

Ethics made easy

Getting to grips with the main features of the different ethical theories can be daunting. **Daniel K Sokol** and **Gillian Bergson** make it a bit simpler

You may already have heard a little about some of the ethical theories that are used to guide and justify ethical decisions. The four principles approach to ethical decisions comprises consequentialism, deontology (duty based ethics), virtue ethics, and principlism.

To provide an insight into each of the main approaches, we have invited representatives of each ethical theory to comment on the case of Adam Zapple, a naive young man who is tempted.

The case of Adam Zapple

Adam Zapple is feeling peckish. On his way home, he notices an elderly woman biting into an appetising apple. Although only 10 minutes away from his well stocked fridge, Adam considers mugging Granny to steal her juicy looking apple. Should he do so? Over to our expert panel.

Colin, the consequentialist—Well, this is an easy one. It's obvious that, on balance, mugging Granny will cause more harm than good. Sure, Adam will enjoy the apple, but Granny's misery will far outweigh his enjoyment. And let's not forget any bystanders who may get upset by the mugging. In fact, Adam himself might feel guilty afterwards and get depressed. But if Adam were about to starve, however...

Dan, the deontologist—It'd still be wrong, Colin, you spawn of the devil. It's just wrong to beat up innocent people, whether it's to steal an apple or save your own life. There are some things people just shouldn't do.

Colin—Oh, so you'd rather die of hunger than steal an old lady's apple?

Dan—Definitely, stealing is wrong. Simple as that. What if everyone stole things whenever it suited them? No, I would kindly ask the lady...

Colin—To give you a new brain? No, seriously, why are some things "just wrong?"

Dan—Too complicated for you, I'm afraid. Wait. Let me work out the consequences... [Dan mockingly takes out a calculator and presses on the keys.]

Colin—Go on. I'll try my best.

Dan—All right. One answer is that we should do—or not do—certain things because God said so in the Bible.

"Thou shalt not steal" is an example.

Colin—I don't believe in God, sorry.

Dan—Fine. Have you ever heard of Kant?

Colin—Sure: I love football.

Dan—No, the 18th century German deontologist philosopher.

Colin—Oh. What's a deontologist?

Dan—Someone who believes that we should do things because we have duties or moral obligations to do them. We have a duty not to beat up innocent people or steal their property, for example, which is why Adam Zapple should not mug Granny.

Colin—Even if he's about to die of starvation, and Granny is sitting on a barrel full of fresh apples?

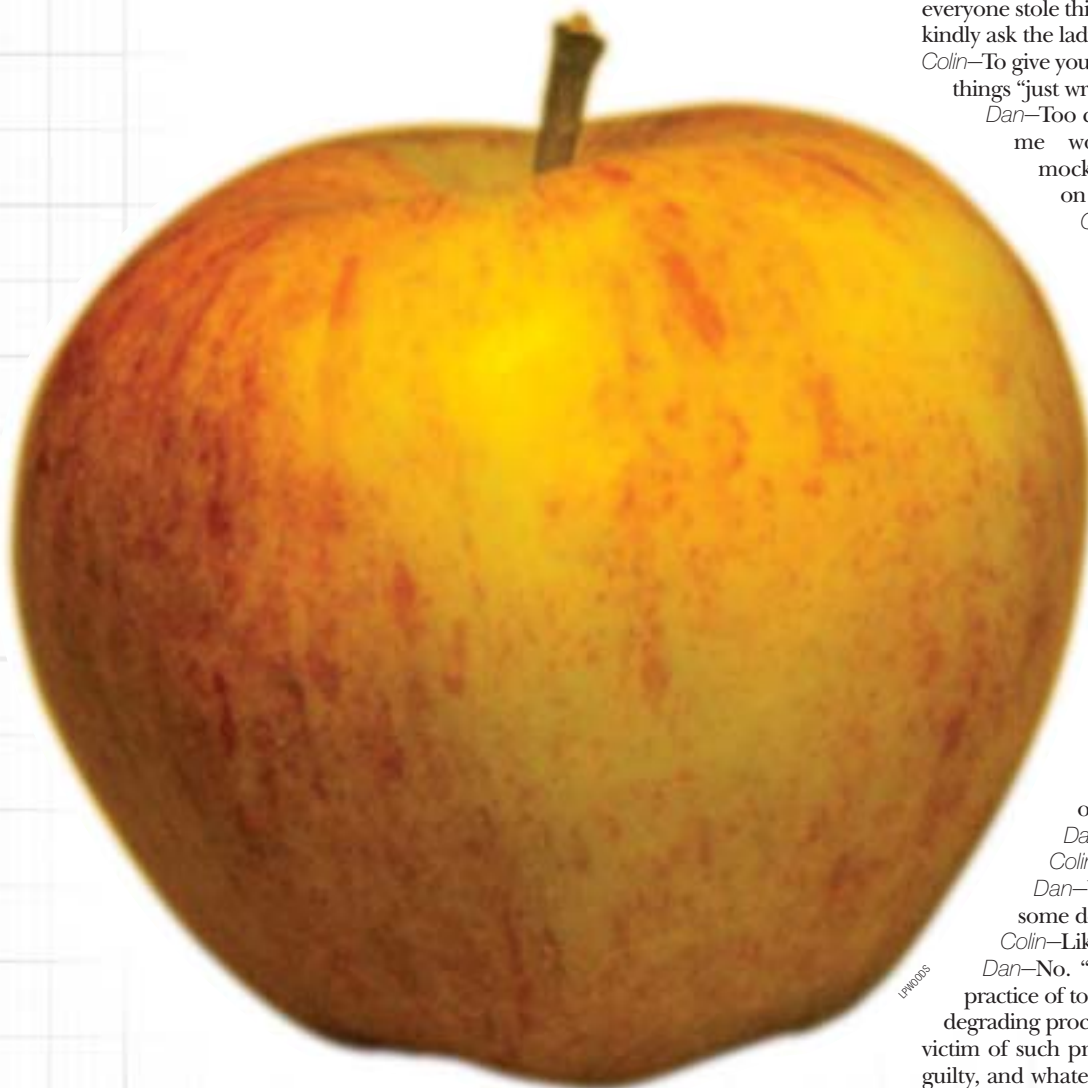
Dan—Yes: stealing is wrong. Full stop.

Colin—Weirdo.

Dan—Well, the World Medical Association has some deontological rules for doctors.

Colin—Like what? "Avoid deontology at all costs."

Dan—No. "The doctor shall not participate in the practice of torture or other forms of cruel, inhuman or degrading procedures, whatever the offence of which the victim of such procedures is suspected, accused or guilty, and whatever the victim's beliefs or motives, »



and in all situations, including armed conflict and civil strife.” That’s a deontological statement.

Colin—Well it’s a fair point, but you should get out more.

Dan—Now, back to Kant.

Colin—Oh good: I love football.

Dan—Colin. Kant was a Christian, but he also believed that morality could be justified without invoking God. People, according to Kant, should follow the categorical imperative, which basically tells us what we should do.

Colin—Wait. I know the answer: maximise happiness and minimise unhappiness.

Dan—Forget your consequentialist rubbish for a second. To satisfy the categorical imperative, Kant said we should follow two main formulas. The first is called the formula of universal law. It tells us to “act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.”

Colin—You’ve lost me.

Dan—Basically, before you do something, ask yourself, “Could I accept a world in which everyone did that?”

Colin—I see. So Adam should ask himself, “Could I accept a world in which everyone who was feeling peckish could beat up people to steal their food?”

Dan—Exactly. If the answer is no, then you shouldn’t do it. It basically prevents people from being partial to themselves. The second formula is the formula of humanity. It tells us to always treat people as ends and never merely as a means.

Colin—Give me an example.

Dan—When you take a taxi, for example, you’re using the taxi driver as a means to your end—to get to your destination, but you’re also paying him for it, so you’re not using him only as a means. If you have a slave, however, then you are using him only as a means to your end. He’s a tool which you can use as you wish. He has no choice in the matter.

Colin—So Adam should not mug Granny because he would be using her merely as a means of getting the apple.

Dan—Precisely. But if he asked her and she consented, then it would be all right because he would be satisfying her wish as well as getting the apple.

Colin—I understand. Deontology sounds fine in parts. After all, we’re told as children not to lie and not to steal and stuff, but I don’t like the fact that consequences don’t seem to matter much. Surely if your life is at stake, then it’s all right to lie?

Dan—Well, I don’t like the fact that you’re only concerned with consequences. If you’re willing to break a promise if you think the consequences are better, for example, then how can people trust you?

Veronica, the virtue theorist—Sorry, can I speak now? I think both your pet



theories are wrong. Mugging Granny for an apple is wrong not because of consequences or deontological rules, but because it’s unkind and disrespectful. No virtuous person would do such an awful thing.

Dan—Sure. But what’s a virtue?

Veronica—Good question. It’s a character trait that’s necessary for living well or that promotes human flourishing, such as courage, honesty, friendship, compassion, kindness, and so on.

Colin—Sounds a bit vague to me. This case is easy, but how do I know what a virtuous person would do in a really difficult ethical dilemma? What happens if two virtues clash with each other? If kindness requires me to be dishonest, for example? How do I decide which one trumps the other?

Paula, the principlist—Mmm, interesting. But let me try to break down Adam’s case using the four principles.

Colin—Oh gosh, here we go again. Good thing I always keep a pillow handy. I can snooze a little.

Dan—What are the four principles?

Paula—In a nutshell, there are four things you should and shouldn’t do as an ethical person. Firstly, you should respect the autonomy of other people. A person should be allowed to make his own choices because only he knows what’s best for him... unless he’s not fit to make those choices, of course. Secondly, you shouldn’t harm others, net harm that is, because almost every action can potentially cause harm. Thirdly, you should produce net benefit to certain people. And finally, you should be fair in offering your help, treat people equally, and not discriminate. There, respect for autonomy, non-maleficence, beneficence, and justice.

Dan—Sounds pretty good to me.

Paula—Now, applying the principles to the case at hand, the principle of non-

maleficence prevents us from causing net harm and here, clearly, Adam is causing more harm than good.

Colin—Ah, I like this consequentialist thinking.

Paula—The principle of respect for autonomy, which tells us to respect people’s freedom to make choices, also prevents him from mugging the old woman because she hasn’t consented to this.

Dan—Sounds quite deontological to me. It reminds me of the formula of humanity: always treat people as an end and never only as a means.

Paula—Yes, it’s a mixture really. It takes into account both consequences and moral rules, but it’s not as black and white as Colin or Dan’s theories. It depends on the situation.

Do I need to know that much about ethical theory?

This dialogue briefly introduces some of the main ethical theories, but is there any need to know them? Most non-philosophers will run a mile at any talk about ethical theories. But a basic understanding of the main moral theories in medical ethics is useful for several reasons.

Firstly, it gives an understanding of the origin of key concepts such as consent and confidentiality, which can be derived from the principle of respect for autonomy, and why they are important. The theories in the discussion have influenced many “rules” of medical ethics.

Secondly, it allows flexibility. The boundaries of medicine are constantly shifting, and ethical positions may need to be reconsidered in the light of new developments. Take, for example, the current debate on abortion. Should we change the date limit for social terminations to match the ever decreasing age at which premature babies can survive? Scientific progress regularly presents new ethical dilemmas. Knowledge of ethical theory can provide tools to analyse new problems.

And, finally, ethical theories can be used to justify the ethical decisions that you make, either as a practising doctor or as a medical student sitting exams. An awareness of the main counterarguments to your chosen solution can make your reasoning even stronger. 📧

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