

Chapter 2

Casuistry versus Ethical Pluralism with Applied Principles

You always admire what you really don't understand.

—Blaise Pascal

(Blaise Pascal (1623–1662) was a French mathematician, physicist, inventor, writer, and Catholic theologian and philosopher. His Letters Provincials ("The Provincial Letters") targeted the Jesuits, and in particular Antonio Escobar, and denounced casuistry as a form of complex reasoning to justify moral laxity and all sorts of sins. His most influential theological work, referred to posthumously as the Pensées ("Thoughts") was a defense of the Catholic faith and is considered a fine example of French prose)

To this point we have considered casuistry's features and history and saw that it is an inductive method of moral deliberation involving the comparison of new situations to previously settled cases. We have seen, too, how it is reliant upon settled truth-bearing narratives that are easy to use in practical situations and how the process is reflective and supportive of the *status quo* and enduring norms of society, particularly those of religious groups.

In the following, we will compare casuistry to the ethical (or moral) pluralistic and applied principles approaches that dominate ethics today. We will then contrast some of casuistry's features to those of other methods, especially reflective equilibrium.

Conventional Approach: Ethical Pluralism with Embedded Applied Principles

In general, ethics today is dominated by ethical pluralistic approaches having embedded moral principles and an approach that is largely deductive and linearly sequential.

A multi-perspectival approach within applied ethics, ethical pluralism maintains that different (plural) normative criteria should apply to moral deliberations.¹ The

¹ For our purposes, ethics is defined as the study of morality and includes three general branches—meta-ethics (the meaning of judgments), normative ethics (moral norms or conventions), and applied ethics (morality applied to real situations).

most common form of it today incorporates the principle-based ethics of utilitarianism and deontology as well as some sort of rights-based justice or common good normative perspective and Aristotle's long-enduring character based ethic called virtue ethics.

The applied principles ethical pluralistic approach is popular today because of the appeal of its clear set of moral principles, the binding qualities of its law-like moral rules, and contemporary society's tendency to turn to compliance with norms when there are questions of ethical propriety. Not surprisingly, it has been applied to contemporary business practices with the works of (Velasquez et al. 1983) and (Bowie 1991) as good examples.

As a process, the applied principles ethical pluralistic approach begins by identifying and isolating the moral aspect of an issue and then scrutinizing it according to various moral criteria. Analysis proceeds sequentially, with the issue judged by each moral method in turn. Individual judgments are then compiled, compared, and contrasted and if or when respective judgments are at odds, other ways of resolving them are brought in and applied. In this way, the entire process is linear and proceeds in a step-by-step orderly way from one method to another until a final overall judgment is reached.

Benefits of Applied Principles Approaches

As a moral approach, the applied principles ethical pluralistic approach is beneficial in a number of ways. First, in relying on multiple moral perspectives, it eliminates or diminishes many of the well-established shortcomings of each of its component methods used in isolation. As judgments are reached using the various criteria, overlaps can emerge and be used together to create a synergy that results in a final judgment that can be more powerful than one derived from any single moral perspective. Even when judgments do not converge, the nature of the differences can contribute to an overall judgment that is more informed. In the end then, a final judgment derived through an ethical pluralistic approach is stronger than one derived by means of a single component perspective used in isolation.

Second, the applied principles embedded ethical pluralistic approach's emphasis on rational principles (rules) works to defuse emotion, reduce subjectivity, and strengthen consensus about judgments in positive ways. Because ethical pluralism is comprised of methods that proceed logically from clearly defined norms, judgments seem more defensible and actionable than those produced by other more seemingly subjective approaches. As a result, ethical pluralism's judgments engender greater confidence than alternative approaches.

Third, the applied principles ethical pluralistic approach provides users with an ordered process that reduces uncertainty in ethical problem solving in positive ways. It does this by offering users a sequential, linear-active method of handling problems—one where each aspect of the problem is isolated, compartmentalized, and scrutinized according to the moral perspectives embedded in it. As a logical and ordered process, it increases the efficiency of reaching judgments. More important,

however, it enhances confidence among users that all aspects of analysis and judging have been thoroughly covered.

In sum, the applied principles ethical pluralistic approach is helpful in providing a simple, clear, reasonable, defensible, direct, and directive way to make moral judgments. It is accepted widely and produces highly regarded moral judgments. It is not surprising, therefore, that it is popular among ethicists.

Shortcomings of Applied Principles Approaches

Despite these and other positive features, the applied principles ethical pluralistic approach has certain shortcomings.² First, it is too abstract, time consuming, and cumbersome for effective use in practical situations. The complexity of extracting and isolating the moral issue from the mundane and the intricacy of analysis that requires the input of moral experts make it unwieldy for use by the non-experts who bear responsibility for making moral judgments in real life settings. Ethical pluralism is so conceptually driven that it is, in short, impractical and ineffectual for everyday use.

Second, the applied principles ethical pluralistic approach renders clear judgments and its rules orientation makes compliance enforceable, but its judgments are either overly narrow or so expansive that they are ineffective in addressing issues beyond the scope of the circumstances that generated moral inquiry.

Not unlike laws or taxes, rule-based approaches wilt when exceptions arise. Rules (laws or taxes) apply either directly to particular circumstances or generally such that exceptions or loopholes can easily be found to sidestep them. Judgments end up being fragile because they are undermined with new bits of data that negate effective rule application. To remain effective then, rules must be constantly monitored, refined, and updated—a laborious catch up process that does little to shore up the certainty of the process among users.

Third, an ethical pluralistic approach featuring applied principles tends to exalt rules at the expense of individual judgment and moral aspiration—two key components of ethics. Principles take on such an exaggerated importance in this method that they govern people's actions and obscure the relevance of people's reflective judgments and moral aspirations. Compliance with norms rather than discerning thought and concern with developing oneself as a moral agent govern people's actions. Rules dictate people rather than vice versa and people become subservient to the instruments they created to serve them. In this way the creation governs the creator and the normal course of morality becomes warped.

Fourth, an ethical pluralistic approach featuring applied principles champions objectivity as an antidote to subjectivism and relativism, yet the norms it relies upon are little more than subjective preferences. The emphasis on an orderly and sequential application of rules, hypercritical attention to detail in analysis, emphasis on rule compliance, and so forth reflect the values of conventional local morality. The

² For a critique of current approaches, see (Cavanagh et al. 1995).

preferences of the method are subjectively determined and are therefore on par with those produced by means of cultural or social group relativism. In the end then, while they are promoted as being objective, the norms embedded in the method are basically culturally rooted and subjectively determined.

Fifth and extending from the last point, an ethical pluralistic approach featuring applied principles typically results in conflicting judgments as the different normative pathways embedded in it produce judgments at odds with each other.

Because the approach typically relies on deontology, utilitarianism, pragmatism, and so forth, it concentrates sequentially on narrow aspects of morality and then combines the various outcomes. Sometimes doing so results in conflicting judgments, which then forces the decision-maker to resolve discrepancies by means of proportionalism, double-effect, or some other ancillary reasoning criteria. This, too, can prove to be unsatisfactory because the added complexity further clouds judgments and leads to even more subjective appeals—best guesses based on what seems reasonable and practically wise at the time.

In the end, an ethical pluralistic approach featuring applied principles is popular and seems robust, but its appeal and strength wither under inspection. It can lead to confusion, lull the unwary into a false confidence that compliance with rules is sufficient for good moral judgments, dull awareness of a wide range of important moral features not covered by rules, and do little more than valorize conventions that are distilled and framed in palatable rules and abstractions.

Although popular, scrutiny reveals the ethical pluralistic approach featuring applied principles to be no more robust than casuistry.

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