

# ETHICS BACKGROUND

## Comparison of Main Ethical Perspectives

Ethical THEORY	MORAL RULES and DUTIES	VIRTUES	OUTCOMES	PRINCIPLES	CARE
Other Names	Duty-Based (Deontological) or Rights-Based Ethics	Virtue-based Ethics	Consequentialist Ethics (Utilitarian)	Principle-Based Ethics	Care-based Ethics
Focus	Act	Agent	Consequence	Context	Power/ Relationships
Description	Actions (independent of consequences) are right or wrong. We are all obliged to fulfill our duties and to act to fulfill these duties	Attitudes, dispositions, or character traits enable us to be and to act in ways that develop our human potential (for example, honesty, trustworthiness, integrity, faithfulness, etc.)	Consequence of actions or policies must uphold the well-being of all persons directly or indirectly affected. Choose actions producing greatest overall benefits	Four principles form a set of pillars for moral life; respect for persons/ autonomy, justice, beneficence (do good), and nonmaleficence (do no harm)	Focuses on relationships and underlying power structures within a situation
What would a person from such an approach say?	“Whenever I am _____, I shall _____. Whenever anyone is _____, he or she will _____.”  “The ends do not justify the means.”	“What is ethical is what develops moral virtues in ourselves and our community.”  “It takes a virtuous person to act in a virtuous manner; if you always act in a virtuous manner, you are a virtuous person.”	“Of any two actions, the most ethical one will produce the greatest balance of benefits.”  “The ends do justify the means.”	“Uphold the pillars whenever possible according to the situation.”  “Take the agent, act, and consequence all into consideration and proceed in the path that follows the principles.”	“What is not being said?” “What are the underlying power relationships and how do they influence actions?” “How can we value relationships?”
Some Contributions	-Offers consistent rules to follow -Recognizes role-related duties in society	Encourages cultivation of human excellence	-Directs attention to consequences -Considers interests of all persons equally	-Requires balancing -Draws on principles familiar to American life	-Provides counterpoint to principle-based approaches -Looks at context
Some Challenges	Sometimes obligations conflict	Lack of consensus regarding essential virtues	-Bad acts are permissible -Interests of the majority can override minority -Can't predict all outcomes	Principles can conflict	-Power structures not always evident -Lacks easily applied rules/ principles

*Adapted with permission from Laura Bishop, Ph.D., Kennedy Institute of Ethics, Georgetown University, and Wendy Law, Ph.D., Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center.*