example, the rule "to always tell the truth" in general promotes the good of everyone and therefore should always be followed, even if in a certain situation lying would produce the best consequences. Despite such differences among utilitarians, however, most hold to the general principle that morality must depend on balancing the beneficial and harmful consequences of our conduct.

While utilitarianism is currently a very popular ethical theory, there are some difficulties in relying on it as a sole method for moral decision-making. First, the utilitarian calculation requires that we assign values to the benefits and harms resulting from our actions and compare them with the benefits and harms that might result from other actions. But it's often difficult, if not impossible, to measure and compare the values of certain benefits and costs. How do we go about assigning a value to life or to art? And how do we go about comparing the value of money with, for example, the value of life, the value of time, or the value of human dignity? Moreover, can we ever be really certain about all of the
consequences of our actions? Our ability to measure and to predict the benefits and harms resulting from a course of action or a moral rule is dubious, to say the least.

Perhaps the greatest difficulty with utilitarianism is that it fails to take into account considerations of justice. We can imagine instances where a certain course of action would produce great benefits for society, but they would be clearly unjust. South African whites, for example, sometimes claim that all South Africans—including blacks—are better off under white rule. They have claimed that in those African nations that have traded a whites-only government for a black or mixed one, social conditions have rapidly deteriorated. Civil wars, economic decline, famine, and unrest, they predict, will be the result of allowing the black majority of South Africa to run the government. If such a prediction is true, then the white government of South Africa would be morally justified by utilitarianism, in spite of its injustice.

If our moral decisions are to take into account considerations of justice, then apparently utilitarianism cannot be the sole principle guiding our decisions. It can, however, play a role in these decisions. The principle of utilitarianism invites us to consider the immediate and the less immediate consequences of our actions. It also asks us to look beyond self-interest to consider impartially the interests of all persons affected by our actions. As John Stuart Mill, a famous utilitarian, once wrote:

The happiness which forms the utilitarian standard of what is right in conduct, is not...(one's) own happiness, but that of all concerned. As between his own happiness and that of others, utilitarianism requires him to be as strictly impartial as a disinterested and benevolent spectator.

In an era that some have characterized as "the age of self-interest", utilitarianism is a powerful reminder that morality calls us to look beyond the self to the good of all.

2. The Rights Perspective

- Identifies certain fundamental civil, political and economic rights that merit protection or respect because they pertain to the dignity of the human person.
- Each person has a fundamental right to be respected and treated as a free and equal rational person capable of making his or her own decisions.
- Examples of rights that are traditionally recognized in this approach include: the right to privacy, autonomy, the right to subsistence, freedom of conscience, the right to physical integrity, etc.
- The principle states: Act in ways that respect the dignity of other persons by honoring or protecting their legitimate moral rights.

In 1978, American Cyanamid, a paint company located in West Virginia, announced that in order "to protect the unborn children of working employees from any possible harm," women capable of bearing children could no longer work in company jobs that might expose them to lead and other chemicals potentially harmful to fetal life. One year later, four women interviewed by a newspaper, claimed that they had to be sterilized to keep their high-paying jobs at American Cyanamid. While the company asserted it was trying to protect the rights of the unborn, the women declared that the company forced them to sacrifice their own reproductive rights. Supporters of the company agreed that an employer has a right to set working conditions for its employees, while supporters for the women claimed that workers have a right to be protected from workplace hazards without having to choose between having themselves sterilized and losing their jobs.

Many moral controversies today are couched in the language of rights. Indeed, we seem to have witnessed an explosion of appeals to rights--gay rights, prisoners' rights, animal
rights, smokers' rights, fetal rights, and employee rights. The appeal to rights has a long
tradition. The American Declaration of Independence asserted that "all men...are endowed
by their Creator with certain unalienable rights...among these are life, liberty, and the
pursuit of happiness." In 1948, the United Nations published the Universal Declaration of
Human Rights, stating that all human beings have "the right to own property,...the right to
work,...the right to just and favorable remuneration,...[and] the right to rest and leisure."

What is a right? A right is a justified claim on others. For example, if I have a right to
freedom, then I have a justified claim to be left alone by others. Turned around, I can say
that others have a responsibility to leave me alone. If I have a right to an education, then I
have a justified claim to be provided with an education by society.

The "justification" of a claim is dependent on some standard acknowledged and accepted
not just by the claimant, but also by society in general. The standard can be as concrete as
the Constitution, which guarantees the right of free speech and assures that every American
accused of a crime "shall enjoy the right to a speedy trial by an impartial jury," or a local
law that spells out the legal rights of landlords and tenants.

Moral rights, are justified by moral standards that most people acknowledge, but which are
not codified in law, and therefore have been interpreted differently by different people.

One of the most important and influential interpretations of moral rights is based on the
work of Immanuel Kant, an eighteenth century philosopher. Kant maintained that each of us
has a worth or a dignity that must be respected. This dignity makes it wrong for others to
abuse us or to use us against our will. Kant expressed this idea in a moral principle:
humanity must always be treated as an end, not merely as a means. To treat a person as a
mere means is to use a person to advance one's own interest. But to treat a person as an
end is to respect that person's dignity by allowing each the freedom to choose for himself or
herself.

Kant's principle is often used to justify a fundamental moral right, the right to freely choose
for oneself, and rights related to this fundamental right, sometimes called negative or
liberty rights. Negative rights, such as the right to privacy, the right not to be killed, or the
right to do what one wants with one's property, are rights that protect some form of human
freedom or liberty. These rights are called negative rights because each one imposes a
negative duty on us—the duty to not interfere with a person's activities in a certain area.
The right to privacy, for example, imposes on us the duty not to intrude into the private
activities of a person.

Kant's principle is also often used to justify positive or welfare rights. Many people argue
that a fundamental right to freedom is worthless if people aren't able to exercise that
freedom. A right to freedom, then, implies that every human being also has a fundamental
right to what is necessary to secure a minimum level of well being. Positive rights,
therefore, are rights that provide something that people need to secure their well being,
such as a right to an education, the right to food, the right to medical care, the right to
housing, or the right to a job. Positive rights impose a positive duty on us—the duty to
actively help a person to have or to do something. A young person's right to an education,
for example, imposes on us a duty to provide that young person with an education.
Respecting a positive right, then requires more than merely not acting; positive rights
impose on us the duty to help sustain the welfare of those who are in need of help.

Whenever we are confronted with a moral dilemma, we need to consider whether the action
would respect the basic rights of each of the individuals involved. How would the action
affect the basic well-being of those individuals? How would the action affect the freedom of
those individuals? Would it involve manipulation or deception? Actions are wrong to the
extent that they violate the rights of individuals.
Sometimes the rights of individuals will come into conflict and one has to decide which right has priority. We may all agree, for example, that everyone has a right to freedom of association as well as a right not to be discriminated against. But suppose a private club has a policy that excludes women from joining. How do we balance the right to freedom of association against the right not to be discriminated against? In cases such as this, we need to examine the freedoms or interests at stake and decide which of the two is the more crucial for securing human dignity. For example, is free association or equality more essential to maintaining our dignity as persons?

Rights, then, play a central role in ethics. Attention to rights ensures that the freedom and well-being of each individual will be protected when others threaten that freedom or well-being. If an individual has a moral right, then it is morally wrong to interfere with that right even if large numbers of people would benefit from such interference.

But rights should not be the sole consideration in ethical decision-making. In some instances, the social costs or the injustice that would result from respecting a right are too great, and accordingly, that right may need to be limited. Moreover, an emphasis on rights tends to limit our vision of what the "moral life" entails. Morality, it's often argued, is not just a matter of not interfering with the rights of others. Relying exclusively on a rights approach to ethics tends to emphasize the individual at the expense of the community. And, while morality does call on us to respect the uniqueness, dignity, and autonomy of each individual, it also invites us to recognize our relatedness--that sense of community, shared values, and the common good which lends itself to an ethics of care, compassion, and concern for others.

3. The Fairness (or Justice) Perspective

- Focuses on how fairly or unfairly our actions distribute benefits and burdens among the members of a group.
- Fairness requires consistency in the way people are treated.
- Examples of what is offered as morally justifiable reasons for treating people differently: need, merit, effort, fault, etc.
- The principle states: "Treat people the same unless there are morally relevant differences between them."

When Beatrice Norton was fourteen, she followed in her mother's footsteps and began working in the cotton mill. In 1968, after a career in the mill, she had to stop working because of her health. Years of exposure to cotton dust had resulted in a case of "brown lung", a chronic and sometimes fatal disease with symptoms similar to asthma and emphysema. In 1977, she testified at a congressional hearing, asking that the government require companies to provide disability compensation for victims of the disease similar to the compensation companies provided for other similar diseases.

I worked in the dust year after year ... I got sicker and sicker. In 1968 I suddenly had no job, no money, and I was too sick to ever work in my life again. State legislators have proven in two successive sessions that they are not going to do anything to help the brown lung victims, so now we come to you in Washington and ask for help. We've waited a long time, and many of us have died waiting. I don't want to die of injustice.

Another woman, Mrs. Vinnie Ellison, spoke bitterly about the way her husband had been treated when the illness caught up with him after twenty one years at a cotton mill:

In the early sixties he started having trouble keeping up his job because of his breathing. In 1963 his bossman told him that he had been a good worker,
but wasn't worth a damn anymore and fired him. He had no pension and nothing to live on. My husband worked long and hard and lost his health because of the dust. It isn't fair that the mill threw him away like so much human garbage after he couldn't keep up his job because he was sick from the dust.

To Mrs. Norton and Mrs. Ellison, receiving compensation for the debilitating effects of brown lung similar to that given to other diseases was a simple matter of justice. In making their case, their arguments reflected a very long tradition in Western civilization. In fact, no idea in Western civilization has been more consistently linked to ethics and morality than the idea of justice. From the Republic, written by the ancient Greek philosopher Plato, to A Theory of Justice, written by the contemporary Harvard philosopher John Rawls, every major work on ethics has held that justice is part of the central core of morality.

Justice means giving each person what he or she deserves, or, in more traditional terms, giving each person what he or her due. The Nortons and Ellisons of this world, for example, are asking for what they feel they deserve; when they are demanding that they be treated with justice and fairness. When people differ over what they believe should be given, or when decisions have to be made about how benefits and burdens should be distributed among a group of people, questions of justice or fairness inevitably arise. In fact, most ethicists today hold the view that there would be no point of talking about justice or fairness if it were not for the conflicts of interest that are created when goods and services are scarce and people differ over who should get what. When such conflicts arise in our society, we need principles of justice that we can all accept as reasonable and fair standards for determining what people deserve.

But saying that justice is giving each person what he or she deserves does not take us very far. How do we determine what people deserve? What criteria and what principles should we use to determine what is due to this or that person?

**Principles of Justice**

The most fundamental principle of justice—one that has been widely accepted since it was first defined by Aristotle more than two thousand years ago—is the principle that "equals should be treated equally and unequals unequally." In its contemporary form, this principle is sometimes expressed as follows: "Individuals should be treated the same, unless they differ in ways that are relevant to the situation in which they are involved." For example, if Jack and Jill both do the same work, and there are no relevant differences between them or the work they are doing, then in justice they should be paid the same wages. And if Jack is paid more than Jill simply because he is a man, or because he is white, then we have an injustice—a form of discrimination—because race and sex are not relevant to normal work situations.

There are, however, many differences that we deem as justifiable criteria for treating people differently. For example, we think it is fair and just when a parent gives his own children more attention and care in his private affairs than he gives the children of others; we think it is fair when the person who is first in a line at a theater is given first choice of theater tickets; we think it is just when the government gives benefits to the needy that it does not provide to more affluent citizens; we think it is just when some who have done wrong are given punishments that are not meted out to others; and we think it is fair when those who exert more efforts or who make a greater contribution to a project receive more benefits from the project than others. These criteria—need, desert, contribution, and effort—we acknowledge as justifying differential treatment, then, are numerous.

On the other hand, there are also criteria that we believe are not justifiable grounds for giving people different treatment. In the world of work, for example, we generally hold that it is unjust to give individuals special treatment on the basis of age, sex, race, or their
If the judge's nephew receives a suspended sentence for armed robbery when another offender goes to jail for the same crime, or the brother of the Director of Public Works gets the million dollar contract to install sprinklers on the municipal golf course despite lower bids from other contractors, we say that it's unfair. We also believe it isn't fair when a person is punished for something over which he or she had no control, or isn't compensated for a harm he or she suffered. And the people involved in the "brown lung hearings" felt that it wasn't fair that some diseases were provided with disability compensation, while other similar diseases weren't.

**Different Kinds of Justice**

There are different kinds of justice. Social justice or distributive justice refers to the extent to which society's institutions ensure that benefits and burdens are distributed among society's members in ways that are fair and just. When the institutions of a society distribute benefits or burdens in unjust ways, there is a strong presumption that those institutions should be changed. For example, the American institution of slavery in the pre-civil war South was condemned as unjust because it was a glaring case of treating people differently on the basis of race; and the same is often said of the apartheid system of South Africa today which continues to distribute political and economic benefits on the basis of race.

A second important kind of justice is retributive or corrective justice. Retributive justice refers to the extent to which punishments are fair and just. In general, punishments are held to be just to the extent that they take into account relevant criteria such as the seriousness of the crime and the intent of the criminal, and discount irrelevant criteria such as race. It would be barbarously unjust, for example, to chop off a person's hand for stealing a dime, or to impose the death penalty on a person who by accident and without negligence injured another party. Studies have frequently shown that when blacks murder whites, they are much more likely to receive death sentences than when whites murder whites or blacks murder blacks. These studies suggest that injustice still exists in the criminal justice system in the United States.

Yet a third important kind of justice is compensatory justice. Compensatory justice refers to the extent to which people are fairly compensated for their injuries by those who have injured them; just compensation is proportional to the loss inflicted on a person. This is precisely the kind of justice that was at stake in the brown lung hearings. Those who testified at the hearings claimed that the owners of the cotton mills where workers had been injured should compensate the workers whose health had been ruined by conditions at the mills.

The foundations of justice can be traced to the notions of social stability, interdependence, and equal dignity. As the ethicist John Rawls has pointed out, the stability of a society—or any group, for that matter—depends upon the extent to which the members of that society feel that they are being treated justly. When some of society's members come to feel that they are subject to unequal treatment, the foundations have been laid for social unrest, disturbances, and strife. The members of a community, Rawls holds, depend on each other, and they will retain their social unity only to the extent that their institutions are just. Moreover, as the philosopher Immanuel Kant and others have pointed out, human beings are all equal in this respect: they all have the same dignity, and in virtue of this dignity they deserve to be treated as equals. Whenever individuals are treated unequally on the basis of characteristics that are arbitrary and irrelevant, their fundamental human dignity is violated.

Justice, then, is a central part of ethics and should be given due consideration in our moral lives. In evaluating any moral decision, we must ask whether our actions treat all persons equally. If not, we must determine whether the difference in treatment is justified: are the criteria we are using relevant to the situation at hand? But justice is not the only principle to consider in making ethical decisions. Sometimes principles of justice may need to be
override in favor of other kinds of moral claims such as rights or society's welfare. Nevertheless, justice is an expression of our mutual recognition of each other's basic dignity, and an acknowledgement that if we are to live together in an interdependent community we must treat each other as equals.

4. The Common Good Perspective

- Presents a vision of society as a community whose members are joined in a shared pursuit of values and goals they hold in common.
- The community is comprised of individuals whose own good is inextricably bound to the good of the whole.
- The principle states: "What is ethical is what advances the common good."

Commenting on the many economic and social problems that American society now confronts, Newsweek columnist Robert J. Samuelson recently wrote: "We face a choice between a society where people accept modest sacrifices for a common good or a more contentious society where group selfishly protect their own benefits." Newsweek is not the only voice calling for a recognition of and commitment to the "common good." Daniel Callahan, an expert on bioethics, argues that solving the current crisis in our health care system--rapidly rising costs and dwindling access--requires replacing the current "ethic of individual rights" with an "ethic of the common good".

Appeals to the common good have also surfaced in discussions of business' social responsibilities, discussions of environmental pollution, discussions of our lack of investment in education, and discussions of the problems of crime and poverty. Everywhere, it seems, social commentators are claiming that our most fundamental social problems grow out of a widespread pursuit of individual interests.

What exactly is "the common good", and why has it come to have such a critical place in current discussions of problems in our society? The common good is a notion that originated over two thousand years ago in the writings of Plato, Aristotle, and Cicero. More recently, the contemporary ethicist, John Rawls, defined the common good as "certain general conditions that are...equally to everyone's advantage". The Catholic religious tradition, which has a long history of struggling to define and promote the common good, defines it as "the sum of those conditions of social life which allow social groups and their individual members relatively thorough and ready access to their own fulfillment." The common good, then, consists primarily of having the social systems, institutions, and environments on which we all depend work in a manner that benefits all people. Examples of particular common goods or parts of the common good include an accessible and affordable public health care system, and effective system of public safety and security, peace among the nations of the world, a just legal and political system, and unpolluted natural environment, and a flourishing economic system. Because such systems, institutions, and environments have such a powerful impact on the well-being of members of a society, it is no surprise that virtually every social problem in one way or another is linked to how well these systems and institutions are functioning.

As these examples suggest, the common good does not just happen. Establishing and maintaining the common good require the cooperative efforts of some, often of many, people. Just as keeping a park free of litter depends on each user picking up after himself, so also maintaining the social conditions from which we all benefit requires the cooperative efforts of citizens. But these efforts pay off, for the common good is a good to which all members of society have access, and from whose enjoyment no one can be easily excluded. All persons, for example, enjoy the benefits of clean air or an unpolluted environment, or any of our society's other common goods. In fact, something counts as a common good only to the extent that it is a good to which all have access.
It might seem that since all citizens benefit from the common good, we would all willingly respond to urgings that we each cooperate to establish and maintain the common good. But numerous observers have identified a number of obstacles that hinder us, as a society, from successfully doing so.

First, according to some philosophers, the very idea of a common good is inconsistent with a pluralistic society like ours. Different people have different ideas about what is worthwhile or what constitutes "the good life for human beings", differences that have increased during the last few decades as the voices of more and more previously silenced groups, such as women and minorities, have been heard. Given these differences, some people urge, it will be impossible for us to agree on what particular kind of social systems, institutions, and environments we will all pitch in to support.

And even if we agreed upon what we all valued, we would certainly disagree about the relative values things have for us. While all may agree, for example, that an affordable health system, a healthy educational system, and a clean environment are all parts of the common good, some will say that more should be invested in health than in education, while others will favor directing resources to the environment over both health and education. Such disagreements are bound to undercut our ability to evoke a sustained and widespread commitment to the common good. In the face of such pluralism, efforts to bring about the common good can only lead to adopting or promoting the views of some, while excluding others, violating the principle of treating people equally. Moreover, such efforts would force everyone to support some specific notion of the common good, violating the freedom of those who do not share in that goal, and inevitably leading to paternalism (imposing one group's preference on others), tyranny, and oppression.

A second problem encountered by proponents of the common good is what is sometimes called the "free-rider problem". The benefits that a common good provides are, as we noted, available to everyone, including those who choose not to do their part to maintain the common good. Individuals can become "free riders" by taking the benefits the common good provides while refusing to do their part to support the common good. An adequate water supply, for example, is a common good from which all people benefit. But to maintain an adequate supply of water during a drought, people must conserve water, which entails sacrifices. Some individuals may be reluctant to do their share, however, since they know that so long as enough other people conserve, they can enjoy the benefits without reducing their own consumption. If enough people become free riders in this way, the common good which depends on their support will be destroyed. Many observers believe that this is exactly what has happened to many of our common goods, such as the environment or education, where the reluctance of all person to support efforts to maintain the health of these systems has led to their virtual collapse.

The third problem encountered by attempts to promote the common good is that of individualism. Our historical traditions place a high value on individual freedom, on personal rights, and on allowing each person to "do her own thing". Our culture views society as comprised of separate independent individuals who are free to pursue their own individual goals and interests without interference from others. In this individualistic culture it is difficult, perhaps impossible, to convince people that they should sacrifice some of their freedom, some of their personal goals, and some of their self-interest, for the sake of the "common good". Our cultural traditions, in fact, reinforce the individual who thinks that she should not have to contribute to the community's common good, but should be left free to pursue her own personal ends.

Finally, appeals to the common good are confronted by the problem of an unequal sharing of burdens. Maintaining a common good often requires that particular individuals or particular groups bear costs that are much greater than those borne by others. Maintaining an unpolluted environment, for example, may require that particular firms that pollute
install costly pollution control devices, undercutting profits. Making employment opportunities more equal may require that some groups, such as white males, sacrifice their own employment chances. Making the health system affordable and accessible to all may require that insurers accept lower premiums, that physicians accept lower salaries, or that those with particularly costly diseases or conditions forego the medical treatment on which their live depend. Forcing particular groups or individuals to carry such unequal burdens "for the sake of the common good", is, at least arguably, unjust. Moreover, the prospect of having to carry such heavy and unequal burdens leads such groups and individuals to resist any attempts to secure common goods.

All of these problems pose considerable obstacles to those who call for an ethic of the common good. Still, appeals to the common good ought not to be dismissed. For they urge us to reflect on broad questions concerning the kind of society we want to become and how we are to achieve that society. They also challenge us to view ourselves as members of the same community and, while respecting and valuing the freedom of individuals to pursue their own goals, to recognize and further those goals we share in common.

5. The Ethics and Virtue Perspective

- Focuses on attitudes, dispositions, or character traits that enable us to be and to act in ways that develop our human potential.
- Examples: honesty, courage, faithfulness, trustworthiness, integrity, compassion, etc.
- The principle states: "What is ethical is what develops moral virtues in ourselves and our communities."

For many of us, the fundamental question of ethics is, "What should I do?" or "How should I act?" Ethics is supposed to provide us with "moral principles" or universal rules that tell us what to do. Many people, for example, re passionate adherents of the moral principle of utilitarianism: "Everyone is obligated to do whatever will achieve the greatest good for the greatest number>" Others are just as devoted to the basic principle of Immanuel Kant: "Everyone is obligated to act only in ways that respect the human dignity and moral rights of all persons."

Moral principles like these focus primarily on people's actions and doings. We "apply" them by asking what these principles require of us in particular circumstances, e.g., when considering whether to lie or to commit suicide. We also apply them when we ask what they require of us as professionals, e.g., lawyers, doctors, or business people, or what they require of our social policies and institutions. In the last decade, dozens of ethics centers and programs devoted to "business ethics", "legal ethics", "medical ethics", and "ethics in public policy" have sprung up. These centers are designed to examine the implications moral principles have for our lives.

But are moral principles all that ethics consists of? Critics have rightly claimed that this emphasis on moral principles smacks of a thoughtless and slavish worship of rules, as if the moral life was a matter of scrupulously checking our every action against a table of do's and don'ts. Fortunately, this obsession with principles and rules has been recently challenged by several ethicists who argue that the emphasis on principles ignores a fundamental component of ethics--virtue. These ethicists point out that by focusing on what people should do or how people should act, the "moral principles approach" neglects the more important issue--what people should be. In other words, the fundamental question of ethics is not "What should I do?" but "What kind of person should I be?" According to "virtue ethics", there are certain ideals, such as excellence or dedication to the common good, toward which we should strive and which allow the full development of our
humanity. These ideals are discovered through thoughtful reflection on what we as human beings have the potential to become.

"Virtues" are attitudes, dispositions, or character traits that enable us to be and to act in ways that develop this potential. They enable us to pursue the ideals we have adopted. Honesty, courage, compassion, generosity, fidelity, integrity, fairness, self-control, and prudence are all examples of virtues.

How does a person develop virtues? Virtues are developed through learning and through practice. As the ancient philosopher Aristotle suggested, a person can improve his or her character by practicing self-discipline, while a good character can be corrupted by repeated self-indulgence. Just as the ability to run a marathon develops through much training and practice, so too does our capacity to be fair, to be courageous, or to be compassionate.

Virtues are habits. That is, once they are acquired, they become characteristic of a person. For example, a person who has developed the virtue of generosity is often referred to as a generous person because he or she tends to be generous in all circumstances. Moreover, a person who has developed virtues will be naturally disposed to act in ways that are consistent with moral principles. The virtuous person is the ethical person.

At the heart of the virtue approach to ethics is the idea of "community". A person's character traits are not developed in isolation, but within and by the communities to which he or she belongs, including family, church, school, and other private and public associations. As people grow and mature, their personalities are deeply affected by the values that their communities prize, by the personality traits that their communities encourage, and by the role models that their communities put forth for imitation through traditional stories, fiction, movies, television, and so on. The virtue approach urges us to pay attention to the contours of our communities and the habits of character they encourage and instill.

The moral life, then, is not simply a matter of following moral rules and of learning to apply them to specific situations. The moral life is also a matter of trying to determine the kind of people we should be and of attending to the development of character within our communities and ourselves.