

Ethical Reasoning Workshop WS 8-2 May 20, 2011

I A. In small group

1. Discuss Ruggiero's introduction to his approach to moral reasoning in the first few pages of the handout. In the handout, he endorses the "respect for persons" as a central item in common among various traditions that can bridge the gap between a theoretical construct and a practical standard. He goes on to identify three "criteria" commonly cited in ethical discourse: obligations, moral ideals, and consequences. He then goes on to provide a four step process to apply these criteria "thoughtfully and systematically." What do you think of his general approach (at least as it is presented in the handout)?

He offers the following summary of the four step process at another place in the text (not one your handout)

STEP 1: STUDY THE DETAILS OF THE CASE

How to Proceed: If you have all the details, not what circumstances distinguish this case from similar ones. If you do not have all the details, obtain them. If they are unavailable, consider what they might be.

STEP 2: IDENTIFY THE RELEVANT CRITERIA

How to Proceed: Consider any *obligations* that might exist among the individuals involved—for example, contractual obligations, obligations of friendship or citizenship, business or professional. Consider *relevant ideals*, including prudence, justice, temperance, courage, loving kindness, honesty, compassion, forgiveness, repentance, reparation, gratitude and beneficence. Consider all *significant consequences*—direct and indirect; obvious and subtle; immediate and delayed, physical, emotional, and intellectual; intended and unintended—of the action of the person performing the act as well as on others.

STEP 3: DETERMINE POSSIBLE COURSE OF ACTION

How to Proceed: Identify the various alternative responses to the situation. Note that this step may require you to use your imagination

STEP 4: DECIDE WHICH ACTION IS MOST ETHICAL

How to Proceed: In the light of your consideration of the criteria, decide which action is ethically preferable. If two actions produce good or two produce harm, choose the one that produces the greater good or the lesser harm

B. Plenary Discussion

II. A. In small group

Discuss the application of this approach to The Case of Professor Woebegone (3rd handout page) Do you agree with the decision he makes? Apply the procedure to the following two examples he offers elsewhere in this text.

1. Mr. Barker is returning to a town he once lived in and a position he once held. He and his wife visited several real estate brokers there in hopes of find a house. One broker mentions that Horace's house will soon be for sale. "Oh," Barker says, "I know Horace; is he leaving the area?" The broker explains that he is not, but he is moving to a larger house she showed him because his family has outgrown their present home. As they are driving to inspect Horace's property, Barker casually asks the broker which house Horace is buying. The broker tells him. She innocently adds that he is paying \$215,000 for it.

After leaving the broker, Barker goes directly to the owner of the house Horace is planning to buy inspects it, is impressed with he sees, and says to the own, "Look, I know Horace has offered you \$215,000. I'll pay you \$217,000 and what's more , you won't have to pay any brokers' commission." The owner agrees and Barker buys the house. Was Barker's behavior unethical?

2. Florida residents enjoy two advantages not available in many other states: They pay no state income tax, and they are granted a \$25,000 homestead exemption on their real estate taxes. To be a legal resident, however, a person must live in the state at least six months out of every year. Realizing that enforcement of this requirement is lax, retired California residents Lester and Myra Shirking buy a small condominium in a Florida coastal town, taking advantage of the falling real estate market, and fill out the necessary forms declaring themselves to be Florida residents, even though they have no intention of spending more than a few weeks in the state each year. They are

granted a homestead exemption, begin filing their federal tax returns from Florida and stop filing California state tax returns. Because they are in a high tax bracket, this maneuver saves them tens of thousands of dollars per year.

B. Plenary Discussion

III. A In small group


Discuss how, if at all, the approach that Ruggerio suggests differs from that presented by R&R under the label “multi-Strategies Utilitarianism.” In a summary section (not in your handout). He offers the following—(pay close attention to his summary for Step 4 listed above)

B. Plenary Discussion

C. In small group, Apply Ruggerio’s approach (or if you find it more acceptable R&R’s) to the following case. What decision should she make ? Why?

Professor Sophia Wisdom, a well-known climate researcher, has been asked to participate in a forum on pending legislation concerning the need to respond to the most recent results in climate science. This forum has been widely advertised and is likely to be available to a large and influential audience. The forum is expected to gain national news coverage as well wide exposure on The Web. Although the forum will consist of several other participants, she was selected because of her exceptional scientific credentials as well as her past work on public policy task forces. She has shown herself to be a careful interpreter of the strengths and limitations of climate research and views these results in a nuanced way. She is an experienced public speaker and has been widely praised for the clarity of her comments and her understanding of larger public policy implications of climate research. Privately, she is a strong proponent of the legislation that she believes could blunt the worst effects of climate change, but that she acknowledges would impose a significant economic cost on the American economy and put substantial strain on an already limited federal budget. Other members of the forum panel have background in science more generally, as well as economics and business. Two of them have been prominent critics of the legislation and one a harsh critic of climate science, who has spoken on Fox News and other conservative venues, about the “myth” that global warm (caused by human activity) is occurring. Professor Wisdom is seen by the environmental and progressive community as their best shot at influencing public opinion in support of the pending legislation. She is torn between two ways of approaching her presentation at the forum. She knows that the critics, some of whom have science credentials (though they have not actually carried out climate research), will argue from a highly partisan and ideological point of view. She has the debating skills to take them on in a similar partisan ideological fashion. But she is also aware that the proponents of her position have distorted the results of climate science in their own way. So she faces the choice of promoting the nuanced, but as she sees it, scientifically more respectable course, or “cherry picking” the results of climate science and launching an emotionally charged polemic against her critics.

IV In small group. As time permits discuss the strengths and weakness of the three types of moral theory (consequentialism, deontological ethics, and virtue ethics) we have discussed. Which, if any, of these types of moral theory do you find most satisfactory and why do you say so? Which of the two more applied approaches (R&R’s multi-strategy utilitarianism or Ruggerio’s three criteria, four step approach) do you find more acceptable?

 **Assignment for Tuesday May 24, 2011** Review the R&R text (especially the topics for the last four weeks) as well as the handouts. Come to class prepared to present your “favorite” approach to moral reasoning and to indicate why you favor it. Does it provide a satisfactory moral theory in that way that R&R seem to want? Does it provide practical moral guidance?