General Ethical Perspectives

Leaders are truly effective only when they are motivated by a concern for others.

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What’s Ahead

This chapter surveys widely used ethical perspectives that can be applied to the leadership role. These approaches include utilitarianism, Kant’s categorical imperative, Rawls’s justice as fairness, communitarianism, and altruism. I provide a brief description of each perspective along with a balance sheet that identifies the theory’s advantages and disadvantages.

Learning about well-established ethical systems can help dispel ethical ignorance and expand our ethical capacity. The ethical dilemmas we face as leaders may be unique. However, we can meet these challenges with the same tools that we apply to other ethical problems. I’ve labeled the ethical approaches or theories described in this chapter as “general” because they were developed for all kinds of moral choices. Yet as we’ll see, they have much to say to those of us in leadership positions.

Utilitarianism: Do the Greatest Good for the Greatest Number of People

Utilitarianism is based on the premise that ethical choices should be based on their consequences. Individuals have probably always considered the likely
outcomes of their decisions when determining what to do. However, this process wasn’t formalized and given a name until the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. English philosophers Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806–1873) argued that the best decisions (a) generate the most benefits as compared with their disadvantages, and (b) benefit the largest number of people.¹ In sum, utilitarianism is attempting to do the greatest good for the greatest number of people. Utility can be based on what is best in a specific case (act utilitarianism) or on what is generally best in most contexts (rule utilitarianism). We can decide, for example, that telling a specific lie is justified in one situation (to protect someone’s reputation) but, as a general rule, believe that lying is wrong because it causes more harm than good.

Leaders frequently take a utilitarian approach to ethical decision making. America’s nuclear weapons program, for instance, was the product of a series of utilitarian decisions. Harry Truman decided to drop the atomic bomb on Japan after determining that the benefits of shortening the war in the Pacific (reduction in the loss of American lives) outweighed the costs of destroying Hiroshima and Nagasaki and ushering in the nuclear age. Federal energy officials later decided that the benefits of nuclear weapons testing—improved national security—outweighed the risks to citizens in Nevada and Utah. Based on this calculation, the Nuclear Energy Commission conducted a series of aboveground nuclear tests in the 1940s and 1950s. Local citizens were not warned in advance, and their exposure to radiation led to abnormally high cancer rates.

**BALANCE SHEET**

*Advantages (+s)*
- Is easy to understand
- Is frequently used
- Forces us to examine the outcomes of our decisions

*Disadvantages (−s)*
- Is difficult to identify and evaluate consequences
- May have unanticipated outcomes
- May result in decision makers reaching different conclusions

The notion of weighing outcomes is easy to understand and to apply. We create a series of mental balance sheets for all types of decisions (see Case Study 5.1). Focusing on outcomes encourages us to think through our decisions, and we’re less likely to make rash, unreasoned choices. The ultimate goal of
evaluating consequences is admirable—to maximize benefits to as many people as possible. Utilitarianism is probably the most defensible approach in a medical combat unit like the one portrayed on the television show MASH, for example. Surgeons give top priority to those who are most likely to survive. It does little good to spend time with a terminal patient while another soldier who would benefit from treatment dies.

Identifying possible consequences can be difficult, particularly for leaders who represent a variety of constituencies or stakeholders. Take the case of a college president who must decide what academic programs to cut in a budget crisis. Many different groups have a stake in this decision, and each will likely reach a different conclusion about potential costs and benefits. Every department believes that it makes a valuable contribution to the university and serves the mission of the school. Powerful alumni may be alienated by the elimination of their majors. Members of the local community might suffer if the education department is terminated and no longer supplies teachers to local schools or if plays and concerts end because of cutbacks in the theater and music departments. Unanticipated consequences further complicate the choice. If student enrollments increase, the president may have to restore programs that she eliminated earlier. Yet failing to make cuts can put the future of the school in jeopardy.

Even when consequences are clear, evaluating their relative merits can be daunting. As I noted in Chapter 2, we tend to favor ourselves when making decisions. Thus, we are likely to put more weight on consequences that most directly affect us. It’s all too easy to confuse the “greatest good” with our selfish interests.

Based on the difficulty of identifying and evaluating potential costs and benefits, utilitarian decision makers sometimes reach different conclusions when faced with the same dilemma. Historians still debate the wisdom of dropping the atomic bomb on Japan. Some contend that the war would have ended soon without the use of nuclear weapons and that no military objective justifies such widespread destruction.
CASE STUDY 5.1

The Reference Letter

Being asked to write a letter of reference can pose a thorny ethical dilemma. Writing or giving a reference for a competent, well-liked employee or student is not a problem. However, deciding what to do in the case of a marginal or poor performer is an entirely different matter. On the one hand, as a supervisor or professor, you don't want to exaggerate or lie about the person's qualifications. On the other hand, refusing the request may alienate the person and endanger your relationship. Writing a critical letter could provoke a lawsuit. That's why many former employers will only confirm the dates that an individual worked for their organization. Further complicating matters is the possibility that writing the letter may help you get rid of a marginal follower, saving you the hassle of having to fire or demote this individual.

Imagine that you are a college professor. What would you do if a marginal (C-) student asked you for a job reference? for a reference to another university or to another program at your school? Would your response be different if this were a bad (D or F) student?

Imagine that you are a supervisor. What would you do if a marginal employee (one that barely meets minimal work standards) asked you for a letter of reference to seek another position or a transfer to another division of your corporation? What would you say if another employer called and asked you to comment on someone you had fired earlier?

Once you've made your decisions, identify the consequences you weighed when making these choices. Describe how the benefits outweighed the costs in each case.

Kant’s Categorical Imperative: Do What’s Right No Matter What the Cost

In sharp contrast to the utilitarians, German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) argued that individuals should do what is morally right no matter what the consequences.2 (The term categorical means “without exception.”) His approach to moral reasoning is the best known example of deontological ethics. Deontological ethicists argue that we ought to make choices based on our duty (deon is the Greek word for duty) to follow universal truths that are imprinted on our consciences. Guilt is an indication that we have violated these moral laws.
According to Kant, what is right for one is right for all. We need to ask ourselves one question: “Would I want everyone else to make the decision I did?” If the answer is yes, the choice is justified. If the answer is no, the decision is wrong. Based on this reasoning, certain behaviors like truth telling and helping the poor are always right. Other acts, such as lying, cheating, and murder, are always wrong. Testing and grading would be impossible if everyone cheated, for example, and cooperation would be impossible if no one could be trusted to tell the truth.

Kant lived well before the advent of the automobile, but violations of his decision-making rule could explain why law enforcement officials now have to crack down on motorists who run red lights. So many Americans regularly disobey traffic signals (endangering pedestrians and other drivers) that some communities have installed cameras at intersections to catch violators. Drivers have failed to recognize one simple fact. They may save time by running lights, but they shouldn’t do so because the system breaks down when large numbers of people ignore traffic signals.

Kant also emphasized the importance of “treating humanity as an end.” That is, although others can help us reach our goals, they should never be considered solely as tools. We should, instead, respect and encourage the capacity of others to think and choose for themselves. Under this standard, it is wrong for companies to expose neighbors living near manufacturing facilities to dangerous pollutants without their knowledge or consent. Coercion and violence are immoral because such tactics violate freedom of choice. Failing to help a neighbor is unethical because ignoring this person’s need limits his or her options.

**BALANCE SHEET**

*Advantages (+s)*

- Promotes persistence and consistency
- Is highly motivational
- Demonstrates respect for others

*Disadvantages (−s)*

- Exceptions exist to nearly every “universal” law
- Actors may have warped consciences
- Is demonstrated through unrealistic examples
- Is hard to apply, particularly under stress

Emphasis on duty encourages persistence and consistent behavior. Those driven by the conviction that certain behaviors are either right or wrong no
matter what the situation are less likely to compromise their personal ethical standards (see Box 5.1). They are apt to “stay the course” despite group pressures and opposition and to follow through on their choices. Transcendent principles serve as powerful motivational tools. Seeking justice, truth, and mercy is more inspiring than pursuing selfish concerns. Respecting the right of others to choose is an important guideline to keep in mind when making moral choices. This standard promotes the sharing of information and concern for others while condemning deception, coercion, and violence.

Most attacks on Kant’s system of reasoning center on his assertion that there are universal principles that should be followed in every situation. In almost every case, we can think of exceptions. For instance, many of us believe that lying is wrong yet would lie or withhold the truth to save the life of a friend. Countries regularly justify homicide during war. Then, too, how do we account for those who seem to have warped or dead consciences, like serial killers Jeffrey Dahmer and Ted Bundy? They didn’t appear to be bothered by guilt. Psychological factors and elements of the environment, such as being born to an alcoholic mother or to abusive parents, can blunt the force of conscience.

Despite the significant differences between the categorical and utilitarian approaches, both theories involve the application of universal rules or principles to specific situations. Dissatisfaction with rule-based approaches is growing. Some contemporary philosophers complain that these ethical guidelines

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**Box 5.1**

**Leadership Ethics at the Movies: The Pianist**

*Key Cast Members:* Adrien Brody, Emilia Fox, Thomas Kretschmann, Frank Finlay, Maureen Lipman

*Synopsis:* Based on the wartime experiences of Polish pianist Wladyslaw Szpilman (Brody). A Jew, Szpilman relocates to the Warsaw ghetto when the Nazis invade in 1939. He flees the ghetto after his family is deported to the Treblinka death camp. Szpilman spends the rest of the war eluding capture with the help of friends, strangers, and a German officer. Along the way, he is witness to the senseless brutality of the occupiers as well as the heroism of the Jewish and Polish resistance movements. The film won three Academy Awards: Best Director (Roman Polanski), Best Actor (Brody), and Best Adapted Screenplay.

*Rating:* R for brutal violence and strong language

*Themes:* duty, altruism, kindness, perseverance, courage, loyalty, beauty, ethical decision making, injustice, cruelty, evil
are applied to extreme situations, not the types of decisions we typically make. Few of us will be faced with the extraordinary scenarios (stealing to save a life or lying to the secret police to protect a fugitive) that are frequently used to illustrate principled decision making. Our dilemmas are less dramatic. We have to determine whether or not to confront a coworker about a sexist joke or tell someone the truth at the risk of hurting their feelings. We also face time pressures and uncertainty. In a crisis, we don’t always have time to carefully weigh consequences or to determine which abstract principle to follow.

Justice as Fairness: Guaranteeing Equal Rights and Opportunities Behind the Veil of Ignorance

Many disputes in democratic societies center on questions of justice or fairness. Is it just to give more tax breaks to the rich than to the poor? What is equitable compensation for executives? Should a certain percentage of federal contracts be reserved for minority contractors? Is it fair that Native Americans are granted special fishing rights? Why should young workers have to contribute to the Social Security system that may not be around when they retire?

During the last third of the twentieth century, Harvard philosopher John Rawls addressed questions like these in two books and a series of articles. He set out to identify principles that would foster cooperation in a society made up of free and equal citizens who, at the same time, must deal with inequalities (status and economic differences, varying levels of talent and abilities, etc.). Rawls rejected utilitarian principles because generating the greatest number of benefits for society as a whole can seriously disadvantage certain groups and individuals. Consider the impact of cutting corporate taxes, for example. This policy may spur a region’s overall economic growth, but most of the benefits of this policy go to the owners of companies. Other citizens have to pay higher taxes to make up for the lost revenue. Those making minimum wage, who can barely pay for rent and food, are particularly hard hit. They end up subsidizing wealthy corporate executives and stockholders.

Instead of basing decisions on cost/benefit analyses, Rawls argues that we should follow these principles of justice and build them into our social institutions:

Principle 1: Each person has an equal right to the same basic liberties that are compatible with similar liberties for all.

Principle 2: Social and economic inequalities are to satisfy two conditions: (A) They are to be attached to offices and positions open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity. (B) They are to be to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged members of society.
The first principle, the “principle of equal liberty,” has priority. It states that certain rights, like the right to vote and freedom of speech, are protected and must be equal to what others have. Attempts to deny voting rights to minorities would be unethical according to this standard. Principle 2A asserts that everyone should have an equal opportunity to qualify for offices and jobs. Discrimination based on race, gender, or ethnic origin is forbidden. Further, everyone in society ought to have access to the training and education needed to prepare for these roles. Principle 2B, “the difference principle,” recognizes that inequalities exist but that priority should be given to meeting the needs of the poor, immigrants, minorities, and other marginalized groups.

Rawls introduces the “veil of ignorance” to back up his claim that his principles provide a solid foundation for a democratic society like the United States. Imagine, he says, a group of people who are asked to come up with a set of principles that will govern society. These group members are ignorant of their characteristics or societal position. Standing behind this veil of ignorance, these individuals would choose (a) equal liberty, because they would want the maximum amount of freedom to pursue their interests; (b) equal opportunity, because if they turned out to be the most talented members of society, they would likely land the best jobs and elected offices; and (c) the difference principle, because they would want to be sure they were cared for if they ended up disadvantaged.

**BALANCE SHEET**

**Advantages (+s)**

- Nurtures both individual freedom and the good of the community
- Highlights important democratic values and concern for the less fortunate
- Encourages leaders to treat followers fairly
- Provides a useful decision-making guide

**Disadvantages (−s)**

- Principles can only be applied to democratic societies
- Groups disagree about the meaning of justice and fairness
- Lack of consensus about the most important rights

Rawls offers a system for dealing with inequalities that encompasses both individual freedom and the common good. More talented, skilled, or fortunate people are free to pursue their goals, but the fruits of their labor must also
benefit their less fortunate neighbors. His principles also uphold important
democratic values like equal opportunity, freedom of thought and speech, and
the right to own and sell property. Following Rawls’s guidelines would ensure
that everyone receives adequate health care, decent housing, and a quality edu-
cation. At the same time, the glaring gap between the haves and have nots
would shrink.

The justice-as-fairness approach is particularly relevant to leaders who, as
we noted in Chapter 1, cast shadows by acting inconsistently. Inconsistent
leaders violate commonly held standards of fairness, arbitrarily giving prefer-
ential treatment to some followers while denying the same benefits to others
who are equally deserving (or more so). Rawls encourages leaders to be fair.
They have a responsibility (a) to guarantee basic rights to all followers; (b) to
ensure that followers have equal access to promotion, training, and other ben-
efits; and (c) to make special efforts to help those followers who have special
needs.

Stepping behind a veil of ignorance is a useful technique to use when
making moral choices. Behind the veil, wealth, education, gender, and race dis-
appear. The least advantaged usually benefit when social class differences are
excluded from the decision-making process. Our judicial system is one example
of an institution that should treat disputants fairly. Unfortunately, economic
and racial considerations influence the selection of juries, the determination of
guilt and innocence, the length of sentences (and where they are served), and
nearly every other aspect of the judicial process.

Rawls’s theory of justice as fairness has come under sharp attack. Rawls
himself acknowledged that his model only applies to liberal democratic
societies. It would not work, for example, in cultures governed by royal families
or religious leaders (Saudi Arabia, Iran, Nepal) who are given special powers
and privileges denied to everyone else. In fact, the more diverse democratic
nations become, the more difficult it is for groups to agree on common values
and principles.

Rawls’s critics note that definitions of justice and fairness vary widely, a
fact that undermines the usefulness of his principles. What seems fair to one
group or individual often appears grossly unjust to others. Evidence of this fact
is found in disputes over college admissions criteria. Minorities claim that they
should be favored in admissions decisions to redress past discrimination and
to achieve equal footing with whites. Caucasians, on the other hand, feel that
such standards are unfair because they deny equality of opportunity and
ignore legitimate differences in abilities.

Some philosophers point out that there is no guarantee that parties who
step behind the veil of ignorance would come up with the same set of prin-
ciples as Rawls. Rather than emphasize fairness, these individuals might
decide to make decisions based on utilitarian criteria or to emphasize certain rights. Libertarians, for example, hold that freedom from coercion is the most important human right. Every individual should be able to produce and sell as he or she chooses regardless of impact on the poor. Capitalist theorists believe that benefits should be distributed based on the contributions each person makes to the group. They argue that helping out the less advantaged rewards laziness while discouraging productive people from doing their best. Because decision makers may reach different conclusions behind the veil, skeptics contend that Rawls’s guidelines lack moral force. Other approaches to managing society’s inequities are just as valid as the notion of fairness.

Communitarianism: Shoulder Your Responsibilities/Seek the Common Good

The modern communitarian movement began in 1990 when a group of 15 ethicists, social scientists, and philosophers led by sociologist Amitai Etzioni met in Washington, D.C., to express their concerns about the state of American society. Members of this gathering took the name “communitarian” to highlight their desire to shift the focus of citizens from individual rights to communal responsibilities. The next year the group started a journal and organized a teach-in that produced the communitarian platform. In 1993, Etzioni published the communitarian agenda in a book entitled The Spirit of Community: The Reinvention of American Society. Etzioni suggests (a) a moratorium on the generation of new individual rights; (b) recognition that citizenship means accepting civic responsibilities (serving on a jury) along with rights and privileges (the right to a trial by jury); (c) acknowledgment that certain duties may not bring any immediate payoffs; and (d) reinterpretation of some legal rights in order to improve public safety and health. For example, sobriety checkpoints mean less personal freedom but are justified because they can significantly reduce traffic deaths.

Many communitarians resemble evangelists more than philosophers. They are out to recruit followers to their movement that promotes moral revival. American society is fragmenting and in a state of moral decline, they proclaim. Evidence of this decay is all around us in the form of high divorce and crime rates, campaign attack ads, and the growing influence of special interest groups in politics. The United States needs renewal that can only come through the creation of healthy local, regional, and national communities. According to political activist and educator John Gardner, healthy or responsive communities are made up of the following:
• **Wholeness incorporating diversity.** The existence of community depends on sharing some vision of a common good or purpose that makes it possible for people to live and work together. Yet at the same time, segments within the system are free to pursue their diverse and often competing interests.

• **A reasonable set of shared values.** Responsive communities agree on a set of core values that are reflected in written rules and laws, unwritten customs, a shared view of the future, and so on. Important ideals include justice, equality, freedom, the dignity of the individual, and the release of human talent and energy.

• **Caring, trust, and teamwork.** Healthy communities foster cooperation and connection at the same time they respect individual differences. Citizens feel a sense of belonging as well as a sense of responsibility. They recognize the rights of minorities, engage in effective conflict resolution, and work together on shared tasks.

• **Participation.** To function effectively, large, complex communities depend on the efforts of leaders disbursed throughout every segment of society.

• **Affirmation.** Healthy collectives sustain a sense of community through continuous reaffirmation of the history, symbols, and identity of the group.

• **Institutional arrangements for community maintenance.** Responsive communities ensure their survival through such structures as city and regional governments, boards of directors, and committees.

Creation of the kinds of communities envisioned by Gardner and others requires citizens to shoulder a number of collective responsibilities. Communitarian citizens should stay informed about public issues and become active in community affairs. They must serve on juries, work with others on common projects, care for the less fortunate, clean up corruption, provide guidance to children, and so forth. These tasks are often accomplished through voluntary associations such as environmental groups, churches, neighborhood patrols, youth sports leagues, and service organizations. (Complete the self-assessment in Box 5.2 to determine if you are shouldering your share of community responsibilities.)

Concern for the common good may be the most useful ethical principle to come out of the communitarian movement. Considering the needs of the broader community discourages selfish, unethical behavior. Lying, polluting, or manufacturing dangerous products may serve the needs of a leader or an organization, but such actions are unethical because they rarely benefit society as a whole. Further, if each group looks out only for its own welfare, the community as a whole suffers. Communitarians address the problems posed by competing interests by urging leaders and followers to put the needs of the whole above the needs of any one individual, group, or organization. By promoting the common good, the communitarian movement encourages dialogue and discussion within and among groups. Consensus about ethical choices may come out of these discussions.
Box 5.2

Self-Assessment

COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT SCALE

Instructions

The following set of questions will help you determine your level of involvement in your school, local, and national communities. Circle either T (true) or F (false) for each item.

1. T or F I have participated in a service project designed to help my college or university within the last year.

2. T or F I have participated in a service project designed to help my hometown or the community where my college or university is located within the last year.

3. T or F I voted in the last school election.

4. T or F I ran for office, or worked on the campaign of someone who ran, during the last school election.

5. T or F I voted in the last state or local election (if eligible to vote).

6. T or F I voted in the last national election (if eligible to vote).

7. T or F I regularly watch or listen to the news to keep up on local and national events.

8. T or F I can identify the congressperson who represents my home district.

9. T or F I have called or e-mailed a local, state, or national government official in the last year.

10. T or F I am a member of at least one club or religious organization at my college or university.

11. T or F I am a member of at least one club or religious organization in my hometown or in the community where my college or university is located.

12. T or F I have participated in an informal discussion of political or social issues within the last month.

13. T or F I have attended a school-sponsored activity (play, lecture, athletic contest) during the past month.

14. T or F I have participated in a formal or informal residence hall activity during the past month.

15. T or F I participate in group recreational activities outside of class (intramural sports, band, choir) on an ongoing basis.

(Continued)
Communitarianism is a promising approach to moral reasoning, particularly for leaders. First, communitarianism addresses selfishness head on, encouraging us to put responsibilities above rights and to seek the common good. We’re less tempted to abuse power or to accumulate leadership perks, for example, if we remember that we have obligations both to our immediate followers and to the entire communities in which we live.

Second, communitarianism promotes the benefits of disbursed leadership and ethical dialogue. Healthy nations are energized networks of leaders operating in every segment of society—business, politics, health care, unions, social service, religion, and education. Leaders in these countries create a framework (characterized
by equality, openness, and honesty) that encourages discussion of moral questions.

Third, communitarianism encourages collaborative leadership, a new way of solving public problems based on partnership. Collaborative leaders bring together representatives of diverse groups to tackle civic problems like failing schools, substandard housing, economic blight, and uncontrolled development. They focus on the decision-making process rather than promote a particular solution. Collaborative leaders have little formal power but function as “first among equals,” convening discussions, providing information, finding resources, helping the group reach agreement, and seeing that the solution is implemented. Collaborative efforts have produced concrete, tangible results in cities both large (Phoenix, Denver, Baltimore) and small (Missoula, Montana, and Sitka, Alaska). Perhaps just as important, these efforts change the way that communities do business. Trust is created, new communication networks form, the focus shifts from serving special interests to serving a common vision, and citizens are more likely to collaborate again in the future.

Fourth, the rise of communitarianism coincides with renewed interest in virtue ethics, which was our focus in Chapter 3. Both are concerned with the development of moral character. The communitarian movement fosters the development of the virtues by supporting strong families, schools, religious congregations, and governments. A “virtue cycle” is created. Virtuous citizens build moral communities that, in turn, encourage further character formation.

The communitarian movement has its share of detractors. Some critics are uncomfortable with the fact that its founders are out to make converts. Others worry about promoting one set of values in a pluralistic society. Who decides, for example, which values are taught in the public schools? Christians want the Ten Commandments displayed in courtrooms (see Chapter 8), but Buddhists, Moslems, and other religious groups object. Still other critics fear that focusing on the needs of the community will erode individual rights.

Competing community standards may pose the greatest threat to communitarianism. Communities frequently have conflicting moral guidelines. For example, debate over flying the Confederate battle flag in South Carolina’s state capitol erupted during the 2000 presidential primary. Many white South Carolinians treat the flag as part of their cultural heritage. Minorities (as well as many white citizens in other parts of the country) see the flag as a symbol of racial discrimination. The Confederate banner was moved from the capitol building to another public location in the same complex after the election, but civil rights leaders continue to object to the flag’s presence on state property.

Communitarians turn first to community agreement when resolving conflicts such as these. Local values should be respected because they reflect the unique history of the group. Community standards can be oppressive, however. After all, segregation was the norm in the South until the 1960s. Communitarian
thinkers turn next to societal values in such cases. Local preferences need to be accountable to the larger society. Attempts to deny blacks the right to vote, for instance, were eventually overturned because they violated rights guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution. Based on this reasoning, the Confederate flag ought to be removed from South Carolina state property because it undermines such national principles as equality, tolerance, and diversity.

Applying societal norms does not always resolve intercommunity moral conflicts. This is the case with Oregon’s “Death With Dignity Act” that sanctions physician-assisted suicide. Twice state voters approved this measure despite strong opposition from medical and religious groups. The attorney general tried to outlaw the use of painkillers for medically assisted suicide under the federal Controlled Substances Act. However, he was prevented from doing so by a federal court ruling. Both sides in the dispute claim that their positions are based on widely shared societal principles. Proponents of death with dignity believe that suicide is justified by such values as compassion, quality of life, free will, and self-determination. Opponents give more priority to the sanctity of life and argue that extending life is more compassionate than prematurely ending it.

**Altruism: Love Your Neighbor**

Advocates of altruism argue that love of neighbor is the ultimate ethical standard. People are never a means to an end; they are the ends. Our actions should be designed to help others whatever the personal cost. The altruistic approach to moral reasoning, like communitarianism, shares much in common with virtue ethics. Many of the virtues that characterize people of high moral character, such as compassion, hospitality, empathy, and generosity, reflect concern for other people. Clearly, virtuous leaders are other-, not self-, centered.

Altruism appears to be a universal value, one promoted in cultures from every region of the world. The Dalai Lama urges followers to practice an ethic of compassion, for instance, and Western thought has been greatly influenced by the altruistic emphasis of Judaism and Christianity. The command to love God and to love others as we love ourselves is our most important obligation in Judeo-Christian ethics. Because humans are made in the image of God and God is love, we have an obligation to love others no matter who they are and no matter what their relationship to us. Jesus drove home this point in the parable of the Good Samaritan.

A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw
the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the
to and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan, as he traveled,
came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to
him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on
his own donkey, took him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took
out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. “Look after him,” he said,
“and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.”

Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the
hands of robbers?

The expert replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”


Hospice volunteers provide a modern-day example of the unconditional
love portrayed in the story of the Good Samaritan. They meet the needs of the
dying regardless of a person’s social or religious background, providing help at
significant personal cost without expecting anything in return.

Concern for others promotes healthy social relationships. Society as a
whole functions more effectively when individuals help one another in their
daily interactions. Altruism is the driving force behind all kinds of move-
ments and organizations designed to help the less fortunate and to eliminate
social problems. Name almost any nonprofit group, ranging from a hospital or
medical relief team to a youth club or crisis hotline, and you’ll find that it was
launched by someone with an altruistic motive. (See the Curing One Patient at
a Time Chapter End Case, for example.) In addition, when we compare good
to evil, altruistic acts generally come to mind. Moral heroes and moral cham-
pions shine so brightly because they ignore personal risks to battle evil forces.

From the discussion above, it’s easy to see why altruism is a significant
ethical consideration for all types of citizens. Management professors Rabindra
Kanungo and Manuel Mendonca believe, however, that concern for others is
even more important for leaders than it is for followers. By definition, leaders
exercise influence on behalf of others. They can’t understand or articulate
the needs of followers unless they focus on the concerns of constituents. To
succeed, leaders may have to take risks and sacrifice personal gain. According
to Kanungo and Mendonca, leaders intent on benefiting followers will pursue
organizational goals, rely on referent and expert power bases, and give power
away. Leaders intent on benefiting themselves will focus on personal achieve-
ments; rely on legitimate, coercive, and reward power bases; and try to control
followers.

Followers prefer selfless leaders to selfish ones. Self-focused leaders
destroy loyalty and trust and are more likely to lead their communities into
disaster. On the other hand, leaders who sacrifice on behalf of the group
demonstrate their commitment to its mission. They set a powerful example
that encourages followers to do the same. Higher performance often results.
BALANCE SHEET

Advantages (+s)
- Ancient yet contemporary
- Important to society and leaders
- Powerful and inspiring

Disadvantages (−s)
- Failure of many who profess to love their neighbor to act like as if they do
- Many different, sometimes conflicting forms

Altruism is an attractive ethical perspective for several reasons. First, concern for others is an ancient yet contemporary principle. Two thousand years have passed since Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan. However, we’re still faced with the same type of dilemma as the characters in the story. Should we stop to help a stranded motorist or drive on? Should we give our spare change to the homeless person on the street or ignore him? Do we help a fallen runner in a 10K race or keep running? (The Parable of the Sadhu at the end of the chapter is a modern version of the Samaritan dilemma, one that may have involved life or death consequences.) Second, as I noted earlier, altruism is essential to the health of society in general and leaders in particular. In recognition of this fact, social scientists have joined theologians and philosophers in studying the roots of altruistic behavior. Third, altruism is both powerful and inspiring. Acting selflessly counteracts the effects of evil and inspires others to do the same.

Although attractive, love of neighbor is not an easy principle to put into practice. Far too many people who claim to follow the Christian ethic fail miserably, for instance. They come across as less, not more, caring than those who don’t claim to follow this approach. Some of the bitterest wars are religious ones fought by believers who seemingly ignore the altruistic values of their faiths. There’s also disagreement about what constitutes loving behavior. For example, committed religious leaders disagree about the legitimacy of war. Some view military service as an act of love, one designed to defend their families and friends. Others oppose the military, believing that nonviolence is the only way to express compassion for others.

Ethical Pluralism

I’ve presented these five ethical perspectives as separate and sometimes conflicting approaches to moral reasoning. In so doing, I may have given you the
impression that you should select one theory and ignore the others. That would be a mistake. Often you’ll need to combine perspectives (practice *ethical pluralism*) in order to resolve an ethical problem. I suggest that you apply all five approaches to the same problem and see what insights you gain from each one. You might find that a particular perspective is more suited to some kinds of ethical dilemmas than others. For example, when discussing the Sadhu case at the end of the chapter, you may conclude that communitarianism is less helpful than utilitarianism or the categorical imperative. We’ll return to the importance of multiple approaches when we examine ethical decision-making formats in Chapter 7.

**Implications and Applications**

- Well-established ethical systems can help you set your ethical priorities as a leader.
- Utilitarianism weighs the possible costs and benefits of moral choices. Seek to do the greatest good for the greatest number of people.
- The categorical imperative urges you to do what’s right no matter what the consequences. By this standard, some actions (lying, cheating, murder) are always wrong. Respect the right of followers to choose for themselves.
- The justice-as-fairness approach guarantees the same basic rights and opportunities to everyone in a democratic society. When these basic requirements are met, your responsibility as a leader is to give special consideration to the least advantaged.
- Communitarians focus attention on responsibility to the larger community and the need to make decisions that support the common good.
- Altruism encourages you to put others first, no matter what the personal cost.
- Don’t expect perfection from any ethical perspective. Ethical approaches, like leaders themselves, have their strengths and weaknesses.
- Two well-meaning leaders can use the same ethical system and reach different conclusions.
- Whenever possible, you should practice ethical pluralism by applying more than one perspective to the same problem.

**For Further Reflection, Challenge, and Assessment**

1. Can you think of any absolute moral laws or duties that must be obeyed without exception?
2. Reflect on one of your recent ethical decisions. What ethical system(s) did you follow? Were you satisfied with your choice?
3. What items can you add to each of the balance sheets in this chapter?
4. Given that inequalities will always exist, what is the best way to allocate wealth, education, health care, and other benefits in a democratic society?

5. In a group, create a list of the characteristics of healthy and unhealthy communities. Then evaluate a town or city of your choice based on your list. Overall, how would you rate the health of this community?

6. Create your own ethics case based on your personal experience or on current or historical events. Describe the key ethical issues raised in the case and evaluate the characters in the story according to each of the five ethical standards.

7. Apply each of the five perspectives to the Sadhu case at the end of the chapter, either on your own or in a group. Write up your conclusions.
CASE STUDY 5.2

Chapter End Case: The Parable of the Sadhu

The following case first appeared in the September-October 1983 issue of the Harvard Business Review. Since that time, it has been discussed in thousands of business schools, churches, and corporations. The author, business professor Bowen H. McCoy, believes that the story of the Sadhu reminds us of the constant tension between reaching our goals and the claims of strangers.

The Sadhu

The Nepal experience was more rugged than I had anticipated. Most commercial treks last two or three weeks and cover a quarter of the distance we traveled. My friend Stephen, the anthropologist, and I were halfway through the sixty-day Himalayan part of the trip when we reached the high point, an 18,000-foot pass over a crest that we’d have to traverse to reach the village of Muklinath, an ancient holy place for pilgrims.

Six years earlier, I had suffered pulmonary edema, an acute form of altitude sickness, at 16,500 feet in the vicinity of Everest base camp—so we were understandably concerned about what would happen at 18,000 feet. Moreover, the Himalayas were having their wettest spring in twenty years; hip-deep powder and ice had already driven us off one ridge. If we failed to cross the pass, I feared that the last half of our once-in-a-lifetime trip would be ruined.

The night before we would try the pass, we camped in a hut at 14,500 feet. In the photos taken at that camp, my face appears wan. The last village we’d passed through was a sturdy two-day walk below us, and I was tired.

During the late afternoon, four backpackers from New Zealand joined us, and we spent most of the night awake, anticipating the climb. Below, we could see the fires of two other parties, which turned out to be two Swiss couples and a Japanese hiking club.

To get over the steep part of the climb before the sun melted the steps cut in the ice, we departed at 3:30 A.M. The New Zealanders left first, followed by Stephen and myself, our porters and Sherpas, and then the Swiss. The Japanese lingered in their camp. The sky was clear, and we were confident that no spring storm would erupt that day to close the pass.

At 15,500 feet, it looked to me as if Stephen were shuffling and staggering a bit, which are symptoms of altitude sickness. (The initial stage of altitude sickness brings a headache and nausea. As the condition worsens, a climber may encounter difficult breathing, disorientation, aphasia, and paralysis.) I felt strong—my adrenaline was flowing—but I was very concerned about my ultimate ability to get across. A couple of our porters were also suffering from the height, and Pasang, our Sherpa sirdar (leader), was worried.
Just after daybreak, while we rested at 15,500 feet, one of the New Zealanders, who had gone ahead, came staggering down toward us with a body slung across his shoulders. He dumped the almost naked, barefoot body of an Indian holy man—a sadhu—at my feet. He had found the pilgrim lying on the ice, shivering and suffering from hypothermia. I cradled the sadhu’s head and laid him out on the rocks. The New Zealander was angry. He wanted to get across the pass before the bright sun melted the snow. He said, “Look, I’ve done what I can. You have porters and Sherpa guides. You care for him. We’re going on!” He turned and went back up the mountain to join his friends.

I took a carotid pulse and found that the sadhu was still alive. We figured he had probably visited the holy shrines at Muklinath and was on his way home. It was fruitless to question why he had chosen this desperately high route instead of the safe, heavily traveled caravan route through the Kali Gandaki gorge. Or why he was shoeless and almost naked, or how long he had been lying in the pass. The answers weren’t going to solve our problem.

Stephen and the four Swiss began stripping off their outer clothing and opening their packs. The sadhu was soon clothed from head to foot. He was not able to walk, but he was very much alive. I looked down the mountain and spotted the Japanese climbers, marching up with a horse.

Without a great deal of thought, I told Stephen and Pasang that I was concerned about withstanding the heights to come and wanted to get over the pass. I took off after several of our porters who had gone ahead.

On the steep part of the ascent where, if the ice steps had given way, I would have slid down about 3,000 feet, I felt vertigo. I stopped for a breather, allowing the Swiss to catch up with me. I inquired about the sadhu and Stephen. They said that the sadhu was fine and that Stephen was just behind them. I set off again for the summit.

Stephen arrived at the summit an hour after I did. Still exhilarated by victory, I ran down the slope to congratulate him. He was suffering from altitude sickness—walking fifteen steps, then stopping, walking fifteen steps, then stopping. Pasang accompanied him all the way up. When I reached them, Stephen glared at me and said: “How do you feel about contributing to the death of a fellow man?”

I did not completely comprehend what he meant, “Is the sadhu dead?” I inquired.

“No,” replied Stephen, “but he surely will be!”

After I had gone, followed not long after by the Swiss, Stephen had remained with the sadhu. When the Japanese had arrived, Stephen had asked to use their horse to transport the sadhu down to the hut. They had refused. He had then asked Pasang to have a group of our porters carry the sadhu. Pasang had resisted the idea, saying that the porters would have to exert all their energy to get themselves over the pass. He believed they could not carry a man down 1,000 feet to the hut, reclimb the slope, and get across safely before the snow melted. Pasang had pressed Stephen not to delay any longer.

The Sherpas had carried the sadhu down to a rock in the sun at about 15,000 feet and pointed out the hut another 500 feet below. The Japanese had given him
food and drink. When they had last seen him, he was listlessly throwing rocks at
the Japanese party's dog, which had frightened him.

We do not know if the sadhu lived or died.

For many of the following days and evenings, Stephen and I discussed and
debated our behavior toward the sadhu. Stephen is a committed Quaker with deep
moral vision. He said, “I feel that what happened with the sadhu is a good exam-
ple of the breakdown between the individual ethic and the corporate ethic. No
one person was willing to assume ultimate responsibility for the sadhu. Each was
willing to do his bit just so long as it was not too inconvenient. When it got to be
a bother, everyone just passed the buck to someone else and took off. Jesus was
relevant to a more individualistic stage of society, but how do we interpret his
teaching today in a world filled with large, impersonal organizations and groups?”

I defended the larger group, saying, “Look, we all cared. We all gave aid and
comfort. Everyone did his bit. The New Zealander carried him down below the
snow line. I took his pulse and suggested we treat him for hypothermia. You and
the Swiss gave him clothing and got him warmed up. The Japanese gave him food
and water. The Sherpas carried him down to the sun and pointed out the easy trail
toward the hut. He was well enough to throw rocks at a dog. What more could
we do?”

“You have just described the typical affluent Westerner’s response to a prob-
lem. Throwing money—in this case food and sweaters—at it, but not solving the
fundamentals!” Stephen retorted.

“What would satisfy you?” I said. “Here we are, a group of New Zealanders,
Swiss, Americans, and Japanese who have never met before and who are at the
apex of one of the most powerful experiences of our lives. Some years the pass is
so bad no one gets over it. What right does an almost naked pilgrim who chooses
the wrong trail have to disrupt our lives? Even the Sherpas had no interest in risk-
ing the trip to help him beyond a certain point.”

Stephen calmly rebutted. “I wonder what the Sherpas would have done if the
sadhu had been a well-dressed Nepali, or what the Japanese would have done if
the sadhu had been a well-dressed Asian, or what you would have done, Buzz,
if the sadhu had been a well-dressed Western woman?”

“Where, in your opinion,” I asked, “is the limit of our responsibility in a sit-
uation like this? We had our own well-being to worry about. Our Sherpa guides
were unwilling to jeopardize us or the porters for the sadhu. No one else on the
mountain was willing to commit himself beyond certain self-imposed limits.”

Stephen said, “As individual Christians or people with a Western ethical tra-
dition, we can fulfill our obligations in such a situation only if one, the sadhu dies
in our care, two, the sadhu demonstrates to us that he can undertake the two-day
walk down to the village; or three, we carry the sadhu for two days down to the
village and persuade someone there to care for him.”

“Leaving the sadhu in the sun with food and clothing—where he demon-
strated hand-eye coordination by throwing a rock at a dog—comes close to fulfill-
ing items one and two,” I answered. “And it wouldn’t have made sense to take
him to the village where the people appeared to be far less caring than the
Sherpas, so the third condition is impractical. Are you really saying that, no
matter what the implications, we should, at the drop of a hat, have changed our entire plan?"

DISCUSSION PROBES

1. Which ethical standard did the author follow? What perspective did Stephen take?
2. Did McCoy make the right choice? How would you evaluate the responses of the other people in the story?
3. How far should we go to help strangers?
4. What parallels can you draw between the parable of the Sadhu and the kinds of ethical choices made by groups and organizations?
5. Is there any way to prepare ourselves for an ethical crisis like this one?
6. What leadership lessons do you draw from this case?

REFERENCE

When asked to name someone who exemplifies service to others, most people think immediately of Mother Teresa. Yet Mother Teresa is only one example of altruism in action. There are many other leaders who help the less fortunate at great cost to themselves. Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist Tracy Kidder profiles the life of one such modern hero, Dr. Paul Farmer, in a book entitled *Mountains Beyond Mountains*.

Paul Farmer is both a medical doctor and an anthropologist, who teaches at Harvard medical school. He is a past recipient of a MacArthur Foundation “genius” grant and an international authority on infectious diseases. With credentials like these, Farmer could enjoy the lifestyle of a wealthy doctor. Farmer runs a clinic in the impoverished highlands of Haiti instead. He splits his time between Boston and his work among the desperately poor peasants who flock to his Zanmi Lasante medical complex to be treated for everything from malnutrition and gangrene to meningitis and cancer. The organization he cofounded to support his work in Haiti, Partners in Health (PIH), also oversees efforts to eradicate drug-resistant tuberculosis in the prisons and slums of Peru and Russia.

Farmer is consumed with bringing health care to the poor, one patient at a time. Dokte Paul, as the Haitians call him, never turns away a sick person. He and his staff go to extraordinary lengths to make sure their clients follow through on treatment plans. (Failure to ensure that patients take their medications often undermines medical projects in developing nations.) According to Farmer, “The only noncompliant people are physicians. If the patient doesn’t get better, it’s your own fault. Fix it” (p. 36). Farmer walks for hours over mountain paths to visit his patients in their huts to make sure that they are taking their medicines. Along the way, he stops frequently to talk with former patients and recruits new clients for the clinic. On his frequent trips back to the United States, he shops on behalf of his patients, returning with watches, Bibles, radios, and nail clippers.

Not satisfied just to treat disease, Dokte Paul established a public health system to root out the causes of illness. Zanmi Lasante administers a variety of educational and health programs, including schools, sanitation systems, vaccination and feeding programs, and literacy campaigns. These efforts have paid off. Malnutrition and infant mortality rates in the clinic’s service area have dropped dramatically. The mother-to-baby HIV transmission rate is half that of the United States. No one in the region has died from tuberculosis in over 10 years.

Farmer’s medical successes have come at significant personal cost. He works constantly, sleeping only a few hours a night in a small house on clinic grounds. His teaching salary and book royalties largely go toward supporting the clinic. When Farmer does have personal funds, he may give the money to a needy
patient. Expansion of Partners in Health has increased his already demanding travel schedule. He can spend weeks on the road, traveling between project sites, speaking at international conferences, and stopping in at PIH headquarters in Boston. He rarely sees his wife and daughter.

Some would like to call Dokte Paul a saint for his self-sacrifice, but he resists this designation. Farmer believes that sacrifice for the poor should be the norm rather than the exception. He is convinced that God has special concern for the less fortunate. They are in misery because the wealthy have refused to share: “God gives us humans everything we need to flourish, but he’s not the one who’s supposed to divvy up the loot. That charge was laid upon us” (p. 79).

Although most admire his efforts, Farmer does have his critics. The majority of international health decisions are made on a cost/benefit basis with money going where it can help the most people. Farmer ignores utilitarian considerations by spending what it takes to meet the needs of a particular patient. As a result, a few could benefit at the expense of the many. Even sympathetic observers argue that Farmer is wasting his time by making rural house calls when he should be addressing global health issues. Not many others will follow his example, they say. Even if they do, only a handful of the sick will be cured. However, these “journeys to the sick” keep Farmer going by helping him connect as a doctor to his patients. Failing to hike to isolated families would mean that their lives matter less than the lives of others. Farmer refuses to make this distinction. Such treks also reflect his philosophy, which is taken from the Haitian proverb that serves as the inspiration for the title of Kidder’s biography of Farmer. Haitians say, “Beyond mountains there are mountains.” When you cross one mountain range (solve one problem), another mountain or problem will appear. So you travel on to solve that problem as well.

DISCUSSION PROBES

1. What are the advantages and disadvantages of Farmer’s methods?
2. Is Farmer wasting his time by investing so much in individual patients?
3. Do leaders have an obligation to give special consideration to the poor as Farmer believes? Why or why not?
4. Do you think that Dokte Paul will experience burnout from sacrificing so much for others? Should he expect that others would follow his example?
5. Should altruism or utilitarianism be the basis for making medical decisions in poor regions?
6. If you could sit down and talk to Dr. Farmer, what would you ask him or say to him?
7. What leadership lessons do you draw from this case?

REFERENCE

Notes

1. See, for example, the following:


4. Material on Rawls’s theory of justice and criticism of his approach is taken from Rawls, J. (1971). *A theory of justice.* Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press. See also the following:


14. See, for example, the following:

