Ethical Theories

The following is an overview of some of the major ethical theories, both within and without the Christian tradition. Please note that Descriptive Ethics describes how things are. Normative Ethics describes how we wish things to be. With each theory, we will look at the norms using the following case:

A nice necklace was left unguarded on a patient's bedside table or on the jewelry counter at the department store. You want the necklace very much and are tempted to snatch it and leave. Your chances of getting caught are negligible. What do you do? This case will be considered from the point of view of each ethical theory.

Deontological Ethics—This theory gets its name from the Latin for "duty" and claims that an action is moral to the extent to which it conform with recognized moral duties. For example, driving while drunk violates the duty to "above all do no harm." The duties derive from various sources, such as religion, biology, psychology, metaphysics, culture, language, etc. Depending on the deontological theory, these duties may be absolute (no exceptions), prima facie (can only be overridden by a more important duty), or conditional (only hold under specified circumstances). Deontological theories do not consider consequences to be important, keeping moral obligations is what matters.

Within the Christian tradition, many theologians have considered moral choices to be primarily made out of our particular duties to God.

The Case Study— In the case of the stolen necklace, you see that your duty is to follow the premise: Thou shalt not steal. As taking this necklace would be stealing, you leave the necklace where it is out of a sense of duty.

Natural Law—This theory suggests that one may, through rational reflection on nature (especially human nature), discover principles of good and bad that can guide our actions in such a way that we will move toward human fulfillment or flourishing. This position suggests that human beings have the capacity within themselves for "actualizing their potential."

The Case Study—Reflection on nature and human nature has shown that stealing is wrong and as taking this necklace would be stealing, you leave the necklace where it is in observance of this natural law.

Relativist Ethics—This theory denies that there is any uniquely right moral theory, standard, or value. Everything is subjective. For example, Jean Paul Sartre claimed that each individual creates his or her own morality based solely on one's own decisions about what is valuable. There are no moral standards to turn to that have any more authority than those that you create. So in this view, monogamy is right for one culture, while polygamy is right for another. Things (including other people) only have value because you gave them value.

The Case Study—No outside standard applies to this decision. If I feel that stealing is moral, it can be moral. The decision will be based on my personal values and possibly the values of the community with which I decide to associate (for the cultural reltivist).

Teleological Ethics—From the word "telos" meaning "end," this theory includes consequential (based on the consequences) or utilitarian (based on what does the greatest good for the greatest number) ethics and judges the rightness of an action in terms of an external goal or purpose. So, according to a teleological theory, consequences always play some part, be it small or large, in the determination of what one should or should not do. A key question in consequentialist theory is how to measure the moral worth of the consequences. Consequences can be good, neutral, or evil. Another relevant question is which consequences count (intended or actual).

Within the Christian tradition, both Thomistic Ethics (from Thomas Aquinas) and Eastern Orthodox ethics are teleological in striving to achieve, as near as possible, the perfect good, which is identified with God.

The Case Study—Over time, societies have learned that if everyone took objects that don't belong to them, all trust in institutions would break down and the economy would collapse; therefore the practice of unauthorized taking objects is contrary to the greatest good of the society; so taking this necklace in these circumstances would therefore be contrary to the greatest good of the society and you decide to leave the necklace where it sits.

Virtue Based Ethics—This theory focuses on the character of the person. According to virtue-based theories, ethics is about what sort of person one should strive to become. The qualities that one should develop in oneself are called virtues (ex. honesty, fairness, kindness, faithfulness, generosity, prudence, integrity, bravery, etc.). Plato listed the four cardinal virtues as prudence (or practical wisdom), justice, temperance (or self-control) and fortitude (or courage). In virtue-based ethics, one should act in ways that develop these virtuous qualities within oneself. For example, Aristotle claimed that in order to become an honest person, one should tell the truth.

Christian tradition once emphasized virtues. Thomas Aquinas added the three theological virtues of faith, hope and love.
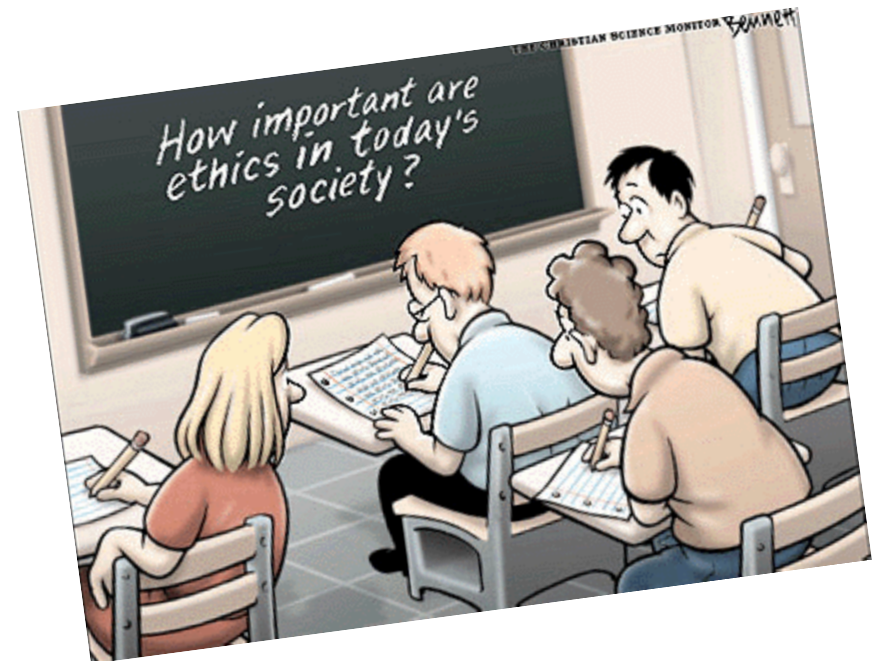
The Case Study—I want to be a honest and stealing is a dishonest act. I want to be a temperate person, and so I need to control my own desire for an object that belongs to someone else. To make these virtues concrete, I will not take the necklace, as stealing would not help me the person I wish to become.

King
of Peace

Episcopal Church — Kingsland, Georgia

Christian Ethics

Making moral choices in the real world

How important are ethics in today's society?

Ethical Theories