

Ethics Alarms

Concepts and Special Terms

Ethical Analysis Toolkit: Definitions, Principles, Concepts and Special Terms

A large percentage of ethics discussions break down over disputes over definitions and the lack of common terms and concepts. This section contains some useful tools to permit analysis, discussion, and argument to go forward, and to provide a quick reference for readers when one or more of these appear in the Ethics Scoreboard.

Ethicists and scholars will find them overly spare; readers who overdosed on this kind of thing in college will regard them as excessive. The ethicists and scholars will be right, but Ethics Alarms visitors can readily find more thorough and authoritative expositions on the topics that follow on the web sites listed in the links section.

Definitions

[Many discussions of ethics and ethical issues founder on disagreements about definitions. Ethics is unique among disciplines in that practitioners often cannot agree on a common definition of their topic. Ethics Alarms can't solve that problem, which is many centuries old. Here is what key words mean when they are used on this website.]

VALUES: Those qualities of behavior, thought, and character that society regards as being intrinsically good, having desirable results, and worthy of emulation by others.

MORALS: Modes of conduct that are taught and accepted as embodying principles of right and good.

MORALITY: A system of determining right and wrong that is usually established by some authority, such as a church, an organization, a society, a deity, or a government.

ETHICS: The process of determining right and wrong conduct.

ETHICAL SYSTEM: A specific formula for distinguishing right from wrong.

UNETHICAL: An action or conduct which violates the principles of one or more ethical systems, or which is counter to an accepted ethical value, such as honesty.

NON-ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS: Powerful human motivations that are not based on right or wrong, but on considerations of survival and well-being, such as health, security, love, wealth, or self-esteem.

CONCEPTS

Non-Ethical Considerations: Defined above, non-ethical considerations are important because they are often the powerful impediments to ethical conduct, and the cause of many conflicts of interest. Non-ethical considerations are many and diverse, and include:

- The need and desire for shelter, health, wealth, fame, security, self-esteem, reputation, power, professional advancement, comfort, love, sex, praise, credit, appreciation, affection, or satisfaction
- The desire for the health, comfort, safety, welfare and happiness for one's family, loved ones, friends, colleagues, and co-workers
- The pursuit of vengeance or retribution
- Hunger, lust, pain, ambition, prejudice, bias, hatred, laziness, fatigue, disgust, anger, fear
- ...and many more

Ethical Dilemma: This is an ethical problem in which the ethical choice involves ignoring a powerful non-ethical consideration. Do the right thing, but lose your job, a friend, a lover, or an opportunity for advancement. A non-ethical consideration can be powerful and important enough to justify choosing it over the strict ethical action.

Ethical Conflict: When two ethical principles demand opposite results in the same situation, this is an ethical conflict. Solving ethical conflicts may require establishing a hierarchy or priority of ethical principles, or examining the situation through another ethical system.

Ethical Gray Area: Gray areas are situations and problems that don't fit neatly into any existing mode of ethical analysis. In some cases, there may even be a dispute regarding whether ethics is involved.

Reciprocity: The ethical system embodied by The Golden Rule, and given slightly different form in other religions and philosophies. It is a straight-forward way of judging conduct affecting others by putting oneself in the position of those affected. Reciprocity should always be available in any ethical analysis, but it is frequently too simple to be helpful in complex ethical situations with multiple competing interests.

Absolutism: Absolutist systems do not permit any exception to certain ethical principles. The champion of all absolutists, philosopher Immanuel Kant, declared that the ethical act was one that the doer was willing to have stand as a universal principle.

One principle of absolutism is that human beings can never be harmed for any objective, no matter how otherwise worthwhile. Absolutism has the advantage of making tough ethical calls seem easy, and the disadvantage of making debate impossible. One sees absolutism reflected today in the controversies over war, torture, abortion, cloning, and capital punishment.

Utilitarianism: Utilitarianism accepts the existence of ethical conflicts and the legitimacy of some ethical dilemmas, and proposes ethical analysis based on the question, "Which act will result in the greatest good for the greatest number of people?" It entails the balancing of greater and lesser goods, and is useful for unraveling complex ethical problems. Its drawback, or trap, is that utilitarianism can slide

into “The ends justify the means” without some application of absolutist and reciprocity principles.

Consequentialism: In formal ethics, utilitarian schools of philosophy are sometimes lumped together as “consequentialism,” in that the ethical decision-making is based on seeking the best result. Here we just uses the above term, **utilitarianism**. **Consequentialism**, in contrast, is the flawed belief that the rightness or wrongness, or even wisdom, of chosen conduct is measures by its actual results rather than its intended results. If “if all worked out for the best,” in other words, the conduct that created the desirable result most have been ethical, whatever its intent or however the conduct was determined to be necessary or desirable. This is a fallacy.

Cognitive Dissonance: Cognitive dissonance is a psychological phenomenon first identified by Leon Festinger. It occurs when there is a discrepancy between what a person believes, knows and values, and persuasive information that calls these into question. The discrepancy causes psychological discomfort, and the mind adjusts to reduce the discrepancy. In ethics, cognitive dissonance is important in its ability to alter values, such as when an admired celebrity embraces behavior that his or her admirers deplore. Their dissonance will often result in changing their attitudes toward the behavior. Dissonance also leads to rationalizations of unethical conduct, as when the appeal and potential benefits of a large amount of money makes unethical actions to acquire it seem less objectionable than if they were applied to smaller amounts.

Moral Luck: The common situation where an unethical act is only discovered, noticed, or deemed worthy of condemnation due to unpredictable occurrences that come as a result of the act or that affect its consequences. Moral luck is the difference, for example, between two mildly intoxicated drivers, one of whom arrives home without incident, while the other has an unwary child dash in front of his automobile, leading to a fatal accident that he couldn't have avoided if completely sober. Yet the unlucky driver will be a pariah in the community, while the more fortunate driver goes on with his life.

Special Terms Used on Ethics Alarms

Authentic Frontier Gibberish (AFG): Intentionally (or sometimes just incompetently) incoherent double-talk used by politicians, advocates, lawyers, celebrities, con artists and wrong-doers to deceive, obfuscate, confuse, bore, or otherwise avoid transparency, admitting fault, accepting accountability or accepting uncomfortable truths. The term comes from “Blazing Saddles,” [in this memorable scene](#).

Bizarro World: In Superman Comics, Bizarro World was a weird cube-shaped planet populated by flawed and mentally deficient clones of Superman and Lois Lane. On the planet, everything was counter-intuitive and the reverse of what would be sensible and normal on Earth: the Bizarros said hello when they meant good-bye, and ate the dinner plates while throwing out the dinner. The term Bizarro World is used on the blog to describe cultures with unethical ethical norms, often with the lesson that in a Bizarro World culture, normal ethics often don't work, and may be futile.

Ethics Chess: The technique of recognizing how certain actions might trigger ethics dilemmas, conflicts and problems before they actually arise, and planning several steps ahead to avoid these if possible.

Ethics Corrupter: An ethics corrupter is someone, usually a celebrity, a public official or an

accomplished and successful individual, who behaves unethically and forces those who admire him or her, or what they have achieved, to defend indefensible conduct as a matter of loyalty or cognitive dissonance. As a result, the defenders warp their own values, using rationalizations to excuse or justify conduct they once correctly understood was wrong. Ethics corrupter degrade the culture by abusing their positions of influence in society to mislead those who admire them, often for legitimate reasons. Among the many ethics corrupters who have lowered the public's understanding of and dedication to ethical behavior in recent times: **Lance Armstrong, Barry Bonds, Woody Allen, Tom Brady, Donald Trump, Bill Cosby, Bill Maher, Harry Reid, Dick Cheney, Donna Brazile, Jose Fernandez, and the Clintons.**

The Ethics Incompleteness Principle: Czech-born mathematician Kurt Gödel's two Incompleteness Theorems, which relate to mathematical proofs, are merely the inspiration for this observation that applies to normative rules, systems, moral codes, laws and other principles. The human language is not sufficiently precise to define a rule that will work in every instance. There are always anomalies on the periphery of every normative system, no matter how sound or well articulated. If one responds to an anomaly by trying to amend the rule or system to accommodate it, the integrity of the rule or system is disturbed, and perhaps ruined. Yet if one stubbornly applies the rule or system without amendment to the anomaly anyway, one may reach an absurd conclusion or an unjust result. The Ethics Incompleteness Principle suggests that when a system or rule doesn't seem to work well when applied to an unexpected or unusual situation, the wise response is to abandon the system or rule—in that one anomalous case only—and use basic ethics principles and analysis to find the best solution. Then return to the system and rules as they were, without altering them to make the treatment of the anomalous situation "consistent."

No system or rule is going to work equally well with every possible scenario, which is why committing to a single ethical system is folly, and why it is important to keep basic ethical values in mind in case a pre-determined formula for determining what is right breaks down.

Ethics Zugzwang

From the chess term "zugzwang," describing a board where the player with the next move worsens his position regardless of which move he chooses. Ethics Zugzwang occurs when all the opportunity to choose ethical options has passed. Any course of action will have unethical consequences.

The Julie Principle

The Julie Principle comes into play when an undesirable or annoying characteristic or behavior pattern in a person or organization appears to be hard-wired and part of their essence. In judging such a person or entity, it is useful to keep the lyrics of Julie's song from "Show Boat" ("*Can't Help Lovin' That Man O' Mine,*" lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein Jr., music by Jerome Kern) firmly in mind, when she sings...

Fish gotta swim, birds gotta fly...

I've gotta love that man til I die

Can't help lovin' that man of mine!

The Niggardly Principles

- **The First Niggardly Principle:** Several years ago, a white Washington D.C. government worker was fired for using the word “niggardly” in the work place. His language was found to be racially insensitive to those whose vocabulary was so limited they didn’t know that the word had nothing to do with race. This incident embarrassed the D.C. government, which is used to being embarrassed, and inflamed pedants. Eventually the worker was reinstated, and the First Niggardly Principle was born, which is as follows...

“No one should be criticized or penalized because someone takes racial, ethnic, religious or other offense at their conduct or speech due to the ignorance, bias or misunderstanding by the offended party.”

- **The Second Niggardly Principle:** Imagine, however, a scenario in which the restored government worker with the good vocabulary decided to use the word niggardly at every opportunity, in the presence of those who were most offended by it. Let’s even say he decided to do it, not to aggravate them, but to make sure they understood the word, in the hopes that they would add it to their vocabulary and that of their families. And that his response to any criticism of his aggressive use of a word he knew bothered some of his co-workers—just because of the way the word sounds, and the uncomfortable associations they had to that sound when uttered by a white man—was to say, “Well, you’re just infringing on my right to free speech, you know. And you are discriminating against me, presuming ill will when in fact I am doing nothing that is either wrong or harmful.” Would that be ethical conduct on the part of the erudite worker?

It would not. It would be unkind, unreasonable and insensitive conduct, because nothing in his job required him to use a word that he knew was, reasonably or not, going to upset his co-workers and be perceived, accurately or not, as a deliberately disrespectful act. This is where Niggardly Principle Two comes in, which says...

“When an individual or group can accomplish its legitimate objectives without engaging in speech or conduct that will offend individuals whose basis for the supposed offense is emotional, mistaken or ignorant, but is not malicious and is based on well-established impulses of human nature, it is unethical to intentionally engage in such speech or conduct.”

- **The Third Niggardly Principle** moderates the Second, in situations where capitulating to sincerely expressed and felt sensitivity may lead to a precedent that will do tangible harm to society, culture, individual rights and personal freedoms. It declares:

“When, however, suppressing speech and conduct based on an individual’s or a group’s sincere claim that such speech or conduct is offensive, however understandable and reasonable this claim may be, creates or threatens to create a powerful precedent that will undermine freedom of speech, expression or political opinion elsewhere, calls to

suppress the speech or conduct must be opposed and rejected.”

Ethics Train Wrecks : Ethics train wrecks are chains of unethical conduct created by a central unethical action. As the event becomes more complex and involves more participants, it becomes increasingly difficult to sort out right from wrong, and all parties who become involved with the episode in any way are at risk of engaging in unethical conduct themselves, intentionally or inadvertently.

The “Awww!” Factor: The “Awww!” Factor occurs when particular conduct seems loving, caring and nice, but is in fact unethical in one or more respects. Such conduct creates such a positive emotion-based sentimental response that valid ethical analysis becomes difficult or impossible. It is frequently accompanied by the rationalization known as “The Saint’s Excuse,” which endorses unethical conduct that is the result of good intentions.

The “Ick” Factor: The Ick Factor occurs when experts, commentators, journalists or the public conclude that an act, activity, conduct or a new technological development is dangerous or unethical simply because it is strange, distasteful, or otherwise causes an unsettled feeling in the gut based more on fear and confusion than on rational, ethical analysis.

Signature Significance: The concept is the creation of baseball statistics genius Bill James, who applied it to baseball performance. Signature significance posits that a single act can be so remarkable that it has predictive and analytical value, and should not be dismissed as statistically insignificant. Thus, in James’ example, certain outstanding pitching performances can prove that the pitcher involved is an outstanding one, because average pitchers literally never reach such levels of excellence, even as a one-time fluke. Ethics Alarms employs the term to describe an extreme ethical or unethical act that similarly reveals the true character of the individual responsible for the conduct, and that can be reliably and fairly used to predict future conduct and trustworthiness.

The Pazuzu Excuse: Pazuzu is the demon that possesses Regan, a 12-year-old girl, in the horror classic, “The Exorcist.” Reagan says horrible things when possessed, but of course, it isn’t really her talking. When public figures who have been recorded or videotaped saying hateful, bigoted, or otherwise offensive things claim that they “didn’t mean” what they said and that the sentiments “are antithetical to my real views,” they are refusing to be accountable for their own words by asserting that people just spontaneously, for example, denigrate Jews when they have never harbored an anti-Semitic thought in their lives. This absurd and cowardly excuse avoids accountability by suggesting that someone, or something else, was speaking...like the demon Pazuzu.

The Ruddigore Fallacy: Also known as “moral licensing,” the Ruddigore Fallacy is the belief that unethical conduct can be erased with sufficient good conduct by the same person or organization, and that, sufficient good conduct entitles a group or individual to engage in unethical conduct with less criticism and negative consequences than a less accomplished individual or group should receive for the same misconduct.

In the excellent Gilbert and Sullivan operetta *Ruddigore*, W.S. Gilbert lampooned this concept. A family curse compels a baronet to commit a crime a day. In the operetta’s first act, the current victim of the curse, Despard Murgatroyd, explains his scheme to foil the curse:

"I get my crime over the first thing in the morning, and then, ha! ha! for the rest of the day I do good! I do good! I do good! Two days since, I stole a child... built an orphan asylum. Yesterday I robbed a bank...and endowed a bishopric. To-day I carry off Rose Maybud and atone with a cathedral!"

Fick: Named in honor of Leroy Fick, a lottery winner who kept receiving food stamps because of a quirk in state law, a fick is someone who openly and blatantly violates social norms of responsibility, honesty or fairness without shame or remorse.

The Knight Scale: A 10 point scale used to rank the outrageousness of manufactured accusations of racism. Inspired by [journalist Christopher Knight](#).

The Naked Teacher Principle: The Principle states that a secondary school teacher or administrator (or other role model for children) who allows pictures of himself or herself to be widely publicized, as on the web, showing the teacher naked or engaging in sexually provocative poses, cannot complain when he or she is dismissed by the school as a result. The first formulation of the NTP can be found [here](#).

The Jumbo Award: The Jumbo is named after the famous moment in the 1935 musical (and 1962 movie adaptation) "[Jumbo](#)" in which a clown, played in both by the sublime Jimmy Durante, is trying to sneak the largest elephant in the world out of the circus, which has been seized by creditors. A sheriff intercepts the would-be elephant-napper, and demands, "Where do you think you are going with that elephant?" To which Durante's character replies innocently, as if the pachyderm at the end of the rope in his hand is invisible, "*Elephant? What elephant?*" The Jumbo Award is periodically awarded to an ethical miscreant who continues to try to brass his or her way out of an obvious act of ethical misconduct when caught red-handed and there is no hope of ducking the consequences.

KABOOM! : A designation used to describe unethical conduct so outrageous and egregious that it makes my head explode. Metaphorically, of course. I hope.

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