

# **Ethical Theories**

Dr. Sahar Hassan

# Ethical Theories

- **Utilitarianism (Consequentialism)**
- **Deontology**
- **Intuitionism**
- **Principlism**

# Ethical Theories

- Ethical theory is a system of principles by which a person can determine what should and should not be done.

# Utilitarianism

**Utilitarianism =  
Consequentialism**

# Utilitarianism

- “principle of utility’ or ‘greatest happiness principle’
- An approach that assumes:
  - ✓ an action or practice is right if it leads to the greatest possible balance of good consequences or to the least possible balance of bad consequences

# Utilitarian Ethics

- Considers the greatest good for the largest number of people.
- Also answers the question:
  - ✓ What should I do & why should I do it?

# Utilitarian Ethics

In simple words:

- An **action is right** if it leads to the greatest happiness of all those it affects, i.e. if it maximizes happiness. Otherwise, the action is wrong
- Greatest happiness should be the goal of our actions
- Our actions are judged not 'in themselves', e.g. by what type of action they are (a lie, helping someone, etc.), but in terms of what consequences they have.



# Utilitarian Ethics

- You judge a morality of act by its consequences
- **The end justifies the means**
- The end being achieving the most benefit for most people
- Utilitarian ethics are noted to be the strongest approach used in bioethical decision making.

# Advantages of Utilitarianism

- Provides a **clear & simple** way of making decisions
- Consider the **consequences** of the different actions you could perform & choose that action that brings about the greatest happiness
- It makes complicated decisions easy – the only thing that matters is happiness

**(and surely everyone wants happiness)**

# Example 1

- Nurse XX respected the wishes of her clients, she would have given them only the information which would have been a benefit to them and not caused them undue stress.
- She would have been motivated by her desire to do good (beneficence), rather than her sense of duty

# Example 2

- Two adult HIV patients, Ben and Herb. Both desire the new experimental medication X.
- In addition to HIV, Herb has serious cardiac and kidney problems.
- Because Herb has these severe problems and poorer chance of living longer, the health care providers decided to give the new experimental medicine to Ben. Herb dies soon afterwards.
- The utilitarian principle is to maximize benefit and minimize harm.
- Giving the only available medicine to Ben satisfies the utilitarian principle.

# An Example

- Imagine the following scenario. A prominent and much-loved leader has been rushed to the hospital, grievously wounded by an assassin's bullet. He needs a heart and lung transplant immediately to survive. No suitable donors are available, but there is a homeless person in the emergency room who is being kept alive on a respirator, who probably has only a few days to live, and who is a perfect donor. Without the transplant, the leader will die; the homeless person will die in a few days anyway. Security at the hospital is very well controlled. The transplant team could hasten the death of the homeless person and carry out the transplant without the public ever knowing that they killed the homeless person for his organs. What should they do?

# Utilitarianism

**“Greatest Happiness Principle”**



# Deontology

# Deontology

- An ethical theory that the morality of an action should be based on whether that action itself is right or wrong under a series of rules, rather than based on the consequences of the action
- An example of deontology is:
  - ✓ the belief that killing someone is wrong, even if it was in self-defense.



# Deontology

- Deontological (**duty-based**) ethics are concerned with what people do, not with the consequences of their actions
- Do the right thing
- Do it because it's the right thing to do
- Don't do wrong things
- Avoid them because they are wrong
- Under this form of ethics you can't justify an action by showing that it produced good consequences

# Deontology

- Deontologists live in a universe of moral rules, such as:
- It is wrong to kill innocent people
- It is wrong to steal
- It is wrong to tell lies
- It is right to keep promises
  
- Someone who follows Duty-based ethics **should do the right thing, even if that produces more harm** (or less good) than doing the wrong thing:
  
- **People have a duty to do the right thing, even if it produces a bad result**

# Deontology

- Actions & their outcomes are independent things
- Basically, there are things you have to do, even though you know they are wrong:
  - ✓ Such as shooting that intruder to protect your family
- According to deontology, you need to focus on the act, such as protecting your family, and not the likely death it will mean for the intruder

# Deontology

- In bioethical decision making, moral rightness is the act that is determined not by the consequences it produces, but by the moral qualities intrinsic to the act itself
- Deontological theory claims that a decision is right only if it conforms to an overriding moral duty & wrong only if it violates that moral duty

## Example 1

- The deontological approach would be at work if: a decision is made to resuscitate and provide mechanical ventilation to a 23-week, despite ability to pay for care & availability of newborn intensive care beds

# Example 2

## **Deontology:** *A duty*

Zelda, a practitioner, believes she has a duty to give cardiac clients detailed information on the pathology involved in their condition even though the client has indicated that they are not ready or may be terrified to hear the information causing the client distress.



**Deontology**

The end does not justify the means.

**Utilitarianism**

The end justifies the means.

# Intuitionism



# Intuitionism

- Resolves ethical dilemmas by appealing to one's intuition, a moral faculty of a person which directly knows what is right or wrong.
- **(A gut feeling of knowing what is right)**

# Intuition

- Some things are just right, and some things are just wrong. How do I know? Because I know.
- I know that good is good because I know that good is good.
- I just know, you know?
- I know because it's obvious
- I know because it's intuitive

**Intuition** is the ability to understand something without conscious reasoning or thought

# Intuition

- Where does intuition come from? It's a subconscious reflex, something free of conscious decision-making, so that leads many philosophers to assume that there is something inherently truthful about it.
- **Intuitionism** is the philosophical theory that basic truths are known intuitively
- Basically, your intuition knows something because it is true

# Principlism

- Principles are rules-based criteria for conduct that naturally flow from the identification of obligation and duties.
- An applied approach to ethics based on following a limited number of principles derived following a limited number of principles derived from several schools of philosophy [?]
- Based on 4 orders of principles:
  - ✓ Autonomy
  - ✓ social justice
  - ✓ beneficence
  - ✓ non-maleficence maleficence)

# Principlism

- Principlism reminds us that the problem in ethics is not “having principles,” but rather following them dogmatically.
- Principles are often used as basis for ethically related documents such as documents reflecting positions about human rights.
- Examples of such documents: The Universal Declaration of Human Rights formulated in 1948 by the UN