Ethical Frameworks Cheat Sheet

Description. This handout summarizes the ethical frameworks introduced in Week 2 of class. It also highlights some important distinctions to consider when making ethical judgments. Use this handout as you consider the ethical case studies explored in class, and also as you consider current events.

Deontological Theories (influential thinker: Emmanuel Kant)
- Stress duty and absolute rules, irrespective of consequences in particular cases
- Logic or reason forms foundation for ethical rules
- Logic or reason = good; irrationality = evil: act according to logic or reason, not your emotions
- Principle of Universality: Rules must be applicable to everyone
- People are not means to ends, but ends in themselves. Treat people accordingly.
- Problems with deontological theories
  - Absolute rules do not take into account circumstances in which breaking the rule could have good consequences
  - It is difficult to agree on a set of absolute rules

Utilitarianism (influential thinker: John Stuart Mill)
- Main guiding principle: maximize “utility”—that which satisfies peoples’ needs and values
- Actions may increase utility for some, and decrease it for others
- Act utilitarianism: Calculate net utility that results from each act, acknowledging that an act may increase utility for some people, but decrease utility for others
- Rule utilitarianism applies utility calculations to rules instead of acts, e.g., if “do not steal” generally results in increased utility, then it is a good rule.
- Problems with act utilitarianism
  - Difficult to determine consequences of an act on all people
  - Difficult to determine how utility for different people should be weighted
  - Difficult to measure utility
  - Act utilitarianism does not respect individual rights

Natural Rights (influential thinker: John Locke)
- People should be allowed to act freely according to their own decisions and judgments
- We need to respect fundamental rights of others, including life, liberty, and property
- According to some, such fundamental rights can be derived from nature or human nature
- Natural rights perspective emphasizes process over result: Acts are likely to be ethical if they allow people to interact and engage freely and voluntarily, without coercion
- Problems with act natural rights
  - Allowing people to act freely may have negative consequences on others
  - Difficult to determine which individual rights should be “fundamental” and preserved, and to what extent.

Key Distinctions
- Ethically obligatory vs. ethically prohibited vs. ethically acceptable
- Negative rights (i.e., liberties) allow one to act without interference, whereas positive rights (i.e., claim rights) require one to provide something for others; they often are in conflict
- Needlessly causing harm may be wrong, but whether an act causes harm does not in itself determine whether the act is ethical
- Means vs. ends: An end could be ethical, but the means used to achieve the end may not
- If you choose not to help advocate a position you find unethical, you are acting based on personal preference, not ethics. There is nothing unethical about advocating a position.
- Some laws enforce ethical rules; some laws establish conventions; and some laws are the result of political pressure