

# **Teaching Ethical Theory Using Symbols**

by

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“The symbols are sort of light bulbs that facilitated or crunch all of the information into a nutshell.” Ed Jimenez<sup>1</sup> – Ethics student

There is a rich tradition across a wide range of disciplines of using symbols to enhance student learning. Symbols have been used to support the transference of theory into practical and useful images (Williams, 2002; Conlon, 2002; Schultz, 2000; Piez, 1997). Teaching Business Ethics by the use of symbols is an excellent way to reduce the complexity of theory into practical and transferable images.

There is a wide range of perspectives from which to begin teaching a Business Ethics class. Some faculty may choose to include the history of ethical thought in their course material. The history of ethical thought often includes the teachings of Aristotle, Nietzsche and Kant, to name a few. Often Business Ethics is taught by incorporating current ethical case studies, analyzing modern concepts such as whistle blowing, executive compensation and intellectual property, and then looking backward to apply the traditions of ethical thought to analyze such issues.

From either perspective, instructors often choose to include in today’s classrooms the history of ethical thought. This historical perspective translates into today’s issues and gives the students an understanding that patterns exist which can guide the ethical choices they face. However, the history of ethical thought can be difficult to grasp and can lead to lengthy discussions and explanations which students may find too complex to apply to their current ethical choices.

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<sup>1</sup> Name used with permission.

An important goal of a Business Ethics course is to help students be more aware, careful and objective as they consider moral choices. Use of symbols creates a visual image, which students can associate with the complex issues of moral thought. Symbols can reduce complex theories and make them more understandable, simple and visual, plus easier to remember. Because symbols help to make the ethical concepts easier to remember, students are more likely to use them. Students who have studied Business Ethics by use of symbols have repeatedly expressed that they have often drawn the symbols as they attempt to either make or explain an ethical choice.

The purpose of this paper is offer the use of symbols as an expedient, practical and useful way to bridge the gap between some of the concepts of the history of ethical thought and the pressing ethical choices students face in their lives and organizations. (A series of over ten symbols<sup>2</sup> have been developed, four of which are included in this paper as examples.) See Attachment One for rendering of the symbols.

The four symbols represent the following ethical concepts:

- Tension thinking
- Comparing Deontological, Teleological and Virtue bases of moral reasoning
- How Frameworks affect outcomes
- How to make Right vs. Right Decisions

**Tension Thinking.** Tension thinking is crucial in evaluating ethical issues. The symbol used for this concept is a circle with two smaller circles sitting on top of it.

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<sup>2</sup> Symbols include emblems, drawings or acronyms that capture a concept into an easily recognizable form.

Between the circles are arrows that indicate the opposite circle holds the polar opposite position. Students are encouraged to list their own viewpoints in one of the smaller circles. Then they are encouraged to suspend judgment for a time to consider an opposing viewpoint, which is elucidated in the other small circle. If the ethical question was executive compensation, for example, one might study Enron, Global Crossing or Tyco, all companies that have recently been accused of having lavish, if not unethically high, levels of executive compensation. So, if a student were to consider a free market salary structure as optimal, tension thinking would require the student to consider the merits of the opposite position, such as the value of equality and equity in pay. Tension thinking does not ask the student to suspend judgment in the long term, but to carefully weigh and give credence to the opposite position before deciding. The use of tension thinking can lead students to value the use of the Venn Diagram.<sup>3</sup> Students then can use the Venn Diagram to understand the underlying assumptions of both positions and then look for commonality, which resides even in opposing the positions. By finding the common ground between opposing positions, students are more likely to be able to be more careful and respectful of those who think differently than they do when facing moral choices, and thus more likely to incorporate additional information before making an ethical choice, which can lead to wiser choices. The use of tension thinking encourages students to not dismiss out-of-hand those individuals whose ethical positions are the opposite of their own but to try and find, if possible, the common ground.

**Deontological, Teleological and Virtue.** Three buckets represent these three concepts of moral reasoning. The first bucket has a “D” in the center to represent

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<sup>3</sup> A Venn Diagram is a symbol of two or more overlapping circles, which is often used to demonstrate the common ground between two opposing positions. John Venn first developed the Venn Diagram in 1883.

Deontological, or rule-based, thought. The second bucket has a “T” in the middle to represent Teleological thought. The third bucket has a “V” to represent Virtue ethics. Students are first given a brief explanation of the differences between these three concepts of moral reasoning. Use of a single letter in a bucket reduces the initial confusion students often experience when exposed to the long and difficult explanations of the theories. At the same time, students are able to begin to understand the inherent differences among these theories. The three buckets help the students to understand that when they are making an ethical choice they may be “drawing from” these different schools of ethical thought.

To apply the three buckets of moral reasoning, the class considers a series of ethical questions. Students are posed an ethical problem and are asked to answer that particular question from one of the three “buckets of ethical reasoning.” Each question is considered first by a student using the Deontological “bucket” of thought. Then the same question is given to the next student to be answered from the Teleological “bucket” of thought, and on to the Virtue “bucket.”

For example, a student would be asked to consider the following statement using ethical theory from the D, or Deontological bucket: “It is all right to conduct personal business on company time.” In deontological thought it is important to follow the rules. So the answer to this question from the “deontological bucket” would be, in part, to look at the policy and procedure manual for the organization to determine if it would violate a company rule to “conduct personal business on company time.” If the company policy was for no work to be done on company time, the “D” bucket it would say it is unacceptable to conduct personal business on company time.

To answer this same question using teleological thought would require a weighing of the benefits and disadvantages of conducting business on company time. Teleological thought involves weighing the advantages and disadvantages of the few against the many, or the long-term against the short-term. Such weighing of the pro's and cons of a decision is an indicator of that bucket. To answer the question of conducting personal business on company time, teleological thought would require the students to consider many more factors than just the rules of the "D" bucket. For example, the student might consider who would get hurt if personal business would be conducted on company time and who would benefit from that decision. Additionally, in teleological thought a student might weigh the impact on an organization if everyone performed personal business on company time.

This same question considered using the Virtue bucket would require the student to say that they would not conduct personal business on company time no matter what the company rules were or what the need was to conduct personal business. A virtue-based decision would be a decision to never take advantage of another (including an employer). Thus, the three "buckets" assist the students in categorizing the analytical context quickly and effectively.

**Frameworks Affect Outcomes.** Ethics also involves establishing ethical frameworks and also an awareness of when an ethical breakdown occurs as the result of a framework failure. An example of an ethical framework that affects an outcome is the way a company pays its employees. Companies that give employees a 3% increase in salary each year, regardless of their individual or group contributions are establishing a framework that rewards "going with the flow," which can reduce creativity. Conversely,

companies that reward employees with large amounts of money for specific contributions can often foster highly creative (and often competitive) environments. Thus, the way employees are paid is a framework that affects an outcome. Students are asked to consider carefully the organizations that they work for and to separate their particular likes and dislikes of specific individuals with an analysis of the frameworks that their organizations have established. To that end, the concept of how frameworks affect outcomes ties in with the Fundamental Attribution Error.<sup>4</sup> Students need to be slow to judge individuals, when it can be a system failure that they are facing. It is optimal to understand the value of working within, and whenever possible establishing an ethical framework. Students when considering an ethical choice, will often remember this symbol and will ask themselves if they are in a situation where a framework has impacted an ethical choice they are currently facing.

**Right vs. Right Decision Making.** Kidder (1995) offers a theory for how to resolve the dilemmas of ethical living. The symbol for this concept is a dial (much like a speedometer in a car). Students are asked to consider an ethical choice (one of their own or within a case study) and to draw the “needle” within the dial to indicate their choice. Thus, if a student were to choose Truth over Loyalty the “0” end of the speedometer would be Truth and at the “150” end of the speedometer would be Loyalty. Students would then draw on the symbol a needle to indicate their choice in relation to either Truth or Loyalty. So if the decision is to slightly favor Truth over Loyalty, then the needle would be drawn closer to the Truth (or the 150) side of the speedometer.

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<sup>4</sup> A feature of the attribution theory. This refers to the fact that whenever people are making attribution about an action, they tend to over-emphasize dispositional factors about the actor, and under-emphasize

Kidder defines ethical dilemmas as those choices we need to make when one right is in direct opposition to another right. Kidder divides ethical decision making into these four paradigms:

Truth vs. Loyalty

Justice vs. Mercy

Self vs. Community

Short-term vs. Long term

An example of a short-term vs. long-term situation would be the choice a whistle blower faces.<sup>5</sup> In the short-term, a whistle-blower puts her job in jeopardy and risks the alienation of co-workers and those in authority if she chooses to speak out against a company decision or practice. In the long term, the whistle blower can be rewarded as the person who reminded the company that an ethical consideration had been ignored. According to Kidder this is a classic right-vs.-right dilemma. The whistle-blower will sacrifice the short-term success with her company for a larger and long-term ethical cause. As students consider the four right versus right dilemmas they are reminded to analyze their current ethical choices in terms of the tension that exists for example, between short-term and long-term. Kidder's work combined with the model, offers students an opportunity to become acquainted quickly with the serious thought that is required in ethical decision-making. Students are reminded that such choices often begin with understanding which of the four Kidder dilemmas is involved, even if the decision is between two "right" choices.

Within a Business Ethics class, students often learn some of the consequences that complex ethical decisions can bring. With the use of symbols, students can more easily learn to apply historical perspectives as they face present moral issues. Students can

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situational factors.



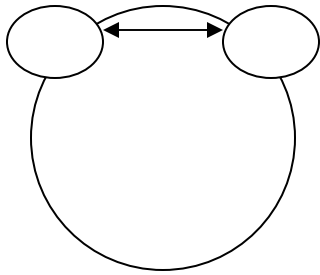
begin to consider what the great thinkers of the past would say about the issues they face today.

There are many ways to teach a Business Ethics class. It is proposed that the above listed symbols and phrases can be used to provide images that will offer students more opportunities to identify with at least some of the history of ethical thought and thus allow the students increased opportunities to stand on the shoulders of the great thinkers of ethical thought while exploring the current ethical decisions they face in their lives and organizations.

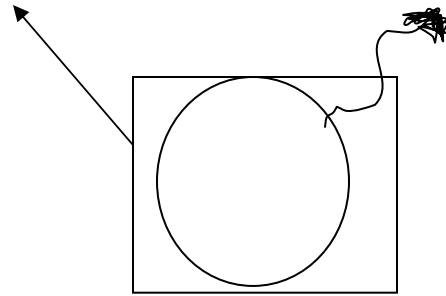
Student Ed Jimenez said it best, “The symbols are sort of light bulbs that facilitated or crunch all of the information into a nutshell.”

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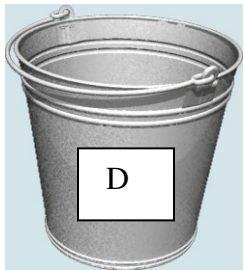
<sup>5</sup> Kidder’s Truth vs. Loyalty and Self vs. Community would also be ethical considerations for the decision making process of a whistle blower.



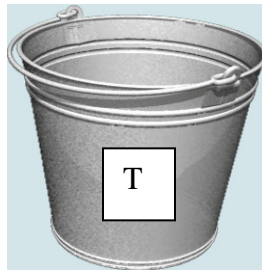
Tension Thinking



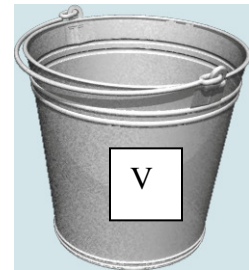
Frameworks  
Affect Outcomes



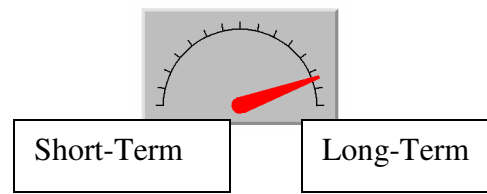
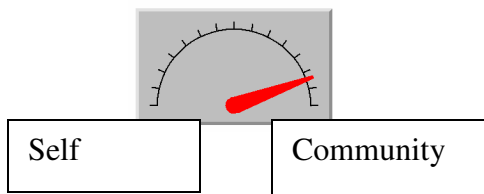
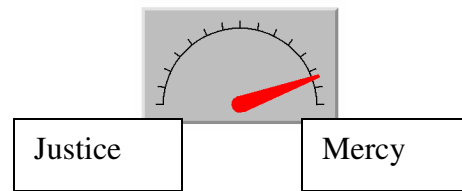
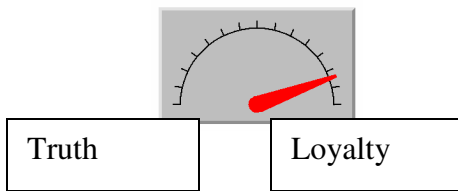
Deontological



Teleological



Virtue



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