Fundamental Moral Unit
Questions for classroom discussions

Western philosophy identifies the individual as the FMU; feminist theories tend to use relationship and maintaining the connections among people; Eastern and indigenous theories put natural or spiritual systems as the core to be maintained.

1) Give an example to show that you can use these different kinds of thinking to arrive at the same or similar answers for what is morally permitted.

2) Show how, in some instances, the answer to what is morally permitted would be different.

3) How can you use these different methods without just picking the theory that best yields the answer that reflects your personal opinion? Any solid normative judgment will have reasons that reflect the values of impartiality and universalization.

4) Western theories are said to emphasize rights and liberty over need and vulnerability. Explain how that connects to FMU.

5) Feminist theories are said to care for the most vulnerable. Show how that is consistent with a theory that uses relationships as its core concept.

6) Which of the three systems best recognizes non-human animals as having moral importance? Explain.
Case Study: Welfare Reform

In 1996, Democratic President Bill Clinton and a Republican-led Congress passed The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), also known as the “Welfare Reform Act.” This bill changed how government-funded welfare operated in the U.S.: it reduced the amount of federal spending for low-income families; placed a limit on the number of years a person could receive federal financial assistance; and required recipients to work within two years of receiving benefits. It also included legislation that limited the funding available to unmarried parents under the age of 18, enhanced legal enforcement of child support, and restricted funding for immigrants. Republican supporters believed these provisions would curb the number of out-of-wedlock births. The bill ignited a decades-long debate about individual responsibility versus social responsibility and the role of the government in directly alleviating poverty.

On the one hand, the bill was heralded as an important step toward helping welfare recipients achieve self-reliance and employment. Through this bill, Clinton aimed to “end welfare as we know it” by creating job opportunities that would help stop a cycle of poverty and dependency. Republican Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich and his colleagues in Congress pressured Clinton to make the bill even more austere. They argued that reducing welfare funding reinforced core American values of individual responsibility, hard work, independence, and free enterprise.

Critics of the bill argued that it negatively affected the most vulnerable people in society. Several members of Clinton’s administration even resigned as a result of the bill. One of these detractors, Peter Edelman, argued that welfare reform would not solve the problem, but rather drive millions more people into poverty, many of them single mothers and their children. During the debate, Senator Edward Kennedy called the bill “legislative child abuse.” From this perspective, the government was essentially abdicating its responsibility to care for children and impoverished people who are systemically disadvantaged.

The government’s role in supporting the poor through direct aid remains an active debate in the U.S. today.
Resources:

Welfare's Changing Face

Was Welfare Reform Successful?

Clinton to Sign Bill Overhauling Welfare

Renewing America
http://www.newsweek.com/renewing-america-184562

Discussion Questions:

1) In this case, who favors the individualistic fundamental moral unit? Who favors the community-oriented fundamental moral unit? Which viewpoint do you find the most compelling and why?

2) Regardless of your own political affiliation, do you think governments or societies have an obligation to care for disadvantaged or lower-income families? Why or why not?

3) Do you think everyone in your home country has equal opportunities to succeed in society? Why or why not? Do you think success is the sole responsibility of the individual or does government have a role to play? Explain your position.

4) How might individuals raised with different notions of the fundamental moral unit respond differently to the Welfare Reform Act?

5) How might awareness of the fundamental moral unit help us to better understand differences between political parties?
There are so many considerations in making ethical decisions, but what consideration is most important? Different cultures and ethical systems have produced theories that favor one consideration over others. The consideration that a theory favors is called a Fundamental Moral Unit, or FMU.

Many of the classical Western philosophers from the Greek and Roman traditions, favor the individual as the Fundamental Moral Unit. In these theories, the primary dictate is a negative statement: Don't get in an individual's way in his or her pursuit of the good life.

Feminist theories tend to determine the best choice based on how well those choices strengthen the connections among people and how well the needs of the most vulnerable are addressed. The fundamental moral unit here is relationship between people and is based on the belief that care should be given to those who can't take care of themselves.

Some Eastern theories promote the overall good of the community first and foremost. And some indigenous theories stress human’s connection with the world as a whole, with all natural systems and species having an equal right to co-exist. People who grow up in these traditions expect that they and others will sacrifice individual self-interest for the good of the group and the environment. The Fundamental Moral Unit here is called “aggregate good.”

Let’s consider a decision you might encounter if you were a member of your local city council. There is a 50 acre parcel of land in your city’s jurisdiction that was designated a hundred years ago to remain open space. Now the area contains some ancient Native burial grounds, but the tribe members a hundred years and tribe members today are happy with the designated use as long as the woodlands around the burial mounds stay intact. A developer would like to build a shopping mall there. As a city council member, you get to decide how that land will be used today: should it remain a park or become a shopping mall?
If you make your choice based only on the good that comes to individuals, you might be tempted to go with the shopping mall. The mall will provide jobs for many of the people in the community who are out of work and the additional income from the taxes from the new property owner and the businesses will allow the city to reduce taxes for individual homeowners.

Which choice best advances the overall good of the community in which I live? The policy choice made previously to protect the land respected human connections to natural systems and was sensitive to the culture and history of a minority group. Affirming that decision helps all people in the community maintain trust in government.

We can see how the teachings from all of these traditions can help us in analyzing an important choice. And they can help us answer one more question: Can I find a choice that doesn’t cause harm to anyone or anything? If a shopping mall is a good idea for the community, alternative building sites that don’t cause harm are waiting to be found.