

CONTEMPORARY ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

Several ethical principles have been widely adopted, because they offer practical guidance for discussions of specific moral issues. These broadly stated principles are justified on the grounds that their opposites are repugnant to the cross section of people wrestling with moral dilemmas. For some people, the principles are of divine origin; for others, they are reasonable; for others, they are built into the very fabric of human existence. For some individuals, these principles are absolutes without exceptions; for others, they function as highly valued guidelines, a framework for moral explorations. In all instances, their meanings must be interpreted and applied, and more than one resolution may result from their use. (See “Ethical Pluralism” on page 27.)

Respect for Persons. Human beings should be treated as subjects, not objects; human life is of significant value. Individuals should never be treated as “things” whether in business, medical care, sexual relations, political and economic systems, etc. Degrees of respect may be justified; for example, one is not called upon to submit to an unjust aggressor, also a person.

Autonomy. Human beings deserve personal liberty in order to make informed judgments and decisions about their lives. However, degrees of autonomy must be applied to prisoners, military personnel, the mentally ill, children, property owners, employees, etc.

Beneficence. Do good; promote goodness. Criteria of “good” need elaboration.

Nonmaleficence. Do no harm; prevent harm. Criteria of “harm” need elaboration.

Justice. Human beings ought to be provided with what is fair and deserved; goodness should be distributed in fair and equitable ways. Interpretations consider whether the distribution is according to need, merit, or equally.

Honesty. Telling the truth is the norm; it is essential to promote and maintain respect for persons and for autonomy. However, some would propose a “moral lie” in some circumstances; criteria for such a lie might include protecting someone from likely harm.

Other Principles. “Informed consent” is the understanding of and consent to a procedure an individual is about to undergo. “Confidentiality” is the restriction of information based on the right to privacy. “Double effect” means that the intended good result requires a secondary harmful or bad effect. “Paternalism” involves the interference with an individual’s liberty of action.

Conflicting Principles. Solutions to conflicts among principles relevant in an actual situation are shaped by appealing to the mostly highly valued principle(s). Disagreements about which is/are the most highly valued may lead to an impasse and, perhaps, an agreement to differ.