



# SNS COLLEGE OF ENGINEERING

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AN AUTONOMOUS INSTITUTION



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## ETHICAL THEORIES

### ETHICAL THEORIES:

Uses and Criteria:

The ethical theories are useful in many respects.

1. In understanding moral dilemma. They provide clarity, consistency, systematic and comprehensive understanding.
2. It provides helpful practical guidance in moral issues towards the solution.
3. Justifying professional obligations and decisions, and
4. In relating ordinary and professional morality.

Different criteria may be applied for evaluating various ethical theories and deciding upon the best.

1. The theory must be clear and (coherent) formulated with concepts that are logically connected.
2. It must be internally consistent, i.e., none of its principles conflicts with any other
3. The theory and its defense must depend, only upon facts.
4. It must organize basic moral values in systematic and comprehensive manner. It is to fix priority of values and provide guidance in all situations
5. It must provide guidance compatible with our moral convictions (judgments) about concrete situations. For example, if an ethical theory says that it is all right for engineers to make explosive devices without the informed consent of the public, we can conclude that the theory is inadequate.

Theories and judgments are continually adjusted to each other until we reach a reflective equilibrium. Most of the theories converge towards the welfare of the humanity. The duty ethics and right ethics differ in great extent on their emphasis. But they remain complementary always.

Ethical Theories/Approaches:

Several ethical theories have been developed over different times, each of them stressing certain ethical principles or features. Each stresses a view and many a times, we find that these theories converge and reinforce the ethics, in deciding upon the actions and justifying the results.

Utilitarian Theory:

The term Utilitarianism was conceived in the 19th century by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill to help legislators determine which laws were morally best. They suggested that the standard of right conduct is maximization of good consequences. Good consequences mean either 'utilities' or the 'balance of good over evil'. This approach weighs the costs and benefits. Right actions are the ones that produce the greatest satisfaction of the preferences of the affected persons. In analyzing an issue in this approach, we have to:

- (a) Identify the various courses of action available to us.

(b) Ask who will be affected by each action and what benefits or harms will be derived from each.

(c) Choose the action that will produce the greatest benefits and the least harm. The ethical action is the one that provides the greatest good for the greatest number.

The ACT UTILITARIAN theory proposed by J.S. Mill (1806-73) focuses on actions, rather than on general rules. An action is right, if it generates the most overall good for the most people involved.

The RULE UTILITARIAN theory, developed by Richard Brandt (1910-97), stressed on the rules, such as 'do not steal', 'do no harm others', 'do not bribe', as of primary importance. He suggested that individual actions are right when they are required by set of rules which maximizes the public good.

The act utilitarian theory permitted a few immoral actions. Hence, there was need to develop rule utilitarian theory to establish morality and justice, in the transactions. For example, stealing an old computer from the employer will benefit the employee more than the loss to the employer. As per Act, utilitarian this action is right. But rule utilitarian observes this as wrong, because the employee should act as 'faithful agent or trustee of the employees'. In another example, some undisciplined engineers are terminated with the blame for the mistakes they have not committed. The process is unfair although this results in promotion of overall good.

## 2. Duty Ethics

A. The duty ethics theory, proposed by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) states, that actions are consequences of performance of one's duties such as, 'being honest', 'not cause suffering of others', 'being fair to others including the meek and weak', 'being grateful', 'keeping promises' etc. The stress is on the universal principle of respect for autonomy i.e., respect and rationality of persons. As per Kant we have duties to ourselves, as we are rational and autonomous beings. We have a duty not to commit suicide; a duty to develop our talents and a duty to avoid harmful drugs. Kant insisted that moral duties are categorical imperatives. They are commands that we impose on ourselves as well as other rational beings. For example, we should be honest because honesty is required by duty. A businessman is to be honest because honesty pays — in terms of profits from customers and from avoiding jail for dishonesty.

B. On the other hand, the DUTY ethics theory, as enunciated by John Rawls, gave importance to the actions that would be voluntarily agreed upon by all persons concerned, assuming impartiality. His view emphasized the autonomy each person exercises in forming agreements with other rational people.

## 3. Rights Theory:

Rights are entitlement to act or to have another individual act in a certain way. Minimally, rights serve as a protective barrier, shielding individuals from unjustified infringement of their moral agency by others. For every right, we have a corresponding duty of noninterference.

### Human rights:

Human rights are explained in two forms, namely liberty rights and welfare rights. Liberty rights are rights to exercise one's liberty and stresses duties on other people not to interfere with one's freedom. The four features of liberty rights (also called moral rights), which lay the base for Government Administration, are:

1. Rights are natural in so far as they are not invented or created by government.
2. They are universal, as they do not change from country to country.

3. They are equal since the rights are the same for all people, irrespective of caste, race, creed or sex.
4. They are inalienable i.e., one cannot hand over his rights to another person such as selling oneself to slavery. The Welfare Rights are the rights to benefit the needy for a decent human life, when one can not earn those benefits and when those benefits are available in the society.

#### Economic rights:

In the free-market economy, the very purpose of the existence of the manufacturer, the sellers and the service providers is to serve the consumer. The consumer is eligible to exercise some rights<sup>9</sup>. The consumers' six basic rights are: Right to Information, Right to Safety, Right to Choice, Right to be Heard, Right to Redressal, and Right to Consumer Education.