

The Lifeboat

Summary

Students discuss an ethical dilemma that is readily comprehensible – who to save in a lifeboat. The various ethical perspectives can be derived in students’ own words. Alternatively, each group can assume one perspective and analyze their choices through that lens.

Student Handouts: Ethical Group Discussion – The Lifeboat

Teacher Instructions

Discussions about the lifeboat are influenced strongly by how the question is posed. Be sure to allow room for solutions that maximize fairness (i.e. drawing straws) by asking students to focus on how they are making their decision. Students often default to solutions that are outcome-based. It is useful to be able to show that there are other approaches that can be applied.

Although the lifeboat scenario does not directly address science, it has many applications to issues that may pertain to a science classroom. Examples are organ allocation (who should get the scarce organ for transplant?) and vaccine distribution (who should receive scarce supplies of vaccine?)

Provide students with the scenario, and specify how long they have to discuss it.

Have each group identify someone to explain *how* the decision was reached, and provide justification. From the debriefing, derive elements of the ethical theories. Also discuss some of the confusion, conflicts, benefits and limitations of each ethical theory.

Variation

Assign each group an ethical perspective, and ask them to base their decisions on that perspective. Refer to the ‘Ethics as a Discipline’ section of the Primer for more information about each perspective.

Moral Rules Groups may choose a rule such as “every life counts” in which case a certain set of people get chosen according to these rules, for example, by lottery.

Virtues Based Groups may hold “achievement” or “justice” as their priority, in which case a certain set of people gets chosen according to who demonstrates the greatest possession of these virtues. In the interest of time, have the group choose one virtue as their priority.

Outcomes Based Groups may weigh how much benefit saving each person has on the person, other people, or society, in which case the most “beneficially effective” people get chosen.

Principles Based Groups may try to weigh and balance all four central principles, in which case a certain set of people gets chosen according to the group consensus on this process. This group tends to have the most difficulty in deciding on the survivors (especially due to the time limitations).

Care Based Groups may decide to serve the typically underserved or honor the most equitable relationships, in which case a certain group get chosen according to these criteria.

Some of our teachers recommend doing the lifeboat twice – once without mention of perspectives, and a second time by assigning students to an ethical perspective, or asking them to compare all perspectives in terms of which individuals should be chosen.

Ethical Group Discussion: The Lifeboat

Discuss the following scenario, and reach a decision as a group.

Someone should be prepared to explain *how* you reached your decision. Best of luck!

Scenario

The ship is sinking and the seas are rough. All but one lifeboat has been destroyed. The lifeboat holds a maximum of six people. There are ten people that want to board the lifeboat. The four individuals who do not board the boat will certainly die.

Woman who thinks she is six weeks pregnant

Lifeguard

Two young adults who recently married

Senior citizen who has fifteen grandchildren

Elementary school teacher

Thirteen year old twins

Veteran nurse

Captain of the ship

Notes and Result of the Discussion:

Classic Ethical Dilemmas

Summary

Students use simple classic dilemmas to learn about or reinforce their understanding of ethical theories and perspectives

Student Handout: Classic Ethical Dilemmas

Teacher Instructions

Before learning about ethical perspectives:

Have small groups of students brainstorm their solutions to the various problems. Use the discussion as a way to teach the ethical perspectives by introducing them and showing how each dilemma would be addressed using that theoretical lens.

After learning the ethical perspectives:

If students have already been exposed to ethical perspectives and theories, these dilemmas are a way of reinforcing that learning. Ask students to develop answers to the dilemmas from the various perspectives.

Note: These dilemmas can also be used in conjunction with the 'Introduction to the Decision-Making Model' activity. Additional sample cases are provided in the Appendix.

Classic Ethical Dilemmas

The 'Heinz' Dilemma

Mr. Heinz is ordinarily a law-abiding man. One day, his wife becomes gravely ill. Heinz takes her to the doctor, who prescribes a medication for her. She does quite well on this medication and begins to recover. However, Heinz has no insurance and runs out of money quickly paying for this expensive medication. After a few months, he can no longer purchase the medication and his wife begins to take a turn for the worse. One day, he is in the pharmacy and notices that no one is behind the counter. The medication is in plain view. Should he steal the medication to help his sick wife?

The Old Woman in the Airport

You are in the airport, trying to catch a flight that is about to leave. As you run down the crowded corridor, an elderly woman suddenly slips in front of you and falls to the ground with a cry. Do you stop to help, if you know you will miss your flight because of it?

The 'Trolley'

Trolley Scenario 1

A trolley is running out of control down a track. In its path are 5 people who have been tied to the track by a mad philosopher. Fortunately, you can flip a switch which will lead the trolley down a different track. Unfortunately, there is a single person tied to that track. Should you flip the switch? Why?

Trolley Scenario 2

As before, a trolley is hurtling down a track towards five people. You are on a bridge under which it will pass, and you can stop it by dropping a heavy weight in front of it. As it happens, there is a man next to you - your only way to stop the trolley is to push him over the bridge and onto the track, killing him to save five. Should you proceed? Why? How is this case different from the first?

The Old Woman in the Airport is modified from Zimmer, C, *Whose Life Would You Save?* Discover, April 2004

The Trolley Problem originates from Philippa Foot, *The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of the Double Effect in Virtues and Vices* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1978). It has been elaborated on by Judith Jarvis Thomson, *Killing, Letting Die, and the Trolley Problem*, 59 *The Monist* 204-17 (1976) and Judith Jarvis Thomson, *The Trolley Problem*, 94 *Yale Law Journal* 1395-1415 (1985). Modified from Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trolley_Problem