

A Veil of Ignorance: Introduction to Applied Ethics

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Motivation

- How do you get students to put aside any preconceptions they have?
- How do you get students to appreciate the usefulness of thought experiments?
- How do you introduce students to the idea of making ethical decisions?

Learning Objectives

- Students will learn the value of impartiality and open-mindedness in applied ethics
 - Students will engage in discussions regarding injustice in current systems
- Students will explore how different ethical theories would help them make ethical decisions
- Students will learn aspects of the history of ethical theory, specifically Utilitarianism, Virtue Ethics, Kantianism, Social Contract Theory, and Rawls' Veil of Ignorance

Timing

- 1st-2nd day of class
 - Before students have a bias towards one ethical theory over another
 - Helps students put ensuing discussion of ethical theories into context
- Interactive discussion to solidify class norms and engage students from the start

Benefits

- Students actively learn the value of thought experiments in applied ethics
- Engages students who learn best by doing, rather than reading or listening
 - Stimulates interest in the topic from Day 1
 - Sets a standard for discussion norms and class participation

Hand out folded papers, students can't open them yet

Papers contain information about the student's new identity for the experiment
Students do not get to know their identities at this stage of the experiment

Propose an ethical question

Example questions:
How should liver transplants be allocated?
How should waste facility locations be chosen?
How should grants be awarded?

Students decide as a group how to handle the situation

Suggestions might inadvertently align with various ethical theories

Students open their papers to discover their situational identities

Were the students satisfied with the consensus, given their new identities?

Students made their original decision from behind a Veil of Ignorance

Did this impact their decision?
Would they change their minds now?
Should all ethical decisions be made in a similar manner?
How were their decisions similar to various ethical theories?

Example

Ethical question

How do you decide who gets a liver transplant?
What would the most just outcome be?

Background

- There are more transplant patients on the waiting list than there are livers available
- Dying of liver disease is a horrible way to die, both for the patient and their family
 - The need for a transplant can arise due to trauma, alcoholism, poor health, acetaminophen overdose, hepatitis, mononucleosis, and more
 - Approximately 4 out of every 1000 people in the country is currently on the Organ Procurement and Transplantation Network's list
- Because the need for livers is high and list of donors is short, there is a stratified waiting list that determines who gets the next liver that comes available

Student suggestions

- Need-based system
- Greatest contribution to society
 - Best expected prognosis
 - Age
 - Length of time spent on list
 - Reason for being on the list
- Likelihood of needing another transplant

Student-led discussion topics

- Can what is logical to do and what is ethical to do conflict?
- How much should you strip off of who the person is? I.e., should it matter if they're the president or a "nobody"?
- When weighing happiness or utility, how much should the recipient's influence on others matter? Should we take into account whether they make others happy?
- Should people with more wealth or power be able to buy their way up the list?

Identities

- General surgeon on the transplant team
- Woman whose husband is on the liver transplant list
 - 32-year-old who was not at fault in a car accident and now needs a liver
- 32-year-old who has had six drinks a day for the past 15 years and now needs a liver
 - Recovering alcoholic, 40 years sober, who needs a second liver transplant

Continuing discussion questions

- How does your identity in this scenario make you feel about how the decision went?
 - How many of you would change your decision given what you now know about who you are in this situation?

Follow up instructor-led discussion topics

- John Rawls' "Veil of Ignorance" theory
- Four bioethics principles (autonomy, beneficence, justice, non-maleficence)
 - Survey of main ethical theories
- The use of thought experiments in ethics