Deontology

Deontology (from the Greek word for "ethics") refers to moral philosophies that focus on the rights of individuals and on the intentions associated with a particular behavior rather than on its consequences. Fundamental to deontological theory is the idea that equal respect must be given to all persons. Unlike utilitarians, deontologists argue that there are some things that we should *not* do, even to maximize utility. For example, deontologists would consider it wrong to kill an innocent person or commit a serious injustice against a person, no matter how much greater social utility might result from doing so, because such an action would infringe on that person's rights as an individual. The utilitarian, however, might consider as acceptable an action that resulted in a person's death if that action created some greater benefit. Deontological philosophies regard certain behaviors as inherently right, and the determination of this rightness focuses on the individual actor, not society. Thus, these perspectives are sometimes referred to as **nonconsequentialism** an ethics based on *respect for persons.*

> *Teleological philosophies consider the ends associated with an action whereas deontological philosophies consider the means.*

Contemporary deontology has been greatly influenced by the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, who developed the so-called categorical imperative: "Act as if the maxim of thy action were to become by thy will a universal law of nature."[11] Simply put, if you feel comfortable allowing everyone in the world to see you commit an act and if your rationale for acting in a particular manner is suitable to become a universal principle guiding behavior, then committing that act is ethical. For example, if a person borrows money, promising to return it but with no intention of keeping that promise, he or she cannot "universalize" that act. If everyone were to borrow money without the intention of returning it, no one would take such promises seriously, and all lending would cease.[12] Therefore, the rationale for the action would not be a suitable universal principle, and the act could not be considered ethical.

The term *nature* is crucial for deontologists. In general, deontologists regard the nature of moral principles as permanent and stable, and they believe that compliance with these principles defines ethicalness. Deontologists believe that individuals have certain absolute rights:

- Freedom of conscience
- Freedom of consent
- Freedom of privacy
- Freedom of speech
- Due process[13]

To decide whether a behavior is ethical, deontologists look for conformity to moral principles. For example, if a manufacturing worker becomes ill or dies as a result of conditions in the workplace, a deontologist might argue that the company must modify its production processes to correct the condition, no matter what the cost—even if it means bankrupting the company and thus causing all workers to lose their jobs. In contrast, a utilitarian would analyze all the costs and benefits of modifying production processes and make a decision on that basis. This example is greatly oversimplified, of course, but it helps clarify the difference between teleology and deontology. In short, teleological philosophies consider the *ends* associated with an action whereas deontological philosophies consider the *means*.

Returning again to our bolt salesperson, let's consider a deontological Sam Colt. He would probably feel obliged to tell the bridge contractor about the defect rate because

of the potential loss of life that might result from an earthquake-caused bridge collapse. Even though constructing the bridge would benefit residents and earn Sam a substantial commission, the failure of the bolts during an earthquake would infringe on the rights of any person crossing the bridge at the time of the collapse. Thus, the deontological Sam would likely inform the bridge contractor of the defect rate and point out the earthquake risk, even though, by doing so, he would probably lose the sale.

As with utilitarians, deontologists may be divided into those who focus on moral rules and those who focus on the nature of the acts themselves. **Rule deontologists** believe that conformity to general moral principles determines ethicalness. Deontological philosophies use reason and logic to formulate rules for behavior. Examples include Kant's categorical imperative and the Golden Rule of the Judeo-Christian tradition: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Such rules, or principles, guiding ethical behavior override the imperatives that emerge from a specific context. One could argue that Jeffery Wigand—who exposed the underside of the tobacco industry when he blew the whistle on his employer, Brown & Williamson Tobacco—was such a rule deontologist. Although it cost him both financially and socially, Wigand testified to Congress about the realities of marketing cigarettes and their effects on society.[14]

Rule deontology is determined by the relationship between the basic rights of the individual and a set of rules governing conduct. For example, a video store owner accused of distributing obscene materials could argue from a rule deontological perspective that the basic right to freedom of speech overrides the other indecency or pornography aspects of his business. Indeed, the free-speech argument has held up in many courts. Kant and rule deontologists would support a process of discovery to identify the moral issues relevant to a firm's mission and objectives. Then, they would follow a process of justifying that mission or those objectives based on rules.[15] An example of rule deontology is Kellogg's president, David Mackay. After hearing about possible salmonella contamination in peanut butter, he encouraged supermarkets not to sell Kellogg's products using peanut butter until the source of the contamination was discovered and peanut butter was deemed safe again.

Act deontologists, in contrast, hold that actions are the proper basis on which to judge morality or ethicalness. Act deontology requires that a person use equity, fairness, and impartiality when making and enforcing decisions.[16] For act deontologists, as for act utilitarians, rules serve only as guidelines, with past experiences weighing more heavily than rules upon the decision making process. In effect, act deontologists suggest that people simply *know* that certain acts are right or wrong, regardless of the consequences or any appeal to deontological rules. In addition, act deontologists regard the particular act or moment in time as taking precedence over any rule. For example, many people view data collection by Internet sites as a violation of personal privacy in itself. Regardless of any website's stated rules or policies, many Internet users want to be left alone unless they provide permission to be tracked while online.[17] A high school teacher at Hoover High in Alabama purportedly lost her job because she refused to change a football player's grade. It would have been much easier for her to do as others had done, yet the philosophy she used was within the act deontologist's range.[18] Current research suggests that rule and act deontological principles play a larger role in a person's decision than teleological philosophies.[19]

As we have seen, ethical issues can be evaluated from many different perspectives. Each type of philosophy discussed here would have a distinct basis for deciding whether a particular action is right or wrong. Adherents of different personal moral philosophies may disagree in their evaluations of a given action, yet all are behaving ethically *according to their own standards.* All would agree that there is no one "right" way to make ethical

decisions and no best moral philosophy except their own. The relativist perspective may be helpful in understanding how people make such decisions in practice.

Relativist Perspective

From the **relativist perspective**, definitions of ethical behavior are derived subjectively from the experiences of individuals and groups. Relativists use themselves or the people around them as their basis for defining ethical standards, and the various forms of relativism include descriptive, metaethical, or normative.[20] **Descriptive relativism** relates to observing cultures. We may observe that different cultures exhibit different norms, customs, and values and, in so doing, arrive at a factual description of a culture. These observations say nothing about the higher questions of ethical justification, however. At this point metaethical relativism comes into play.

Metaethical relativists understand that people naturally see situations from their own perspectives and argue that, as a result, there is no objective way of resolving ethical disputes between value systems and individuals. Simply put, one culture's moral philosophy cannot logically be preferred to another because there exists no meaningful basis for comparison.

> *Normative relativists assume that one person's opinion is as good as another's.*

Because ethical rules are relative to a specific culture, the values and behaviors of people in one culture need not influence the behaviors of people in another culture.[21] At the individual level of reasoning, we have **normative relativism**. Normative relativists assume that one person's opinion is as good as another's.[22]

Basic relativism acknowledges that we live in a society in which people have many different views and bases from which to justify decisions as right or wrong. The relativist looks to the interacting groups and tries to determine probable solutions based on group consensus. When formulating business strategies and plans, for example, a relativist would try to anticipate the conflicts that might arise between the different philosophies held by members of the organization, its suppliers, its customers, and the community at large.

The relativist observes the actions of members of an involved group and attempts to determine that group's consensus on a given behavior. A positive consensus, for example, would signify that the group considers the action to be right or ethical. However, such judgments may not remain valid forever. As circumstances evolve or the makeup of the group changes, a formerly accepted behavior may come to be viewed as wrong or unethical, or vice versa. Within the accounting profession, for example, it was traditionally considered unethical to advertise. However, advertising has been gaining acceptance among accountants. This shift in ethical views may have come about as a result of the steady increase in the number of accountants, which has led to greater competition. Moreover, the federal government investigated the restrictions that accounting groups placed on their members and concluded that they inhibited free competition. Consequently, an informal consensus has emerged in the accounting industry that advertising is now acceptable. A problem with relativism is that it places too much emphasis on peoples' differences while ignoring their basic similarities. Similarities within different people and cultures—such as beliefs against incest, murder, and theft or promoting reciprocity and respect for the elderly—are hard to argue away and hard to explain from the relativist perspective.

In the case of the Midwest Hardware salesperson, if he were a relativist, he would attempt to determine the group consensus before deciding whether to tell his prospective customer about the bolts' defect rate. The relativist Sam Colt would look at both his own company's policy and at the general industry practice. He might also informally survey his

colleagues and superiors as well as consulting industry trade journals and codes of ethics. Such investigations would help him determine the group consensus, which should reflect a variety of moral philosophies. If he learns that general company policy, as well as industry practice, is to discuss defect rates with those customers for whom faulty bolts may cause serious problems, he may infer that there is a consensus on the matter. As a relativist, he would probably then inform the bridge contractor that some of the bolts may fail, perhaps leading to a bridge collapse in the event of an earthquake. Conversely, if he determines that the normal practice in his company and the industry is to not inform customers about defect rates, he would probably not raise the subject with the bridge contractor.

Empirical research into the general concept of relativism suggests that it is negatively related to a person's ethical sensitivity to issues. Thus, if someone scores high on relativism, he or she will probably be less likely to detect or be sensitive to issues that are defined by others as having an ethical component.[23]

Virtue Ethics

A moral virtue represents an acquired disposition that is valued as a part of an individual's character. As an individual develops socially, he or she may become disposed to behave in the same way (in terms of reasons, feelings, and desires) as what he or she considers to be moral.[24] A person who has the character trait of honesty will be disposed to tell the truth because it is considered to be right and comfortable. This individual will always try to tell the truth because of its importance in human communication. A virtue is considered praiseworthy because it is an achievement that an individual develops through practice and commitment.[25]

This philosophy is called **virtue ethics**, and it posits that what is moral in a given situation is not only what conventional morality or moral rules (current societal definitions) require but also what the mature person with a "good" moral character would deem appropriate.

Proponents of virtue ethics frequently discuss lists of basic goods and virtues, which are generally presented as positive and useful mental habits or cultivated character traits. Aristotle named, among others, standards of loyalty, courage, wit, community, and judgment as the "excellences" that society requires. While listing the important virtues is a popular theoretical task, the philosopher Dewey cautions that virtues should not be looked at separately. The pluralism of virtues gives the businessperson a positive character and constitutes the very best idea of integrity of character. The virtue ethics approach to business can be summarized as follows:

1. Individual virtue and integrity count, but good corporate ethics programs encourage individual virtue and integrity.

2. By the employee's role in the community (organization), these virtues associated with appropriate conduct form a good person.

3. The ultimate purpose is to serve society's demands and the public good and to be rewarded in one's career.

4. The well-being of the community goes together with individual excellence because of the social consciousness and public spirit of every individual.[26]

The difference between deontology, teleology, and virtue ethics is that the first two are applied *deductively* to problems whereas virtue ethics is applied *inductively*. Virtue ethics assumes that what current societal moral rules require may indeed be the moral minimum

for the beginning of virtue. The viability of our political, social, and economic systems depends on the presence of certain virtues among the citizenry that are vital for the proper functioning of a market economy.[27]

Indeed, virtue theory could be thought of as a dynamic theory of how to conduct business activities. The virtue ethicist believes that to have a successful market economy, society must be capable of carving out sanctuaries such as family, school, church, and community, where virtues can be nurtured. These virtues, including truth, trust, tolerance, and restraint, can play a role in the functioning of an individualistic, contractual economy and create obligations that make social cooperation possible. The operation of a market economy based on virtues provides a traditional existence where individuals in the economic system have powerful inducements to conform to prevailing standards of behavior. Some philosophers think that virtues may be weakened by the operation of the market, but virtue ethicists believe that institutions and society must maintain a balance and constantly add to their stock of virtues.[28] Some of the virtues that could drive a market economy are listed in Table 6–2; the list, although not comprehensive, provides examples of the types of virtues that support the business environment.

TABLE 6–2 Virtues That Support Business Transactions

Trust: The predisposition to place confidence in the behavior of others while taking the risk that the expected behavior will not be performed	Trust eliminates the need for and associated cost of monitoring compliance with agreements, contracts, and reciprocal agreements. There is the expectation that a promise or agreement can be relied on.
Self-control: The disposition to pass up an immediate advantage or gratification. It indicates the ability to avoid exploiting a known opportunity for self-interest	The trade-off is between short-term self-interest and long-term benefits.
Empathy: The ability to share the feelings or emotions of others	Empathy promotes civility because success in the market depends on the courteous treatment of people who have the option of going to competitors. The ability to anticipate needs and satisfy customers and employees contributes to a firm's economic success.
Fairness: The disposition to deal equitably with the perceived injustices of others	Fairness often relates to doing the right thing with respect to small matters in order to cultivate a long-term business relationship.
Truthfulness: The disposition to provide the facts or correct information as known to the individual	Telling the truth involves avoiding deception and contributes to trust in business relationships.
Learning: The disposition to constantly acquire knowledge internal and external to the firm, whether of an industry, culture, or other societies	Learning involves gaining knowledge to make better, more informed decisions.
Gratitude: A sign of maturity that is the beginning of civility and decency	Gratitude is the recognition that people do not succeed alone.
Civility: The disposition or essence of courtesy, politeness, respect, and consideration for others	Civility relates to the process of doing business in a culturally correct way, thus decreasing communication errors and increasing trust.
Moral leadership: Strength of character, peace of mind, heart, and happiness in life	Moral leadership is a trait of those leaders who follow a consistent pattern of behavior based on virtues

Source: Adapted from Ian Maitland, "Virtuous Markets: The Market as School of the Virtues," *Business Ethics Quarterly* (January 1997): 97; and Gordon B. Hinckley, *Standing for Something: 10 Neglected Virtues That Will Heal Our Hearts and Homes* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001).

The elements of virtue that are important to business transactions have been defined as trust, self-control, empathy, fairness, and truthfulness. Attributes in contrast to virtue would include lying, cheating, fraud, and corruption. In their broadest sense, these concepts appear to be accepted within all cultures. The problem of virtue ethics comes in its implementation within and between cultures, as those who practice virtue ethics go beyond social norms. For example, if a company tacitly approves of corruption, the employee who adheres to the virtues of trust and truthfulness would consider it wrong to sell unneeded repair parts despite the organization's approval of such acts. Some employees might view this truthful employee as highly ethical but, in order to rationalize their own behavior, judge his or her ethics as going beyond what is required by their job or society. They might argue that virtue is an unattainable goal and thus one should not be obliged to live up to its standards. However, to those who espouse virtue ethics, this relativistic argument is meaningless because they believe in the universal reality of the elements of virtue.

If our salesperson Sam Colt were a virtue ethicist, he would consider the elements of virtue and then tell the prospective customer about the defect rate and about his concerns regarding the building of the bridge. He would not resort to puffery to explain the product or its risks and, indeed, might suggest alternative products or companies that would lower the probability of the bridge collapsing.

Justice

Justice as it is applied in business ethics involves evaluations of fairness or the disposition to deal with perceived injustices of others. Justice is fair treatment and due reward in accordance with ethical or legal standards. In business, this means that the decision rules used by an individual to determine the justice of a situation could be based on the perceived rights of individuals and on the intentions of the people involved in a given business interaction. For that reason, justice is more likely to be based on deontological moral philosophies than on teleological or utilitarian philosophies. In other words, justice deals more with the issue of what individuals feel they are due based on their rights and performance in the workplace. For example, the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission exists to help employees who suspect they have been unjustly discriminated against in the workplace.

Three types of justice provide a framework for evaluating the fairness of different situations (see Table 6–3). **Distributive justice** is based on the evaluation of the outcomes or results of the business relationship. If some employees feel that they are paid less than their coworkers for the same work, then they have concerns about distributive justice. Distributive justice is difficult to develop when one member of the business exchange intends to take advantage of the relationship. A boss who forces his employees to do more work so that he can take more time off would be seen as unjust because he is taking advantage of his position to redistribute the workers under him. Situations such as this cause an imbalance in distributive justice.

Procedural justice is based on the processes and activities that produce the outcome or results. Evaluations of performance that are not consistently developed and applied can lead to problems with procedural justice. For instance, employees' concerns about inequitable compensation would relate to their perception that the processes of fairness or justice in their company were inconsistent. A climate that emphasizes procedural justice is expected to positively influence employees' attitudes and behaviors toward work-group cohesion. The visibility of supervisors and the work group's perceptions of its own cohesiveness

TABLE 6–3 Types of Justice

Justice Type	Evaluations of Fairness
Distributive justice: Based on the evaluation of outcomes or results of the business relationship	**Benefits derived** **Equity in rewards**
Procedural justice: Based on the processes and activities that produce the outcome or results	**Decision making process** **Level of access, openness, and participation**
Interactional justice: Based on an evaluation of the communication process used in the business relationship	**Accuracy of information** **Truthfulness, respect, and courtesy in the process**

are products of a climate of procedural justice.[29] When there is strong employee support for decisions, decision makers, organizations, and outcomes, procedural justice is less important to the individual. In contrast, when employees' support for decisions, decision makers, organizations, or outcomes is not very strong, then procedural justice becomes more important.[30] For example, Wainwright Bank and Trust Corporation in Boston has made a commitment to promoting justice to all stakeholders by providing a "sense of inclusion and diversity that extends from the boardroom to the mail room."[31] The bank, in other words, uses methods of procedural justice to establish positive stakeholder relationships by promoting understanding and inclusion in the decision making process.

Interactional justice is based on evaluating the communication processes used in the business relationship. Because interactional justice is linked to fairness in communication, it often involves the individual's relationship with the business organization through the accuracy of the information the organization provides. Employees can also be guilty in interactional justice disputes. For example, many employees admit that they stay home when they are not really sick if they feel they can get away with it. Such workplace absenteeism costs businesses millions of dollars each year. Being untruthful about the reasons for missing work is an example of an interactional justice issue.

All three types of justice—distributive, procedural, and interactional—could be used to evaluate a single business situation and the fairness of the organization involved. In the example of Sam Colt, Sam's decision to implement a justice perspective would be identical to using a deontological moral philosophy. That is, he would feel obligated to tell all affected parties about the bolt defect rate and the possible consequences of it. In general, justice evaluations result in restitution seeking, relationship building, and evaluations of fairness in business relationships.

APPLYING MORAL PHILOSOPHY TO ETHICAL DECISION MAKING

Strong evidence shows that individuals use different moral philosophies depending on whether they are making a personal decision outside the work environment or making a work-related decision on the job.[32] Two possible reasons may explain this. First, in the business arena, some goals and pressures for success differ from the goals and pressures in a person's life outside of work. As a result, an employee might view a specific action as "good" in the business sector but "unacceptable" in the nonwork environment. It is often