

BUSINESS ETHICS

Lecture # 12

Hand Out

The Ethics of Care

As the Malden Mills fire and rebuilding shows, there are perspectives on ethics that are not explainable from the point of view of utilitarianism, rights, or Kantian philosophy. The owner had no duty to rebuild (or to pay his workers when they were not working) from any of these perspectives; still, he maintained that he had a responsibility to his workers and to his community. Rather than being impartial (which all of these theories maintain is crucial), this owner treated his community and workers partially.

This is central to the point of view known as the **ethics of care**, an approach to ethics that many feminist ethicists have recently advanced. According to this method, we have an obligation to exercise special care toward the people with whom we have valuable, close relationships. Compassion, concern, love, friendship, and kindness are all sentiments or virtues that normally manifest this dimension of morality. Thus, an ethic of care emphasizes two moral demands:

1. We each exist in a web of relationships and should preserve and nurture those concrete and valuable relationships we have with specific persons.
2. We each should exercise special care for those with whom we are concretely related by attending to their particular needs, values, desires, and concrete well-being as seen from their own personal perspective, and by responding positively to these needs, values, desires, and concrete well-being, particularly of those who are vulnerable and dependent on our care.

An ethic of care, therefore, can be seen as encompassing the kinds of obligations that a so-called communitarian ethic advocates. A **communitarian ethic** is an ethic that sees concrete communities and communal relationships as having a fundamental value that should be preserved and maintained.

The demands of caring are sometimes in conflict with the demands of justice, though, and no fixed rule exists to resolve these conflicts. Critics point out that the ethics of care can easily degenerate into unjust favoritism. Though the ethics of care can also lead to burnout, the advantage of the theory is that it is a corrective to the other approaches that are impartial and universal.

Integrating Utility, Rights, Justice, and Caring

So far, the chapter has outlined four main kinds of basic moral considerations:

1. **Utilitarian standards** - must be used when we do not have the resources to attain everyone's objectives, so we are forced to consider the net social benefits and social costs consequent on the actions (or policies or institutions) by which

we can attain these objectives.

2. **Standards that specify how individuals must be treated** - must be employed when our actions and policies will substantially affect the welfare and freedom of specifiable individuals. Moral reasoning of this type forces consideration of whether the behavior respects the basic rights of the individuals involved and whether the behavior is consistent with one's agreements and special duties.
3. **Standards of justice** - indicate how benefits and burdens should be distributed among the members of a group. These sorts of standards must be employed when evaluating actions whose distributive effects differ in important ways.
4. **Standards of caring** - indicate the kind of care that is owed to those with whom we have special concrete relationships. Standards of caring are essential when moral questions arise that involve persons embedded in a web of relationships, particularly persons with whom one has close relationships, especially those of dependency.

One simple strategy for ensuring that all four kinds of considerations are incorporated into one's moral reasoning is to inquire systematically into the utility, rights, justice, and caring involved in a given moral judgment, as in Fig. 2.1. One might, for example, ask a series of questions about an action that one is considering: (a) Does the action, as far as possible, maximize social benefits and minimize social injuries? (b) Is the action consistent with the moral rights of those whom it will affect? (c) Will the action lead to a just distribution of benefits and burdens? (d) Does the action exhibit appropriate care for the well-being of those who are closely related to or dependent on oneself?

Unfortunately, there is not yet any comprehensive moral theory to show when one of these considerations should take precedence.

An Alternative to Moral Principles: Virtue Ethics

Many ethicists criticize the entire notion that actions are the subject of ethics. The central issue (as Ivan Boesky's case demonstrates) is the kind of person an agent ought to be and what the character of humans ought to be. This does not mean that the conclusion of this type of ethics (called *virtue ethics*) will be much different, however. Rather, the virtues provide a perspective that covers the same ground as the four approaches, just from a different perspective.

A **moral virtue** is an acquired disposition that is a valuable part of a morally good person, exhibited in the person's habitual behavior. It is praiseworthy, in part, because it is an achievement whose development requires effort. The most basic issue, from the perspective of virtue ethics, is the question: What are the traits of character that make a person a morally good human being? Which traits of character are moral virtues? According to Aristotle, moral virtues enable humans to act in accordance with their specific purpose (which he held to be reasoning). Other philosophers, such as Aquinas, have come up with different lists of virtues.