

# Chapter 2: Ethical Theory

## Overview

This chapter offers some basic descriptions of philosophy, theory, ethics, the philosophical basis of ethical theory, and the major ethical theories. It also discusses the relationship of ethics to the profession of nursing. Philosophy is the intense and critical examination of beliefs and assumptions. Recognizing that theories are constructs of the human mind and do not represent fact, students learn that ethical theories exist to explain and predict values and behavior related to cultural and moral norms. Views about the origin or basis of moral reasoning include naturalism and rationalism. Although there are many ethical theories, two of the most basic and most highly developed theories are discussed—utilitarianism and deontology. In addition, there is a description of virtue ethics, focal virtues, and moral particularism. Students are challenged to contemplate the intricacies of the various theories and appreciate the value of utilizing a logical and systematic method for examining moral dilemmas.

## Instructional Strategies

- Encourage students to think critically and discuss their beliefs about the philosophical basis for ethical theory. Ask the following questions: Are there some actions that are always wrong, or are there circumstances that justify loathsome actions? How do we know what is right and what is wrong—is the knowledge innate in all humans or derived from a higher source?
- Discuss the following situation: Two nursing students cheated on several assignments. Although the evidence is irrefutable, both students deny cheating. Discuss these students in terms of virtue ethics. Do these students have integrity? Do these students have the character to become good nurses? Should the instructor allow them another chance?
- Assign students to attend (or role-play using a hypothetical case) an ethics committee meeting in a local hospital. Ask the students to critique individual members and the committee in terms of philosophical consistency. Is it relatively easy to infer a particular ethical theory in the discussions among members? How do apparent similarities or differences among members affect group decision making?
- Divide the class into groups of four and ask them to discuss the following issue: The new HPV vaccine is nearly 100% effective in preventing HPV disease and subsequent cervical cancer. The cost of the HPV immunization series is nearly \$400. The contraception and sexually transmitted infection program is low on funds. Ask the groups to role-play a committee meeting, with two members supporting deontological views and two members supporting utilitarian views. Have each group report back to the entire class on their reasoning for various decisions. Information about the vaccine can be found at the following CDC website: <http://www.cdc.gov/hpv/>

## Teaching Aids and Resources

American Journal of Bioethics at <http://www.bioethics.net/>

Beauchamp, T., & Childress, J. (2001). *Principles of biomedical ethics* (5th ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.

Beauchamp, T. L. (2001). *Philosophical ethics. An introduction to moral philosophy* (3rd ed.). Boston: McGraw-Hill.

Durant, W. (1926). *The story of philosophy*. New York: Washington Square.

Honderich, T. (Ed.). (2005). *The Oxford companion to philosophy* (2nd ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.

Kennedy Institute of Ethics resource library at <http://bioethics.georgetown.edu/>

Raphael, D. D. (1994). *The moral philosophy* (2nd ed.). New York: Oxford University Press.

University of Pennsylvania Center for Bioethics at <http://www.bioethics.upenn.edu/>

## **Critical Reflection Exercise**

Discuss the following case in terms of deontological and utilitarian perspectives:

CASE: Mrs. N, a 77-year-old married woman, has moderately advanced Alzheimer's disease, which causes periods of confusion, frustration, anger, and obsessive thinking. Before she became ill, Mrs. N and her husband discussed their wishes should anything happen to them. Mrs. N told her husband that if there was no chance of survival, she would not want to be "hooked up" to a breathing machine. They never got around to completing their advance directives.

Mr. N is devoted to his wife and wants her to receive the best care possible. He has spent the past year watching after her, cooking for her, cleaning the home, and witnessing her deterioration. When Mrs. N becomes unable to walk alone safely, he allows the physician to admit her to a long-term care facility.

After three weeks in the nursing home, Mrs. N starts to cough and becomes febrile. The doctor diagnoses pneumonia, begins IV antibiotics, and transfers her to a local hospital. The pneumonia responds to the antibiotics, but Mrs. N stops talking and refuses to eat. The physician calls her husband for permission to insert a feeding tube. Mr. N wants to do what is best for his wife. He wonders if a feeding tube is similar to a breathing machine. If she doesn't want a breathing machine, would she also not want a feeding tube? Would it be possible for him to watch her die of starvation? Is that murder? What would she want? What is the right thing to do?

## **Evaluative Hints**

Look for evidence that the student:

1. Demonstrates insight and honest articulation of personal values.
2. Is aware of the influence of personal beliefs on the evaluation of other's decisions.
3. Recognizes that differences of opinion about ethical issues are valid.
4. Is able to articulate objectively the various issues embedded in this case.