ASSIGNMENT

You began this session considering a moral-ethical dilemma you yourself faced that you either resolved or failed to resolve, but hopefully learned from. You may never have given much thought to ethical theory nor what ethical premises/paradigms you have unconsciously held.

Now that you've had an opportunity to explore ethics formally, create a reflective assessment. Revisit your ethical memoir: what ethical theory best applies to your experience? Which significant author you have studied most speaks to your own ethical paradigm as you are (re)forming it now? If you didn't resolve your ethical dilemma when you experienced it, what would you do now and why?

Additionally, explore your process of transformation in this course. Discuss your experiences of the course, your beginnings, and where you are at now with your team or partners and create an oral presentation that reflectively assesses your learning experience and the collaborations you engaged in throughout this session. Are we a society of learners who greatly benefit from interactions? Or are we islands, whose individual systems and beliefs are exclusive to ourselves? [Note: You may find it useful to write your thoughts out in an essay form, but the essay is not required in the drop box. Instead, focus on visual and audio quality, poise, and grace in the execution of this assignment. Let your content and stylistic choices reign creatively, and let your message be compelling, persuasive, and convincing.

Utilitarian

The history of ethics is as long as education itself, and it should be clear that theories of ethics have arisen when two conditions are present: the cultural need for a new way of thinking through ethics (metaethics) and a particularly talented teacher to speak and write it out.

Utilitarian ethics is the most common form in use today. In the context of the Modern Era, by which we mean since the start of the Industrial Age in the 1840s, utilitarian ends-based thinking has thrived because two needs have been met by it: first, ends-based thinking is common throughout the culture as people have sought to improve and perfect what is produced by their effort; second, the speed of life has made single-criterion solutions attractive toward rapid and effective problem solving.

Aristotle had taught that all things have a purpose. It is good to ask about the proper purpose of ethical work; indeed, of ethics themselves. With utilitarian ends-based ethics, the purpose is to produce good outcomes. More directly, utilitarian ethics aims to produce one specific outcome: happiness. As happiness is the single good to be produced, all the many things that are associated with happy outcomes are merely the means to deliver said happiness.

Why do we work the many activities of our lives and occupations? While a case can be made that some things are valuable on their own merit, our activities are generally valued for what they produce. The most basic outcome is happiness for ourselves as individuals, with further value attached to the happiness of our whole community. A proper word for this, not common in daily discussion, is "approbation."

Before beginning, let's visit with John Stuart Mill.

Outcomes & Consequences

It's truly amazing how few people ever figure out the connection between their decisions and the consequences of those decisions. Consequences are outcomes, yet many people blithely move through life wondering why life is difficult. Life is full of consequences of unrecognized decisions, and many are quite troublesome.

There is a logical link: If the purpose of ethics is decisions, then better ethics will yield better decisions and better consequences. Quality ethics aimed at decisions will generally produce better consequences; therefore, a vision of desirable consequences (and less undesirable ones) will drive better decisions.

Looking at decisions and consequences in a sequential manner, decisions are made in time before their consequences appear. In simple form, this is why the Latin term a posteriori is used, post being the word meaning "after." A simple test for spotting an ends-based way is to consider, "What would happen if we actually choose this?" That is a very sobering question, but it displays the model of thinking. Beyond the decision in time is an opportunity to evaluate the decision making and to learn lessons from it in preparation for the next utilitarian decision.

Of the three primary schools of ethics given in the Week 1 reading, **Utilitarianism**is distinct in its focus as the most common and developed ends-based ethical system. This is not a process of trial and error as much as a process of improvement through success and failure of decision making.

Comparing with Aristotle

Outside of the literature is a special concept that only consequentialist ends-based ethics display. Ends-based theories anticipate outcomes and give opportunities to measure the quality of decisions after they are made by the happiness that was actually delivered. This, then, gives a secondary opportunity to learn from the evaluation of decisions and improve decision making for the future and improvement of subsequent outcomes. A kind of feedback loop is created for a process of continuous improvement.

We are invited to ask a question that poses the ultimate utilitarian test: "What will happen if we actually choose this action instead of another one?" What, indeed! Such a question makes no sense in deontological ethics, like those of Kant, because the single criterion for deontological ethics is that principle and intentions drive the decisions completely outside of concern for outcomes and consequences.

Compared with Aristotle's Ethics of Virtue, Utilitarian ethics have a similar practical aspect of developing habits and skill over time and through repetition and practice--different from but not unlike Aristotle's virtues.

Philosopher of the week Transcript

Mill speaks:

My name is John Stuart Mill. How exciting to be a part of a 21st century Ethics course. Once again, I see that my fears about democracy perhaps have come true. When you have done some research about me, and read the lecturette, you will find that I lived during the late 19th century, in London, and that my wife Harriet Taylor and myself feared that we lived in a society where bold and adventurous individuals were becoming all too rare. My critics thought that the prospect of a mass democracy in which working-class opinion would be oppressive and perhaps violent frightened me. This was an untrue belief. The truth is that middle-class conformism frightened me much more. My ethics state that individual liberty and the rights of the individual are by far the most important of all! I also believed in women’s rights and liberty back when no man believed this. How can we love the individual, if we deny this in women? The answer is, “We cannot!” Women and men should be treated equally in all things! I am a Utilitarian. That which is useful is that which is right. I have lain down "one very simple principle" to govern the use of coercion (meaning legal penalties) in society --- we may only coerce others in self-defense - either to defend ourselves, or to defend others from harm. All of this “saving people from themselves” is rubbish! It is not the role of the government to make people behave “better.” It is the role of the individual to do this. Only by adopting a principle of self-restraint can we seek out the truth, experience the truth as "our own", and fully develop our individual selves. Your Patriot Act? You will discuss this during our class. How can this be good? Do you feel safer? Are you willing to give up all of your rights if that will make you 100% safe? One of your great Americans said, “Give me liberty or give me death.” Americans, do you still believe this? I do wonder. Read my Essay “On Liberty.” You may learn something. Good day!

Care-based Dilemmas

Utilitarian ethics clearly connect individuals with their larger community, but at the individual level, they are not completely unlike the care-based ethics presented in the Three Primary Schools model. To ask what outcomes and consequences will occur is similar to making care-based decisions in the thought of what decision-makers would want to happen to them in the same situation.

Care-based ethics enjoys a kind of reciprocity between people in which decision-makers can imagine themselves as the object of the decision as well as the subject of the decision-making process. At the same time, and perceiving themselves in dual roles in the dilemma, this process of ethics can become very subjective for decision-makers who can confuse what is good for others with what they perceive as good for themselves.

People who must communicate public decisions encounter a special difficulty. Public officials and their spokespersons desire public acceptance of their decisions and public approval of their administrations. The public in general is very mixed in its opinions, unsystematic in its understanding if issues and ethics, dependent on media commentators for analysis, and generally responsive in personal and subjective ways--mixing concerns and simultaneous reactions to what is communicated. Communicating to the public audience is most effective when directed toward them at several levels simultaneously.

One recent president ended many public speeches about policies and actions by trying to appeal to everybody in their manners of responding by saying, "We should do this for (reasons X, Y, and Z); besides, it is the right thing to do."