

## **Ethical Theories and Teaching**

- Introduction to key ethical theories (utilitarianism, deontology, virtue ethics)
- Applying ethical theories to teaching scenarios
- Case study: Ethical dilemmas in classroom management

### **Main Reference:**

Strike, K., & Soltis, J. F. (2015). *The ethics of teaching*. Teachers College Press.

## **Ethical Theories and Teaching**

**Introduction** Ethics plays a crucial role in teaching, helping educators navigate complex decisions that impact students, parents, and the school community. The application of key ethical theories—utilitarianism, deontology, and virtue ethics—can assist teachers in handling these dilemmas with greater awareness and integrity. This expanded content builds on the work of Kenneth Strike and Jonas Soltis in *The Ethics of Teaching* (2015), focusing on the practical application of these theories to real-life scenarios in teaching.

### **Key Ethical Theories**

#### **Utilitarianism**

Utilitarianism, a consequentialist theory developed by philosophers like Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, focuses on the outcomes of actions. It holds that an action is morally right if it produces the greatest good for the greatest number of

people. In teaching, this can translate to decisions that maximize benefits for the majority of students, even if it causes discomfort or disadvantage for a few.

For example, a teacher might face a situation where a disruptive student distracts others from learning. A utilitarian approach would support removing the student from the classroom temporarily to restore a productive learning environment for the majority. While this might negatively affect the individual student, it serves the greater good of the class.

In *The Ethics of Teaching*, Strike and Soltis use a similar approach to illustrate how utilitarian thinking can help resolve ethical conflicts. Teachers often have to consider the impact of their actions not just on individual students but on the broader classroom community. Decisions about resource allocation, grading policies, and even classroom discipline can be evaluated through a utilitarian lens.

## **Deontology**

Deontological ethics, primarily associated with Immanuel Kant, focuses on duty and rules rather than outcomes. According to deontology, certain actions are inherently right or wrong, regardless of the consequences. In teaching, this often means adhering to ethical principles such as honesty, fairness, and respect for individual rights.

For example, a teacher faced with a situation where a student has plagiarized an assignment might feel compelled to report the incident, even if doing so could harm the student's academic record. The teacher's duty to uphold academic integrity overrides concerns about the personal consequences for the student. Deontology emphasizes the importance of following rules and acting out of moral obligation, regardless of the results.

Strike and Soltis point out that teachers often face conflicts between their professional duties and personal inclinations. For instance, a teacher may have a strong personal connection with a student but must still apply disciplinary actions when rules are broken. The deontological approach helps teachers navigate such dilemmas by focusing on their professional responsibilities rather than the potential outcomes of their actions.

## **Virtue Ethics**

Virtue ethics, rooted in Aristotelian philosophy, focuses on the character of the individual and the development of virtuous qualities such as courage, kindness, and honesty. Unlike utilitarianism and deontology, which focus on actions or rules, virtue ethics emphasizes the moral character of the teacher. In the classroom, a virtuous teacher is one who consistently models ethical behavior and fosters a positive moral climate.

For example, a teacher who demonstrates patience and empathy when dealing with a struggling student is embodying the virtues of compassion and understanding. This approach emphasizes the importance of moral education, not just through explicit teaching but through the teacher's own behavior.

In *The Ethics of Teaching*, Strike and Soltis suggest that virtue ethics can help teachers cultivate positive relationships with their students and create a classroom environment that encourages ethical behavior. By acting as role models, teachers can influence their students' moral development, fostering qualities like responsibility, honesty, and respect.

## Applying Ethical Theories to Teaching Scenarios

### Scenario 1: Handling a Disruptive Student

A middle school teacher is dealing with a student who frequently disrupts the class by talking out of turn and distracting others. The teacher has tried several strategies, including speaking to the student privately and implementing behavior management techniques, but the disruptions continue.

- **Utilitarian Approach:** The teacher could decide to remove the student from the classroom to maintain an optimal learning environment for the majority of students. While this decision may harm the individual student's progress in the short term, it would benefit the other students who can then learn without interruptions.
- **Deontological Approach:** The teacher might adhere strictly to the school's disciplinary policy, issuing warnings or referring the student to the administration. Even if this action might harm the student's relationship with the teacher or classmates, the teacher is fulfilling their duty to maintain order and uphold the rules.
- **Virtue Ethics Approach:** The teacher might approach the situation with patience and empathy, trying to understand the root cause of the behavior. By modeling self-control and compassion, the teacher could foster a more constructive dialogue with the student, addressing the issue without resorting to punishment.

Each of these approaches offers a different lens through which to view the situation. While utilitarianism focuses on the greatest good, deontology emphasizes

following the rules, and virtue ethics encourages a compassionate, character-driven response.

## **Scenario 2: Academic Dishonesty**

A high school teacher discovers that a student has plagiarized a significant portion of their final paper. The teacher knows that the student is under a lot of personal stress due to family issues and doesn't want to worsen the student's emotional state by reporting the plagiarism. However, the school has a strict academic honesty policy.

- **Utilitarian Approach:** The teacher might weigh the overall impact of reporting the student. Reporting the incident could serve as a deterrent to other students and uphold the integrity of the academic process, benefiting the school community as a whole. However, it could also harm the individual student's academic standing and future prospects.
- **Deontological Approach:** Following a deontological perspective, the teacher is morally obligated to report the plagiarism, regardless of the student's personal circumstances. Upholding the principle of academic honesty is the primary concern, and the potential consequences for the student, while unfortunate, do not change the teacher's duty.
- **Virtue Ethics Approach:** A teacher with a virtue ethics mindset might focus on guiding the student to make better choices in the future. This could involve having a candid conversation about the student's stress, encouraging them to take responsibility for their actions, and offering support to help them manage both their personal and academic challenges.

## Case Study: Ethical Dilemmas in Classroom Management

Classroom management often involves making quick decisions that can have lasting ethical implications. Teachers must balance the needs of individual students with the needs of the class, all while maintaining fairness and consistency.

Consider a teacher who has a policy of deducting points for late assignments. One student, who consistently submits work late due to issues at home, asks for an exception. The teacher is torn between enforcing the policy and showing compassion for the student's difficult circumstances.

- **Utilitarian Approach:** The teacher might consider whether making an exception would lead to a greater overall good. Allowing the student extra time could enable them to succeed academically, but it might also set a precedent that could encourage other students to seek exceptions, leading to a breakdown of classroom discipline.
- **Deontological Approach:** From a deontological perspective, the teacher should apply the same rules to everyone, regardless of the circumstances. This ensures fairness and consistency in the classroom, even if it means the student faces negative consequences.
- **Virtue Ethics Approach:** The teacher could take a more compassionate approach, seeking to understand the student's challenges and providing support to help them meet deadlines in the future. This approach emphasizes character development and the cultivation of empathy and resilience, both for the student and the teacher.

## **Conclusion**

Ethical decision-making in teaching is complex, requiring a balance between competing values and principles. Utilitarianism offers a way to evaluate the broader impact of decisions, while deontology provides a clear framework for following ethical rules. Virtue ethics, on the other hand, focuses on the character and moral development of both teachers and students. By considering these different ethical perspectives, teachers can navigate the challenges of their profession with greater moral clarity and integrity.

The ethical teacher, as envisioned by Strike and Soltis, is not only someone who follows rules or seeks the greatest good but someone who embodies moral virtues in everyday interactions with students. In the face of ethical dilemmas, the teacher must draw on these virtues to make decisions that promote both individual well-being and the collective good of the classroom community. By applying these ethical theories in their practice, teachers can foster a more just, compassionate, and effective educational environment.

## **10 Questions Based on the Text**

1. What are the key differences between utilitarianism and deontology in the context of teaching?
2. How can a teacher apply utilitarian ethics when faced with a disruptive student?
3. Why might a deontological approach to classroom management sometimes lead to conflicts between personal relationships and professional duties?
4. In what ways does virtue ethics emphasize the role of character in teaching?

5. How can a teacher embody the principles of virtue ethics when dealing with a student who consistently submits late assignments?
6. What are the potential drawbacks of applying a strict deontological approach to ethical dilemmas in the classroom?
7. How can a teacher balance the need for fairness with compassion when handling cases of academic dishonesty?
8. How does Strike and Soltis' work help teachers navigate ethical dilemmas in education?
9. What are some of the challenges teachers face when trying to apply utilitarian principles in a diverse classroom?
10. How can the development of moral virtues in teachers positively impact the ethical climate of a school?