

How to Conduct Case Study Analysis

This document will focus on the sort of case study analysis found in applied ethics and professional ethics, conducted in particular subjects like business ethics, biomedical ethics and environmental ethics. It is broken down into a number of sections so that the points can be kept separate.

A case study analysis involves examining one case, or a specific instance, of an issue. The case is used in place of a sample but is taken also as a unique instance demanding its own fair hearing. A case, in general terms, is any particular instance of a moral or ethical issue. Facts pertain to it and one can go about gathering these facts from various sources.

Sometimes cases are made-up. When I have done case studies before, I have given students a hypothetical or imaginary case which they will analyze. More on how to analyze will appear below. Still these cases reflect possible real ones and might even be modeled upon them. However, to perform a thorough case study analysis, it is best to find a case or even another case study analysis and perform your own analysis.

Cases studies use **analysis**. What is meant by analysis? This will vary from discipline to discipline but all should begin with a general orientation. Analysis involves the ability to identify the important parts of the case, those facts and issues that are relevant to consider. Such a decision rests on what sort of analysis is done. Because this is a philosophical-ethical analysis, it will use theories and terms in ethics to identify the relevant facts.

Such an identification is often called **positive analysis**, which involves identifying the important facts in the case. Usually this is done by the act of capturing cases and for those of you would will be selecting your own case, the writing up of the case will imply doing positive analysis. When cases are written up, they should stick to important and relevant facts and attempt to limit their number. How does one know which facts are important? This depends upon the kind of analysis in general.

In general the kind of analysis to be applied here is typically called **normative analysis**. Such analysis uses theories and orientations in the field of ethics and applies these to the case. It is called normative because it applies the **values** in the theories to draw out the meaning of the case. Much more needs to be said about normative analysis, so bear with me. Normative analysis sometimes applies only the most relevant theory in ethics to the case. When it is judged by the author that a certain theory is best used because the facts of the case seem to dictate this, then only the terms and elements of one theory are applied. Sometimes a case study analysis simply adopts a theoretical viewpoint not because the case demands it but because such a method allows us to see another dimension of the case.

In most cases, however, normative analysis will identify at least two competing theories, like utilitarianism and deontology—they compete because one is consequentialist, the other non-consequentialist—and apply them to see how each perspective would make sense of the case. Such a tactic is used to draw out implications about the case from competing theories to see which theory best understands the case or best allows us to make recommendations on how the case is to be resolved or sorted out. This tactic also and importantly allows us to chart the various recommendation options. One theory might suggest or point in the direction of a set of recommendations, while another would suggest other solutions.

Normative analysis usually begins by applying the ethical theory in a general, wide-sweeping fashion. How the theory is applied or what elements of any given theory are applied are determined by the author or student. For instance, deontology emphasizes a number of important elements and admits of several interpretations. It could focus on applying Kant's categorical imperatives or to the values of purpose or intention and the language of rights and obligations. For Kant's deontology, at least two formulations of the categorical imperative are to be applied. But how fully one is applied depends upon the author. Implicit here is how important it is for the student to know the elements of the theory. It might be necessary to consult other secondary sources, other than our text, to get a better sense of the elements of these theories.

The last step in a case study is called **strategic analysis**. Many ethicists admit that while this might be the most crucial one, they are adamant that it cannot be done properly without the preceding normative analysis. Strategic analysis attempts to make recommendations based upon the normative analysis about how to resolve the case or what sorts of actions, government policies, laws, institutional practices, perhaps even ethical codes, are needed to address this case. Now, because the case is particular, it does not usually recommend some general procedure or policy but something likewise particular. In general, strategic analysis attempts to offer **prescriptions** about what is to be done, how we are to act or not, what policies we need to put in place or not, because of the case so as to resolve the case.

This implies that the case is by nature rather **controversial**. Cases that do not admit of a variety of interpretations and ethical dilemma are often not regarded as relevant. So, in your choice of a case, make sure it admits of debate and would generate competing interpretations of how it should be analyzed and resolved. Not all cases can be resolved in a complete fashion. Sometimes cases suggest that more analysis is required, usually positive analysis. Sometimes strategic analysis calls for more positive analysis, that is suggests what other facts are needed, what information should be gathered and so on. It might, hence, encourage something like Royal Commissions (we have at least one report in our text from a Royal Commission so check this out if you need to know a bit about these commissions.)