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Ethics and Society

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Ethics refers to the principals or standards of human conduct that can be used by an individual to make decisions between alternative courses of action. Ethical choices occur in all lifestyles and typically involve a conflict where one person or group benefits at the expense of another. Business, for example, is often confronted with the decision to utilize new technology to reduce its workforce and thereby raise its profits to benefit its shareholders, at the expense of eliminating the jobs of loyal employees whom have been with the company for many years. One could make an argument for either course of action, and indeed there is no right or wrong answer, because either action might be deemed correct within its own objective.

How then does one make an ethical decision? As with every decision, you begin by identifying the facts – who did (or will do) what to whom, and where, when, and how was (will it) be done? What are the opposing courses of action and the consequences of each? The decision maker can then decide which path to follow and which principal or value to apply. He or she may be guided by a professional code of conduct such as those advocated by the American Medical Association or the American Bar Association. There may also be a clear legal principle, but as is often the case with new technology the law may not yet exist.

Eventually, however, every ethical choice is a matter of individual conscience. Perhaps the most basic tenet guiding any decision is the Golden Rule to “*do unto others as you would have others do unto you*”. One might also be influenced by Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) who said that “*if an action is not right for everyone, it is not right for anyone*”. René Descartes (1596–1650) espoused almost the same philosophy by stating “*that while an action might be acceptable initially, it must be repeatable or else it should not be taken at all*”. Nevertheless, ethical decisions are seldom easy because ultimately, we are all human and our self-interest may be in conflict with established legal or ethical principles.

Our objective is not to preach, but rather to raise your consciousness of ethical issues as the basis for class discussion. Consider now several situations that require you to render an ethical decision. List the pros and cons for each scenario, and then state the ethical principal(s) that most influenced your decision.

The Office CD: Your best friend has just purchased a new computer that includes a copy of Microsoft Office 2007. You ask your friend to borrow the CD in order to install the software on your computer. You are on a strict budget and cannot afford to spend the approximately \$200 the software would cost at the University bookstore. You intend to use the software only for school and will not benefit from it commercially. You are not hurting anyone and no one other than your friend will even know that you even borrowed the CD. You are shocked when your friend says no. What reason could he or she have for denying your request?

The Borrowed Home Work Assignment: Your roommate has just come back from a family emergency and has not had time to do the assignment for today's class. He or she has asked for your home work in order to copy it and submit it as their own. You worked hard and you know you are going to get an A. Home work is an integral component of the grade in this course and your friend cannot afford to do poorly in this class. Do you let your friend copy your homework? Would your answer be different if your friend did not have to go home for the family emergency? What if the situation were reversed? Would you expect your roommate to let you copy his or her homework?

The Honor Code: You would not think of cheating on an exam. You have, however, seen one of your classmates blatantly copying from a cheat sheet. The student in question is doing poorly in the course and in danger of losing their scholarship if they do not receive a grade of A. Do you report the incident to the professor? The professor does not grade on a curve so no one else is affected by the actions of this classmate. On the other hand, are you being fair to the students who studied diligently for the exam yet managed no better than a C? If you do report the incident can you live with the fact that you were responsible for your classmate failing the exam, thereby failing the course, and losing a badly needed scholarship.

The \$50 Bill: You gave the clerk a \$5.00 bill but got change for a \$50, resulting in a "wind fall" of \$45. Do you keep the extra money? Does your answer depend on whether it is a small store in which case it is coming directly out of the proprietor's pocket, or a large store in which the store would absorb the loss? After all the store can afford it, whereas you really need the money. What if, it was the person ahead of you on line who received change for the \$50, when you clearly saw they gave the clerk \$5? Would you speak up without being asked?

Downloading Music from the Web: The Internet has been a great friend to your pocketbook; you haven't purchased a CD, cassette tape, or any other form of music since the invention of MP3. This may be great for you as a consumer, but imagine that you actually wrote and produced a particular song, and that your livelihood depends on the funds generated from the sale of that song. Do you still think it is appropriate to obtain copies of songs for free? What if music fans everywhere decided to stop buying music and simply wait for it to be uploaded to the Web? What affect would this have on the music industry?