Moral Issues

Teacher Background

Moral issues greet us each morning in the newspaper, confront us in the memos on our desks, nag us from our children's soccer fields and bid us good night on the evening news. We are bombarded daily with questions about the justice of our foreign policy, the morality of medical technologies that can prolong our lives, the rights of the homeless and the fairness of our children's teachers towards students in their classrooms. Dealing with these moral issues is often perplexing. How, exactly, should we think through an ethical issue? What questions should we ask? What factors should we consider?

The first step in analysing moral issues is obvious but not always easy: Get the facts. Some moral issues create controversies simply because we do not bother to check the facts. This first step, although obvious, is also among the most important and the most frequently overlooked.

But having the facts is not enough. Facts by themselves only tell us what is; they do not tell us what ought to be. In addition to getting the facts, resolving an ethical issue also requires an appeal to values. Philosophers have developed five different approaches to values in order to deal with moral issues.

The Utilitarian Approach

Utilitarianism was conceived in the 19th century by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill to help legislators determine which laws were morally best. Both Bentham and Mill suggested that ethical actions are those that provide the greatest balance of good over evil.

To analyse an issue using the Utilitarian approach, we first identify the various courses of action available to us. Second, we ask who will be affected by each action and what benefits or harms will be derived from each. And third, we choose the action that will produce the greatest benefits and the least harm. According to this approach, the ethical action is the one that provides the greatest good for the greatest number.

The Rights Approach

Another approach to ethics has its roots in the philosophy of the 18th-century thinker Immanuel Kant and others like him, who focused on the individual's right to choose for her or himself. According to these philosophers, what makes human beings different from mere things is that people have dignity based on their ability to choose freely what they will do with their lives and they have a fundamental moral right to have these choices respected. People are not objects to be manipulated; it is a violation of human dignity to use people in ways they do not freely choose. In deciding whether an action is moral or immoral using this second approach, then, we must ask: Does the action respect the moral rights of everyone? Actions are wrong to the extent that they violate the rights of individuals: the more serious the violation, the more wrongful the action.

The Fairness or Justice Approach

The fairness or justice approach to ethics has its roots in the teachings of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, who said that "equals should be treated equally and unequals unequally." The basic moral question in this approach is: How fair is an action? Does it treat everyone in the same way, or does it show favouritism and discrimination? Favouritism gives benefits to some people without a justifiable reason for singling them out; discrimination imposes burdens on people who are no different from those on whom burdens are not imposed. Both favouritism and discrimination are unjust and wrong.
The Common Good Approach
This approach to ethics assumes a society comprised of individuals whose own good is inextricably linked to the good of the community. Community members are bound by the pursuit of common values and goals.
The Common Good is a notion that originated more than 2,000 years ago in the writings of Plato, Aristotle and Cicero. More recently, contemporary ethicist John Rawls defined the common good as "certain general conditions that are...equally to everyone's advantage."
In this approach, we focus on ensuring that the social policies, social systems, institutions and environments on which we depend are beneficial to all. Examples of goods common to all include affordable health care, effective public safety, peace among nations, a just legal system and an unpolluted environment.
Appeals to the common good urge us to view ourselves as members of the same community, reflecting on broad questions concerning the kind of society we want to become and how we are to achieve it. While respecting and valuing the freedom of individuals to pursue their own goals, the common-good approach challenges us also to recognise and further those goals we share in common.

The Virtue Approach
The virtue approach to ethics assumes that there are certain ideals that provide for the full development of our humanity and toward which we should strive. These ideals are discovered through thoughtful reflection on what kind of people we have the potential to become.
Virtues are attitudes or character traits that enable us to be and to act in ways that develop our highest potential. They enable us to pursue the ideals we have adopted. Honesty, courage, compassion, generosity, fidelity, integrity, fairness, self-control and prudence are all examples of virtues.
Virtues are like habits; that is, once acquired, they become characteristic of a person. This approach argues that a person who has developed virtues will be naturally disposed to act in ways consistent with moral principles. The virtuous person is the ethical person.

In dealing with an ethical problem using the virtue approach, we might ask: What kind of person should I be? What will promote the development of character in my community and me?

Ethical Problem Solving
These five approaches suggest that once we have ascertained the facts, we should ask ourselves five questions when trying to resolve a moral issue:

- What benefits and what harms will each course of action produce and which alternative will lead to the best overall consequences?
- What moral rights do the affected parties have and which course of action best respects those rights?
- Which course of action treats everyone the same, except where there is a morally justifiable reason not to and does not show favouritism or discrimination?
- Which course of action advances the common good?
- Which course of action develops moral virtues?

This method, of course, does not provide an automatic solution to moral problems. It is not meant to. The method is merely meant to help identify most of the important ethical considerations. In the end, we must deliberate on moral issues for ourselves, keeping a careful eye on both the facts and on the ethical considerations involved.

Author Information
The teacher background information for this module organiser has been taken from the following article: