



Overview

Theoretical Foundations for Media Ethics

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MEDIA ethics concerns right and wrong, good and bad, better and worse actions taken by people working in the field of journalism and mass communication. Media themselves, of course, cannot be ethical or unethical—only workers in the media can. When we deal with *media ethics*, we are really concerned with standards media people have and the kinds of actions they take.

Because this book is designed largely as a textbook for students considering the complexities of media ethics as well as for those who want an introductory view of the moral problems and dilemmas of mass communication, it is well that we use this rather long introduction to build a framework or a foundation from which to attack the specific ethical controversies that we discuss later on. Ethics is a nebulous subject. All a person has to do is to pick up almost any book or article on ethics to see that disagreements and contradictions arise almost at once. The great moral philosophers of history have not agreed on many aspects of ethics or on its main theories and subtheories.

One thing we do know: ethics is the study of what we ought to do. Some of us (followers of Immanuel Kant) try to follow predetermined rules and treat others as ends and not means. The intuitivists get help from some kind of instinctive, metaphysical or mystical sense. The egoists think of self first and the transvaluation of the person. The altruists put self last and the community first in making ethical decisions. The existentialists are devoted to freedom, courage, action, and personal responsibility. The communitarians seek group conversation, harmony, social stability and security. The utilitarians want to maximize happiness and goodness. The Machiavellians desire pragmatic success in achieving desired ends, by any means necessary.

Ethics has to do with duty—duty to self and duty to others. It is private and personal, although it is related to obligations and duties to others. The quality of human life relates to both solitude and sociability. We do right or wrong by ourselves in the private or inward part of our lives where we are acting and reacting in a context of others. This duality of individual

and social morality is implicit in the very concept of ethics, and the reader of this book will notice how these two aspects affect core arguments on each side of various issues.

For example, a journalist (or for that matter, a person who writes a television drama) is not simply writing for the consumption of others. He or she is writing as self-expression and self-gratification, and the self is developed by the very act of expression. The processes of deciding to do a story, selecting what will be used, and expressing this material all impinge on ethics and affect the moral character of the media person. What all media people communicate is, in a very real sense, what they are. They please or displease themselves, not just those for whom they are writing. What they do to live up to their personal standards affects not only the beliefs and activities of others but also, in a very real sense, the very essence of their own lives. Through their actions, they existentially make their ethical selves.

ETHICAL CONCERN: STARTING POINT

A concern for being ethical is the starting point. If media people do not care whether what they do is good or bad, then they will have little or no interest in, or consideration of, ethics. For the average person working in the communications media, however, ethics is an important concern that permeates the entire professional activity. A sense of right conduct does not come naturally; it must be developed, thought about, reasoned through, cared deeply about. In short, it must be nurtured. Unless journalists, for example, see themselves as blotters, soaking up news-reality, how they collect this news and what they do with it is the essence of their professional life.

In recent years, an interest in making ethics relevant to the professions has become firmly entrenched. Books, articles, seminars, conferences, and workshops have stressed the need for practical ethics. Professional ethics courses have developed in many areas, especially in business, law, medicine, and journalism. Books for such courses have followed; a good example of an ethics book encompassing several professions is Serafini's (1989) *Ethics and Social Concern*. Journalism and mass communications academics and practitioners have written a great number of ethics books in the last several decades. Media organizations, subject to increasing criticism from the public, have encouraged their staff members to become more concerned with moral issues.

Mass communicators are right in the middle of all sorts of ethical problems in the daily work environment. Such people must decide what is the right (or at least the best) thing to do at every turn. At the core of media ethics are certain key questions: What should I consider worth publishing, broadcasting, or disseminating in the first place? How much should I publish? Which parts should I omit? These and other questions spin out of a decision to bring a story, program, or advertisement to the public's attention. The media person works in the realm of ethics, whether or not he or she gives any thought to it as *ethics*.

Ethical concern is important, for it forces the media person to make commitments and thoughtful decisions among alternatives. Ethical concern leads the media person to seek the *summum bonum*, the highest good in professional practice, thereby heightening self-respect and public credibility and respect. The reader who expects this book to answer every question about what to do (prescriptive ethics) or not to do (proscriptive ethics) will be

disappointed. In fact, as the very nature of the book attests, ethical determinations are *debatable*. What we hope to do is to serve as ethical thought-provokers and moral consciousness-raisers, and to raise significant ethical controversies in various media contexts with which readers can grapple. The purpose of this book is not to answer once and for all the basic questions of media morality, but to raise significant questions worthy of continuing concern.

Although concern with media ethics may be growing, it is still underdeveloped. Marvin Kalb, former NBC reporter who went on to Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, maintains that American journalism is "mean-spirited," having a "desire to tear down rather than build up" (Budiansky, 1995, p. 46). In the same article by Budiansky in *U.S. News & World Report*, Kathleen Hall Jamieson of the University of Pennsylvania says of today's journalists that "everyone operates out of cynical self-interest" (p. 46). Newton N. Minow, who called television "a vast wasteland" in 1961, reappraised the medium in 1995 and found it still lacking in quality. He writes that TV has had a "distorting influence" (Minow, 1995, p. 6) and has failed to serve four main needs: properly supporting education, meeting the needs of children, adequately providing serious public programming, and supporting the political system during campaigns. Minow maintains that television has not "fulfilled our needs and will not do so in the next 30 years" (Minow, 1995, p. 6). There seems to be no doubt that ethical awareness among media people is not what it ought to be.

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Two Main Ethical Emphases

Ethical concern can manifest itself in two main emphases: (1) the mass communicator can be concerned mainly with taking ethical cues from the society, from colleagues, and from the community, or (2) he or she can emphasize personal ethical development and put community priorities second. The first emphasis is today called *social* or *communitarian* ethics, the second is called *personal* or *individual* ethics. In both cases, the media person is concerned with ethics and wants to do the right or best thing. It is simply a matter of emphasis—one relying on group-driven ethics, the other on personally determined ethics. One stresses other-directed ethical action, the other inner-directed ethical action.

Actually, these two emphases are not mutually exclusive, although the proponents of each often seem hostile to one another. The communitarian does not ignore individuality; the individualist does not disdain cooperative or social concerns. It is simply a matter of emphasis. A good book that gives the communitarian perspective is *Good News*, by Clifford Christians et al. (1993), which proposes that journalists forget the Enlightenment concepts of individualism and libertarianism touted by such liberal thinkers throughout history as Locke, Voltaire, Constant, Adam Smith, James Mill, John Stuart Mill, and Kant. Communitarians see individual or liberal ethics as dysfunctional to the community and generally based on personal quirks rather than on group-determined standards.

Today, communitarian ethicists such as Amitai Etzioni, Alasdair MacIntyre, Christopher Lasch, Joseph de Maistre, and Michael Sandel would have journalists publish things that would bring people together, not fractionalize them. Christians et al. (1993) ask for a universal ethics, saying that journalists should realize that "universal solidarity is the normative core of the social and moral order" and that journalists should throw out the old

concepts of journalistic autonomy, individualism, and *negative freedom* (Christians et al., 1993, pp. 14 and 42–44).

The other emphasis or ethical orientation is the liberal or libertarian one, which asks for maximum personal autonomy in ethical decision-making. It does indeed stress the values of the European Enlightenment thinkers and puts the individual at the center of the ethical system. One of the best books upholding the liberal or individualistic emphasis and criticizing the communitarian perspective is Stephen Holmes’s (1993) book *The Anatomy of Antiliberalism*. This University of Chicago political theorist explains both communitarianism and libertarianism, but mainly provides a critique of what he calls antiliberalism (communitarianism).

<u>Communitarians</u>	<u>Libertarians</u>
Groupists Egalitarians Altruists	Individualists Enlightenment liberals Existentialists
Traits Restrained freedom Civic transformation Normative ethics codes Selflessness Cooperation Social influence on policy Bonding/conformity Group-progress “Other-directed” Like-minded worldview Positive, cohesive news Social guidance Universal solidarity Agreement on common ethics Universal-legalistic ethics Media professionalism	Traits Maximum freedom Self-transformation Personal ethical codes Self-concern Self-enhancement Personal influence Autonomy/diversity Competition/meritocracy “Inter-directed” Diverse worldviews Total spectrum news Social information Universal competition Disagreement on ethics Relative-situation ethics Anti-media professionalization
Exemplars Confucius, Plato, Marx, Etzioni, Bellah, Lasch, Hutchins, MacIntyre, Niebuhr, Buber, Jonas, Sandel, Christians	Exemplars Lao-tzu, Socrates, Aristotle, Locke, Jefferson, Madison, Voltaire, Constant, Tocqueville, Mill, Thoreau, Camus, Jaspers, Rand, Nozick, Hayek, Merrill

FIGURE 0.1 | Two ethical mega-emphases

Another defender of individualism and critic of egalitarianism and other forms of communitarianism is *Time* magazine's former media critic, William A. Henry III. In his book *In Defense of Elitism*, Henry (1994) describes the growth of the "community" emphasis, which leads to a deprecation of the individual, and of "elitism" or meritocracy—the idea that some people are smarter than others, that some ideas are better than others. Explaining the kind of elitism he supports, Henry (1994) writes:

The kind of elitists I admire are those who ruthlessly seek out and encourage intelligence and who believe that competition—and, inevitably, some measure of failure—will do more for character than coddling ever can. My kind of elitist does not grade on a curve and is willing to flunk the whole class. My kind of elitist detests the policy of social promotion that has rendered a high school diploma meaningless and a college degree nearly so. . . . My kind of elitist hates tenure, seniority, and the whole union ethos that contends that workers are interchangeable and their performances essentially equivalent.

(Henry, 1994, p. 19)

To Henry, the contemporary emphasis on community desires is taking precedence over individual preferences to the degree that the marketplace of ideas is being threatened. Even in education, which Henry believes should foster individualism, there is an "academic echo of Marxism [as] administrators join activists in celebrating the importance of 'community' over the importance of individual thought and exploration" (Henry, 1994, p. 108).

Another book, George Morgan's (1968) *The Human Predicament*, is also anticomunitarian in its thrust; it extols the individual person and bemoans the drift toward standardization of social activities. In a chapter called "Dissolution of the Person," Morgan warns that increasingly one's everyday activity is modeled after the machine: standardized, automatic, and repeatable. "In all departments of life," he writes, "unceasing efforts are made to avoid, or render unnecessary, the judgments, decisions, and even the presence of the individual man" (Morgan, 1968, p. 61). He continues:

This situation is so taken for granted that few are aware of it or can see its true nature. Once recognized, however, its manifestations are found everywhere. Let it be epitomized here by a development that reaches into the core of the person: the ever-spreading assumption that a person's life need not be shaped through his own search, understanding, and decision—aided by the experience and wisdom of others.

(Morgan, 1968, p. 62)

We can see that these two emphases are important: the libertarian holds fast to individualistic ethical development and the communitarian seeks to enhance the community and take ethical nourishment from the group. The first would improve society by stressing self-improvement and individual decision-making; the second would improve society by sublimating personal concerns to community wishes and cooperatively making decisions that are designed to eliminate friction.

THE IMPORTANCE OF FREEDOM IN DISCUSSIONS OF ETHICS

It is good that we think seriously about press freedom and its relationship to media ethics. Freedom, or a large amount of it, is necessary even to consider ethical action. Positive freedom (freedom from outside control) must be present for the actor to be able to decide between or among alternative actions. If there is no freedom, then the ethical debate is moot—the media person is acting in accordance with a controlling agent and cannot really be making an individual ethical decision.

In the United States and throughout Western society, journalists—and people generally—put their trust in the owners and managers of their media. And, therefore, this loyalty affects their concept of ethics. But in many non-Western countries—e.g. Singapore, Saudi Arabia, and Iran—the main loyalty is to a political or religious authority. Social order there is often more important than individual pluralism or a private media system. Many in the world feel that Western journalism is irresponsible, biased, greedy, imperialistic, and harmful to nation-building. Therefore, it is natural that they see Western media morality as intrinsically bad.

So, in discussing media ethics there are really two main paradigms of the press in the world—(1) the Western freedom-centered one that has grown out of the European Enlightenment and (2) the non-Western authority-centered one that prevails in most of the world. The first type of press system is designed for maximum freedom and consequently permits excesses in journalistic activity, while the second type is designed to bring about an increasing degree of social order.

In the social-order (authoritarian) countries the media system is not much concerned with *ethics* per se, but with guiding principles and controls placed on the press by the political authority. Journalists in these countries have their guidelines and rules; what is the proper thing to do is determined for them *a priori*, so there is no real need for any serious consideration of ethical behavior. So it should be remembered that when we talk about countries having less and less press freedom, we are at the same time decreasingly concerned with ethics. Yet there are exceptions, for example Venezuela in mid-2007, when the opposition television channel was ordered off the air by the government. It moved its content to the Web and defied government efforts to silence its point of view (James, 2007).

Since the controversies in this book mainly relate to ethics in the United States, it is helpful to assume that those making the ethical decisions are virtually free. Of course, we know that there are freedom-limiting factors such as political correctness, editors and publishers, news directors, advertisers and others that impinge on complete freedom. But by and large, U.S. journalists are free and cannot really escape their freedom (and necessity) to make ethical decisions.

It is paradoxical to some degree that a growing concern for ethics can *diminish* press freedom. Being ethical in journalism often results in compromise, pulling punches, circumlocutions, self-censorship, biasing stories for “ethical reasons,” being “fair,” or trying to bring about “good” consequences.

So freedom and ethics are closely connected, and this connection can be seen as basically good by some and basically bad by others. It is little wonder that the controversies presented in this book provide a problematic view of media ethics in the U.S. context. And

often what is at issue in these controversies is the importance the different commentators give to freedom as compared to order and a concern for “responsibility.”

INTRODUCING THE FIELD OF ETHICS

Before getting to the controversial issues in the succeeding chapters, it is well to provide an introduction to the field of ethics, to talk *about ethics*—the need for ethics and some of the theories and subtheories of ethics. Actually, this discussion deals with what moral philosophers call *theoretical* normative ethics—the theories philosophers have developed to explain moral behavior. The rest of the book considers what is called normative ethics (what ought to be done in specific situations and cases). This introductory part, along with the *pro* and *con* arguments (and the commentaries) throughout the rest of the book, provide a rather broad perspective on ethics as it relates to the problems of media people as they face real decision-making.

Media ethics is a branch of philosophy seeking to help journalists and other media people determine how to behave in their work. In its practical application, it is very much a normative science of conduct, with conduct considered primarily self-determined, rational, and voluntary. It must be remembered that without freedom and sanity, ethics is meaningless to a person and impossible to take seriously as a subject of discourse. To have the option of being ethical, I must know what I am doing and I must have the freedom to decide among alternatives of action.

Many workers in the media might say that they have very little freedom because they are employees—that they must follow orders, not make their own ethical decisions. They point to the fact that jobs are scarce and that they must make a living. Indeed, there is much pressure on media employees to conform, to give up their freedom and their integrity; to be sure, there are authoritarian bosses who give little or no leeway to the individual worker. But media people cannot adopt the defense used by the Nazis at the Nuremberg war crimes trials, and disclaim their responsibility for the actions they take. Although journalists and other media people in the United States may not have all the freedom they might want, they have a great deal—enough at least to have the force of ethical sanctions fall on them.

A media person concerned with ethics, like anyone else, goes through a process of moral development. It is generally thought there are three main levels in such a moral progress, each one more sophisticated than the last. The first level is based on *instinct*, in which right conduct is determined by the person’s fundamental needs and instincts. On this primitive level, ethics comes from innate tendencies. The second level is based on *custom*—what seems right to the person is conduct that is in accordance with the customs of the various groups to which he or she belongs. The third and highest general level of morality is based on *conscience*. Here, conduct that appears right is that which is approved by the agent’s own personally developed judgment of what is right or wrong. The conscience is developed by the person’s own reasoning, building on custom and instinct.

Regardless of the particular theory or subtheory of ethics used, the third level of moral development is the media person’s goal. Here, moral standards are actively chosen by the individual after deliberation; they are no longer accepted passively as a natural part of

group-assigned conduct, although they may rely to some extent on social expectations. The person at this level senses a new personal interest in morality, recognizing that *at the level of conscience* to be good is essentially an individual matter. At this third level of moral development, which William Lillie (1961, pp. 51 ff.) calls “pure morality,” the agent leaves a level of ethics based on institutional or group-approved actions and enters a level where right and wrong become a matter of individual determination. James Q. Wilson (1993), in *The Moral Sense*, deals at length with this more personal kind of ethics, and his approach will be discussed later.

It is probably true that most media morality today is largely stuck at the level of custom. But there are those in the media who reflect on moral matters and, guided by conscience, refuse to follow the customs of their particular media institution or professional society. It is undoubtedly beneficial to the group or society that most people accept the group standards without question; if all journalists constantly asked questions about the rightness and wrongness of the rules of their newspaper, there would be a breakdown of stability and traditional principles would not be passed on.

It should be noted that many of the ethical principles found at the custom level actually *began* with the thoughts of some person in the past. How else could a custom get its start? So it is not true that all custom-based ethical principles are wrong. Generally, however, the level of custom in ethics is more non-rational and inflexible than the level of conscience. It is more ritualistic and conformist, making morality less likely to progress, develop, and adapt to the special needs of the individual or the particular situation. Being a group-determined morality, it is more absolutist and often insensitive to the thoughtful individual who finds a need for exceptions to rules. Such a thinking individual is often considered, on the level of customary ethics, to be a danger to social stability and harmony. (Lillie (1961) discusses this in Chapter 3, “Development of Morality,” of *An Introduction to Ethics*.)

Later we shall consider various theories of ethics that fall in all three of these levels of moral development—instinct, custom, and conscience. We shall see that the custom level (including various versions of social or communitarian ethics) and the conscience level (including the more individualistic, egocentric, and existential ethical inclinations) seem to manifest themselves as moral adversaries. It might be said that the two strands of moral emphasis have their genesis in the moral thinking of Plato (more aligned to communitarian, social ethics) and Aristotle (more aligned to individualistic ethics), although the ideas of both philosophers were quite complex and there are bits of both strands in each of them. At any rate, it will be interesting to keep these *levels of ethical development* in mind as we consider broad and narrow theories of ethics.

THREE CLASSES OF ETHICAL THEORIES

Theories of ethics abound, but we shall try to keep our explanations here as simple as possible and focus primarily on two main or mega-theories of ethics: *deontological*, those that base ethical actions on *a priori* principles or maxims that are accepted as guides for such actions, and *teleological*, those that base ethical actions on a consideration of their consequences. Here we shall expand this binary typology, placing several subconcepts under a

third heading, which we shall call *personalist* or *subjective theories*, which provide more instinctive guidance theories.

The following sections offer brief descriptions of these three main classes or types of ethical theory: *absolutist/legalistic theories*, which are deontological (including Aristotelianism, Confucianism, Kantianism, and the divine command theory); *consequence theories*, which are teleological (including utilitarianism, altruism, egoism, the social contract theory, and the pragmatic or Machiavellian); and *personalist theories*, which are predominantly subjective and individualistic (including the instinctual, emotive, antinomian, and existential).

Deontological Ethical Theory

The first of the mega-theories, the *deontological*, has to do with duty, with following formalistic rules, principles, or maxims. If you follow them (e.g., *always* give sources of quotes in a news story), you are ethical; if you don't, you are unethical. In this sense, it is clear-cut and simple. And it has a great appeal for many people in the media. Just tell the truth. Be consistent. Have no double standards. Be forthright and full in your reporting. Let the chips fall where they will. Don't worry about consequences; just do what you are supposed to do.

Probably history's leading *deontologist* in ethics was Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), a German philosopher who provided the fullest arguments for a duty-bound system of ethical behavior. He believed that *only* an action taken out of self-imposed duty could be ethical, and he formulated what he called the *categorical imperative*, which said that what was ethical for a person to do was what that person would will that everyone should do. Another version of the famous imperative (a kind of supermaxim from which ethical principles can be formulated) was that no person should be treated as a means to an end, but only as an end. Together, these two formulations make up the core of Kant's duty-to-principle ethics—guidelines a person can have ahead of time to guide ethical decisions.

Teleological Ethical Theory

The *teleological* or *consequence-related* mega-theory says that the person trying to decide what to do attempts to predict what the consequences will be if *A* is done instead of *B*. The object is to choose the action that will bring the most good to the party the actor deems most important. The altruist thinks of good to others; the egoist considers good to the self, with perhaps some benefits spinning off to others.

At any rate, the *teleological* approach to ethics is a popular one and will recur in most of the arguments found in the controversy discussions in later chapters of this book. The theorist most commonly associated with this thinking is John Stuart Mill, the 19th-century British philosopher who formulated the theory of *utilitarianism*—whose aim it was to bring the greatest happiness (or pleasure) to the greatest number (see Merrill's (1994) *Legacy of Wisdom*, profile 16). Many versions of teleological ethics, other than the altruistic one just mentioned, were propounded by such thinkers as Mill, Bentham, and Hume. For example, there are *egoistic* teleologists who consider consequences mainly to one's self, rather than

to others. Twentieth-century writer Ayn Rand (see Merrill, 1994, profile 22) is a good example of an egoistic teleologist.

Personalist or Subjective Theory

The *personalist* or *subjective* mega-theory subsumes many subtheories lending themselves to intuitive, emotive, spiritual, and other highly personal moral factors. Unlike the deontological and teleological theories, this personal-subjective theory is non-rational. It is more spontaneous, motivated by instinct or a spiritually motivated will. The person has a kind of moral sense that nudges him or her toward right action—call it conscience, instinct, or spiritual guidance. For the Christian moralist, this ethical sense may be directed by a deep-rooted concern often called *agape* (God-centered love). Such spiritual-religious overtones are exemplified by the *religious* or *faith* level—the highest level of Kierkegaard’s moral progression. It is also related to Joseph Fletcher’s (1966) *situation ethics*, where one’s actions in any situation are directed by a love (deep concern) that flows constantly through the agent and is projected to others. *Agape ethics* serves as a kind of underpinning for such a social ethical stance, in one of the domains of communitarian ethics. Personalist or subjective ethics does not have to be God-centered, however; ethical direction can also be found through various forms of meditation, mystical experiences, and existentialism.

One type of the *personalist* or *subjective* mega-theory we should mention is what C. S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* (1952, esp. Book III, ch. 3) and others call *conscience* and James Q. Wilson (1993) calls the *moral sense*—something genetic or biological, something, as Wilson (1993, p. xii) says, that is “intuitive or directly felt . . . about how one ought to act when one is free to act voluntarily.” Wilson says that it is impossible to define such a subjective concept any more clearly than that, and he mentions British philosopher Henry Sidgwick’s (1956) struggle with the concept of “ought” through six editions of his great ethics treatise; Wilson (1993, p. 30) concludes that the concept “is too elementary to admit of any formal definition.”

It seems that gender may have something to do with the moral sense Wilson talks about. Harvard’s Carol Gilligan (1982) has concluded that childhood experiences coupled with innate or genetic differences may lead to the existence and development of a moral sense. She also believes that much of it is gender based. For example, her research indicates that men are more prone to stress such concepts as fairness, justice, and duty, whereas women stress such moral attributes as assistance, care, and sympathy. It should be noted that these gender-based inclinations are based on what people *say* they are concerned about, not what they *do* in a real situation.

Because this third cluster of theories is personal and subjective, it is hard to make generalizations beyond the kind made by Gilligan which are applicable to the mass communicator.

At this point we shall leave this subjective macro-theory and briefly consider two perspectives that can be considered professional indicators of a journalist’s basic allegiance: to norms or rules, on the one hand, and to consequences on the other. For the journalist, these legalistic and consequence theories often collide.

For example, does the journalist who claims to have some predetermined *deontological* principle (for example, to be truthful and full in the report) on occasion break with these beliefs when consequences seem to warrant it? The answer usually is yes. For instance, many rule-based journalists would omit the name of a rape victim from a story, even though it would be required for a full account. Thus, deontology and teleology intermingle in the decisions and actions of most media practitioners.

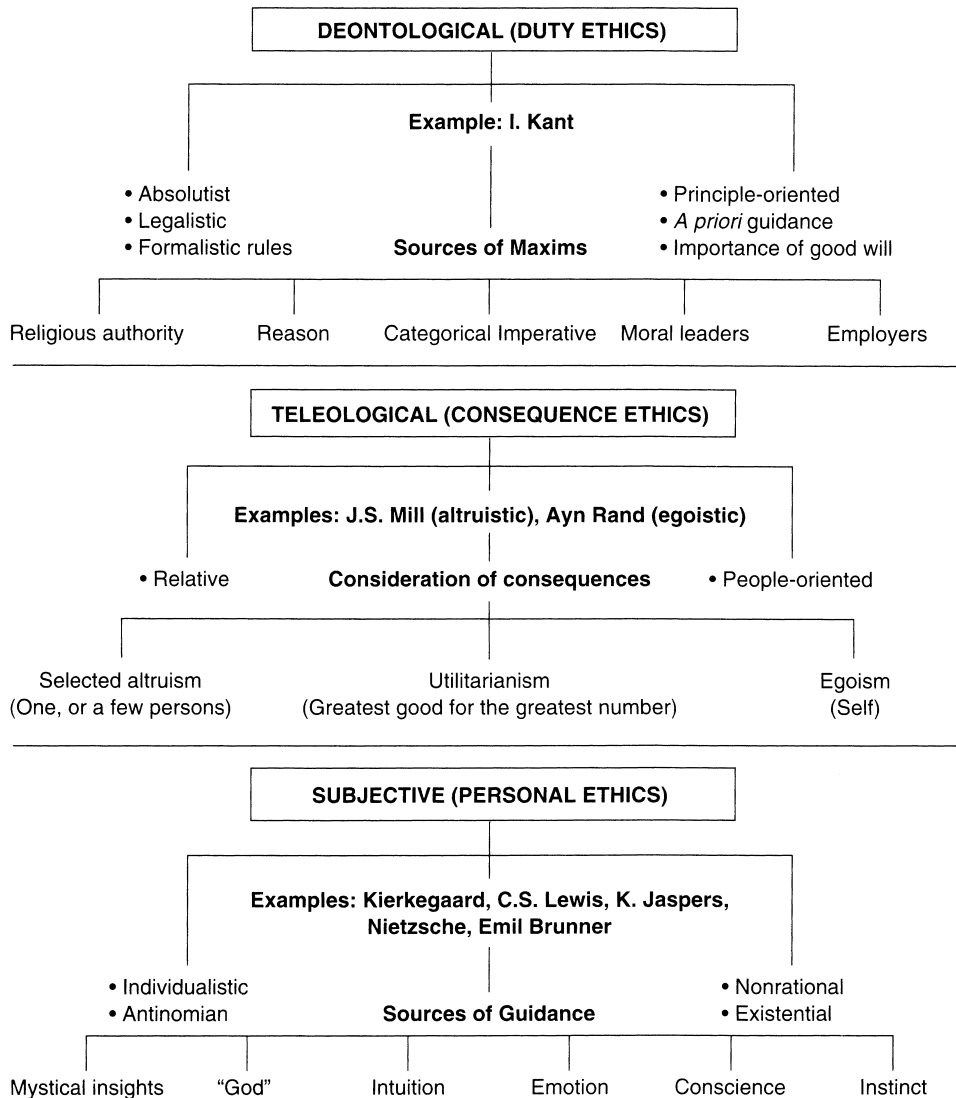


FIGURE 0.2 | Three classes of ethical theory

THE PROFESSIONAL AND HUMANISTIC STANCES

We are faced with a real conundrum in ethics—two perspectives that might be called the *professional* stance and the *humanistic* stance. The professional stance, for example, is that of reporters who are dedicated to “the people’s right to know,” who feel an ethical obligation to let them know. They might do so without worrying about consequences and, perhaps, without considering as important the *means* of getting the story. The driving principle would be providing a truthful and full account. Neither the means of achieving this end nor the consequences would be important. For example, a reporter who publishes the name of a rape victim, believing this to be good, full, accurate, and truthful reporting, could be described as taking the “professional” stance (Merrill, 1985). The corresponding *Machiavellian* principle would be that the information needed to make a full and accurate story may be obtained by any means necessary (Merrill, 1998).

The *humanistic* stance, on the other hand, is more relativistic and more teleological or consequence motivated. It is not tied to any one professional objective, however important it might be. Of course, a person taking this stance would make exceptions to general principles, consider consequences to people involved in the situation, use ethical means to achieve desired ends, and put human sensitivities and humanistic concerns above the job of simply providing a full and truthful account or meeting some other goal.

A BRIEF LOOK AT SUBTHEORIES

There are many ways to look at ethics and its many theories and subtheories. The main three have been presented as teleological, deontological, and personalist. We now proceed to some of the more restricted or specific ways philosophers have classified conceptions of ethics. This is not an exhaustive list, and some concepts do not fit neatly into only one of the three basic theoretical types. We can certainly see in each of the following the genesis of many interesting controversies, some of which manifest themselves throughout the rest of this book.

Acquired-Virtue Ethics

Many ethicists actually consider *virtue ethics* one of the macro-theories, not a subtheory. At any rate, Aristotle (384–322 B.C.) can probably be called the father (or at least one of the fathers, along with Confucius) of this kind of ethical theory, which is elaborated on in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. Such an ethics is built mainly on the concept of virtue and on the habitual practice of actions that foster harmonious relations among people. Aristotle saw ethics tied to character, principles, and good will (see Merrill, 1994, profile 5). Self-esteem was important to Aristotle and the practice of virtue was the key to self-development. He would have people concentrate on character building and the formation of intellectually sound habits, for he believed that moral virtues arise within us as a result of habits. We are not born with them. In fact, the Greek word *ethos* (habit) is similar to *ethike*, from which we get our word “ethics.”

For Aristotle, virtue is a state of character concerned with choices of a moderate nature, a kind of balance determined by a rational person possessing practical wisdom. This *Golden Mean* is the midpoint between two vices, one excessive (too much) and the other defective (too little). Avoid extremes in action, he seems to say; seek a moderate and rational position in ethical decision-making.

In journalism, Merrill (1989) has related Aristotle's Golden Mean to Hegel's synthesis of the dialectic and has proposed this middle-way ethical stance as a worthy one for media people. Personal needs clash with societal needs; the resulting synthesis is moderated action. James Wilson (1993, p. 93) says that, according to Aristotle, most people become temperate as they begin to value "deferred pleasures" such as friendship, respect, and lasting happiness that come as they "subordinate their immoderate passions to moderate habits."

Many journalists feel that seeking some kind of Aristotelian mean is not very useful in journalism. Some issues, such as freedom of expression, do not lend themselves to a Golden Mean position; a journalist, they say, cannot be a "little free." However, compromise in ethics is indeed possible, and the fact that one does not have complete freedom does not keep that person from having a great degree of freedom. It seems that one can indeed be a "little free." Some media people—and entire media systems—can be freer than others.

As Anthony Serafini (1989) points out, Aristotle's approach to ethics is empirical, similar to the approach taken later on by the utilitarians and by their 20th-century followers who have modified and adapted their ideas. A person, in acquiring virtues and making them habitual in practice, brings happiness to others—and to oneself at the same time. Through *reason*, and through following the practices of respected people deemed virtuous in their society, one develops good habits and a moral character. That person's morality can be observed by others in everyday activities; ethics, for the person who enthrones the development of character, is not a matter of simple belief, but a matter of empirical reality where the virtuous person habituates actions on the basis of thinking, has good motives, and does nothing in excess.

Another ancient sage who proposed a variant of *acquired-virtue ethics* is Confucius (Kung Fu-tzu, 551–470 B.C.). This Chinese thinker was, in many ways, similar in his ethical outlook to Aristotle. When we think of Confucian ethics (see his *Analects*, many editions), we are mainly considering ceremonial activities, manners, and the like. In short, in Confucius we see a stress on Aristotelian habitual virtuous actions (see Merrill, 1994, profile 1).

In the ethics of Confucius, manners are extremely important; in fact, they play a key role. Life would be brutish and graceless, Confucius believed, without human ceremony. Ceremony, he said, can transform a person's life (Dawson, 1932). It can check depravity before it develops, and cause the individual to move toward what is good, keeping him or her from wrongdoing without consciously realizing it. This kind of ceremonial ethics is largely culture bound. Moral habits come, in large degree, from community expectations and are "habits of the heart" (a term coined by Alexis de Tocqueville and discussed at length by Bellah et al., 1985).

Virtues can be learned and developed. They then become part of the person, and come into play automatically when they are needed to keep the person on the moral road. The virtues of work and courage and the graces of courtesy, civility, consideration, and empathy are all central to Confucian ethics. Henry Hazlitt (1972, pp. 76–77) has called this kind of

ethics “major ethics,” in the sense that it is an ethics of everyday life. Codes of manners, according to Hazlitt, set up an unwritten order of priorities such as the young yielding to the old, the able-bodied to those who are ill or have a disability, the gentleman to the lady, the host to the guest. How we act toward one another was very important to Confucius. He even proposed (four centuries before Christ) what is called the Negative Golden Rule: do not do unto others what you would not wish others to do unto you. Confucius believed that an internalized code of ethics is the foundation of morality and tends to reduce or eliminate life’s irritations and traumas.

Confucius recognized the importance of such an everyday morality and gave less attention to what might be called “crisis” morality and its focus on big issues. For this Chinese thinker, what was important was having good manners, being polite, being considerate of others in all the details of everyday life. The big crisis issues would tend to disappear in the presence of the continuous practice of the “little virtues.”

By and large, Confucian ethicists believe that the person who is considerate and thoughtful in little things will also be so in big things. Of course, rational morality (with the possible exception of Kant’s) concedes that there are exceptions to any ethical path. For example, a person can evidence perfect manners and outward manifestations of concern for others while also being cunning, devious, and scornful of others. But generally, according to Confucian thought, this is not the case; the habit of good manners and consideration casts the person in an ethical mode from which he or she seldom deviates. In a sense, we have here a kind of morality where actions (manners and ceremonial actions) destine a person to be ethical. It is the ethics of acquired virtues, habitually put into action. It is the ethics of habitual virtue, the concept of “do and you will be”—a trait of cultural morality often found in Eastern cultures.

Confucian ethicists believe that the person who is considerate and thoughtful in little things will also be so in big things.

For Confucius, the whole social order is preserved by customs (*li*, which can be defined as imperatives of conduct). Karl Jaspers (1957) summarizes the importance that Confucius gave to *li*:

Confucius drew no distinction between custom, morality, and justice. . . . His vision embraced the whole world of Chinese customs: the right way of walking, greeting, behaving in company, always in accordance with the particular situation; the rites of marriage, birth, death, and burial; the rules of administration; the customs governing work, war, the family, the priesthood, the court; the order of the days and seasons, the stages of life.

(Jaspers, 1957, p. 45)

Cultural Relativism

Many thinkers believe that different cultures have different moral codes, thus generating a system of cultural relativism. A good example of such theories can be found in anthropologist Ruth Benedict’s (1934) popular book *Patterns of Culture*. What one believes and does depends simply on where you are, according to Benedict. For example, in Mexico a journalist may well moonlight for a politician in the evenings, and there is nothing unethical about it, whereas in the United States such a practice would be considered unethical. The

believer in ethical *cultural relativism* would claim that there is no objective standard by which we can call one societal code better than another, that different societies or cultures have differing ethical codes, that one's own moral code has no advantage over others, that there is no universal truth in ethics, and that it is nothing more than arrogance for us to judge the conduct of other peoples. Cultural relativism is closely related to contextual (sometimes called situation) ethics.

Ethical Subjectivism

Ethical subjectivism is the view of ethics that says that our moral opinions are based simply on our feelings. No objective right or wrong exists. When we say that a reporter should keep personal opinions out of a story, we are not stating a fact that putting personal opinions in the story is bad or wrong; we are only saying that we have negative feelings about doing so. If I am an ethical subjectivist, I am only recognizing that my opinions represent my own personal feelings and have nothing to do with “the truth” of the matter.

Subjectivism is by far the most common form of relative ethics. Fundamentally, the subjective ethicist who is saying that a certain action is right is simply expressing personal approval or disapproval of an action. Serious moral philosophers through the ages have not found subjectivism very convincing as an ethical theory, seeing it more as a psychological manifestation than a rational view of morality. This theory is also known as *emotivism*. It is closely related to ethical intuitionism, antinomianism, and even existentialism.

Religious Morality

Theologian Emil Brunner offered the well-known statement that doing good means always doing what God wills at any particular moment. This expresses the core idea of the ethics of religion. The problem for the media person and for anyone else, however, is knowing what “God wills” at any one moment in the decision-making workday. Holy books such as the Bible, the Talmud, and the Koran can give only general guidance, not specifics, about the will of some higher being or spirit. For many, a solution is found in the *divine command theory*, where “ethically correct” or “morally right” means “commanded by God” and “morally wrong” means “forbidden by God.” But many problems are connected to this theory. For instance, such a theory would be of no help to the many people who are atheists. Also, as Plato asked four centuries before Christ: is conduct right because the gods command it, or do the gods command it because it is right? Of course, there is also the basic problem of receiving specific guidelines for professional decision-making via a transcendental channel.

This is nevertheless a real and important theory for many religious media people. They believe that they can take divine guidance in general things and adapt it to specific decisions; it is a matter of belief, faith, and interpretation. For them, this is sufficient ethical guidance. Related to this theory is what is often called the *theory of natural law*, which states that moral judgments are “dictates of reason,” and that the best thing to do in any case is what seems most reasonable.

Natural law, which is not really in conflict with religious ethical theory, also includes the person who is not religious. There are natural laws that prescribe our behavior just as there

are “laws of nature” by which nature operates. Reason, it may be said, is congenial with the idea of a rational divinity who created the world as a rational order peopled by rational creatures.

Ethical Egoism

The core of ethical egoism was well expressed by Ayn Rand (1964, p. 37) when she stated that the “achievement of his own happiness is man’s highest moral purpose.” Rand’s version is a kind of egoistical utilitarianism that many see negatively as a form of ethical hedonism. Thomas Hobbes (1950) defended ethical egoism by connecting it with the Golden Rule. One considers the self first by thinking that if he or she does good things for others, they will do good things in return. In one way, the theory is a common-sense view of ethics, saying that we should look out for our own interests and that at least we should balance our interests against the interests of others. Whereas psychological egoism says that we do pursue our own interests, *ethical egoism* goes further and says that we *should* pursue our own self-interests.

Certainly it is a theory that challenges some of our deepest moral beliefs. Ethical egoism is a radical theory that says that one’s *sole* duty is to promote one’s personal interests. The theory does not forbid one from aiding others; in fact, it often sees such aid as an effective way of helping oneself. The ethical egoist believes that what makes an act ethical is the fact that it is beneficial to oneself. It should also be noted that ethical egoists do not always do what they want to do, or what might give them short-term pleasure. What a person should do is what will be the best for that person *in the long run*. It does indeed recommend selfishness, but it doesn’t advocate foolishness.

Writing of the rational self-interest of Ayn Rand, Leonard Peikoff (1983) stresses that moral selfishness does not mean a license to act as one pleases or to engage in “whim” ethics. What it does mean is a disciplined defining and pursuing of one’s *rational* self-interest and a rejection of all forms of sacrifice, whether of self to others or others to self. The theory upholds the virtues of reason, independence, justice, honesty, productiveness, self-pride, and integrity (Peikoff, 1983, pp. 308–309).

Despite a stress on such virtues, ethical egoism seems rather cold and uncaring. Maybe it is the word *egoism* that makes it hard to accept as an ethical theory. Can there be any real arguments for such a theory? There are some. For example, if we are always concerned for others, we may intrude into their privacy; it may be better for us to mind our own business. Besides, giving charity may well be degrading to others, robbing them of individual dignity and self-respect. Altruistic ethics regards the individual as sacrificial for the good of others, whereas ethical egoism permits a person to view his or her life as being of ultimate value. It seems, however, that these two contrasting ethical stances are really not “pure,” for there is considerable overlap. A person living in a social situation *must* have some consideration for the welfare and progress of others—although, it may be said, this consideration stems from a selfish motivation.

Egoism is more ethically substantive than people usually think. For example, if we think of the moral end as self-perfection, then it is likely that we can do very little for the perfection of others. Egoism holds that the only contribution a person can make to a good world

is to maximize his or her own goodness. One of the significant arguments against ethical egoism, however, is that it does not conform with moral intuitions. The moral sense or conscience (the highest of the development stages of morality) tells us to seek the good of others rather than our own, and it is impossible to have a meaningful ethics that goes against basic instincts.

Somewhere between egoistic ethics and the ethics of altruism is what some have called *mutualistic ethics*. Most of us are not really against the pursuit of self-interest; what we feel uncomfortable with is the pursuit of self-interest at the expense of others. Are we like the egoist (even a rational one) of Ayn Rand who would act only out of self-interest? Or, on the other hand, do we act solely out of the interest of others? For most of us, or perhaps all of us, the answer to both questions is *no*.

A society in which all people worked only for the good of others would be hard to conceive. A society in which everyone acted purely egoistically would certainly not be workable. What is important to recognize is that egoism and altruism are not mutually exclusive. What we really have as ethical motivations might be called mutualism—a kind of synthesis of symbiosis. This ethical stance shows that what promotes the well-being of the individual also promotes the well-being of society generally, and what is good for society is good for the individual. As a theory, this mutualistic ethics may seem reasonable, but in all probability each person will remain intrinsically—or mainly—an egoist or an altruist, motivated either largely by concern for self or concern for others.

Machiavellian Ethics

A variant of egoistic ethics is one that might be called *pragmatic egoism*, or *Machiavellian ethics*, and its leading exemplar was Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527), a Florentine historian and political consultant who championed the achieving of predetermined ends. Success was his guiding principle. Use conventional ethical standards, he said, when they will work for you, but don't refrain from using *any* means if they are needed to achieve your ends. His was certainly a very pragmatic, flexible, relativistic, ego-centered *teleological* system of ethics (Merrill, 1998), predicated on personal achievement of desired ends.

Machiavelli might well be considered the father of modern propaganda and, many might say, of modern advertising and public relations. Certainly he would represent the competitive, get-the-story-at-all-costs philosophy of many modern hard-nosed investigative reporters. Machiavelli's ethics is success-driven and egoistic.

It is not hard for today's media viewers to see media-Machiavellians at work. One is hardly surprised at the invocation of the old saw that "the end justifies the means." Hidden cameras have been used by television programs such as ABC's *20/20* and CBS's *60 Minutes*—is that unethical? They were used in the Academy Award-nominated documentary *The Last Truck* (2009), and many local news investigations have used them over the years on the basis that the ends justified the deceptive means. CBS's Don Hewitt, legendary producer of *60 Minutes*, said in 1992 that using hidden cameras bothered him somewhat, but he saw it as "a minor crime versus the greater good" (*Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, 1992, pp. 31–32). (See Chapter 3, p. 105, for additional discussion of Hewitt's position on the use of hidden cameras.)

Journalists have been at this undercover reporting sting business for a long time. One of the most widely discussed cases was in the late 1970s, when the Chicago *Sun-Times* and the Better Government Association set up a Chicago bar called the Mirage, secretly photographing local inspectors seeking bribes. Was this entrapment? It has been argued both ways. However, since then U.S. newspapers have avoided such operations, although similar stings have appeared on television.

Mike Wallace of CBS admits he does not like to lie or to mislead, but says it depends on your motive; each case, for Wallace, “must be weighed separately as to the cost-benefit ratio” (*Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, 1992, p. 32). Machiavelli would have been happy with that statement. I have no doubt that many leading journalists subscribe to such Machiavellian or pragmatic ethics. Some ethics scholars even question whether such deceptive journalistic tactics as hiding one’s identity as a journalist or surreptitiously taping are wrong, or whether some ends can indeed justify the means.

Others are more certain of the unethical nature of such activities. Tom Goldstein, long-time journalist, media critic, and journalism educator (including 13 years as a dean, first at the University of California-Berkeley and then at Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism), said bluntly: “I think it is wrong. Journalists should announce who they are. I’m uncomfortable living in a world where you don’t know who you’re talking to” (*Washington Post National Weekly Edition*, 1992, p. 32). Despite voices such as Goldstein’s that rise emphatically from time to time, I fear that the spirit of Machiavelli pervades the ranks of serious investigative reporters, who often seem to put professional expediency before traditional ethical concerns.

One thing is certain: the public does not respect or trust the media, thinking the national press is politically biased, inaccurate and unwilling to admit its mistakes. A 2009 survey by the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press reported that 63% of the respondents thought that news stories frequently were inaccurate, while only 29% thought they were accurate. In a similar 1985 survey, those percentages were 34% and 55%, respectively. Only 26% of the people agreed that news organizations take care to avoid political bias; only 20% said that the news media are independent of powerful people or institutions, and 21% said that they were willing to admit mistakes—both matching all-time lows in this series of surveys (“Press Accuracy Rating . . .,” 2009).

It is hardly a new phenomenon. In 1995, Everette Dennis, former executive director of the Freedom Forum Media Studies Center in New York, was quoted as saying today’s journalists have a sense of superiority: “I think a lot of journalists think they could do a better job of running the country than anyone in office” (Budiansky, 1995, p. 46). Much of the hatred and mistrust of the press stems from its Machiavellian penchant to succeed, to have power, to get the story by any means necessary (see also Merrill, 1998).

Utilitarian Ethics

Now we come to *utilitarianism*, a theory that is quite different, being happiness-oriented and altruistic. This is probably the most influential of ethical theories. It belongs to the consequence, or *teleological*, class of theories, one of the great moral systems we discussed earlier. Utilitarianism in some form has profoundly altered the thinking about morality and

pushed ethics into a new direction that emphasizes the importance of means and ends. Utilitarians (such as David Hume, Jeremy Bentham, and John Stuart Mill of 18th- and 19th-century Britain) began thinking differently about ethics. For example, Bentham (1823) said that morality was more than loyalty to abstract rules and even more than pleasing God; it was nothing less than an attempt to maximize the happiness in the world. This is one variant of *teleological ethics*, or consequence-oriented ethics.

What this means for the media person making an ethical decision is that he or she would determine which of several possible courses of action would bring about the most happiness or the greatest good to the greatest number of people. Then this ethical course could be taken. John Stuart Mill, in his *Utilitarianism* (1863), states that the primary ethical rule is following this happiness-producing theory which he called the Greatest Happiness Principle. The end would justify the means if the end were the greatest happiness for the greatest number.

Often, the words *pleasure*, *value*, or *good* are substituted for *happiness* in the utilitarian model. Mill believed that pleasure is the only desirable end, and the only proof that something is desirable is the fact that people actually desire it, and every person's pleasure (or happiness) is a good to that person, so the general happiness is the largest good of all. The name of this theory, utilitarianism, is somewhat misleading, for it emphasizes utility or usefulness rather than happiness or pleasure. But the term has stuck and has taken on a meaning consistent with the slogan "the greatest happiness to the greatest number."

Often, the words *pleasure*, *value*, or *good* are substituted for *happiness* in the utilitarian model.

In the field of mass communication, such a theory is often professed by media people. The journalist, for example, may consider consequences when the story is written, and certain liberties then may be taken with presentation of the facts in the name of happiness-production or justice-production. This is the teleological approach, as we have said earlier; the journalist who would reject the utilitarian approach would be the *professional* type who would see happiness of others as irrelevant, and even damaging, to the truth of the story. Even for the utilitarian journalist, one of the main problems of using such a theory would be the difficulty (many would say the impossibility) of predicting which action would bring greater future happiness.

According to the theory of utilitarianism, a person is considered ethical if the motivation is to bring about happiness—not only to the agent, but also to the greatest number of people. (Note: such a will or motive to do good reminds us, rather strangely, of Kant, one of utilitarianism's opponents.) Most utilitarians, however, would dismiss motive and place the emphasis on the results or the actual consequences of the action. Also, such a concept has been refined through the years by substituting "good" for "happiness." But this enlargement of the concept has not done very much to obviate the problems with utilitarianism.

In fact, in many ways, trying to bring about "good" to the greatest number is as troublesome, if not more so, than trying to bring about "happiness." Semantic problems abound everywhere in ethics, but with utilitarianism they are legion. Today's journalist is in a peculiar situation: a member of a *minority*—intellectually and morally seeking after high quality—wanting to push society to high levels, while at the same time facing a largely indifferent *majority* (the masses) that wants no more than superficiality and entertainment. What then is the journalist's moral goal: satisfy the masses or try to reform and transform them? Here is one of the paradoxical aspects of the philosophy of John Stuart Mill

and later utilitarians. When one tries to merge “good” (mainly a moral term) with “happiness” (mainly an emotional term), there arises an inherent conflict if not an outright contradiction.

Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832), utilitarianism’s founder, enthroned happiness but seemed to equate it with pleasure and contrast it with pain. This, of course, could include intellectual and moral pleasure and not only emotional happiness. J. S. Mill, in revising Bentham’s utilitarianism in the direction of quality rather than quantity, seemed to read into “happiness” something deeper than mere physical or emotional well-being.

In spite of its troublesome nature, utilitarianism is probably the most popular ethical theory. It is both rational and freely chosen. It is both individualistic and socially concerned. It is concerned with actions and consequences, not just lofty rhetoric or ideas. Sissela Bok (1978), a Harvard philosopher, in her book *Lying*, has called utilitarianism the “common-sense” approach to ethics. By contrast, Edmund Lambeth (1992) noted the difficulty of predicting the effects of an action and warned that “journalists may hobble themselves in pursuit of the truth if they allow themselves to become preoccupied with the effects and beneficial results of their work. To concentrate on effects can interfere with the gathering of facts.” He also expressed concern that under “utilitarianism’s loose standards, too much that is shabby can be justified under the journalistic mantle of watchdog of the public interest” (Lambeth, 1992, pp. 20 and 44). And there is also the very real concern that in maximizing the “good” for the majority, utilitarianism makes it easy to overlook harmful effects that the minority may experience.

In spite of the positive concepts that surround utilitarianism, especially the expansion of the meaning of happiness and good into more aesthetic and intellectual levels, there is one theory that contradicts it: the absolute or legalistic ethics of Immanuel Kant that we will look at next. For Kant sees this “consider-the-results” stance of Mill’s philosophy as a surrender of principle, an abdication of moral responsibility, and an invitation to personal aggrandizement and rationalization. Certainly it is a theory worthy to contend with utilitarianism.

Ethical Absolutism

The foremost spokesman for the formalistic approach to ethics theory was Immanuel Kant (1724–1804). It is a species of what is called *deontological ethics*, and it is the opposite of such theories as utilitarianism. According to Kant, consequences are not to be considered. The essential ingredient of this ethical theory is *duty* to principle. Have some *a priori* maxims, principles, rules and feel a profound *duty* to follow them. These are absolute principles that one imposes rationally on oneself and which will serve as a guide to ethical behavior. The person who follows them, is ethical; the one who does not follow them is unethical, according to Kant (see Merrill, 1994, profile 12).

An ethical maxim, for Kant, implied obligation. You should do such-and-such, period. These duties are called *categorical*, as contrasted with hypothetical, which hold that if you want to achieve some desire, then do such-and-such. A categorical duty is one that, *regardless of your particular desire*, you would do. These categorical “oughts” bind rational people simply *because they are rational*. These “oughts” stem from what Kant called his *categorical imperative*, a principle that he believed every rational person would accept. This

supermaxim, or imperative, went like this: “Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law” (Kant, 1959).

Being an ethical person, in Kant’s view, entails being guided by absolute rules, universal laws, and moral principles that hold, without exception, everywhere. Kant also enthroned people as people, and his second formulation of the categorical imperative insisted that every person should be treated as a person and not as a means to some end. A basic respect for people and a deep valuation of their human dignity were the foundation of Kant’s ethics. He was saying, in effect, “Don’t *use* people.” Pragmatists or Machiavellians could never be Kantians. Perhaps we can summarize the essence of Kant’s ethical theory in this way: have a deep respect for human dignity and act toward others only in ways you would want everyone to act. Not a bad formula for the media person trying to make ethical decisions.

Many media people try to be Kantians, having strongly held beliefs about what to do and what not to do. Tell the truth, for example. Always give the source for quotes. Don’t ever change direct quotes. Don’t misrepresent a product. On the other hand, many media people who believe in human dignity, or say they do, find nothing wrong with “using” people to garner information or to put together an eye-catching ad. This Kantian ethical road is a difficult one to travel, and most media people seem to wander from it from time to time, thereby exposing many double standards, exceptions, and contradictions in their overall moral demeanor. But Kantian ethics is a good starting point for media people, and many of the maxims found in codes of ethics seem to reflect a proclivity for this formalistic absolutism.

Antinomian Ethics

The ethics of law, of duty, of absolute obligation such as Kant recommends is a little strong for most media workers. This legalistic stance is often confronted by its opposite—what has been called *antinomianism*. Some rebels against Kantian legalism have accepted what might be considered an extremely reactionary stance called by many a non-ethics—a completely open kind of morality that is against any *a priori* rules, laws, or guidelines.

The antinomian has, by and large, tossed out all basic principles, precepts, codes, standards, and laws that might guide conduct. Just as the legalist tends toward absolutist or universal ethics, the antinomian tends toward anarchy or nihilism in morality. In many ways, antinomian ethics is a modern variety of what might be called Freudian ethics. Some people consider this ethic really an anti-ethical, or at least a non-ethical, system. Freud at various times evidenced a hostility to self-restraint and self-discipline and showed a tolerance for self-indulgence and irresponsibility. Richard LePiere (1959) has gone deeply into this antinomian aspect of Freudian ethics.

In brief, such an ethic says that people must be socially supported and maintained and they cannot be expected to be provident and self-reliant. Support for this type of moral philosophy has been spread in the United States through a steady growth of permissiveness and avoidance of personal responsibility. There is a tendency to blame others or social institutions or conditions for any kind of immoral actions one may take. The person who might be said to act unethically is simply a victim of “society,” limited by its rigorous moral code.

This “hostility to moral laws” ethical system places non-rational freedom above self-restraint and assumes that what comes naturally is the ethical thing to do. Such a view is based on psychology rather than moral philosophy. The antinomian clashes with the legalist. And such a clash, as Joseph Fletcher (1966) has asserted, has resulted in a synthesis that is often called “situation ethics.”

Another version of this kind of “non-ethical” system might be that which has been suggested by analytical philosophers who have truly abandoned morality. In essence, they say that moral judgments are no more than personal preferences and not much different from a taste or distaste for apple pie. A. J. Ayer (1946), for example, maintained that because moral arguments cannot be verified scientifically, they are no more than commands or pure expressions of feeling that have absolutely no objective validity.

Situation Ethics

The basic tenet of *situation ethics* is that we must consider the particular situation before we can determine what is ethical or not ethical. This concept has been around in some form for a long time, but it was Fletcher (1966), in his *Situation Ethics*, who planted this term firmly in the public mind. He was talking about a special Christian concept of situationism that applied a kind of God-induced love (agape) to any moral dilemma. Love would be the guide to ethical action *in any situation*. Much of the philosophical (or theological) basis for this theory—in its Christian sense—comes largely from the writings of German theologians Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Rudolf Bultmann, and Paul Tillich.

In this Christian sense, situationism is just another variant of religious ethics, but one that eschews specific moral principles to be applied on every occasion. It certainly is different from the divine command theory of ethics. The only guide for the Christian situationist is to act out of love. *Simply apply love in every situation and you will be ethical*. Of course, this poses some problems because love can be defined differently and lead to a wide variety of destinations in ethical thinking and behavior.

These religious versions of situation ethics were, however, somewhat different from an earlier and more prominent idea of situationism in morality. More common was the idea that the situation determines the ethics—no more than a form of moral relativism that said there are no universal ethical principles that can be applied in every situation. These situation ethicists believed that only non-rational moral robots would try to adhere to an absolutist ethics.

Thus, situationism is really a type of relativistic ethics focusing on the particular set of circumstances. For Fletcher and other Christian ethicists, love determines action in each situation; for general relativists, each situation requires a special and different kind of ethical decision-making, using whatever standards they think best.

An extreme approach is what Leonard Peikoff (1983) called the new relativism—a theory based on the belief that truth is unknowable, that there is no objectivity, that reason is not as reliable as passion. It dismisses values and sees society as diminishing the individual. It denies that virtue is possible, it hates standards, it despises quality and excellence, and it attacks achievement, success, and beauty. And it believes that one person’s sense of morality is as good as another’s.

Intuitive Ethics

Intuitive ethics is perhaps the oldest moral doctrine. It is the theory that we know what is right and what is wrong without having any *a priori* rules or without doing a lot of thinking before we act. Intuitionists give many answers when asked how they know what to do. Theorists like James Wilson (1993) say that God plants in each person a certain *moral sense*. Others call the immediate guide to ethical action *conscience*, a kind of inner voice that directs each person. At any rate, most intuitionists believe that rightness and wrongness are self-evident—simply a matter of intuition. *Conscience*, of course, means many different things, from the repressive superego of Freud (1930), to the God-given moral implantation of C. S. Lewis (1952), to the “disinterested spectator” theory of Adam Smith (1759).

Although there are philosophers who believe in ethical intuition, the doctrine does not have a wide following. Usually one who points to intuition is someone whose intuition is based on past experiences and who has thought about consequences of varying kinds of action. Or, and this perhaps is even more plausible, such an intuitionist is a person who has habituated certain actions and does certain things spontaneously. Therefore, the actions *seem* to flow from mere instinct or intuition.

Intuitionism is closely related to what has been called common-sense ethics, which draws on wisdom gleaned from large numbers of particular cases. We use traditional moral rules that have seemed to satisfy moral conditions throughout the ages. Taken together, these traditions and rules tend to crystallize into a body of practical wisdom (as found in the philosophies of Aristotle and Confucius). This is nothing more than common sense that respects precedent. Common-sense morality, and also perhaps so-called intuitionism, recognizes the need to abide by general rules that have proved to be useful.

Having such general rules in ethics is very close to what Immanuel Kant proposed as duty ethics. Each person develops rules, maxims, or principles to which she or he is dedicated and obligated. Unlike Kant, however, modern common-sense ethicists are flexible, being willing to follow moral rules except when there are clear reasons for not doing so. It is important that exceptions be made carefully and infrequently—with the burden of proof being on the exception or on the alternative ethical innovation.

Although there may not be any ethical intuitions per se, there may be certain ethical principles or maxims that are self-evident. For example, a rule that journalists should not fabricate news stories is self-evident in that the whole concept of news and the media’s credibility would disappear if it were not so; besides, no reasonable journalist would ever feel the need to ask the justification for such an ethical rule.

Social Contract Theory

Another theory or subtheory of ethics we should mention is one that links morality to the state or to society. It is a kind of citizen-volunteerism to accept socially enforced rules of conduct; because this social enforcement is by the state, it is a kind of people–state agreement or contract for a common morality. The state exists to make possible social living through external enforcement, whereas ethics deals with overarching voluntary rules that enhance social living.

This theory says that only in the context of the social contract can people be moral agents. Why? Because the contract creates the conditions necessary for us to care about other people. As the state organizes society generally, it organizes social and moral expectations of society specifically. In short, a state makes it possible for us to have civilized relations with others, giving rise to the very concept of ethics.

The Harvard philosophy professor John Rawls (*A Theory of Justice*, 1971) built on the social contract in the development of his theory of justice. In this theory, Rawls stresses that free and rational people must assume a position of equality in determining the terms of their association. These people agree on, or contract, the basis of their social cooperation. Rawls proposes what he calls the *veil of ignorance* in order to ensure that the principles agreed on will be just. Participants in such a contract, according to Rawls, are situated behind this veil of ignorance, not knowing how the decisions they make will affect their own lives. In short, they must put aside their own identities and make decisions by adopting the identities, in turn, of the other people affected by their decisions. Nobody behind this veil of ignorance knows for sure what their identities will be when the veil is lifted. This, according to Rawls, will ensure fairness and justice in the contractual situation (Rawls, 1971, pp. 136–142).

Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), also an espouser of ethical egoism, and Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) are most closely identified with the social contract theory. Somewhat related to this theory is one that is sometimes called the *socialist* or *Marxist* theory stressing a kind of classless utopianism in which people are bound together by a sense of community veering in the direction of egalitarianism. In the various versions, the objective is to eliminate discrepancies among people, level out material benefits and opportunities, and permit the state to play a more important part in making a fair and equitable system, after which presumably it would wither away. Probably the earliest proponent of such a theory was Plato, who saw a person's ethical duty as supporting the authority of the state and working for the public good.

The social contract theory requires people to set aside private, self-centered desires and inclinations in favor of principles that impartially promote the welfare of everyone. Of course, a person can do this only if others have agreed to do the same thing—in effect, by entering into a kind of unwritten contract. For the advocate of this theory, ethics consists of rules dealing with the way people will treat one another—rules reasonable people will accept for their mutual benefit. This is the basis of the theory in a nutshell.

Actually, a media organization—not necessarily a state or total society—can subscribe to a social contract theory. The members of the staff of a broadcast station, a public relations agency, or a newspaper can agree to follow certain institutional moral rules because it is to the advantage of each person to do so. It would not be to anyone's advantage if people violated the rules at any time. The main point of such a theory of ethics is that people must be able to *predict* what others will do; we must be able to count on one another to follow certain rules, at least most of the time.

One advantage of the social contract theory is that morality is simply a set of rules that reasonable people agree to accept for their mutual benefit. We don't need to worry about the objectivity or subjectivity of moral principles, about relativism or absolutism around the world. What we have is a socially based theory; we have socially established rules, and if we deviate from them we are being unethical. Period. It seems, in many ways, a theory akin

One advantage of the social contract theory is that morality is simply a set of rules that reasonable people agree to accept for their mutual benefit.

to that of Kant—certainly a deontological one—but, unlike Kant’s theory, it is socially rather than individually determined and enforced.

It is not difficult to see this social contract approach as spawning what today is often called the *social responsibility* media theory. The media and the people, in a sense, contract with one another to bring about certain mutual expectations, such as adequate and pluralistic information, truthfulness, reliable and credible social exposition, and a meaningful context, with social good as a guiding ethical principle.

Existentialist Ethical Theory

In one sense, there is no real ethical theory of existentialism; existentialist ethics is so individualistic that many feel the term is oxymoronic. Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–80), perhaps the best known existentialist, said he would write on this subject of ethics specifically, but never got around to it. However, he did deal with ethical problems to some extent. For example, Sartre (1957, pp. 42–43) stresses that we cannot decide *a priori* on an ethics that will guide us in a specific action; he is certainly not a Kantian in this respect. Ethical considerations, of course, permeate the writings of all existentialists from Kierkegaard onward. At the heart of any existentialist ethics appear to lie personal authenticity, integrity, honesty, deep concern with freedom, and the acceptance of personal responsibility. One may be free to be unethical, but according to American philosopher Hazel Barnes, an authority on existentialism, the person who chooses to be unethical rejects the positive benefits of freedom. Barnes’s (1978) *An Existentialist Ethics* makes the overall point that ethics and freedom are both needed for a rich, fulfilling, productive life that benefits both the individual and society.

Ethics, for the existentialist, must be personal if it is to contribute to the authenticity of the person. As I pointed out in *Existential Journalism* (Merrill, 1995), for a media person to follow some group-designed code or traditional manner of action, either out of blind submission or thoughtless habit, is inauthentic and depersonalizing. The basic point is that there is no blueprint for what an individual media person can become or what he or she should do. The individual must decide, for the essence of each person is self-determined.

Many see existentialist ethics as a form of egoistic ethics, and to some degree they are right. But no major existentialist philosopher has ever suggested extreme individualism and the fulfillment of all one’s desires. Always there is some control. A kind of reasonableness, for instance, that keeps personal freedom in bounds, is quite common in existentialist literature. Or, as Kierkegaard believed, Christian love and a concern for others keep personal freedom under control. Or, as Sartre held, control is exercised by a person’s notion of responsibility. He also said the anguish of personal choice arises from the fact that, in making the choice, a person is committing not only him- or herself but, in a certain manner, all humankind. This existentialist statement is almost Kantian: we choose only the things we would be willing to see universalized.

Also, for the existentialist, an ethical demeanor is necessary because of the necessity of accepting personal responsibility for actions. This imposes a kind of ethical restraint on a person; for example, existentialist media people would never try to escape the consequences of their freely determined actions. Media workers have superiors—and colleagues, sources, and audience members—who are affected by the workers’ actions. Media people

know this, understand this, and must decide whether to take certain actions. It is the ethical restraint of individual integrity.

For the existentialist, there is also the restraint of human dignity. Such dignity places just limits on action for the simple reason that a person does not live isolated in society, and all members of society have this same human dignity. Moral people have such dignity. And who are moral people? Those who do not succumb to instincts or passions, who do not change opinions without justification, who are not flatterers or falsifiers, who constantly attempt to transcend self and traditional morality.

This concept of transcendence was important to Friedrich Nietzsche, an important existentialist voice. He would have us say “yes” to life, therefore becoming more noble and heroic, always rising to our highest potential. Nietzsche sounded a common note of the existentialist concept of ethics: that the individual person is extremely valuable and worthy, more so as that person determines his or her own destiny and does not submit to any authority that restricts personal freedom or makes the person inauthentic.

One variant of existentialist ethics might be a kind of “superior person” ethics, where through existential progress an individual “transcends” normal morality and, in a sense, becomes a superior ethical person. Nietzsche, who espoused in *Beyond Good and Evil* (1866) what he called the *Übermensch* (*Overman*, usually translated as the *Superman*) and talked of a “master-morality,” is probably the best example of such an ethicist.

Nietzsche drew heavily on Greek philosopher Thrasymachus, who believed that justice is no more than the interest of the stronger. Nietzsche would interpret stronger not only in terms of physical or military strength but also in terms of a full spectrum of intellectual and moral strength that transcends physical power. Nietzsche is rather vague as to how these superior people will manifest themselves. His ethical theory is a close relative of the egoistic ethical theory, but is different in that Nietzsche’s Superman draws on subjective and mystical insights for transforming moral progress. Egoistic theory is based more on rationality.

Communitarian Theory

A theory of ethics that is concerned with “the community” and with “civic transformation” and retreat of the individual into the comfortable and cooperative warmth of the group is known as *communitarianism*. This theory, espoused by people such as Amitai Etzioni, a sociologist, and Clifford Christians, a communications scholar and ethicist, would shift the purpose of news from unbiased information transmission to what Christians calls “an agent of community transformation.” Community impact journalism, it might be called. Consistent with postmodernism, communitarianism considers the tenets of 18th-century European Enlightenment to have failed and the tradition of objectivity unprepared to deal with the complexities of modern communities and morality.

The spirit of communitarianism has always been with us. Communitarians contend generally that their theory permits ethical discussion to focus on social altruism and benevolence and to have them treated on equal footing with the more traditional concepts of loyalty and truth-telling. A rejoinder to this might be that ethical discussions have always considered altruism and benevolence and certainly traditional theories (e.g., utilitarianism, intuitionism, legalism) have gone far beyond concern only with truth-telling and loyalty.

Communitarianism stresses cooperation. The good cooperators with the group is the ethical person, reminding us of the German philosophers Georg Hegel and Gottlieb Fichte who would have people sacrifice their individualism to their state or community. What is good for the community is the moral imperative. Confucius, the great sage of ancient China, was probably the first communitarian, stressing social harmony, loyalty and love of family and allegiance to elders and superiors in government. His philosophy is usually contrasted to that of Mo-tzu, a more individualistic thinker, and even more meritocratic. And, of course, the “democrats” of ancient Greece (who condemned Socrates to death) were community oriented. Plato, in a way, was even more group oriented, structuring his ideal republic into “groups,” each knowing exactly what was expected of them.

In Medieval Europe the Church was *the community*, although modern communitarians would say that it was not a democratic one. Nevertheless, it was a voluntary one that fostered not only obedience to religious norms, but also to the virtues of selflessness, altruism, temperance and honor. It was a cooperationist era. But with the Renaissance of the 14th and 15th centuries, a spirit of individualism began to make its mark on Europe. And the 17th and 18th centuries brought in very strong individualism and reason, and a stress on personal liberty that had been missing.

Communitarians believe that this Enlightenment emphasis on freedom has been misused and has spawned much of modern immorality. So they recommend cooperation and community values over personal freedom and competition. The free press under the direction of elite media owners is seen by communitarians as ineffective and even a negative institution—one that has been tried and found wanting. Communitarianism has become a strong force in the public-media debates.

The journalist dedicated to communitarianism finds his or her role shifting. No longer an observer of the passing scene, the communitarian journalist attempts to *change or transform the scene*. In a sense this journalist disdains neutralism and objectivity and seeks only the social good. This is defined by some kind of “conversation” (perhaps drawing on Jürgen Habermas’ “ideal speech situation”) where consensus emerges based on the participants’ tolerance of one another, their interest in the problem, their abilities as communicators, and their knowledge of the issue. The communitarian journalist thus becomes a kind of social worker, rather than emulating the old-time journalist. More important than public information are public cohesion, public interdependence, public involvement, and shared moral values.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Now that we have taken a quick trip through many of the paths of ethics and ethical theory, we are ready to consider some specific examples of troublesome ethical problems facing people who work in mass communication. We will do so in the chapters that follow. These chapters are in the form of informal debates (or better, opposing contentions) on a variety of today’s controversial ethical issues.

As we stated earlier, there are no hard and fast answers to such ethical questions, and the varying ethical positions on the issues that follow attempt to provide only some of the most

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salient arguments on either side. Of course, there are always *more than two sides* to these complex ethical questions, but the basic format of the chapters deals mainly with the most common two sides of the issues. Other ethical positions are mainly left to each student to grapple with. Some are suggested by questions posed by the opposing positions, or in the commentary that follows each debate; others will probably come up in class or other discussion. The important point is that this is a book of basic *positions and commentary* on some important ethical issues in the field of media studies; it is *not* a textbook of normative ethics intended to provide concrete answers to these many difficult moral problems.

We hope that you will weigh the evidence presented by each debater carefully, consider the commentaries, and resolve the controversies as rationally as possible. But what is truly important is that the reader realize that, in a real sense, nobody *wins* or *loses* in such controversial ethical discourse. The smart reader takes what is most meaningful, useful, and helpful from *all of the positions* presented here, integrates it into an already developing personal morality, and makes it useful in present and future relationships and activities.

Media people can progress ethically—becoming ever more consistent and sensitive to the moral environment that encompasses them. Many moral development theories are available to the serious person desiring to mature ethically. Except for the three main theories discussed early in this Overview, we have not dealt with them, but they are important and indicate that there are many levels or stages through which a person may proceed on an ethical journey. Books such as Ronald Duska and Mariellen Whelan’s (1975) *Moral Development: A Guide to Piaget and Kohlberg* will acquaint the student with development models. And, of course, books by Jean Piaget (1932) and Lawrence Kohlberg (1981), both important developmental theorists, will get the reader into the intricacies of moral development theories.

The important point here is that a person does not one day just become “ethical” and that is the end of the moral story. Individuals grow ethically just as they grow physically and intellectually. Whatever ethical theory—or combination of theories—drives them through the brambles of moral choices, there is always the possibility of maturing further and making even better ethical decisions.

We hope that the controversial discussions that follow will give you the opportunity to think about ethical quandaries facing a person working in the media. By accepting or rejecting the arguments put forth by the debaters, and by considering the remarks made in the commentaries, we believe you can improve your moral reasoning and reach a higher level of ethical consciousness. But remember: there are always higher levels to strive for. The ethical journey is never over.

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