Ethical Reasoning

There are a number of different types of ethical reasoning. If we think about the complexities of our decision-making process, it only makes sense that each of us grounds our thoughts and actions with different priorities in mind. For our purposes, we will be addressing five key concepts in the ethical reasoning realm. Below, you will find a synopsis of each type:

**Utilitarian**

**Description** – Ethical concept that deems the right course of action is the one that produces more good than bad for the majority involved.

**Cons** - So long as a decision creates a benefit for most, Utilitarianism is not concerned with the minority.

**Example** – I won the lottery. I wanted to take my family on a vacation. I allowed them to have input as to where they would like to go. The majority chose the Bahamas, while one member chose Alaska, as she doesn’t like the hot weather. We ended up going to the Bahamas, which most of us were happy with.

**Egoism**

**Description** – Ethical concept that deems the right course of action is the one that produces the greatest benefits for the individual.

**Cons** – So long as a decision creates a benefit for the individual, Egoism is not concerned with the majority.

**Example** –I decided to take a new job. My previous employment paid well, but I found the duties boring and tedious. I have a family of four who depends solely on my paycheck. The new job pays considerably less, but I am happier in my work.

**Deontology**

**Description** – Ethical concept that deems the right course of action is the one that adheres to the duty, law or rule.

**Cons** – So long as a decision is made to adhere to duty, law, or rule, Deontology is not concerned with personal or social measures of morality.

**Example** – I noticed my coworker, John, leaving work 30 minutes before we closed every day, while the rest us stayed until the end of our shift. John explained that he was a single father and needed to pick his children up from school, as there was no one else to help him. I reported John to my boss, as that is what we are told to do when a coworker is violating any of the policies in the employee handbook.

**Relativism**

**Description** - Ethical concept that deems the right course of action is relative to the norms of one's culture. That is, whether an action is right or wrong depends on the moral norms of the society in which it is practiced.

**Cons** – So long as a decision is made to adhere to the culture’s norms, Relativism is not concerned with individual moral beliefs for the social norm.

**Example** – I drive on the right side of the road in accordance with the law. I went to London and quickly realized that driving on the right side of the road was unacceptable and illegal. What was lawful in the United States was a violation in another country.

**Justice**

**Description** – Ethical concept that deems the right course of action is the one that treats everyone fairly unless there is a sufficient reason to treat anyone (or anything) unequally.

**Cons** – The definitions of fairness are numerous and differential treatment can be controversial, therefore making it difficult to apply this concept to practice.

**Example** – I wanted to teach my 16 year old child the value of saving money. I set up a savings account for him so that he put some of his paycheck towards his new car. Whatever he put in, I would match. I did the same with my 12 year old. She wanted a new bike, so I helped her set up a savings account so that she could put some of her babysitting money towards her purchase. I told her I would match whatever she put in to the account.