
Basic Approaches

There are many approaches to ethics, but we can group most of them under six different models.

Duty Ethics. This is often called “deontological ethics”—from Greek *deon*—that which is obligatory or a duty. Actions are right or wrong to the extent that they are fulfillment of duty. Duty theories differ as to where to find human duties defined—usually in God, in reason, or in history. A duty ethics considers actions as intrinsically right or wrong in themselves regardless of their consequences. This approach is nearly the opposite of Outcome Ethics. So you cannot torture spies even if the outcome is morally preferable, like the early ending of a war. Proponents include Immanuel Kant and Paul Ramsey.

Outcomes Ethics. Also called “teleological ethics,” from *telos*, the end or the goal. Actions are judged to be morally good in light of expected outcomes.

Goal Ethics. An act *right* only if the acting person's *goal* is to produce the best available balance of good over bad. The goals approach abandons any claim to moral certainty. So you *can* torture spies if it simply promises to shorten a war. A leading proponent is John Stuart Mill. Critics fault goal ethics for its focus on people's good or bad *intentions*, without consideration of uncertainties about consequences.

Consequentialist Ethics. An outcomes theory that the rightness or wrongness of actions depends on their actual consequences. The action is made right or wrong *after* its performance. The end justifies the means. "All's well that ends well." Advocates include James Burtness. Critics find fault in the focus on outcomes for individuals, rather than the general population, and in the absence of criteria for determining what outcomes are *objectively* better.

Utilitarian Ethics. An outcomes theory that maintains that an action is right if it produces the greatest good for the greatest number. (Note that "utilitarian" does not equate to "useful.") It points to pleasure and happiness as criteria for what is objectively better. Critics point out that it provides no justice for minorities and ignores the possibility of intrinsically bad acts like torturing babies. Leading proponents are Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill.

Natural Law Ethics. The natural order of things is good. People must not violate that order. The origins of Natural Law theory go back as far as the ancient Greeks (Sophocles' play, "Antigone," c. 442 BCE) but are famously developed by Thomas Aquinas (c. 1250 CE). The fundamental natural law is to protect oneself and the innocent. From these can be derived the rules about living, procreating, creating a civil society and worshiping God. The Roman Catholic Church is the prominent exponent of Natural Law Ethics today, manifested particularly in official documents opposing artificial contraception and abortion.

Virtue Ethics. Also called Character Ethics. Morality does not find its basis in the action but the actor. The focus is primarily on character, not conduct. Character ethics draw on Aristotle's understanding of the four primary virtues: prudence, justice, courage, and temperance. Proponents include Alasdair MacIntyre, Stanley Hauerwas, and Gilbert Meilaender. See <http://www.iep.utm.edu/v/virtue.htm>

Situation Ethics. An ethics based on the virtue of love in concrete situations. (Note that "situation ethics" does not draw its criteria exclusively from what is publically observed about a "situation.") Joseph Fletcher proposed this view in the 1960s as an alternative to legalistic and natural-law codes of ethics that dominated Christian ethical thought. He argued that the morally right thing to do depended on many factors in specific situations but ultimately was that which was most loving in that particular situation. The love Fletcher meant was agape or unconditional love. The theory has been rejected by some Christian Churches, most notably the Roman Catholic.