



Short Definitions of Ethical Principles and Theories Familiar words, what do they mean?

Autonomy—agreement to respect another's right to self-determine a course of action; support of independent decision making.

In 1990 the *Patient Self Determination Act* was passed by the United States (US) Congress, this Act stated that competent people could make their wishes known regarding what they wanted in their end of life experience, when they were possibly not competent. Also included in this Act is the durable power of attorney, which designates a competent person to assist in making end-of-life decisions when the individual was no longer competent.

Beauchamp, T. L., & Childress, J. F. (2009). *Principles of biomedical ethics* (6th ed., pp. 38-39). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

American Bar Association. Health care advance directives. Retrieved from http://www.abanet.org/publiced/practical/patient_self_determination_act.html

Example: In clinical situations nurses respect a patient's autonomy, where the patient is allowed the freedom of choice regarding treatment, such as in deciding whether he/she wishes to be intubated during an exacerbation of COPD, or deciding when he/she wishes to forgo further dialysis. If a patient lacks capacity for such a decision and has an advance directive, the person who has the durable power of attorney can make the decision.

Beneficence- compassion; taking positive action to help others; desire to do good; core principle of our patient advocacy.

Beauchamp, T. L., & Childress, J. F. (2009). *Principles of biomedical ethics* (6th ed., pp. 38-39). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Example: An elderly patient falls at home and has a fractured hip. In the emergency room, the nurse acts to provide pain medication as soon as possible in an act of beneficence.

Nonmaleficence- avoidance of harm or hurt; core of medical oath and nursing ethics.

Often in modern times, nonmaleficence extends to making sure you are doing no harm in the beneficent act of using technology to extend life or in using experimental treatments that have not been well tested.

Beauchamp, T. L., & Childress, J. F. (2009). *Principles of biomedical ethics* (6th ed., pp. 152-153). New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Example: When this elderly person above received pain medication (an act of beneficence) there are complications that could arise. Practitioners recognize that using a narcotic may cause confusion. When obtaining the consent for her hip surgery, we want to make certain that the patient is alert enough to understand the risks and benefits of the procedure. We must balance the beneficence of providing the medication quickly with the possible maleficence of obtaining a consent when patient does not have the capacity to make the decision for surgery.

Fidelity- This principle requires loyalty, fairness, truthfulness, advocacy, and dedication to our patients. It involves an agreement to keep our promises. Fidelity refers to the concept of keeping a commitment and is based upon the virtue of caring.

Ethics Resource Center. (May 29, 2009). Definition of values. Retrieved from <http://www.ethics.org/resource/definitions-values>

Example: A patient asks the nurse not to reveal the fact that she is dying or give her diagnosis to his family. The nurse asks why she does not want her family advised. The patient explains that her family is very emotional and has stated they would do everything to keep her alive, even if it required long-term mechanical ventilation. The patient has explained multiple times that she does not want mechanical ventilation. The nurse recognizes that keeping of this information in confidence, while supporting the family, is an example of exercising fidelity.

Justice- Derived from the work of John Rawls, this principle refers to an equal and fair distribution of resources, based on analysis of benefits and burdens of decision. Justice implies that all citizens have an equal right to the goods distributed, regardless of what they have contributed or who they are. For example, in the US, we all have rights to services from the postal service, firefighters, police, and access to public schools, safe water, and sanitation.

Butts, J. B., & Rich, K. L. (2008). *Nursing ethics across the curriculum and into practice* (2nd ed., p. 48). Sunbury, MA: Jones and Bartlett.

Example: A hospital organization wishes to donate low or no-cost pediatric dental services to the community. There are openings for 45 children per month. Justice requires a fair method, that is free from bias, to determine who will receive these services.

Paternalism- Healthcare professionals make decisions about diagnosis, therapy, and prognosis for the patient. Based upon the health care professional's belief about what is in the best interest of the patient, he/she chooses to reveal or withhold patient information in these three important arenas. This principle is heavily laden as an application of power over the patient.

Butts, J. B., & Rich, K. L. (2008). *Nursing ethics across the curriculum and into practice* (2nd ed., p. 263). Sunbury, MA: Jones and Bartlett.

Example: Patient has repeatedly voiced fear over receiving a diagnosis of lung cancer, as he believes this is a death sentence. His primary care physician decides not to reveal the diagnosis to the patient after he says he would kill himself if he had lung cancer.

Ethical Theories

Ethical Relativism- This theory holds that morality is relative to the norms of one's culture.

The theory states that before decisions are made, the context of the decision must be examined. The doctrine states that there are no absolute truths in ethics and that what is morally right or wrong varies from person to person or from society to society. The theory believes that variances in culture and society influence whether an act is moral. Unlike deontology, this theory believes that what is right for one group may not be right for another; this theory believes there is no “universal truth.” Those opposed to this theory feel that there are some things (e.g. incest or torture) that are not open to debate.

Britannica online encyclopedia. Definitions. Retrieved from <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/194016/ethical-relativism>

Example: An example, often used, is female genital circumcision. One side calls it female genital mutilation. Another group may consider this an appropriate cultural rite of passage. The ethical issue discussed—is this a cultural issue or human rights issue? Since it is performed on girls as young as seven years old, the issue of assent, consent, and culture are prominent in ethical discussions.

Feminist Theory- This theory supports ethical relativism in that it does not support universal acts. Feminist theory requires examination of context of the situation in order to come to a moral conclusion. It asks how an action affects the person, the family, and those depending upon one another (e.g. community).

Butts, J. B., & Rich, K. L. (2008). *Nursing ethics across the curriculum and into practice* (2nd ed., p. 28). Sunbury, MA: Jones and Bartlett.

Pojman, L. P. (2010). *Ethical theory: Classical and contemporary readings* (5th ed., pp. 15-37). Florence, KY: Cengage Learning, Inc.

Example: There are two people, who are 16 years of age, who have a new diagnosis of insulin dependent diabetes. Neither can afford the recommended insulin pump. The company will donate one pump per year as a charity option. Ethical relativism might help make a decision on which patient to give the pump to at no cost. Using this theory, one would take into account the patient's culture, lifestyle, motivation, and maturity level before deciding to whom the insulin pump would be best allocated. Additionally, feminist ethics would look at how the parents of the young people are being affected by the disease, and whether a pump would make life easier or more difficult for the family. The

family's resources, both financial and emotional, would be taken into account. The context of the situation would be explored.

Deontology- This theory judges the morality of an action based on the action's adherence to rules. Whether an action is ethical depends on the intentions behind the decisions rather than the outcomes that result.

This ethical theory is based on the work of Immanuel Kant. All individual actions should be done, as if they could become universal law (i.e. categorical imperative). Among the various formulations of the categorical imperative, two are particularly worth noting:

Always act in such a way that you can also resolve that the maxim of your action should become a universal law (categorical imperative)

Act so that you treat humanity, both in your own person and in that of another, always as an end and never merely as a means (principle of ends)

Deontology does not look primarily at consequences of actions, but examines a situation for the essential moral worth of the intention of act, or rightness or wrongness of the act. Many religious traditions are based upon deontology.

Butts, J. B., & Rich, K. L. (2008). *Nursing ethics across the curriculum and into practice* (2nd ed., pp. 21-22). Sunbury, MA: Jones and Bartlett.

Example: Individuals would examine their intentions to determine the ethics of their actions. For example, we have begun not to use restraints on older people for their safety and to think of other measures. We do this because restraining someone against his or her will could not be considered a universal law.

Utilitarianism- This theory supports what is best for most people. The value of the act is determined by its usefulness, with the main emphasis on the outcome or consequences.

This theory examines what creates the most happiness for the most people. In US, most of our public health policies are based upon this principle. For example, Medicare for all citizens over age 65 is based upon the theory of utilitarianism.

Butts, J. B., & Rich, K. L. (2008). *Nursing ethics across the curriculum and into practice* (2nd ed., p. 23). Sunbury, MA: Jones and Bartlett.

Example: In the US, our system of disaster triage is based upon the concept of utilitarianism. Health care providers triage rapidly, electing to use resources to provide the most care to the greatest number of people, as opposed to expending maximum resources on a single critically ill person who is unlikely to survive.