

activities and that there had to be one fundamental principle to accomplish this; there could not be multiple competing principles. The fundamental principle he proposed was the creation of the greatest net good for the full society. This was later proposed by an English clergyman to the familiar "greatest good for the greatest number;" Mill objected, saying the measure should be the net effect upon the full society, but upon a fortunate portion that society. The modern version of this ethical principle can be expressed as "Never take any action that does not result in greater net benefits than harms for the full society of which you are a part."

The Principle of Universal Duties (Kant, 1724–1804)

There are two basic problems with the principle of greater net benefits than harms for the full society as a gauge of what is right, just, and fair for that society. The first focuses on distribution. Every member of the community does not receive an absolutely equal share of the social benefits and social harms. Some may garner most of the benefits, while others may suffer almost all of the harms. The second problem concerns measurement. The benefits usually consist of desired goods and useful services; both—particularly in a market economy—can easily be expressed in financial equivalents. Harms, however, often involve the life and health of individuals or the usefulness and attractiveness of their surroundings; both are difficult to convert to a monetary scale. Kant knew of these problems, but he did not refer to them in his writing. Kant was also focused on the search for an absolute principle that would logically separate right from wrong in all human activities (as had been Mill), but he wanted to base his reasoning on duties rather than outcomes. He started by proposing that nothing in the world could be considered to be an absolute good, except for a good will. This "good will" is usually translated as a person's positive intent, beneficial desire, or recognized duty to help others. Obviously, a person's true positive intent, beneficial desire, or recognized duty toward others cannot be directly observed because it is both internal and private.

How then can other people tell whether a particular individual's will is indeed good and reflects a true sense of obligations toward others? Kant proposed that a will could be considered to be good only if the individual involved was willing to have his or her intent made into a universal law: everyone in the same situation should then be free or even encouraged to act in exactly the same way. This was the first formulation of the universal duty, or Categorical Imperative.

The second formulation of the Categorical Imperative is derived from the first: Every person should always treat others as ends, worthy of dignity and respect, and never as means to his or her own ends. Kant maintained that this second formulation exactly the same meaning as the first, for clearly all individuals would be willing to have everyone else in the world act in exactly this categorically imperative way toward themselves, and treat them with dignity and respect. The modern version of this ethical principle then is "Never take any action that you would not be willing to see others faced with the same or a closely similar situation, also be free or even encouraged to take, and never take any action that does not treat all others as ends, worthy of dignity and respect, and never as means to your own ends."

The Principle of Distributive Justice (Rawls, 1921–2002)

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Many critics have noted that the problem with Kant's first formulation of the universal duty principle—which states that none of us should ever take any action that we would not be willing to see others free or even encouraged to take in roughly similar situations—is that it provides no means for the comparison or relative ranking of alternatives. In Kant's view, a decision or action was either morally right or morally wrong, with no possible gradations between those two extremes. The problem with his second formulation—which states that we should always treat other people as ends, worthy of dignity and respect, and never as means to our own ends—is that it is hard not to treat other people as means to our ends. Adam Smith explained in *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), while Kant was still active, that storekeepers were the means to procuring our dinners, customers were the means to earning our livelihoods, and workers were the means to staffing our factories. Almost exactly 200 years later, John Rawls thought we needed something more precise than a rule to treat everyone with dignity and respect, and he proposed an ethical principle that he believed to be both universal and applicable because it was based upon the difficult-to-deny benefits of economic efficiency.

Rawls believed that society was an association of free individuals, and that cooperation between those individuals was needed to generate social benefits in the form of marketable goods and services, but that these difficult-to-deny benefits in the form of distributed goods and services, but that these difficult-to-deny benefits were unjustly distributed because some people were excluded from the twin markets for output goods and services and for input material, capital, and labor. These unfortunate, left-out people owned no material or capital and had so few inherent abilities or educated skills that they were unable to find remunerative employment in the labor markets, and thus had only minimal wages to satisfy their needs in the product markets, and thus had those distributive inequalities were not adequately addressed by the social and political processes that were an accepted portion of the complete economic theory.

Rawls suggested that under the conditions of the Social Contract, or—as he termed this same concept—the Veil of Ignorance (where people did not know what abilities, skills, or resources they might have, and thus their potential for earnings to satisfy their needs), they would make a single and simple agreement. This single and simple agreement would be that inequalities in the distribution of the material benefits of social cooperation would be permitted only as long as it was reasonable to assume that those inequalities would work out to the benefit of all. That is, it would be perfectly all right to pay scientists more than laborers because it would be reasonable to assume that the additional pay would attract more scientists who would invent better products that would make life more rewarding for everyone, including the laborers.

Rawls understood that it would be impossible to compute the impacts of all the inequalities in benefit distribution upon the life prospects of all of the people within society, and so he suggested that instead we could compute the impact upon the "least among us," those with the least education, the least income, and the least skills and abilities—and consequently the ones most likely to be excluded from the normal distribution methods, whether based upon market forces or social/political processes.