Traditional ethical theories – Lecture guide

What is Ethics

- Ethics is a generic term for various ways of understanding and examining the **moral** life

- Is there a distinction between Ethics and Morality?

- There is a distinction between them in philosophy.

- Strictly speaking, morality is used to refer to what we would call moral standards and moral conduct, while ethics is used to refer to the formal **study** of those standards and conduct. For this reason, the study of ethics is also often called "moral philosophy."

What is Ethics in the context of health care?

- Ethics is a system of principles and rules of conduct that helps determine right from wrong actions when values clash.

- Ethics helps us appreciate the choices that others make, and the justifications they provide for their actions.

- Ethics requires us to be open-minded, and to take a variety of perspectives into consideration.

What is an 'Ethical Issue?'

- An *Ethical Issue* is any dilemma that represents:

    - A conflict of values (organizational, personal, professional) and ethical principles

    - A violation of commonly accepted ethical principles

    - A significant undue hardship or inappropriate harm to any stakeholder

In health care, ethics helps us decide:

- What we should do
- Why we should do it
- How we should do it

Identifying Ethical Issues

- Ethical issues can be clearly visible or hidden within the complexity of health care

- They are present at all levels of care and within all service areas: acute care, long-term care, community services, etc.

- Issues can be clinical, organizational, or research-based; case or non-case based

- Ethical issues are typically both clinical and organizational

Ethical theories

- Frameworks within which agents can reflect on the **acceptability** of actions and can **evaluate** moral judgments and moral character

- How information, competing values, and interests are **organized** as to answer and determine **"What should I do?"**

- Every ethical decision has to be justified with convincing reasons

Ethical theories

- Consequence-Based or Teleological theory

    ◦ E.g. Utilitarianism

- Obligation-Based or Deontological theory

    ◦ E.g. Kantianism

- Other ethical theories

    ◦ Principle-based approach

    ◦ Religious ethics

Utilitarianism: Key Features

1. **Consequences**: "The right action is determined by the good" and the ultimate "good" in life is often argued to be happiness or pleasure
2. **Maximization:** If the ultimate good in life is happiness, then the more happiness we have the better. The right thing to do is to "maximize happiness and minimize suffering."
3. **Impartiality:** When bringing about more happiness in the world, no person's happiness counts for more than the happiness of another. The right action will be the one that brings about the greatest amount of happiness overall.

Utilitarianism

- **Principle of Utility**

- One should always act in such a way as to <u>bring about the greatest good</u> and the least harm for the greatest number of people.

Utilitarianism – Problems to Consider

- Utilitarianism does not define the good to be maximized or the harm to be minimized (But utilitarian philosophers have attempted to do so)

- How do we define the good? Is it Happiness?

    ◦ Is good defined by our intuition?

    ◦ Is good defined by looking at nature/what is natural?

- ◦ Is good what society prefers?

- Why might happiness be the greatest good?

- What about a person's intentions, feelings, or convictions?

- How do we calculate the consequences of every action?

Deontological Ethics

- A moral system based on *what we have a duty to do,* not based on consequences of actions

- We have reason to do something because it is good in itself (e.g. do not tell a lie)

- Reasoning focuses on following

    - ◦ Rules

    - ◦ Principles

    - ◦ Codes of Ethics

Deontology – Kantian Ethics

- To determine what we should do, ask:

    - ◦ What if everyone were to do that? Is my maxim Universal?

    - ◦ Do you use others to serve your needs? Do others use you?

Deontology: Key Features

- **Deontological constraints:** There are some actions that are right or wrong regardless of their consequences or the goods they bring about ("duties")

- **Categorical Imperative (Formula of Universal Law):** A test for deciding whether what you are considering is the moral thing to do is whether you can consistently make it into a general rule that everyone must follow. "Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law." (Categorical Imperative 1)

- **Categorical Imperative (Formula of Humanity):** The right thing to do is to always treat people at least in part as "ends in themselves" - not as a means to something else but as centers of experience, choice and rational thought. "Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only." (Categorical Imperative 2)

Problems with Deontological Theories

- The problem of conflicting obligations

    - ◦ It is possible that a deontological theory would require us to have obligations that conflict in situations where both obligations could be met. Promise keeping versus duty of care (e.g. "do no harm").

- Overemphasizing rules while under-emphasizing relationships

    ◦ If moral responsibilities in relationships among friends and family exist, they are not considered under deontological theories.

- Abstractness without content

    ◦ Lacks the power to develop specific duties especially in everyday morality. Instead, deontological theories generally present overarching duties or rules to follow (e.g. do not lie).

Religious Ethics

- Ethics is within a particular faith/belief system

    ◦ E.g. Islam, Buddhism or Christianity.

    ◦ Dictates what is good/bad or moral/immoral because it is "God's will".

    ◦ E.g. In vitro fertilization (IVF), pregnancy termination, euthanasia/assisted death/Medical Assistance in Dying (MAID), palliative sedation

    ◦ The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantees freedom of religion

- How should organizations accommodate religious convictions?

Building Our Ethics Toolkit: Two Families of Moral Values

In traditional ethical theories, we might suggest two families of moral values:

1. Goods - Happiness and well-being, pleasure, the relief of pain

2. Rights and Duties - Respect for persons, fairness, justice, treating others as equals

Two Approaches to Understanding and Applying Ethical Theories

According to one view:

A theory of ethics is a set of rules or procedures that, when applied correctly, predictably produce "good" or "right" or "best" decisions and actions

- Example: Jeremy Bentham's *Hedonic Calculus (Consequentialist)*

Such a calculus is meant to help us determine what we should do, or how we should act. In our calculus, the variables of pleasure and pain are measured by considering the following:

- Intensity: How strong is the pleasure?

- Duration: How long will the pleasure last?

- Certainty: How likely or unlikely is it that the pleasure will occur?

- Propinquity or remoteness: How soon will the pleasure occur?

- Fecundity The probability that the action will be followed by sensations of the same kind.

- Purity: The probability that it will not be followed by sensations of the opposite kind.

- Extent: How many people will be affected?

In essence, one must add up the "pleasures," and repeat with "pains." Subtract one from the other. Do this exercise for each person affected and then aggregate the results.

Ethical Theories as Lenses

According to a second view:

- Each ethical theory highlights important features of moral deliberation and decision making but no single theory does all the work on its own

- Theories are better thought of as a set of lenses which allow us to look at and explore as many moral dimensions of a problem as possible, from several different angles. One example of doing so, is to use "Principlism" in decision making.

References

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