ETHICAL MODELS

Potter Box, Kant’s Categorical Imperative, and Principles of Utility
• Ethics is not just knowing what is right or wrong, but doing it!
• Theories help us to make decisions thus implementing them.
This ethical decision-making model was derived by Ralph Potter of the Harvard Divinity School. It includes four steps:

- Define the situation
- Identify values
- Select principles
- Choose loyalties

Potter Box Model
Four Dimensions of Moral Analysis

Definition → Values

Loyalties ↑ Principles
Potter Box

- Sociological
- Immediate
- External
- Philosophical
- Reflective
- Internal

- Empirical Definition
  - Identifying Values
    - both positive & negative

- Facts

- Choosing Loyalties
  - Appeal to Ethical Principles
    - virtue, duty, utility, rights, love

- Particular Judgment or Policy

Feedback
• Define the ethical situation or dilemma. Look at it in detail, and from points of view other than your own. As the case develops, recognize that additional insights may cause you to adjust your selections in other quadrants of the Potter Box. You may have to return to this quadrant and go through the cycle again.
• Identify the values—beliefs that define what you stand for. Values are helpful in rationalizing or defending your behavior. They are standards of choice through which persons and groups seek consistency in our values. Some values are instrumental, or desirable modes of conduct. Others are terminal, or end results.
• Don’t moralize or give inconsistent, dogmatic, ad hoc advice. Use moral philosophy instead, giving general, consistent advice drawn from the wisdom of the ages. The ethical principles, as laid down by philosophers, should illuminate the issues.

• MAKE THE DECISION (or start over)
Choose your loyalties

- To whom are you ultimately loyal, and to whom at intermediate steps are you loyal? Who gets hurt? Who benefits? You may have competing loyalties to yourself, your family and friends, your boss, your company or firm, your professional colleagues, your audience, your news sources, and to society at large.
Potter Box Applied to the Liverpool Murder Case

**SITUATION**

Two ten-year-olds go to trial for kidnapping and brutally murdering two-year-old Jason Bugler.

**VALUES**

- **British Television**: honor the court restrictions against reporting juvenile names.
- **U.S. Newspaper**: do not suppress public information.

**JUDGMENT**

- **British Television**: withhold broadcasting.
- **U.S. Newspaper**: publish names and details.

**LOYALTIES**

- **British Television**: to juvenile defendants and their families.
- **U.S. Newspaper**: to general readership.

**PRINCIPLE**

- **British Television**: other-regarding care.
- **U.S. Newspaper**: truth telling is categorical imperative.
Determining the Ethical Decision

• Is there a universal ground for making ethical decisions, an overarching theory from which we can choose among competing alternatives?
• Or is ethical decision making simply a process of adjusting to the mores and commitments of a given community?
  
  The Potter Box accounts for both.
• Without an appeal to an explicit ethical principle, a conclusion is not considered morally justified.
Evaluation With the Potter Box Model

- When competing values seem appropriate, resolution usually occurs in step three (ethical principles).
- When two different ethical theories are relevant, the adequacy of the theories themselves must be evaluated through metaphysics or theology.
- Occasionally, the ethical choice is not apparent until quadrant four, loyalties, as in the case of the Liverpool murder.
Why We Study the Process By Which Choices Are Made

• Knowing the elements in moral analysis sharpens our vocabulary and enhances our discussion of media ethics
• Understanding the logic of social ethics improves the quality of our conceptual work and the validity of the choices we make in media practice.
• The four dimensions of the Potter Box allow us to develop normative ethics.
• Our society challenges the practice of searching for moral norms.

• BUT norms rightly understood are foundational for moral commitment.

Challenging Moral Norms
• Allows us to draw responsible conclusions that yield justifiable actions

• Helps us to determine which ethical theory is most powerful under which conditions

Purpose of Sound Ethical Reasoning
“Act only on that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law”

Kant’s Categorical Imperative
• Ethics are objective
• Any genuine moral obligation can be universalized
• Categorical = unconditional
• What is right must be done regardless of circumstances
• Existence of higher truths
• Deontological ethics
Higher Truths

- *Noumena*
- Superior to reason
- Transcend physical universe
- Innate in human beings
- Apprehended by conscience NOT reason
Deontological Ethics

- From *deon* (Greek for duty)
- Rule determines the result
- Rule is the basis of the act
- Rule is good regardless of the act
- Result always calculated within the rules
Application of Kant's Categorical Imperative

- Moral law is unconditionally binding on all rational beings.
- Certain actions are always wrong.
- Certain actions are always right.
- Examples
Questions to Consider

- What happens when there is a conflict of duties? (2 rules that are universalized)
- Is every rule we would universalize a moral duty?
- Can we truly ignore results in decision-making?
- Do we really want to make reason the final, sole authority in determining right and wrong?
Mill’s Principle of Utility

“Seek the greatest happiness for the greatest number”
• Consider what course will yield the best consequences for the welfare of human beings
• Ethical choice produces the greatest balance of good over evil
• Good end must be promoted, bad end must be restrained
• Happiness or pleasure
• To Mill, preventing pain and promoting pleasure are the only desirable ends.
• Pluralistic utilitarians argue that other values besides happiness possess intrinsic worth (friendship, knowledge, health).
  • Rightness or wrongness assessed according to total value ultimately produced
1. Calculate the consequences of various options. How much benefit and how much harm would result in the lives of everyone affected, including ourselves?

2. Choose the alternative that both
   A. Produces the greatest possible balance of good over evil
   B. Distributes this balance as widely as possible

Application of the Principle of Utility
1. Act Utilitarianism: Greatest good in a specific case
   Will a particular action in a particular situation result in a balance of good over evil?
2. Rule Utilitarianism: Greatest good for general welfare
   Will a general rule result in a balance of good over evil?
• How do we account for the long term consequences of a decision that are not always able to be foreseen?
• What if the majority rejects basic standards of decency?
• What problems are generated by defining the public good as the sum total of all private goods?
To Whom Is Moral Duty Owed?
Who Ought to Decide?
Five Categories of Obligation

1. Duty to ourselves
2. Duty to clients / subscribers / supporters
3. Duty to our organization or firm
4. Duty to professional colleagues
5. Duty to society
• Duty to society is critical

• Ethical decision-making must be marked by a sincere sense of social responsibility and a genuine concern for the citizenry

• In the Potter Box the loyalty component necessitates the acknowledgment of the implications of a decision for institutions and social groups before an ethical decision is made.
• Are parents alone accountable for the programs their children watch, or do advertisers and networks carry responsibility also?
• Can producers of entertainment dismiss their responsibility for quality programming by arguing that they merely give the public what it wants
• Requiring accountability across the board preferable to giving absolute authority to one person or group.

Accountability
• The individual is the authentic moral agent.
• Though corporations are real, they are not concrete enough to be assigned praise or blame in any real sense.
• Ultimately it is the individual who will be held responsible.

Individuals
• Corporate obligation still meaningful
• Ultimate responsibility rests with individuals but must be distributed among the individuals constituting a corporation.
• Broad attacks on entire media systems are not helpful. Ethics is fundamentally concerned with individual choices.
Thank you