

Applying an Ethical Framework

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- Each ethical framework provides a list of conditions for what it takes for an (action, policy, data science practice, application of technology, etc.) to count as ethical or unethical.
- If you want to claim that issue X is being handled *ethically* under framework Y, you must show that issue X meets the conditions set out by framework Y for being ethical.
- If you want to show that issue X is being handled *unethically* under framework Y, you must show that issue X fails to meet the conditions set out for framework Y for being ethical.
- Here are the conditions specified by each of the three frameworks:
 - **Applying the Utilitarian Framework.**
 - To argue that an (action, policy, etc.) is *ethical* under the utilitarian framework, you must show that the (action, policy, etc.) *maximizes overall utility compared to available alternatives*.
 - Note 1: it is not enough to show that an (action, policy, etc.) has positive net utility (produces more good than harm). Under the utilitarian framework, it must also be the case that no other available alternative (action, policy, etc.) produces *more* net utility.
 - While you cannot consider every available alternative action in your article reports, in order to correctly apply the utilitarian framework per the assignment rubric, you must compare the (action, policy, etc.) you discuss to at least one other available alternative (action, policy, etc.)
 - Note 2: it is possible under utilitarianism for an (action, policy, etc.) to produce negative net utility but still be ethical to perform. This happens when the (action, policy, etc.) produces more net utility than any other option.
 - Note 3: in determining how much utility an (action, policy, etc.) produces, you must explain what assumptions you are making about the way that different benefits and harms weigh out against each other. (For instance, how does the loss of \$5 weigh out against the loss of a human life? Why?)
 - Note 4: Note that utilitarianism requires the maximization of “overall” utility. Thus, in determining how much utility an (action, policy, etc.) produces, you must consider the net harms and benefits produced by that action summed over *everyone involved*.
 - **Applying the Kantian Framework**
 - To argue that an (action, policy, etc.) is *ethical* under the Kantian framework, you must show either that performing that (action, policy, etc.) doesn’t violate any universal moral rules and/ or doesn’t use others as mere means to an end.
 - Note 1: if you choose to argue that an (action, policy, etc.) violates a particular moral rule (categorical imperative), you must clearly state the moral rule, and also explain why it should be considered a universal moral rule. (Is it the sort of thing that involves treating others as mere means to an end? Is it the sort of thing that would harm society if everyone in society were to do it? Do you think it is a universal moral rule for some other reason?) While there is no mutually agreed upon set of universal moral rules, examples of universal moral rules from different ethical theories include rules like the Ten Commandments (proposed by many religious theorists), the Golden Rule, or rules like keeping promises, not harming others, and telling the truth (one contemporary deontological theorist who advocates for these kinds of rules is WD Ross: you can read his list of proposed universal moral rules here).
 - **Applying the Virtue Ethical Framework**
 - To argue that an (action, policy, etc.) is *ethical* under the Virtue Ethical framework, you must show that performing that (action, policy, etc.) is something someone with a morally virtuous character might do.

- Note 1: “Virtues” in the virtue ethical framework are virtues of *character*. They are things that make a particular person excellent. Some examples of Aristotelean virtues are virtues like *courage*, *honesty*, or *generosity*.
- Note 2: In showing that an (action, policy, etc.) is something that a morally virtuous person might do, you must say why you think that the action is consistent with the character of a virtuous person. (E.g. what makes a person virtuous? Why is doing action X consistent with the character of a virtuous person?)