"It is only a few rare and exceptional men who have that kind of love toward mankind ... that makes them unable to endure patiently the general mass of evil and suffering, regardless of any relation it may have to their own lives. These few, driven by sympathetic pain, will seek, ...some new system of society by which life may become richer, more full of joy and less full of preventable evils...

—BERTRAND RUSSELL, 1919, Proposed Roads to Freedom

THE THINKER'S GUIDE TO

ETHICAL REASONING

Based on Critical Thinking Concepts & Tools

By DR. RICHARD PAUL and DR. LINDA ELDER

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FOUNDATION FOR CRITICAL THINKING

The Function of Ethics—and Its Main Impediment

"If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being."

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*

The proper role of ethical reasoning is to highlight acts of two kinds: those which enhance the well-being of others—that warrant our praise—and those that harm or diminish the well-being of others—and thus warrant our criticism. Developing one's ethical reasoning abilities is crucial because there is in human nature a strong tendency toward egotism, prejudice, self-justification, and self-deception. These tendencies are exacerbated by powerful sociocentric cultural influences that shape our lives—not least of which is the mass media. These tendencies can be actively combated only through the systematic cultivation of fair-mindedness, honesty, integrity, self-knowledge, and deep concern for the welfare of others. We can never eliminate our egocentric tendencies absolutely and finally. But we can actively combat them as we learn to develop as ethical persons.

The ultimate basis for ethics is clear: Human behavior has consequences for the welfare of others. We are capable of acting toward others in such a way as to increase or decrease the quality of their lives. We are capable of helping or harming. What is more, we are theoretically capable of understanding when we are doing the one and when the other. This is so because we have the capacity to put ourselves imaginatively in the place of others and recognize how we would be affected if someone were to act toward us as we are acting toward others.

Thus nearly everyone gives at least lip service to a common core of general ethical principles—for example, that it is morally wrong to cheat, deceive, exploit, abuse, harm, or steal from others, that everyone has an ethical responsibility to respect the rights of others, including their freedom and well-being, to help those most in need of help, to seek the common good and not merely their own self-interest and egocentric pleasures, to strive in some way to make the world more just and humane.

Even young children have some idea of what it is to help or harm others. Unfortunately, children (like adults) tend to have a much clearer awareness of the harm done to them than of the harm they do to others:

- "That's not fair! He got more than I did!"
- "She won't let me have any of the toys!"
- "He hit me and I didn't do anything to him. He's mean!"
- "She promised me. Now she won't give me my doll back!"
- "Cheater! Cheater!"
- "It's my turn now. You had your turn. That's not fair."

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Ethical Decisions Require Depth of Understanding

Unfortunately, mere verbal agreement on ethical principles alone will not accomplish important moral ends nor change the world for the better. Ethical principles mean something only when manifested in behavior. They have force only when embodied in action. Yet to put them into action requires intellectual skills as well as ethical insights.

The world does not present itself to us in morally transparent terms. We live in a world in which propaganda and self-deception are rife. Public discussion and media communication are not neutral centers of open debate. A tremendous amount of money is spent on persuading people to see the events of the world in one way rather than another. Furthermore, depending on the society and culture in which we are raised, we ourselves are strongly pre-disposed to see some persons and nations on the side of good and other persons and nations on the side of evil. Humans typically take themselves to be on the side of good and their enemies on the side of evil.

> ***"We must rid the world of evil."***
> ***"Now is the time to draw a line in the sand against the evil ones."***
> ***"Across the world and across the years, we will fight the evil ones, and we will win."***
> ***"You are either for us or against us."***
>
> President George Bush, 2002

In the everyday world, the ethical thing to do is sometimes viewed as obvious and self-evident when it should be a matter of debate, or, conversely, viewed as a matter of debate when it should be obvious and self-evident. One and the same act is often ethically praised by particular social, religious or political groups and ethically condemned by others.

Through example and encouragement, we can cultivate important intellectual traits. We can learn to respect the rights of others and not simply focus on fulfilling our desires. The main problem is not so much distinguishing between helping and harming, but our natural propensity to be focused almost exclusively on ourselves and those closely connected with us.

This is clear in the behavior of national, religious, and ethnic groups. Few groups, in fact, value the lives and welfare of others (other nations, other religions, other ethnic groups) as they value those of their own. Few think about the consequences to other groups of their own group's pursuit of money, power, prestige, and property. The result is that few people (in virtually any society) act consistently on ethical principles when dealing with "outsiders." A double standard in applying ethical principles to human life is virtually universal and often flagrant.

In short, ethical persons, however strongly motivated to do what is ethically right, can do so only if they know what is ethically right. And this they cannot do if they systematically confuse their sense of what is ethically right with self-interest, personal desires, or social taboos. Ethically motivated persons must learn the art of self- and social-critique, of ethical self-examination. They must recognize the pervasive everyday pitfalls of ethical judgment: moral intolerance, self-deception, and uncritical conformity.

Few have thought much about the difficulty of getting ethically relevant facts about the world. Few are skilled in tracing the implications of the facts they do have. And few

can identify their own moral contradictions, or clearly distinguish their self-interest and egocentric desires from what is genuinely ethical. Few have thought deeply about their own ethical feelings and judgments, have tied these judgments together into a coherent ethical perspective, or have mastered the complexities of moral reasoning. As a result, everyday ethical judgments are often a subtle mixture of pseudo and genuine morality, ethical insight and moral prejudice, ethical truth and moral hypocrisy.

Egocentrism as a Fundamental Barrier to Ethical Reasoning

The human tendency to judge the world from a narrow, self-serving perspective is powerful. Humans are typically masterful at self-deception and rationalization. We often maintain beliefs that fly in the face of the evidence. We often engage in acts that blatantly violate ethical principles. What is more, we feel perfectly confident in our righteousness.

In other words, humans naturally develop into narrow-minded, self-centered thinkers. In a way, this makes perfect sense. We feel our own pain; we don't feel the pain of others. We think our own thoughts; we do not think the thoughts of others. And as we age, we unfortunately do not naturally develop the ability to empathize with others, to consider points of view that conflict with our own. Consequently, we are often unable to reason from a genuinely ethical perspective.

Nevertheless, it is possible to learn to think critically through ethical issues. With practice and sound instruction, we can acquire the disposition and skills required to analyze and evaluate situations from opposing ethical perspectives.

At the root of virtually every unethical act lies some form and degree of self-delusion. And at the root of every self-delusion lies some flaw in thinking. For instance, Hitler confidently believed he was doing the right thing in carrying out egregious acts against the Jews. His actions were a product of the erroneous beliefs that Jews were inferior to the Aryan race, and that they were the cause of Germany's problems. In ridding Germany of the Jews, he believed himself to be doing what was in the best interest of his Germany. He therefore considered his actions to be ethically justified. His deeply flawed reasoning resulted in untold human harm and suffering.

We cannot develop as ethical persons if we are unwilling to face the fact that every one of us is prone to egotism, prejudice, self-justification, and self-deception and that these flaws in human thinking are the cause of much human suffering. Only the systematic cultivation of fair-mindedness, honesty, integrity, self-knowledge, and deep concern for the welfare of others can provide foundations for sound ethical reasoning.

Ethical reasoning entails doing what is right even in the face of powerful selfish desires. To live an ethical life, then, is to develop command over our native egocentric tendencies. It is not enough to advocate living an ethical life. It is not enough to be able to do the right thing when we ourselves have nothing to lose. We must be willing to fulfill our ethical obligations at the expense of our selfish desires and vested interests.

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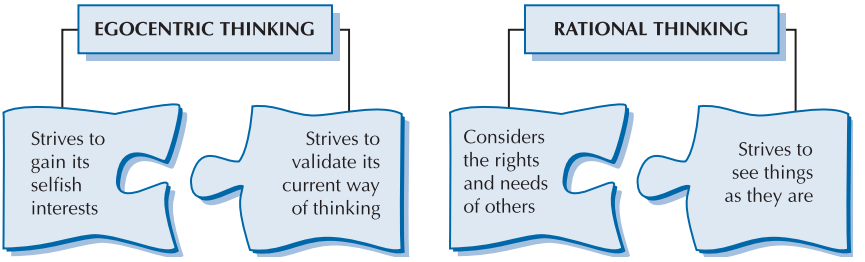

Pathological Dispositions Inherent in Egocentric Thought

Much of our ethical insight comes from an in-depth recognition of inconsistencies in human behavior—for example, saying one thing and doing another; applying one standard to ourselves and another standard to others. Ethical reasoning implies an awareness of interrelated pathological dispositions inherent in native egocentric thought. We need to identify these tendencies in our lives, determining which of them are the most prominent and which the least. As you read them, ask yourself whether you recognize these as processes that occur in your own mind (if you conclude, "not me!" think again):

- **egocentric memory:** the natural tendency to "forget" evidence that does not support our thinking and to "remember" evidence that does
- **egocentric myopia:** the natural tendency to think in an absolutist way within an overly narrow point of view
- **egocentric righteousness:** the natural tendency to see ourselves as in possession of "The Truth"
- **egocentric hypocrisy:** the natural tendency to ignore flagrant inconsistencies—between what we profess to believe and the actual beliefs our behavior implies, or between the standards we apply to ourselves and those we apply to others
- **egocentric oversimplification:** the natural tendency to ignore real and important complexities in the world in favor of simplistic notions when consideration of those complexities would require us to modify our beliefs or values
- **egocentric blindness:** the natural tendency not to notice facts and evidence that contradict our favored beliefs or values
- **egocentric immediacy:** the natural tendency to over-generalize immediate feelings and experiences, so that when one, or only a few, events in our life seem highly favorable or unfavorable, all of life seems favorable or unfavorable to us
- **egocentric absurdity:** the natural tendency to fail to notice when our thinking has "absurd" implications

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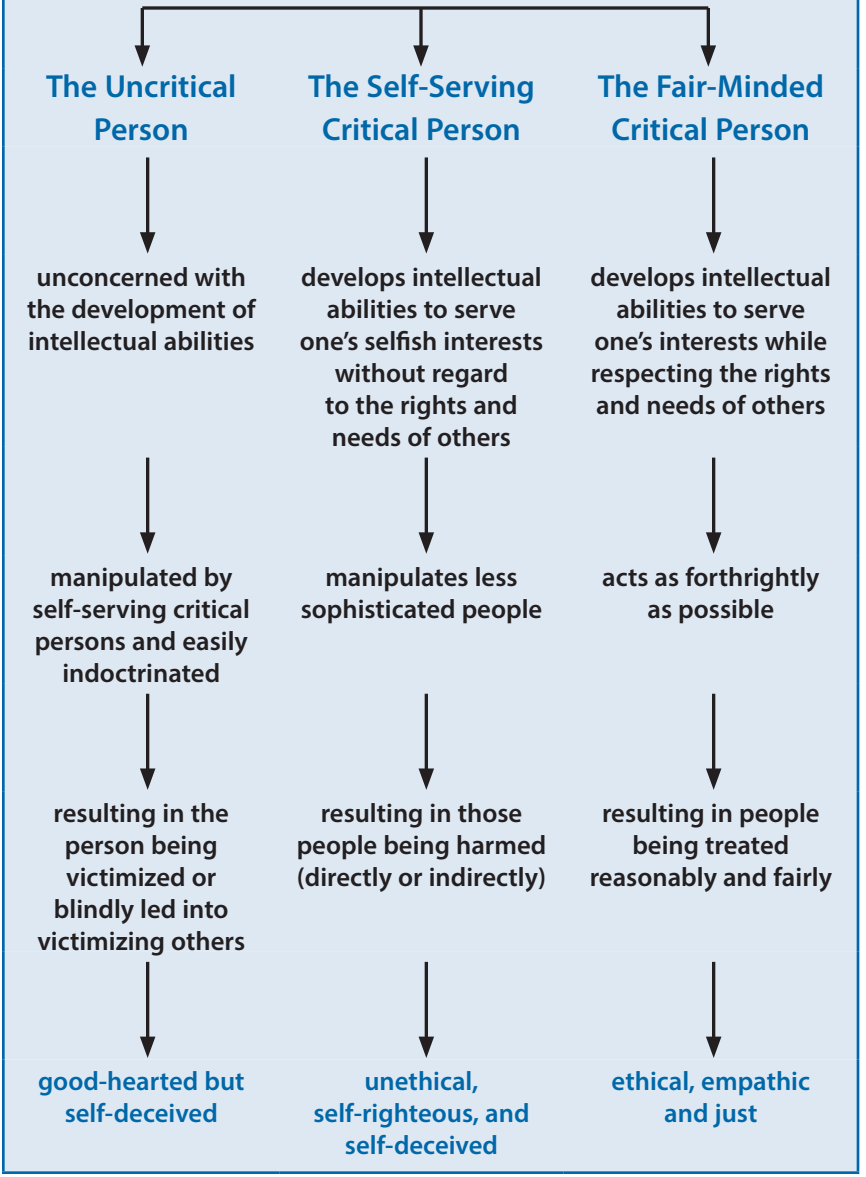
Three Modes of Character Integration

(Expressed in exclusive categories for purpose of theoretical clarity. In fact, these are matters of degree).



The Problem of Pseudo-Ethics

The Sociocentric Counterfeits of Ethical Reasoning

Skilled ethical thinkers routinely distinguish ethics from its counterfeits, such as the domains of social conventions (conventional thinking), religion (theological thinking), politics (ideological thinking) and the law (legal thinking). Too often, ethics is confused with these very different modes of thinking. It is not uncommon, for example, for highly variant and conflicting social values and taboos to be treated as if they were universal ethical principles.

Thus, religious ideologies, social "rules," and laws are often mistakenly taken to be inherently ethical in nature. If we were to equate this amalgamation of domains with universal ethics, then by implication every practice within any religious system would necessarily be ethically binding, every social rule ethically obligatory, and every law ethically justified.

If all particular religious do's and don'ts defined ethics, we could not then judge any religious practices—e.g., torturing unbelievers or burning them alive—as unethical. In the same way, if ethical and conventional thinking were one and the same, every social practice within any culture would necessarily be ethically obligatory—including social conventions in Nazi Germany. We could not, then, condemn any social traditions, norms, and taboos from an ethical standpoint—however ethically bankrupt they in fact were. What's more, if one country's laws defined ethics, then by implication politicians and lawyers would be considered experts on ethics and every law they finagled to get on the books would take on the status of a moral truth.

It is essential, then, to differentiate ethics from other modes of thinking commonly confused with ethics. As critical thinkers and autonomous persons we must remain free to critique commonly accepted social conventions, religious practices, political ideas, and laws using ethical concepts not defined by these counterfeits of ethics. No one lacking this ability can become proficient in genuine ethical reasoning. Let us consider these domains of pseudo ethics more specifically to drive home this crucial ethical insight.

Ethics and Religion

Theological reasoning answers metaphysical questions such as:

> What is the origin of all things? Is there a God? Is there more than one God? If there is a God, what is his/her nature? Are there ordained divine laws expressed by God to guide our life and behavior? If so, what are these laws? How are they communicated to us? What must we do to live in keeping with the will of the divine?

Religious Beliefs Are Culturally Variant

Religious variability derives from the fact that theological beliefs are intrinsically subject to debate. There are an unlimited number of alternative ways for people to conceive and account for the nature of the "spiritual." The Encyclopedia Americana, for example, lists over 300 different religious belief systems. These traditional ways of believing adopted by social groups or cultures often take on the force of habit and custom. They are then handed down from one generation to another. To the individuals in any given religious group, their particular beliefs seem to them to be the ONLY way, or the only REASONABLE way, to conceive of the "divine."

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They cannot see that their religious beliefs are just one set among many possible religious belief systems.

Examples of theological beliefs confused with ethical principles:

- Members of majority religious groups often enforce their beliefs on minorities.
- Members of religious groups often act as if their theological views are self-evidently true, scorning those who hold conflicting views.
- Members of religious groups often fail to recognize that "sin" is a theological concept, not an ethical one. ("Sin" is theologically defined.)
- Divergent religions define sin in different ways (but often expect their views to be enforced on all others as if a matter of universal ethics).

Religious beliefs, when dominant in a human group, tend to shape many, if not all, aspects of a person's life—with rules, requirements, taboos, and rituals. Most of these regulations have no ethical force beyond the members of one group. In fact, they are, in themselves, neither right nor wrong, but simply represent social preferences and culturally subjective choices.

It is every person's human right to choose his or her own religious orientation, including, if one wishes, that of agnosticism or atheism. That is why there is a provision (Article 18) in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights concerning the right to change one's religious beliefs:

> ***"Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief…"***

Beliefs about divinity and spirituality are widely divergent and should therefore be non-compulsory. There is no definitive way to prove any one set of religious beliefs to the exclusion of all others. For that reason religious freedom is a human right. One can objectively prove that murder and assault are harmful to persons, but not that non-belief in God is.

That ethical judgment must trump religious belief is shown by the undeniable fact that many persons have been tortured and/or murdered by people motivated by religious zeal or conviction. Indeed religious persecution is commonplace in human history. Humans need recourse to ethics in defending themselves against religious intolerance and persecution.

Consider this example: If a religious group were to believe that the firstborn male of every family must be sacrificed, every person in that group would think themselves ethically obligated to kill their firstborn male. Their religious beliefs would lead them to unethical behavior and lessen their capacity to appreciate the cruel nature of their acts.

Furthermore, a society must be deemed unethical if it accepts among its religious practices any form of slavery, torture, sexism, racism, persecution, murder, assault, fraud, deceit, or intimidation. Remember, atrocities have often been committed during religious warfare. Even to this day, religious persecution and religiously motivated atrocities are commonplace. No religious belief as such can justify violations of basic human rights.

In short, theological beliefs cannot override ethical principles. We must turn to ethical principles to protect ourselves from intolerant and oppressive religious practices.

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Ethics and Social Conventions

All of us are, in the first instance, socially conditioned. Consequently, we do not begin with the ability to critique social norms and taboos. Unless we learn to critique the social mores and taboos imposed upon us from birth, we will inherently accept those traditions as "right."

Consider the history of the United States. For more than a hundred years most Americans considered slavery to be justified and desirable. It was part of social custom. Moreover, throughout history, many groups of people, including people of various nationalities and skin colors, as well as females, children, and individuals with disabilities, have been victims of discrimination as the result of social convention treated as ethical obligation. Yet, all social practices violating human rights are rejected, and have been rejected, by ethically sensitive, reasonable persons no matter what social conventions support those practices.

Socially or Culturally Variant Practices

Cultural diversity derives from the fact that there are an unlimited number of alternative ways for social groups to satisfy their needs and fulfill their desires. Those traditional ways of living within a social group or culture take on the force of habit and custom. They are handed down from one generation to another. To the individuals in a given group they seem to be the ONLY way, or the only REASONABLE way, to do things. And these social customs sometimes have ethical implications. Social habits and customs answer questions like this:

- How should marriage take place? Who should be allowed to marry, under what conditions, and with what ritual or ceremony? Once married what role should the male play? What role should the female play? Are multiple marriage partners possible? Is divorce possible? Under what conditions?
- Who should care for the children? What should they teach the children as to proper and improper ways to act? When children do not act as they are expected to act, how should they be treated?
- When should children be accepted as adults? When should they be considered old enough to be married? Who should they be allowed to marry?
- When children develop sensual and sexual desires, how should they be allowed to act? With whom, if anyone, should they be allowed to engage in sexual exploration and discovery? What sexual acts are considered acceptable and wholesome? What sexual acts are considered perverted or sinful?
- How should men and women dress? To what degree should their body be exposed in public? How is nudity treated? How are those who violate these codes treated?
- How should food be obtained and how should it be prepared? Who is responsible for obtaining food? Who for preparing it? How should it be served? How eaten?
- How is the society "stratified" (into levels of power)? How is the society controlled? What belief system is used to justify the distribution of scarce goods and services and the way rituals and practices are carried out?
- If the society develops enemies or is threatened from without, how will it deal with those threats? How will it defend itself? How does the society engage in war, or does it?
- What sorts of games, sports, or amusements will be practiced in the society? Who is

allowed to engage in them?
- What religions are taught or allowable within the society? Who is allowed to participate in the religious rituals or to interpret divine or spiritual teachings to the group?
- How are grievances settled in the society? Who decides who is right and who wrong? How are violators treated?

Schools traditionally function as apologists for conventional thought; those who teach often inadvertently foster confusion between convention and ethics because they themselves have internalized the conventions of society. Education, properly so called, should foster the intellectual skills that enable students to distinguish between cultural mores and ethical precepts, between social commandments and ethical truths. In each case, when social beliefs and taboos conflict with ethical principles, ethical principles should prevail.

Examples of confusion between ethics and social conventions:

- Many societies have created taboos against showing various parts of the body and have severely punished those who violated them.
- Many societies have created taboos against giving women the same rights as men.
- Many societies have socially legitimized religious persecution.
- Many societies have socially stigmatized interracial marriages.

These practices seem (wrongly) to be ethically obligatory to those socialized into accepting them.

Ethics and Sexual Taboos

Social taboos are often matters of strong emotions. People are often disgusted when others violate a taboo. Their disgust signals to them that the behavior is unethical. They forget that what is socially repugnant to us may not violate any ethical principle but, instead, may merely differ from social convention. Social doctrines regarding human sexuality are often classic examples of conventions expressed as if they were ethical truths. Social groups often establish strong sanctions for unconventional behavior involving the human body. Some social groups inflict unjust punishments on women who do no more than appear in public without being completely veiled, an act considered in some cultures as indecent and sexually provocative. Sexual behaviors should be considered unethical only when they result in unequivocal harm or damage, not if they merely elicit religious and social shame or guilt. Michelangelo's *David* may shock a Puritan, but not for ethical reasons.

Ethics and Political Ideology

A political ideology provides an analysis of the present distribution of wealth and power and devises strategies in keeping with that analysis. It provides either a "justification" of the present structure of power or a "critique." It seeks either to protect and maintain the way things are or to change them. It seeks to change things in small ways or in big ways. It compares the present to the past and both to a future it projects.

Conservative ideologies "justify" the status quo or seek a return to a previous "ideal" time. Liberal ideologies critique the status quo and seek to justify "new" forms of political

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arrangements designed to rectify present problems. Reactionary ideologies plead for a "radical" return to the past; revolutionary ideologies plead for a "radical" overturning of the fundamental ("corrupt") structures. Conservative ideologies consider the highest values to be private property, family, God, and country. Liberal ideologies consider the highest values to be liberty, equality, and social justice.

Ideological analyses have implications that should be assessed ethically. Put into action they often have profound negative effects on the well being of people.

Virtually all political ideologies speak in the name of the "people." Yet most of them, in fact, are committed to powerful vested interest groups who fund their election campaigns. The same people often end up ruling, independent of the "official" ideology. Thus, in the post-soviet power structure, many of those who were formerly powerful in the communist party are now among the most prominent and acquisitive neo-capitalists.

The bottom line is that politics and ethics are divergent concepts. Struggling against each other for power and control, political movements and interests often sacrifice ethical ideals for practical advantage. They often rationalize unethical acts as unavoidable necessities (for example, "forced on them" by their opponents). And they systematically use propaganda to further vested interest agendas.

Ethics and the Law

Anyone interested in developing their ethical reasoning abilities must learn to differentiate ethics and the law. What is illegal may or may not be a matter of ethics. What is ethically obligatory may be illegal. What is unethical may be legal. There is no essential connection between ethics and the law.

Laws often emerge out of social conventions and taboos. And, because we cannot assume that social conventions are ethical, we cannot assume that human laws are ethical. What is more, most laws are ultimately made by politicians, who routinely confuse social values with ethical principles. As we have said, their primary motivation is, except in special cases, power, vested interest, or expediency. For example, (from 1900 through 1930), American politicians, in response to an electorate dominated by fundamentalist religious believers, passed laws which made it illegal for anyone, including doctors, to disseminate any information about birth control. The consequence was predictable: hundreds of thousands of poor and working class women suffered severe injuries or death from the effects of illegal drugs and unsanitary abortions. To "criminalize" behavior that goes against social conventions is one of the time-honored ways for politicians to get re-elected.[1]

Examples of confusing ethics and the law:

- Many sexual practices (such as homosexuality) have been unjustly punished with life imprisonment or death (under the laws of one society or another).
- Many societies have enforced unjust laws based on racist views.
- Many societies have enforced laws that discriminated against women.
- Many societies have enforced laws that discriminated against children.

[1] The U.S. now has a higher percentage of its citizens in prison than any other country in the world (recently surpassing Russia).

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- Many societies have made torture and/or slavery legal.
- Many societies have enforced laws arbitrarily punishing people for using some drugs but not others.

Acts that are Unethical In-and-of-Themselves

For any action to be unethical, it must inherently deny another person or creature some inalienable right. The following classes of acts are unethical in-and-of themselves. Any person or group that violates them is properly criticized from an ethical standpoint:

- SLAVERY: Owning people, whether individually or in groups.
- GENOCIDE: Systematically killing with the attempt to eliminate a whole nation or ethnic group.
- TORTURE: Inflicting severe pain to force information, get revenge or serve some other irrational end.
- SEXISM: Treating people unequally (and harmfully) in virtue of their gender.
- RACISM: Treating people unequally (and harmfully) in virtue of their race or ethnicity.
- MURDER: The pre-meditated killing of people for revenge, pleasure, or to gain advantage for oneself.
- ASSAULT: Attacking an innocent person with intent to cause grievous bodily harm.
- RAPE: Forcing an unwilling person to have intercourse.
- FRAUD: Intentional deception that causes someone to give up property or some right.
- DECEIT: Representing something as true which one knows to be false in order to gain a selfish end harmful to another.
- INTIMIDATION: Forcing a person to act against his interest or deter from acting in his interest by threats or violence.
- Putting persons in jail without telling them the charges against them or providing them with a reasonable opportunity to defend themselves.
- Putting persons in jail, or otherwise punishing them, solely for their political or religious views.

We Must Learn to Distinguish Among Questions of Ethics, Social Conventions, Religion and the Law

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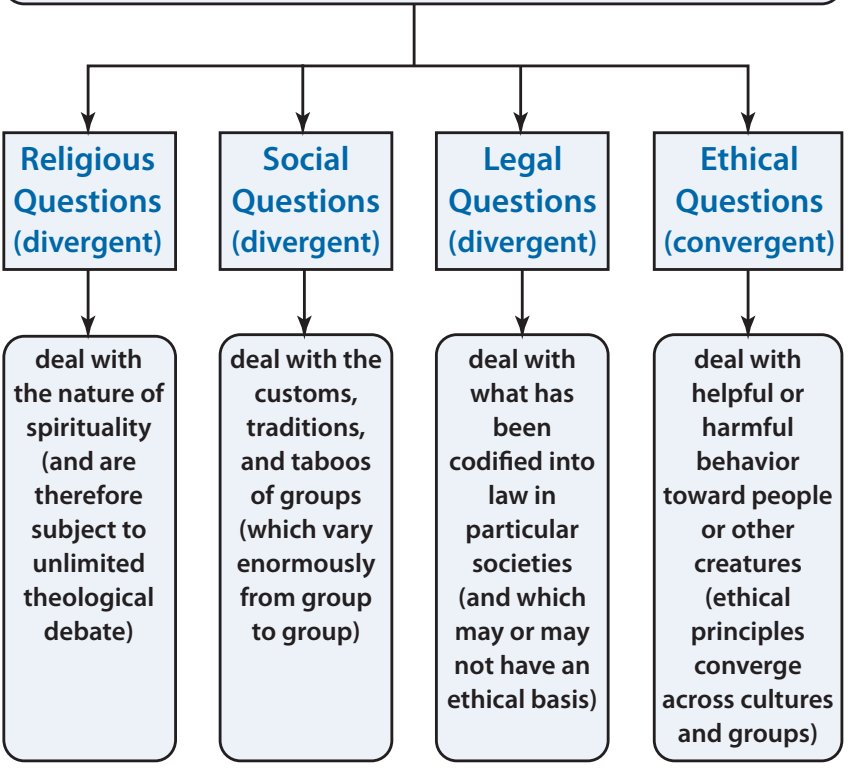
If we are ever to reach a point in human development where skilled ethical reasoning is the norm, each of us must cultivate in ourselves the ability to determine whether any belief system, practice, rule, or law is ethical. To be skilled at ethical reasoning means to develop a conscience not subservient to fluctuating social conventions, theological systems, or unethical laws. Consistently sound reasoning in any domain of thought presupposes practice in reasoning through cases and issues in that domain. As we face problems in our lives, we must distinguish the ethical from the non-ethical and the pseudo-ethical, and apply appropriate ethical principles to those problems that are genuinely ethical problems. The more often we do so, the better we become at ethical reasoning.



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Language as a Guide to Ethical Reasoning

Ideas are to humans like the air we breathe. We project them everywhere. Yet we rarely notice this. We use words and the ideas they express to create our picture of the world. What we experience we experience through ideas, often uncritically funneled into the categories of "good" and "evil." We uncritically assume ourselves to be good. We uncritically assume our enemies to be evil. We select positive terms to cover up the "indefensible" things we do. We select negative terms to condemn even the good things our enemies do. We often see the world in a distorted way, to our advantage. Our conceptualizations often result from indoctrination or social conditioning (our allegiances presented, uncritically of course, in positive terms).

Ideas, then, are our paths to both reality and self-delusion. We don't typically recognize ourselves as engaged in idea construction of any kind, whether good or ill. In our everyday life we don't experience ourselves shaping what we see and constructing the world to our advantage.

To the uncritical mind, it is as if people in the world came to us with our labels for them inherent in who they are. THEY are "terrorists." WE are "freedom fighters." All of us fall victim at times to an inevitable illusion of objectivity. Thus we see others not sharing a common human nature, but absolutistically as "friends" and "enemies," and accordingly "good" or "bad." Ideology, self-deception, and myth play a large part in our identity and how we think and judge. Our minds operate, however, as if we were simply neutral observers of reality. And to top it off, we often become self-righteous when our ideas are challenged.

To develop as ethical reasoners, we must take a new stand towards ourselves. We must come to recognize the ideas through which we see and experience the world. We must become the master of our own ideas. We must learn how to think with alternative ideas, and within alternative "world views." As general semanticists often say: "The word is not the thing! The word is not the thing!" If we are trapped in one set of concepts (ideas, words) then our thinking is trapped. Word and thing become one and the same in our minds. We are unable then to act as free and ethical persons.

The ideas we have formed in personal experience are often egocentric in nature. The ideas we inherit from social indoctrination are typically ethnocentric in nature. Both can limit our insight significantly. This is where understanding the ethical terms in our native language can help us.

The ideas we learn from academic subjects and from the study of distinctions inherent in the uses of language can take us beyond our personal egocentrism and social ideology. When we learn to think historically, sociologically, anthropologically, scientifically, and philosophically, we can come to see ignorance, prejudice, stereotypes, illusions, and biases in our personal thinking and in the thinking common in our society.

In addition, command of ethical distinctions implicit in established linguistic usage can have a significant influence upon the way we shape our experience. Through such command, for example, we distinguish ethics from religion, social convention and politics. This ability impacts the judgments we make and the way we interpret situations.

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Fundamental Ethical Concepts Embedded in Natural Languages

To reason well through an ethical question or issue requires that we identify and apply the ethical concepts relevant to it. But where do we find these concepts? They are inherent in all natural languages.[2] To identify them, we need only refer to a good Doing ethical good involves: promoting kindness, compassion, understanding, open-mindedness, forbearance, tolerance, forgiveness, mercy, benevolence, thoughtfulness, considerateness, civility, respect, generosity, charity, empathy, justice, impartiality, evenhandedness, integrity, and fair-play.

Doing harm involves: thoughtlessness, egotism, egocentricity, cruelty, injustice, greed, domination, selfishness, disrespect, prejudice, narrow-mindedness, inconsiderateness, hypocrisy, unkindness, insensitivity, meanness, brutality, malice, hatred, spite, vindictiveness, mercilessness, avarice, bigotry, discrimination, chauvinism, small-mindedness, duplicity, insincerity, callousness, heartlessness, viciousness, ruthlessness, intolerance, unfairness, favoritism, pettiness, trivial-mindedness, dishonesty, cunning, deception, fraudulence, deceit, fanaticism, disingenuousness, violence, sadism, cheating, and lying.

To act ethically we must understand and become sensitive to ideas, such as those above, that shed light on the difference between acting in an ethical or unethical manner. If we are to act so as to maximize the good and minimize the harm we do to others, we must learn to monitor and assess our own thoughts, feelings, dispositions, and actions. We must become skilled in identifying when we are being egocentric or acting within a self-serving and/or self-deceptive perspective. We must recognize how common it is for humans to act without respect for the rights and needs of others. We must recognize how often we behave like those we condemn. We must come to see the "good" in our enemies and the "evil" in ourselves. As William Graham Sumner has said "That we are good and others evil is never true." Each of us is a mixture of both.

[2] We use the expression "natural language" to contrast with "technical language." German, French, Japanese, and English are "natural" languages. The languages of physics, chemistry, and math are "technical" languages. Natural languages are in use in everyday life and enable us to use its terms to think in an unlimited multiplicity of ways, including, for example, in a religious, social, political, ethical, or personal way.

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Concepts Depicting Ethical Behavior or Motivation

Going Beyond What is Obligatory to Improve the Lives of Others

Generous
Unselfish
Charitable
Altruistic
Philanthropic
Humanitarian
Benevolent

Dealing With People Objectively in Order to Be Fair

Understanding
Impartial
Equitable
Unbiased
Dispassionate
Objective

Relating to People in Ethically Appropriate Ways

Civil
Polite
Courteous
Respectful
Forbearing
Tolerant
Tactful

Being Forthright and Honest

Honest
Truthful
Integrity
Loyal
Faithful
Trustworthy

Relating to People in Commendable Ways

Friendly
Obliging
Cordial
Kind
Gentle
Gracious
Tender
Warm
Warm-hearted

Being Willing to Forgive in Order to Alleviate Suffering

Forgive
Pardon
Absolve
Exonerate
Compassionate
Merciful

Acting Out of a Concern to Behave Ethically

Scrupulous
Honorable
Upright
Open-minded
Evenhanded

Acting Out of a Concern for the Feelings of Others

Sympathetic
Empathetic
Understanding
Compassionate
Considerate

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Concepts Depicting Unethical Behavior or Motivation

Using Intellectual Skills to Get Others to Act Against their Own Best Interest

Cunning	Double-dealing	Mislead
Sly	Cheat	Beguile
Crafty	Defraud	Delude
Trickery	Swindle	Betray
Wily	Dupe	Misrepresent
Duplicitous	Deceive	Use Subterfuge

Ignoring the Rights and Needs of Others to Get What You Want

Selfish	Grasping
Self-conceit	Acquisitive
Self-aggrandizement	Covetous
Greedy	Egotistic
Avaricious	

Rigidity of Mind Which Keeps People from Being Ethical

Prejudice	Unfair
Bias	Chauvinist
Narrow-minded	Jingoist
Bigot	Small-minded
Zealot	Intolerant
Fanatic	

Causing Emotional Discomfort

Disrespectful	Heartless
Rude	Impatience
Ill-mannered	Insensitive
Discourteous	Petty
Unkind	Belligerent
Uncivil	Bellicose
Dishonor	Pugnacious
Hateful	Quarrelsome
Callous	Contentious

Causing Pain or Suffering

Unkind	Merciless
Dominate	Rancorous
Tyrannize	Malignant
Oppress	Pitiless
Bully	Ruthless
Hurt	Vicious
Cruel	Malicious
Brutal	Ill-willed
Inconsiderate	Malevolence
Inhuman	

Refusing to Tell the Truth Due to Self-Interest

Dishonest	Hypocritical
Deceitful	Disingenuous
Lying	False
Untruthful	Disloyal
Insincere	

Unethical Behavior that Results From a Perceived Grievance

Holding a Grudge	Revengeful
Vindictive	Spiteful
Vengeful	

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Basic Ethical Principles Emerge From Ethical Concepts

Ethical principles are implicit in ethical concepts. They should be a guiding force in ethical reasoning. To become skilled in any domain of reasoning we must understand the principles that define that domain. To be skilled in mathematical reasoning, we must understand fundamental mathematical principles. To be skilled in scientific reasoning, we must understand fundamental scientific principles (principles of physics, of chemistry, of astronomy, and so on). In like manner, to be skilled in ethical reasoning, we must understand fundamental ethical principles. Of course, in many cases identification and application of ethical principles is simple. In some cases it is not.

Consider some simple cases. Lying about, misrepresenting, or distorting the facts to gain a material advantage over others is clearly a violation of the basic principle implied by the concept of honesty. Expecting others to live up to standards that we ourselves routinely violate is clearly a violation of the basic principle implied by the concept of integrity. Treating others as if they were worth less than we take ourselves to be worth is a violation of the principles implied by the concepts of integrity, justice, and equality. It is unethical to kill people to get their money or to torture people because we think they are guilty and ought to confess.

Complicated ethical questions arise when conflicting ethical principles seemingly apply to the same case and we are in a dilemma as to which should be given precedence. In those cases we should engage in dialogical reasoning between conflicting ethical perspectives. We should judge the reasoning used by each perspective as we would in any other multi-logical question open to reasonable debate. Of course, whether or not a question is or is not multi-logical may itself be a matter of dispute. Most importantly, we must approach complex cases with intellectual humility, avoiding the tendency toward self-righteousness in applying ethical principles.

Universal Ethical Principles

As we have said, ethical principles, are inherent in ethical concepts. Most ethical principles are clear, though their application to complicated cases may not be. Among the most clear-cut ethical principles are the following: that it is ethically wrong to cheat, deceive, exploit, abuse, harm, or steal from others, that we have an ethical responsibility to respect the rights of others, including their freedom and well-being, to help those most in need of help, to seek the common good and not merely our own self-interest and egocentric pleasures, and to strive to make the world more just and humane.

There is no nation, no religion, and no ethnic group that openly argues for the right to cheat, deceive, exploit, abuse, harm, or steal from others. Neither is there anyone who publicly attempts to justify slavery, genocide, torture, terrorism, denial of due process, politically motivated imprisonment, sexism, racism, murder, assault, rape, fraud, deceit, or intimidation. Of course, all groups violate some (if not many) of these principles, covering up such violations with misleading uses of language. All groups are skilled in telling their story in self-serving and self-justifying ways. The problem, then, is not that we lack ethical principles. The problem is that we are naturally adept at hiding our own violations of them.

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For example, the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights, established on December 10, 1948 by the General Assembly of the United Nations, articulates universal ethical principles. Every nation without exception has signed it. It globally defines the domain of ethics. It consists of a preamble, a general proclamation, and 30 detailing articles. Here is the proclamation and part of the preamble:

> THIS UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction.
>
> The recognition of inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world… Disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people.

This declaration was conceived as "a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations." It is a good example of explicit ethical principles. Here are a few of the principles laid out in the 30 articles of the declaration:

- All humans are born free and equal in dignity and rights.
- Everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of person.
- No one shall be held in slavery or servitude.
- No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment.
- Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family.
- Everyone has the right to education.
- Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.
- Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kinds, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, or status.
- All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law.

Though the principles outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are universally accepted in theory, virtually every country violates them (though not to the same degree). For example, on October 5, 1998, the New York Times ("Amnesty Finds 'Widespread Pattern' of U.S. Rights Violations," p. A11) reported that Amnesty International was citing the United States for violating fundamental human rights. According to the Amnesty

International report, "police forces and criminal and legal systems have a persistent and widespread pattern of human rights violations" in the United States.

In the report, Amnesty International protested a U.S. failure "to deliver the fundamental promise of rights for all." The report states, "Across the country thousands of people are subjected to sustained and deliberate brutality at the hands of police officers. Cruel, degrading, and sometimes life-threatening methods of constraint continue to be a feature of the U.S. criminal justice system." Pierre Sane, Secretary General of Amnesty International for six years, said, "We felt it was ironic that the most powerful country in the world uses international human rights laws to criticize others but does not apply the same standards at home."

At the level of action, then, verbal agreement on general principles is not enough. There are too many ways in which humans can rationalize their rapacious desires and feel justified in taking advantage of those weaker or less able to protect themselves. There are too many forces in human life—social groups, religions, political ideologies—generating behavioral norms that ignore, distort, or override core ethical principles. In short, in a world where force and power are the ultimate determinants of what happens, universally "accepted" ethical principles do not translate into the reality of a just world.

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Two Kinds of Ethical Questions

Ethical questions can be either simple or complex. Simple ethical questions are either definitional in nature, or are easily answered through applying an undisputable ethical principle or set of principles to a clear-cut set of facts. Complex ethical questions on the other hand require one to reason through more than one ethical perspective, and come to reasoned ethical judgments. Ethical questions are complex when there are multiple ways of looking at the relevant information. Complex questions are therefore open for reasoned dialogue and debate. Both types of questions, however, require ethical reasoning.

Simple ethical questions virtually answer themselves.

Some examples:

- Is it cruel to subject an innocent creature to unnecessary suffering? (definitional)
- Is it unjust to deny someone a basic human right? (definitional)
- All things being equal, it is ethically wrong to lie? (definitional)
- Is it ethically wrong to torture animals for fun? (clear-cut case)
- Is it ethically wrong to torture people in order to exact a confession? (clear-cut case)
- Is it ethically wrong to use another person to serve your selfish interests? (clear-cut case)

Complex ethical questions are questions that can be argued in more than one way (using ethical principles). They require reasoning within multiple viewpoints.

Some examples:

- Under what conditions, if any, should animal experimentation be allowed?
- Is it ethically wrong to kill animals for food?
- To what extent should scientists be allowed to experiment with new viruses (when the virus they create might itself cause harm)?
- Under what conditions should people be kept artificially alive?
- To what extent do scientists have special ethical responsibilities to society?
- Are we ethically justified in engaging in unethical practices in our own defense because our enemies use them against us?
- To what extent am I ethically obligated to contribute to the health of the environment?
- Under what conditions, if any, is capital punishment ethically justifiable?

A Hypothetical Example of Reasoning Through a Complex Ethical Question

Consider, for example, the complex ethical question: Is euthanasia ever ethically justifiable? As people become conversant with the foundations of ethics, we would expect them to reason in ways that demonstrate sensitivity to ethical concepts and principles, the cases and situations to which ethical concepts and principles should be applied, and the need to exclude pseudo-ethical concepts and principles from their ethical reasoning. Here is a reconstruction of how someone might begin to reason regarding euthanasia, as he or she internalized the foundations of ethical reasoning:

> "Some consider euthanasia absolutely wrong in all cases, others regard it as clearly right in some cases, wrong in others, and still others see it as a true ethical dilemma.

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> There are any number of situations in which euthanasia is not justified. To entertain the question of whether it is ever justified, however, we must reflect on the various conditions under which euthanasia seems plausible. For example, we must consider cases involving people who suffer intense pain from terminal diseases. Within this group are some who plead with us to end their suffering by helping them end their lives (since, though in torment, they cannot end their lives without assistance).
>
> Given the fact that a person so circumstanced is experiencing intense terminal suffering, one significant ethical concept relevant to this question is the concept of cruelty. Cruelty is defined by Webster's New World Dictionary as 'causing, or of a kind to cause, pain, distress, etc. . .; the word 'cruel' implies indifference to the suffering of others or a disposition to inflict it on others.' Cruelty, in this case, means 'of a kind to cause' unnecessary pain. It means allowing an innocent person to experience unnecessary pain and suffering when you have the power to alleviate it—without sacrificing something of equal value. Another related ethical concept is compassion. To have compassion is to show deep sympathy for another, accompanied by the urge to help alleviate suffering.
>
> Being compassionate (and avoiding cruelty) requires us to 'strive to act so as to reduce or end the unnecessary pain and suffering of innocent persons and creatures.' With this ethical principle in mind, we can seek to determine in what sense, and in what situations, refusing to assist a suffering person should be considered cruel.
>
> Of course, another ethical principle that may be relevant to this issue is, 'Life is good in itself and should be preserved.' Most rational persons would argue that, all things being equal, life is good in itself and should be preserved. But that is a different matter from believing that 'life should be preserved no matter what the circumstances.' It seems that this absolute principle can be defended only by using theological claims (such as 'God has absolutely forbidden suicide under any and all conditions'). But this theological belief is relevant only to those who accept the religious doctrines underlying it. It is not an ethical imperative as such and should not be confused with one. No one who rejects a theological belief system—and everyone has this right—need accept any assertions dependent on it."

This excerpt includes three strengths:

- The reasoner identifies the kind of case in which euthanasia is most plausible.
- The reasoner identifies relevant ethical concepts and principles.
- The reasoner recognizes that theological beliefs must not be used in ethical reasoning.

Of course, this reasoning is not "complete." It does not settle the issue. The issue is too complex to be easily settled. Focusing on specific cases, learning how to identify relevant ethical concepts and principles, learning how to reason within multiple points of view, and learning how to exclude pseudo-ethical concepts are all essential components of skilled ethical reasoning. However, in a complex case such as the one above, further questions will need to be asked. A wide number of actual and possible cases will need to be identified, described, and analyzed. The reasoner will need to consider objections from multiple viewpoints, as well as follow out the implications of each major position. Any number of unique situations might arise in which qualifications or modified ethical judgments are necessary.

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The Significance of Facts and Perspective

When dealing with a simple ethical question, there is a clear-cut correct answer. But when faced with a complex ethical question, it is essential to analyze the data relevant to the question utilizing multiple perspectives. There are (typically) multiple viewpoints from which a complicated set of events can be viewed and interpreted. Openness to a range of insights from multiple points of view and a willingness to question one's own are crucial to "objectivity." This can be suggested in the diagram on page 29 illustrating how multiple points of view may stand in relation to the same set of events. To reason objectively through a complex or complicated ethical issue one must consider a wide range of relevant perspectives, obtain insights from all of them, identify weaknesses and partiality in each, and integrate what one has learned into a more comprehensive, many-sided whole. Each viewpoint should serve to "correct" exaggerations or distortions in the others and to add facts not highlighted by them.

Ethical Facts are Often Distorted or Ignored By Mainstream News[3]

Because it is profit oriented, the mainstream news is fundamentally driven by what sells to readers. Many ethical issues are therefore distorted by the mainstream news media, as they seek to present news in a form that validates prior beliefs and perceptions of their audience. That our country is "good" and our enemies "bad" is axiomatic in virtually all mainstream news coverage.

Furthermore, if objectivity or fairness in the construction of news stories is considered equivalent to presenting all the facts and only the facts ("All the news that's fit to print"), then objectivity and fairness is an illusion. No human knows more than a small percentage of the facts and it is not possible to present all the facts (even if one did know them). It isn't even possible to present all the important facts, for even if we knew all the facts, there would still be many competing criteria for determining what is "important." We must therefore always ask, with respect to media coverage that has ethical implications and our national identity at stake: "What has been left out of this article?" "How might I think differently if different facts had been highlighted here?" "What if this article had been written by those who oppose us, our enemies?"

[3] For a more complete analysis of the problem of media bias and propaganda in international news, see the mini-guide on this problem published by the Foundation for Critical Thinking.

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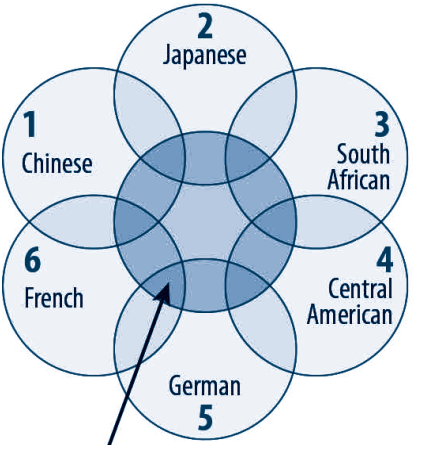
Multiple Points of View with Respect to a Given Set of Facts



Note:

- Only some of the facts are highlighted in any point of view
- All points of view ignore or play down some facts
- No single point of view provides total understanding
- Understanding multiple viewpoints increases insight

The total set of facts relevant to understanding a given set of events

The media (in every country around the world) focuses on what its readers personally care about. Thus, even if its readers are irrational in some belief (e.g., harbor some irrational hate), that belief (that hatred) will nevertheless be treated as rational by the home media. Hence, when slavery was commonly accepted in the United States, the media presented slavery as "natural." When the country became divided, the media divided in its presentation of the "facts" (each paper presenting as right what the majority of its readers believed to be right).

Consider how the media deals with what is "shocking" or "exciting" or "disgusting" or "delightful" to it readers. For example, a woman sun-bathing on a beach with bare breasts is commonplace on the French Riviera. She is therefore not condemned and her story is not treated as "news." But the same woman would be arrested and punished for sun-bathing in a similar way at a beach in Lebanon. She therefore is condemned and her story is treated as "news." But bare breasted sun bathing is neither ethical nor unethical. It is a question of cultural convention.

To effectively analyze and assess media coverage of an ethical issue, we need to:

- identify the viewpoint from which a particular news story or historical account is constructed, as well as the audience for which it is written
- recognize what viewpoints the story is negating or ignoring and why, and
- distinguish the raw facts behind the story from the interpretation and spin put on the facts

When we do this, we are able to exercise greater independence of judgment. We aren't manipulated by conceptual distortions that would lead us to misunderstand ethical issues.

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The logic behind bias and propaganda in presenting the facts relevant to ethical issues is simple. Humans typically bring to situations some orientation, perspective, or point of view. Their orientation tends to color what they see and how they see it. But the truth of what is happening in any given situation is almost always more complicated than perceived by persons with a personal or vested interest in the situation. To do justice to ethical issues, we must keep our minds open to multiple ways of describing what has "happened." We must seek out the facts pointed out by our enemies as they make their case against us and not simply focus on the facts that support our outlook.

The Uncritical Mind Systematically Distorts the Facts Underlying Ethical Issues

The uncritical mind is unconsciously driven to identify the "facts" underlying ethical issues in accordance with the following unspoken, but deeply felt, maxims:

- "These are the facts because I believe them to be so."
- "These are the facts because we believe them to be so."
- "These are the facts because we want to believe them to be so."
- "These are the facts because it serves our vested interest to believe them to be so."

The critical mind consciously seeks the truth in accordance with the following self-correcting maxims:

- "I believe it, but it may not be true."
- "We believe it, but we may be wrong."
- "We want to believe it, but we may be prejudiced by our desires or cultural limitations."
- It serves our vested interest to believe it, but our vested interest has nothing to do with the truth."

Discovering the Facts that Bear Upon an Ethical Issue

When reasoning through an ethical issue, we must be sensitive to the following sets of questions related to facts and perspectives:

1. What are the raw facts, the most neutral description of the essential features of the situation? If one describes the experience this way, and others disagree, how can we investigate the facts more fully?
2. What interests, attitudes, desires, or concerns influence the way I am viewing the ethical situation? Am I always aware of them? Why or why not?
3. How am I conceptualizing or interpreting the ethical situation in light of my viewpoint? How else might it be interpreted?

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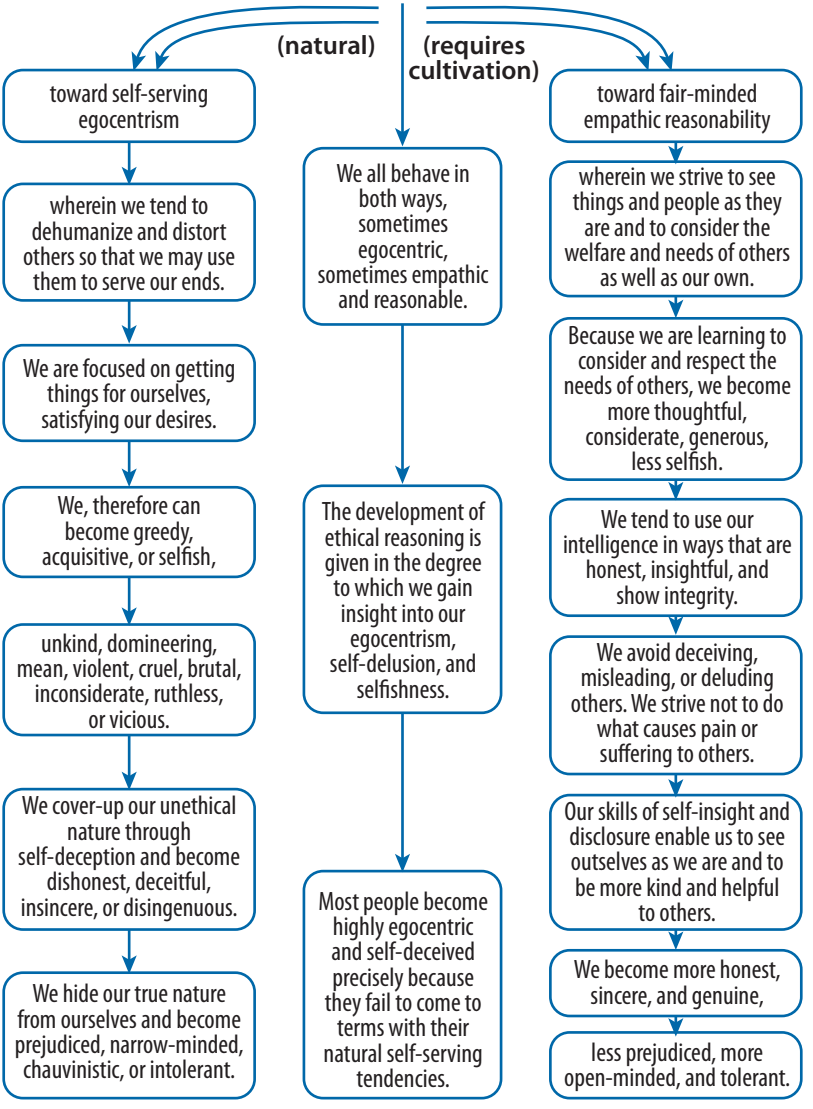
The Logic of Developing as an Ethical Thinker

We are All Drawn in Two Directions



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Intellectual Standards for Assessing Ethical Reasoning

Ethical reasoning must meet the same intellectual standards that apply to other domains of knowledge. If our ethical reasoning is to be sound, it must be clear, accurate, precise, relevant, deep, broad, logical and non-trivial. Here are brief elaborations of some important intellectual standards along with questions one can ask in applying the standards:

Clarity: understandable, the meaning can be grasped

(We cannot agree or disagree with ethical reasoning that is not clear to us.)

- How clear is our ethical reasoning?
- Do we need to clarify our purpose?
- Are we clear about the ethical concepts we are using in our reasoning?
- Do we need to further elaborate any point?
- Do we need to give further examples?
- Do we need to introduce clarifying analogies or illustrations?

Accuracy: free from errors or distortions, true

(If ethical reasoning includes inaccurate information, it is flawed.)

- How accurate is our ethical reasoning?
- Is any feature of the situation misrepresented or distorted?
- Do we provide complete information?
- Can we truthfully say that we are using ethical principles to guide our reasoning, or are we using social, religious or legal directives instead?

Precision: exact to the necessary level of detail

(We often cannot reason through ethical issues while lacking specifics and details.)

- Does our reasoning lack essential details and specifics?
- Should we add any?
- Do we need more details in this question to adequately address the ethical issue?

Relevance: relating to the matter at hand

(Ethical reasoning is distorted if it uses irrelevant concepts or facts.)

- Is any of what we are saying unconnected to the key ethical questions we need to consider?
- Do we need to introduce further ethical concepts or principles?
- What viewpoints are relevant to the ethical issue?
- Are we sure this information is relevant to the ethical question?
- How does this or that comment bear upon the ethical issue?

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Depth: containing complexities and interrelationships

(Superficial reasoning that fails to address complexities in an ethical issue is flawed.)

- Are we addressing the ethical situation and posing the ethical question in such a way as to do justice to the complexities inherent in the matter or are we oversimplifying the situation?
- What factors make this a difficult ethical problem?
- What are some of the complexities in this ethical question?
- What are some of the difficulties we face in reasoning through it?

Breadth: encompassing multiple viewpoints

(Ethical reasoning is flawed when the reasoner ignores relevant points of view.)

- Have we considered all relevant viewpoints or have we left out a point of view germane to the ethical question?
- What other perspectives must we consider to do justice to the ethical issue?
- Do we need to look at this ethical problem in other ways?

Logic: the parts make sense together, no contradictions

(Humans often think in self-contradictory ways, using double standards. Both integrity and logic require that we consistently apply ethical standards.)

- Are we reasoning consistently?
- Or is our reasoning self-contradictory?
- Do our conclusions follow from the evidence?
- What is likely to happen if we act on the ethical issue in this way or that?
- Is this the most logical way of looking at the ethical issue?

Significance: focusing on the important, not the trivial

(Reasoning in support of vested interests often treats relatively insignificant matters as of high ethical significance while playing down issues of significance.)

- Are we focusing on the most significant ethical dimensions of the issue?
- Are we trivializing what is ethically significant or overstating the significance of what should be given little consideration?
- Is this the most important ethical problem to consider?
- What ethical concepts and principles are most importantly relevant to the issue?
- Which of these facts should be given the most weight?

Fairness: justifiable, not self-serving (or egocentric)

(Self-centeredness and selfish interest leading to self-deception are among the most significant barriers to sound ethical reasoning.)

- Are we treating all relevant viewpoints with consistency?
- Are we accurately and fairly representing the positions with which we disagree?
- Do we have a vested interest in distorting alternative viewpoints?
- Have we examined our thinking for prejudice?

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Ethical Reasoning Abilities

Ethical Affective Dimensions

- exercising independent ethical thought and judgment
- developing insight into ethical egocentrism and sociocentrism
- exercising ethical reciprocity
- exploring thought underlying ethical reactions
- suspending ethical judgement

Cognitive Dimensions: Ethical Macro-Abilities

- avoiding oversimplification of ethical issues
- developing one's ethical perspective
- clarifying ethical issues and claims
- clarifying ethical ideas
- developing criteria for ethical evaluation
- evaluating ethical authorities
- raising and pursuing root ethical questions
- evaluating ethical arguments
- generating and assessing solutions to ethical problems
- identifying and clarifying ethical points of view
- engaging in Socratic discussion on ethical issues
- practicing dialectical thinking on ethical issues

Cognitive Dimensions: Ethical Micro-Skills

- distinguishing facts from ethical principles, values, and ideas
- using critical vocabulary in discussing ethical issues
- distinguishing ethical principles or ideas
- examining ethical assumptions
- distinguishing ethically relevant from ethically irrelevant facts
- making plausible ethical inferences
- supplying evidence for an ethical conclusion
- recognizing ethical contradictions
- recognizing ethical implications and consequences
- refining ethical generalizations

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Essential Ethical Traits

Ethical Humility

Awareness of the limits of one's ethical insight, including sensitivity to circumstances in which one's native egocentrism is likely to function self-deceptively; sensitivity to bias and prejudice in, and limitations of, one's viewpoint. Ethical humility is based on the recognition that no one should claim to know more than one actually knows. It does not imply spinelessness or submissiveness. It implies the lack of ethical pretentiousness, boastfulness, or conceit, combined with insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the logical foundations of one's beliefs.

Ethical Courage

The willingness to face and assess fairly ethical ideas, beliefs, or viewpoints to which we have not given serious hearing, regardless of our strong negative reaction to them. This courage arises from the recognition that ideas considered dangerous and absurd are sometimes rationally justified (in whole or in part), and that ethical conclusions or beliefs espoused by those around us or inculcated in us are sometimes false or misleading.

Ethical Empathy

Having a consciousness of the need to imaginatively put oneself in the place of others in order to genuinely understand them. We must recognize our egocentric tendency to identify truth with our immediate perceptions or longstanding beliefs. This trait correlates with the ability to accurately reconstruct the ethical viewpoints and reasoning of others and to reason from ethical premises, assumptions, and ideas other than our own. This trait also requires that we remember occasions when we were ethically wrong despite an intense conviction that we were right as well as consider that we might be similarly deceived in a case at hand.

Ethical Integrity

Recognition of the need to be true to one's own ethical thinking, to be consistent in the ethical standards one applies, to hold one's self to the same rigorous standards of evidence and proof to which one holds one's antagonists, to practice what one ethically advocates for others, and to honestly admit discrepancies and ethical inconsistencies in one's own thought and action.

Ethical Perseverance

Willingness and consciousness of the need to pursue ethical insights and truths despite difficulties, obstacles, and frustrations, firm adherence to ethical principles despite irrational opposition of others, a sense of the need to struggle with confusion and unsettled questions over an extended period of time, to achieve deeper ethical understanding or insight.

Fairmindedness

Willingness and consciousness of the need to entertain all ethical viewpoints sympathetically and to assess them with the same intellectual standards without reference to one's own feelings or vested interests, or the feeling or vested interests of one's friends, community, or nation; implies adherence to ethical standards without reference to one's own advantage or the advantage of one's group.

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Dr. Linda Elder is an educational psychologist who has taught both psychology and critical thinking at the college level. She is the President of the Foundation for Critical Thinking and the Executive Director of the Center for Critical Thinking. Dr. Elder has a special interest in the relation of thought to emotion, and in the cognitive and affective. She has developed an original theory of the stages of critical thinking development. Dr. Elder has coauthored four books on critical thinking, as well as 24 Thinker's Guides. She has presented workshops to more than 50,000 educators.

Dr. Richard Paul was a leading proponent of critical thinking until his death in August of 2015, and in his work and legacy, Paul remains an international authority on critical thinking. He founded the Center for Critical Thinking at Sonoma State University in 1980, followed by the Foundation for Critical Thinking. In his lifetime, he developed concepts, principles, and theory essential to a robust and fairminded conception of critical thinking; he worked tenaciously to advance ethical, or strong-sense, critical thinking throughout education and society. In his lifetime, Paul authored more than 200 articles and seven books on critical thinking. He presented workshops to hundreds of thousands of educators over his 35-year history as a primary leader in the critical thinking movement.

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