

# Activity One

## Scenario

Analyze the dilemma in the following scenario from the vantage point of both utilitarian and deontological ethical theories. In particular, how might Ross's theory of act-deontology apply?

The United States government, with the approval of the majority of Americans, has decided to round up all Arab-Americans and relocate them into internment camps. You have a friend who is an American citizen of Arab descent. She asks you to protect her from the authorities. You have known this person all of your life, and you are convinced that she is a loyal American. So you agree to hide her in the third floor of your house. Next, imagine that a United States federal agent knocks on your door and asks if you know the whereabouts of the person you are hiding. How would you respond to that agent?

You realize that you cannot both keep your promise to your friend and tell the truth to the federal agent. Initially, your gut reaction might suggest that the solution to your dilemma is really quite simple: a far greater good will be served by lying to the federal agent than by breaking your promise to your friend. However, to embrace the moral principle underlying that line of reasoning is to embrace a form of utilitarianism. And we have already seen some of the difficulties that can result from trying to be a consistent and thoroughgoing utilitarian.

Furthermore, could you consistently universalize a moral principle that states: Whenever you must choose between telling the truth to authorities and breaking a promise to a friend, you should always keep your promise? Will that principle always work? Write a short answer to the above questions (no more than an A4 page long)

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## Response

The given scenario can be analysed using deontologism, utilitarianism or virtue ethics. Each of the schools of ethics raises problems or questions and none is the right one. Utilitarianism acts in the will of the action causing the greatest good to the greatest number of people. It is a subset of consequentialism, where the consequences of a certain action are definitive. Deontologism decides by the action itself, ignoring the consequences. Virtue ethics is neither interested in the

action or the consequence, but the character, thus morals, motives etc., of that person.

The greatest hurdle laid out by deontology is the applicability over several scales. E.g. Helping a friend is a good act and should be done, but that conflicts with complying with the authorities, which should also be done. The acts themselves are both good, but combined they can conflict in certain circumstances (like the one described).

Virtue ethics would make it even harder to decide, as the good character may be defined as the positive contribution (and thus least negative contribution) to society. The good character for society may though conflict with the good character of a friend.

The question of whom's good to maximise is important when dealing with ethical problems, as the above examples lay out the conflicts between e.g. society's and personal good.

Ethical theories tend to have an inverse-relationship between applicability and reliability. That makes them less able to give an obvious option for the philosopher when having to apply a theory to multiples of scenarios.

I believe Kantianism may be a good ethical theory to apply. Kantian ethics would imply the categorical imperative, which may be described as to choose the act, that one would accept to become universally and generally the action to choose. Kant solves one problem that arises in the other ethical theories, which is the applicability over several scenarios. Kant describes that if everyone were to hide their friends from the authorities, that would be acceptable. It is acceptable, as it is driven by society. Any definition has been made to what it is by society and nothing else, thus society defines good and bad. This also raises the problem between the originally intended definitions compared to the definitions used by society.

If everyone were to hide their friends (a universal moral principle), that would only be okay as long as the decision would not extend over the reach of the personal influence of the decision maker, not creating negative externalities for society (e.g. hiding a serial murderer on the run, as that could imply negative future impacts on society).

Especially in the modern world, society as a complex system is a driver for most things, thus an ethical concept considering society as its main aspect may offer interesting viewpoints.