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| **Lesson Three: Ethical Theories**Lesson Two introduced leadership, some of the qualities that are generally associated with successful leadership, and some of the types of power that leaders wield. Lesson Three will introduce three of the most prominent ethical theories in philosophical debate today, and apply a famous ethical problem for analysis. As a helpful refresher, Lesson One *supra* established that ethics encompass the behaviors and perspectives that maximize morality---that is to say, those behaviors and perspectives which have the most positive impact on well-being for those involved. Although seems to be fairly straight-forward, one thing you should be beginning to notice is that insofar as philosophy on right and wrong or good and bad is concerned, nothing is as simple as it may at first seem. Understanding that the goal of ethics is to maximize well-being, questions immediately arise as to the *best* ways to maximize well-being. When sacrifices must be made, whose well-being matters most, and why? These are difficult questions, and through rigorous philosophical inquiry, some of the greatest thinkers on the subject have reduced their perspectives to some basic ethical theories upon which most points of view can at some level be mapped. In this lesson, we will discuss three of the most well-established of these theories. **Egoism** Egoism is the idea that the optimal response to any moral quandary is that which maximizes well-being for the person responding. Egoism, ergo, is premised on the basis of self-interest, and in its purest form, it argues that those actions which are *most* in furtherance of a person’s self-interest are inherently the best choices. Immediately we can notice an obvious selfish bias to the concept of pure egoism. In its unqualified form, egoism would embrace human qualities like greed, and assert that one’s own gains are the only variables that matter within the context of personal ethics. However, it is only fair to note that some philosophers advocate a modified version of egoism called *enlightened egoism*. The basic premise of enlightened egoism is that individuals serve their own self-interest when they act in ways that serve the interests of others. Put another way, the motivation is still selfish (one’s own self-interest), but by helping others it is purported that mutual cooperation will ultimately benefit the actor more than if he or she had pursued a line of behavior consistent with pure greed and selfishness (The Basics of Philosophy, n.d.-b). As one simple example, if it is agreed that self-preservation is the ultimate self-interest, then under egoist theory there would perhaps be no circumstances under which the individual should be persuaded to sacrifice his or her own life for the benefit of others. One of the most famous proponents of egoism was Adam Smith, the father of modern-day capitalism. Capitalism itself is primarily based on the principle that if players in an economic environment act in a way that promotes their own individual self-interests, the resulting competition will force those players to maximize efficiency and productivity, players and consumers will benefit as a result. This is also the foundation for the Reagan administration’s philosophy of trickle-down economics, which suggested that if government made it easier for the private sector to do business (cut regulations, lower taxes, etc.), everyone would ultimately benefit from the prosperity, businesses included (Welch, 2006). **Utilitarianism** A second ethical theory is that of utilitarianism. Utilitarianism contrasts with egoism in that it asserts that the most ethical conduct is measured by taking a simple inventory of well-being accomplished (or, alternatively, suffering avoided) for *all those involved*, without any special consideration for the individual actor. In this sense, utilitarianism is perhaps the most mathematically sound basis for ethical conduct. Under utilitarianism, in order to maximize morality all one need do is measure the total amount of well-being produced (or suffering relieved) for all parties involved in each alternative option, and then choose the option with the best net yield. As a result of this simple logic, utilitarianism can be starkly distinguished from egoism in that under utilitarianism the most ethical behavior may be one in which the actor enjoys no well-bring whatsoever. In fact, the most ethical behavior may be one which brings suffering (or a decrease in well-being) to the actor. If other people involved would derive more benefit than the harm attributed, then such behaviors are preferable under a utilitarian theory (The Basics of Philosophy, n.d.-c).  In the example of self-sacrifice, utilitarianism would support the general idea of sacrificing one’s own life *so long as* such an act serves to save at least two other lives. This example, of course, assumes all other things to be equal. It is worth noting that a distinction is made in utilitarian theory between quantitative well-being and qualitative well-being. In other words, utilitarian theory permits an argument that all lives are not equally valuable. Jeremy Bentham, an 18th century English jurist and philosopher, was one of the biggest advocates of utilitarianism. Bentham adamantly opposed the death penalty, slavery, physical punishment, and the subjugation of basic freedoms and rights (he also advocated then-extreme views like decriminalization of homosexuality). All such positions were based on the idea that offenses in these areas violated the utilitarian premise of maximizing well-being for all stakeholders. **Deontology** Deontology is yet another ethical theory. Deontology essentially asserts that the morality of behavior is informed by the duties that human beings have to themselves and to others. Thus, from a deontological perspective individuals should do only that which conforms with their duties. The challenge in deontological perspectives is rather obvious: establishing a reasoned, objective derivation of duty for the individual (The Basics of Philosophy, n.d.-a). The two biggest proponents of deontology, Immanuel Kant and W.D. Ross, shared different perspectives on this problem of duty. Kant suggested that reasoning should be the basis of establishing duty. This, of course, precariously presupposes that reasoning would lead to universal conclusions, notwithstanding culture, religion, etc. Ross, on the other hand, believed that “common sense intuition” is that which should inform duty. Although it can be argued that this notion is about as ambiguous as it gets, Ross at least provided some of his own “common sense” as objective premise for this point of view. For example, according to Ross, not causing harm to others was to be the highest priority, followed by lesser duties such as fidelity, justice, beneficence, etc. Sufficeth to say that deontology leaves the individual awash in sometimes-irreconcilable subjective interpretations of “duty”. **The Trolley Problem** In order to help illustrate the differences between these theories, we can apply a famous hypothetical ethics quandary introduced by Philippa Foot in the mid-20th century. The quandary was coined “The Trolley Problem” and is set up as follows: Barreling down a track is a trolley, and tied to the track ahead of the trolley are five individuals who will be killed by the trolley unless something is done. You (the observer) had nothing to do with the circumstances in which these five people are currently situated, but you are standing next to a lever that would switch the track and divert the trolley away from the five people, effectively rescuing them from certain death. However, you observe that there is *one* individual standing on the alternate track to which the trolley would be diverted if you pull the lever, and this individual would be killed were you to do so. The problem is to deliberate as to the most ethical conduct here: let the five people die, or pull the lever and kill the one on the alternate track? (Philosopher’s Toolkit, n.d.). This problem was originally created to emphasize the distinction between taking action and omitting action. Is there an ethical difference between *permitting* the death of five people that you could easily save, and *orchestrating* the death of one person who was not otherwise in peril? Feel free to conduct this thought experiment in your own head and analyze the implications (What would you choose? And more importantly, why?). However, for the purposes of our discussion, we can also apply the three ethical theories we’ve discussed in this lesson to the problem, in order to evaluate differences in consequences: * **Egoism**: In an egoist paradigm, the question at hand would be: which of the two choices would bring about better well-being for the observer? If the observer had a personal attachment to any of the individuals in peril in the scenario, then the decision might be determined by one’s prerogative to save those people that are of greatest personal value to the observer. For example, if the one person on the alternate track is the observer’s mother, then this might persuade a choice not to pull the lever. However, absent such facts, if all those individuals involved were complete strangers to the observer, then there might not be a strong investment in the decision either way. Alternatively, though, one might also consider the weight of accountability on the observer afterward (e.g. how guilty would the observer feel about his or her decision?), and as a result, this might compel more thorough consideration.
* **Utilitarianism**: Under utilitarian ethics theory, it is fairly obvious that flipping the lever would maximize the well-being involved here (saving the lives of five people at the cost of one). However, as discussed *supra*, this conclusion might be complicated a bit when one considers quantitative versus qualitative well-being. In either case, one wrestling with The Trolley Problem isn’t given enough information to begin to assess the qualitative value of each life involved, so the numbers are all one has to work with here. (As an aside, it is fascinating that while the condition of psychopathy is often synonymized in horror movies with crazed, homicidal tendencies, some psychopaths simply lack a capacity for empathy, and while this would normally be regarded as an impairment, such a psychopath would have no problem weighing the cold, hard math of the problem and switching the tracks...notwithstanding personal connections to any of those involved. This might sound like a heartless disposition, but such a perspective might be advantageous when emotions cloud otherwise rational judgment).
* **Deontology**: Based on a deontological position, one would assess the choices here based on perceptions of one’s duties to themselves and to the individuals involved. The problem is that with both Kant’s and Ross’s views on deontology, we are left with the question of whether or not *allowing someone to die* is ethically equivalent to *killing someone*. If the two *are* equivalent, then there isn’t any deontological argument for one choice over the other, although it could be argued that duties to five people might outweigh duties to one, regardless of what those duties are construed to be. However, if they *are not* equivalent, then one must decide which holds a higher priority in terms of the hierarchy of duties. Most scholars who suggest a difference suggest that killing is the greater of the two wrongs, and if that is the case such that a higher deontological duty would be placed on *not killing* than on *not allowing death*, then an observer following this view would presumably not throw the switch.

 **Conclusion** In this lesson, we discussed three of the most prominent ethical theories, as well as their application to The Trolley Problem in order to assess relative consequences. In Lesson Four, we will discuss some seminal theories on leadership efficacy, and the difference between transactional and transformational leadership. **References** Philosopher’s Toolkit (n.d.). The Trolley Problem. <http://www.philosopherstoolkit.com/the-trolley-problem.php> The Basics of Philosophy (n.d.-a). Deontology. Retrieved from <http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_deontology.html> The Basics of Philosophy (n.d.-b). Egoism. Retrieved from <http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_egoism.html> The Basics of Philosophy (n.d.-c). Utilitarianism. Retrieved from <http://www.philosophybasics.com/branch_utilitarianism.html> Welch, W. (2006). Adam Smith: Capitalism’s founding father. *Vision*. Retrieved from <http://www.vision.org/visionmedia/biography-adam-smith/868.aspx>  |
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