

Ethical Theories

There are generally three philosophical approaches or three ethical theories:

1. Utilitarian
2. Deontological
3. Virtue Theory

1. Utilitarian (Consequential/ Teleological)

The first ethical system in normative ethics, utilitarianism, is often equated with the concept of *'the greatest good for the greatest number'*. The idea behind it is that ethical decisions are made on the basis of the consequences of the action, which is why it is also sometimes called consequentialism. The attraction of this ethical perspective may lie in the fact that it appears to be a way to weigh out the impact of behavior and **determine the greatest good for the greatest number**. While this idea initially may seem appealing, particularly with a field that has a core duty to the public, it does not provide a solid ethical framework for decision-making. There are **three main concerns** that seem to arise when public relations professionals rely on utilitarian ethics to make decisions.

First, rather than looking at the choice or action itself, **decision-makers are forced to guess the potential outcomes of their choice in order to determine what is ethical**. Grunig believes this is a faulty line of reasoning when he suggested that: "We believe, in contrast, the public relations should be based on a worldview that incorporates ethics into the process of public relations rather than on a view that debates the ethics of its outcomes." In other words, ethics should be about the decision-making process, not just the outcome, which can't be guaranteed.

Second, utilitarian ethics also "presents **questions of conflict with regard to which segment of society should be considered most important**" in weighing the "good" or outcome. In other words, if a solution drastically harms a minority group, would it be ethical if the majority benefited from that decision? This seems to contradict the goal of public relations to build mutually beneficial relationships, regardless of the number of people in a particular stakeholder group.

The third objection is that it is **not always possible to predict the outcome of an action**. Bowen points out that “consequences are too unpredictable to be an accurate measure of the ethics of a situations.” In other words, consequences of actions can be highly volatile or impossible, even, to predict. Using outcomes as a measurement of ethics will not, therefore, provide an accurate way for professionals to measure whether decisions are ethical. Professionals must be able to evaluate decisions and choices with concrete ethical guidelines instead of hoping that certain outcomes will result in them having made an ethical choice. Many scholars in public relations identify these issues, as well as others, as evidence that utilitarianism, sometimes called consequentialism due the concept relying on the consequence of a decision, is not as strong of a fit for public relations professional ethics.

2. Deontological

The second prominent concept, deontological ethics, is associated with the father of modern deontology, Immanuel Kant. He was known for the ‘Categorical Imperative’ that looks for transcendent principles that apply to all humans. The idea is that “human beings should be treated with dignity and respect because they have rights.” Put another way, it could be argued that in deontological ethics “people have a duty to respect other people’s rights and treat them accordingly.” The core concept behind this is that there are objective obligations, or duties, that are required of all people. When faced with an ethical situation, then, **the process is simply one of identifying one’s duty and making the appropriate decision**.

There are few **challenges** to this approach:

- 1) Conflicts that arise when there is not an agreement about the principles involved in the decision.
- 2) The implications of making a ‘right’ choice that has bad consequences
- 3) What decisions should be made when duties conflict. These challenges should be considered when relying on this as an ethical system.

However, despite these concerns, many have found that **deontology provides the strongest model for applied public relations ethics**. Bowen, for example, suggests that “deontology is based on the moral autonomy of the individual, similar to the autonomy and freedom from

encroachment that public relations seeks to be considered excellent. That ideological consistency gives the theory posed here a solid theoretical foundation with the practice of public relations as well as a normative theory function.” Similarly, Fitzpatrick & Gauthier suggest, “practitioners need some basis on which to judge the rightness of the decisions they make everyday. They need ethical principles derived from the fundamental values that define their work as a public relations professional.” A key thought in this concept is the assumption that there needs to be some objective morals that professionals rely on in order to determine ethical behavior.

3. Virtue Ethics

The third and growing area of philosophical reasoning with ethics is known as virtue ethics. It has gained more attention in public relations scholarship in recent years. This philosophy stems from Aristotle and is based on the virtues of the person making a decision. The consideration in virtue ethics is essentially “what makes a good person,” or, for the purpose of this discussion, “what makes a good public relations professional?” **Virtue ethics require the decision-maker to understand what virtues are good for public relations and then decisions are made in light of those particular virtues.** For example, if the virtue of honesty is most important for a good public relations professional, then all decisions should be made ethically to ensure honesty is preserved. While this theory is growing in popularity, there are several objections that can be made. First, in terms of the public relations profession, the focus on virtues of the professional themselves seems to miss the importance and role of obligations to clients and publics. The industry is not simply about what public relations people themselves, but ultimately the impact they have on the society. Additionally, it also can face the same obstacle as deontological ethics when having conflicting virtues. There may be a conflict if there is a virtue of loyalty to a client and honesty to the public.

The table given below is showing a comparative analysis of the three ethical theories:

Normative Theory	Definition of 'good'	Focus	Strengths	Weaknesses
Deontological	Fulfillment or discharge of moral obligations	Responsibility, intention & duty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoids overly demanding aspects of consequentialism • Accounting for cross-cultural moral intuitions • Reflects our moral intuitions and captures the sense in which morality 'binds' us like a law • Clear moral boundaries 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Possible conflicts between different duties and rights • Outcome 'blindness' • Inflexibility: rules do not change according to context
Consequentialist	Acting to promote best outcomes	Consequences and outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Captures 'objective' sense of morality • Can incorporate multiple perspectives • A practical approach to ethical problems 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Endorsement of counter-intuitive or objectionable outcomes • Issues surrounding metrics • No necessary link with intention behind actions (which seem in themselves to be significant)
Virtue Ethics	Flourishing (<i>eudemonia</i>)	Individual character and 'well-being' Developing practical wisdom (<i>phronésis</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No complex procedure of decision-making. It trusts that a 'virtuous' person will make good moral choices. • Recognises morality as an holistic, developmental process • Emphasis on enjoying life and it being good to live virtuously • Considers life experiences as a whole • Linked to personal development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Disagreement: 'virtuous' people may not agree on the right thing to do • Problems with proposed link between virtue and flourishing • Struggles to accommodate value plurality • Promotes self-centredness or egoism

These three theories of ethics (utilitarian ethics, deontological ethics, virtue ethics) form the foundation of normative ethics conversations. It is important, however, that public relations professionals also understand how to apply these concepts to the actual practice of the profession. Ethical discussion that focuses on how a professional makes decisions, known as applied ethics, are heavily influenced by the role or purpose of the profession within society.

Sources for the E-Content

Auditing and Corporate Governance, Taxmann's, Anil Kumar, Loveleen Gupta, Jyotsna Rajan Arora, 2nd Edition (January 2019)

Auditing and Corporate Governance, Taxmann's, Aruna Jha, 2nd Edition (January 2019)

<https://pagecentertraining.psu.edu/public-relations-ethics/introduction-to-public-relations-ethics/lesson-1/ethical-theories>

www.tutorialspoint.com/engineering_ethics/engineering_ethical_theories.htm

www.iep.utm.edu/ethics

www.learning-theories.com/ethical-theories-and-frameworks.html

www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category:Ethical_theories

www.businessjargons.com/ethical-theories.html

www.study.com/academy/lesson/ethical-theories-in-business-applications-differences.html

Disclaimer:

1. These notes are only for the students.
2. These notes are prepared after referring various books and websites.