



goals



principles

Three points of view on ethics



relationships

Three Points of View on Ethics

- These slides present a three-viewpoint way of raising and trying to answer ethical questions.
- They are meant to be useful to anyone, whether you have formally studied ethics or not.
- The three viewpoints are like different seats at a ball game. Using all three, you'll see more than if you just stick with one.
- As you'll see, they are related to the most common ethical theories. But you don't need to be familiar with those theories to use these three viewpoints.

1st viewpoint: goals, circumstances, benefit and harm

- Basic insight: Ethics is about doing the *best* thing, producing the most benefit and the least harm.
- Key terms: good & bad, benefit and harm, weighing the consequences.
- Key questions to ask: What choices do we have? Who will benefit or be harmed, and in what way, by each of them?

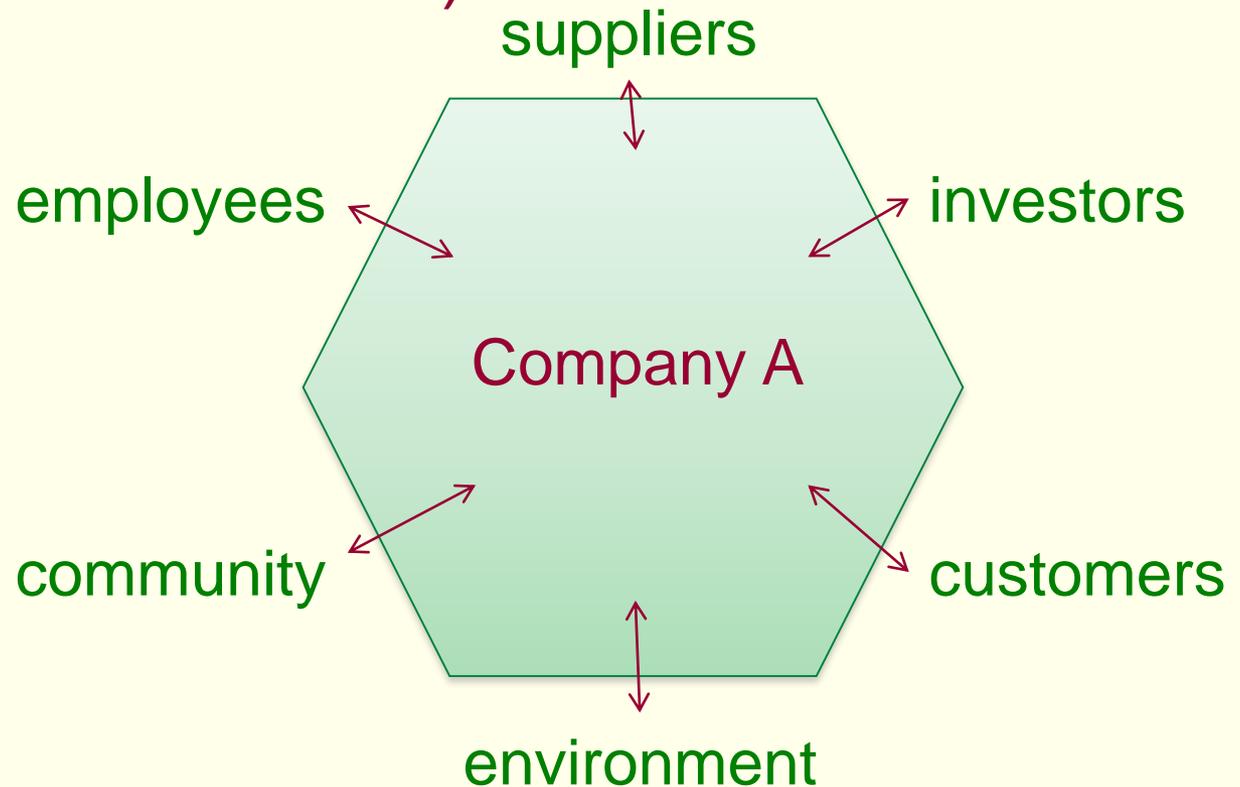


1st Viewpoint (cont.)

- 1st viewpoint in business or policy decisions: stakeholder analysis. (Who has a stake in the outcome? Decision makers must take stakeholder benefits and harms into account.)
- The easy way: cost/benefit analysis, measured in dollars and cents.
- The hard way: benefit and harm analysis, where non-financial benefits and harms are also considered.

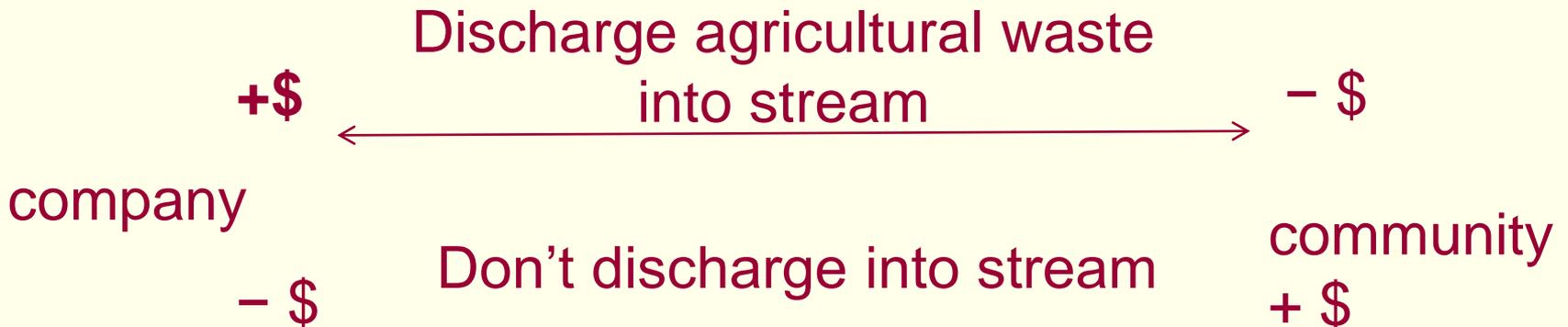
1st Viewpoint (cont.)

- 1st viewpoint in business: **stakeholder analysis**. (Who has a stake in the business? The business must take their benefit and harm into account when it makes decisions.)



1st Viewpoint (cont.)

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1st viewpoint and ethical theory

- *Consequentialist* theories (like utilitarianism) start with this viewpoint. An action is *right* just in case *it promotes the best consequences for all concerned*. Any consequentialist theory will also suggest a rule about what consequences are best (for classic utilitarianism, it's the optimal balance of pleasure over pain for the greatest number of people).

1st viewpoint and ethical theory

- An action is *right* just in case *it promotes the best consequences.*

Action 1	Action 2	Action 3
Benefits = +10 PU* Harms = - 50 PU*	Benefits = +50 PU* Harms = - 50 PU*	Benefits = +75 PU* Harms = -15 PU*
		

*PU = pleasure units

1st viewpoint and ethical theory

- Note: every ethical theory will deal with results, with rules, and with motivation and character. The difference will come in what kind of explanation a theory considers to be most basic.
- So the utilitarian J. S. Mill, for example, believed that *moral principles are basically* rules about what will produce the greatest balance of pleasure over pain for the greatest number of people. (See *Utilitarianism* for his ideas.)
- These rules gradually become established in society, and we feel bound by them.

1st viewpoint and ethical theory

– J.S. Mill (cont.)

- But the force of moral rules comes, ultimately, from our desire to gain pleasure and avoid pain, and the fact that some of our pleasures and pains are *empathetic*; when others are happy, we are pleased; when others suffer, so do we.
- Our empathetic emotions are weak motivators compared with self-interest. But in society, over time, empathetic emotions are additive, whereas conflicting self-interests cancel each other out.

1st viewpoint and ethical theory

– J.S. Mill (cont.)

- Over time, then, these empathetic emotions become encoded as principles in society, and we internalize them as binding rules.
- But when we examine them closely, we see that they are just another form of our familiar old motivators pleasure and pain. They don't have any *independent* authority; and if they conflict with the principle of utility, we should get rid of them or revise them.

1st viewpoint & sustainability

- Calculating benefit and harm is necessary when making decisions about sustainability (see next slide).
- Fact-finding is especially essential for policy decisions re: sustainability
- Dale Jamieson's problem about consequences: sustainable decisions only matter when enough people make them. So when threshold effects are involved, utility apparently recommends *avoiding* sustainable action at non-trivial cost, unless enough others get on the train to cross the threshold.
- Thinking about this problem: read Jamieson 2003, also Clowney 2014.

1st viewpoint – strengths and limits

- 1st viewpoint is a natural for environmental ethics, and for business, law and policy. *Must* consider various beneficial and harmful effects of our actions for all stakeholders, weigh consequences of various actions & policy choices. Much discussion about policy centers here.
- But how do we tell what is a benefit or a harm? And who should count as a stakeholder? Future generations? If so, how to count them? Other life forms? If so, which ones, and why?



Where's the finish line?

Transition to 2nd viewpoint

- Cost-benefit analysis tries to answer those questions in dollars and cents.
- Classic utilitarianism answers in terms of pleasure and pain.
- Risk analysis answers in terms of probable harms and benefits.
- But are these answers adequate? Don't we need viewpoints 2 & 3?



2nd viewpoint – principles, norms, fairness

- Ethics is about right and wrong, about doing your duty, and about being fair.
- Key concepts: right and wrong, obligation, acting on principle, fairness.
- From this viewpoint, ethics is *law-like*.
- *Deontological* theories make this viewpoint central.
- We may determine our *goals* by appeal to our *principles*.

2nd viewpoint (cont.)

- So we might say that *on principle*, all living things deserve equal respect.
- Or, we might say that *on principle*, creatures that are part of our moral community (human beings) must come first.
- Again, we might say that *on principle*, the well-being of individual life forms must be balanced against the good of species, ecosystems, and the whole biosphere.

2nd viewpoint and ethical theory

- *Deontological* theories tend to consider this second viewpoint most basic. An action is right just in case it conforms to the correct principle.
- But how would we decide between the principles on the last slide? What makes a principle correct? Depends on the theory. Could be “God wills it.” (A theistic theory.) Could be “Reason requires it.” (Kant). Could be a list of principles thought to be self-evident (W.D. Ross)

2nd Viewpoint – Kant's ethics

- The most well known deontological theory of ethics proposed by a philosopher is that of 18th century Enlightenment thinker Immanuel Kant.
- Kant asked what makes ethics possible? What must the world be like, if ethics is not an illusion?
- His answer is, we must be free, rational agents.

Kant's ethics (cont.)

- To be a *free* rational agent means you are not *determined* by other forces.
- Your rationality can't just be used to *rationalize* "choices" that are really driven in some way by other forces (e.g., by biological drives).
- In fact, the content of ethics follows from reflection on how you would act, if your choices were guided by respect for rational agency.

Kant's ethics (cont.)

- Sounds circular and empty? It's not. Here are Kant's three formulations of his basic "categorical" ethical imperative. The third formulation is a kind of synthesis of the first two:
 1. Always act on a maxim that you could consistently will to be a universal law.
 2. Always treat other rational agents as "ends in themselves", and never only as means to your ends.
 3. Always act according to maxims of a universally legislating member of a merely possible kingdom of ends. (I.e., see yourself as a member of a community of autonomous rational agents, even though that's an unrealized ideal right now.)

Kant and sustainability

- It's pretty obvious that Kant's ethics has to be modified and extended to deal with environmental issues.
- The most obvious way is to mandate respect and care for nature, because rational agents need it to flourish. It's the necessary environment for the kingdom of ends. This leaves us at the center of things.
- Some environmental philosophers (e.g. Tom Regan and Paul W. Taylor) have extended Kant's philosophy to include respect for every being that has an interest or good of its own.

2nd viewpoint – strengths and limits, transition to viewpoint 3

- Fairness, duty, and principle seem to be necessary parts of ethics, even if (like Mill) you ultimately explain them in terms of something more basic.
- But where do the principles come from?
- God? Respect for reason? Biology and what is “natural?”
- Also, can every decision be made according to a rule?
- And what happens when principles conflict?

Transition to 3rd viewpoint

- Finally, doesn't it seem that living by calculations and rules is a rigid, soulless way to live? Shouldn't ethics somehow point us positively in the right direction, but leave us free to figure out the details?
- Some (perhaps not all) of these problems call for the 3rd viewpoint.

Third viewpoint: Persons and relationships

- Basic idea: Ethics is about *character* and *motives*, and about responding appropriately to the presence of others – other people, perhaps also other life forms, etc. Basic ethical situation is being face to face with another.
- Key questions: What kind of person do I want to be? What kind of society are we? What does the presence of the other demand of me? If I do this, will I be able to sleep at night? Would I be proud or ashamed?



3rd viewpoint

- Key concepts: motive, character, relationship, presence.
- 3rd viewpoint questions about sustainability
 - What does the presence of the natural world demand of us?
 - How can we relate to future human and non-human generations, when they are *not* present to us?
- Ethical theories that emphasize viewpoint 3: virtue ethics (Aristotle and modern virtue theorists); feminist ethics of care.

3rd viewpoint and moral theory

- Aristotle's virtue ethics
 - Basic idea: we are rational, social animals; rational life in society is what we are for.
 - We always seek (what seems to us to be) good.
 - But we can easily let more immediate desires control us, rather than seeking what really promotes rational life in society.
 - To seek and do what fulfills us in the long run, we need virtues.

3rd viewpoint and moral theory

- Aristotle's virtue ethics
 - A virtue (Greek *arete*) is an excellence of character. Having virtues will make you able to live a human life well; in fact, if you have and act virtuously, you will be living human life well.
 - Example: Courage is a virtue. To be courageous is to know what should be feared, to know when to stand and when to run, and to have a habit of mastering fear and standing firm when that is appropriate.

Virtue ethics & sustainability

- Could redefine “virtue” to include characteristics that are necessary to meet the demands of the world that we should care about, even when they don’t promote human flourishing.
- Or, could recognize that human beings need a relation with nature, so that love for nature is good for us.

Virtue ethics & sustainability

- Helpful hint for deciding which approach to take: virtues have a *justification*, a *target*, and a *cognitive-affective content*.
- So *Biophilia* (active, informed, habitual love of nature) could be *justified* by the fact that we human beings need and depend on healthy natural systems, while its *target* is the flourishing of non-human nature, and its *cognitive-affective content* is an attitude of care and respect for nature independent of our need for it.

3rd viewpoint and moral theory

- Ethics of care – emphasize *caring* rather than conforming to rules. Many feminist theorists favor the ethics of care.
- Both Virtue ethics and ethics of care put character and relationships at the center of ethics.

Environmental Ethics – opportunities and challenges

- Environmental ethics is social ethics, where traditional ethics is more individual. Environmental problems are collective problems. How should our ethics adapt to address such problems?
- E.E. brings us face to face with other life forms. What is our *ethical* obligation to the rest of life on earth?
- E.E. challenges us to think differently about time. What do we owe to future generations?

Environmental Ethics – opportunities and challenges

- Ethics often involves fact-finding; you can't know what to do until you know the situation and the possible outcomes of your possible choices.
- E.E. involves fact-finding on a different scale: “Big Science” over many decades. Restoring public trust in the findings of Big Science is a challenge in the face of persistent, well funded attacks on same.
- Risk is especially important in EE. What *might* happen? How bad would that be, how likely is it?