

Six Ethical Philosophies

Six principal ethical philosophies can and should be used to analyze a situation. They are the categorical imperative, utilitarianism, hedonism, the golden mean, the golden rule, and the veil of ignorance. These are the principle theories that have survived from 2500 years of Western moral philosophy. They are familiar to all who have grown up in the US or other European-influenced cultures. Aspects of these theories are evident in our public policies, laws, and social conventions.

Golden Rule The golden rule, or the ethic of reciprocity, teaches people to “love your neighbor as yourself.” This theory has been attributed to ancient Greek philosophers such as Pittacus of Mytilene (died 568 BCE), considered one of the “Seven Sages of Greece,” who wrote, “Do not to your neighbor what you would take ill from him;” Thales of Miletus (died 546 BCE), another Sage of Greece who said, “Avoid doing what you would blame others for doing;” and Epictetus (died 135 CE), a Stoic philosopher who wrote, “What thou avoidest suffering thyself seek not to impose on others.” In fact, very major religion has some variable of the golden rule as a part of their scriptures and/or teachings. This philosophy holds that an individual should be as humane as possible and never harm others by insensitive actions.

[Further reading](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_rule).

Hedonism From the Greek word for pleasure, hedonism is closely related to the philosophies of nihilism and narcissism. A student of Socrates, Aristippus (who died in Athens in 366 BCE) founded this ethical philosophy on the basis of pleasure. Aristippus believed that people should “act to maximize pleasure now and not worry about the future.” However, Aristippus referred to pleasures of the mind—intellectual pleasures—not physical sensations. He believed that people should fill their time with intellectual pursuits and use restraint and good judgment in their personal relationships. His phrase sums up the hedonistic philosophy: “I possess; I am not

possessed.” Unfortunately, modern usage of the philosophy ignores his original intent. The Renaissance playwright and poet Ben Jonson, a contemporary of William Shakespeare, once wrote one of the best summaries of the hedonistic philosophy, “Drink today, and drown all sorrow; You shall perhaps not do it tomorrow; Best, while you have it, use your breath; There is no drinking after death.” Phrases such as “live for today” and “don’t worry, be happy” currently express the hedonistic philosophy. If an opinion or action is based purely on a personal motivation—money, fame, relationships, and the like—the modern interpretation of hedonistic philosophy is at work.

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07187a.htm>>Further reading.

Golden Mean The Greek philosopher Aristotle was born near the city Thessaloniki in 384 BCE. As his parents were wealthy, he studied at the Athens-based Academy led by the renowned Greek philosopher Plato. After learning and teaching at the Academy for 20 years, he traveled throughout the region studying the biology and botany of his country. He was eventually hired as a tutor for Alexander the Great and two other kings of Greece, Ptolemy and Cassander. When he was about 50 years old he returned to Athens and began his own educational institution, the Lyceum, where he wrote an astounding number of books on diverse subjects that made breakthroughs in science, communications, politics, rhetoric, and ethics. He was the earliest known writer to describe the phenomenon of light noticed in a *camera obscura* that eventually led to a further understanding of how the eyes and the photographic medium work.

Although the golden mean was originally a neo-Confucian concept first espoused by Zisi, the only grandson of the Chinese philosopher Confucius, Aristotle elaborated on it for Western readers in his book *Nicomachean Ethics*. The golden mean philosophy refers to finding a middle ground or a compromise between two extreme points of view or actions. The middle way doesn’t involve a precisely mathematical average but is an action that approximately fits that

situation at that time. When using the golden mean philosophy, you must first think of the two most extreme examples. For a particularly violent or controversial news photograph or video, there are two extreme choices. The first is to take and then use the picture large and in color on a front page of a newspaper, the cover of a magazine, or in the lead for a news broadcast. The other extreme choice is not to use the image at all. A compromise or middle way might be to use the image in black and white, small, on an inside page, as a short, edited video, or on a website where users are warned before clicking a link to it. Generally speaking, most ethical dilemmas are solved with the golden mean approach.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Golden_mean_%28philosophy%29>Further reading.

Categorical Imperative Immanuel Kant was born in Königsberg, the capital of Prussia (now Kaliningrad, Russia) in 1724. The fourth of 11 children, at an early age he showed intellectual promise and escaped his crowded household to attend a special school. At the age of 16 he graduated from the University of Königsberg, where he stayed and taught until his death. Kant never married and never traveled farther than 100 miles from his home during his lifetime. Thirteen years before his death in 1804, he published *Critique of Pure Reason*. It is considered one of the most important works in philosophical history. Kant established the concept of the categorical imperative. *Categorical* means unconditional, and *imperative* means that the concept should be employed without any question, extenuating circumstances, or exceptions. Right is right and must be done even under the most extreme conditions. Consistency is the key to the categorical imperative philosophy. Once a rule is established for a proposed action or idea, behavior and opinions must be consistently and always applied in accordance with it. But for Kant, the right action must have a positive effect and not promote unjustified harm or evil. Nevertheless, the categorical imperative is a difficult mandate to live up to.

<http://www.philosophypages.com/hy/5i.htm>>Further reading.

Utilitarianism This philosophy is usually considered the combined work of British thinkers Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill. The legal scholar and philosopher Jeremy Bentham developed his theory of utility, or the greatest happiness principle, from the work of Joseph Priestley, who is considered one of the most important philosophers and scientists of the 18th century. Bentham acknowledged Priestley as the architect of the idea that “the greatest happiness of the greatest number is the foundation of morals and legislation.” John Stuart Mill was the son of the Scottish philosopher James Mill and was tutored for a time by Bentham. When he was three years old, he was taught to read Greek; by the time he was 10 he read Plato’s works easily. With the aid of his wife Harriet Taylor, he developed the philosophy of utilitarianism expressed in his books *On Liberty* (1859) and *Utilitarianism* (1863). He gave credit to Taylor for her influence but, as was the custom of the time, did not give her co-authorship credit.

Mill expanded on Priestley and Bentham’s idea of utilitarianism by separating different kinds of happiness. For Mill, intellectual happiness is more important than the physical kind. He also thought that there is a difference between happiness and contentment, which is culminated in his phrase, “It is better to be a human being dissatisfied than a pig satisfied; better to be Socrates dissatisfied than a fool satisfied.” In utilitarianism, various consequences of an act are imagined, and the outcome that helps the most people is usually the best choice under the circumstances. However, Mill specified that each individual’s moral and legal rights must be met before applying the utilitarian calculus. According to Mill, it is not acceptable to cause great harm to a few persons in order to bring about a little benefit to many. However, if everyone is being treated justly, then it is acceptable to do something that might provide a large benefit to the community as a whole.

Editors and news directors frequently use and misuse utilitarianism to justify the printing of

disturbing accident scenes in their newspapers, magazines, on television, and on websites. Although the image may upset a few because of its gruesome content, it may persuade many others to drive more carefully. That action is acceptable under the utilitarianism philosophy because people do not have a moral right to be sheltered from sad news on occasion. For many, the educational function of the news media—from the typographical and graphic design displays that can be easily read to informational graphics that explain a complex concept—is most often expressed in the utilitarian philosophy.

<http://www.utilitarianism.com/utilitarianism.html>>Further reading.

Veil of Ignorance Articulated by the American philosopher John Rawls in his book *A Theory of Justice* in 1971, the veil of ignorance philosophy considers all people equal as if each member were wearing a veil so that such attributes as age, gender, ethnicity, and so on could not be determined. No one class of people would be entitled to advantages over any other. Imagining oneself without knowing the positions that one brings to a situation results in an attitude of respect for all involved. The phrase “walk a mile in someone’s shoes” is a popular adaptation of the veil of ignorance philosophy. It is considered one answer to prejudice and discrimination. Rawls taught at Harvard University for almost 40 years. In 1999 he received the National Humanities Medal from President Bill Clinton, who said that he “helped a whole generation of learned Americans revive their faith in democracy itself.”

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Veil_of_ignorance>Further reading.