

Ethical Reasoning Essential to Education



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Throughout their lives, students will face a broad range of ethical issues and questions. Thus, it is essential that they learn the foundational ethical principles and understandings requisite to skilled ethical reasoning.

The ultimate basis for ethics is clear: Much 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.

The proper role of ethical reasoning is to highlight acts of two kinds: those that enhance the wellbeing 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 pathological tendencies are exacerbated by powerful ethnocentric or sociocentric influences that shape our lives. 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.

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.

Unfortunately, mere verbal agreement on ethical principles will not accomplish important ethical 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 a combination of intellectual skills and ethical insights.

One ethical insight all humans need to acquire is that ethics is frequently confused with other divergent modes of thought that often leads to a failure to act ethically (while assuming oneself to be acting ethically). Skilled ethical thinkers routinely distinguish ethics from domains such as social conventions (conventional thinking), religion (theological thinking), and the law (legal thinking).

When ethics is confused with these very different modes of thinking it is not uncommon for 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 accept this amalgamation of domains, then by implication every practice within any religious system would necessarily be ethical, every social rule ethically obligatory, and every law ethically justified.

If religion were to define ethics, we could not then judge any religious practices—for example torturing unbelievers or burning them alive—as ethical. 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 Nazi Germany. We could not, then, condemn any social traditions, norms, and taboos from an ethical standpoint—however ethically bankrupt they were. What’s more, if the law defined ethics, then by implication politicians and lawyers would be experts on ethics and every law they finagled to get on the books would take on the status of an ethical truth.

It is essential, then, to differentiate ethics from modes of thinking commonly confused with ethics. We must remain free to critique commonly accepted social conventions, religious

practices, political ideas, and laws using ethical concepts not defined by them. No one lacking this ability will become proficient in ethical reasoning.

Distinguishing Ethics from Religion

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.” Throughout history there have been hundreds of differing 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 group, their particular beliefs seem to them to be the ONLY way, or the only REASONABLE way, to conceive of the “divine.” They cannot see that their religious beliefs are just one set among many possible religious belief systems.

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?

Examples of Religious Beliefs Being 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 other 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).

Because beliefs about divinity and spirituality are not based in ethical concepts and principles, they are not compulsory. There is no definitive way to prove any single 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, but not that non-belief in God is.

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.

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. Even today, 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.

Distinguishing Ethics from the Law

It is important that students learn to distinguish ethics from 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. The case of Oscar Wilde offers a paradigm case of social taboos and conventions guiding the law. In 1895, Wilde was convicted of sodomy for engaging in homosexual acts, which were a felony in England at that time. At sentencing, the judge said "It is the worst case I have ever tried...the crime of which you have been convicted is so bad that one has to put stern restraint upon one's self to prevent one's self from describing, in language which I would rather not use, the sentiments which must rise to the breast of every man of honor who has heard of the details...People who can do these things must be dead to all sense of shame...I shall, under such circumstances, be expected to pass the severest sentence that the law allows. In my judgment it is totally inadequate for such a case as this." Wilde was sentenced to 2 years hard labor and died only a few short years after his release.

Examples of Laws Being Confused with Ethics:

- 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 and/or children.
- Many societies have made torture and/or slavery legal.

Distinguishing Ethics From Social Conventions

To understand why people often do not reason well through ethical issues, it is essential to recognize that humans are routinely socially conditioned. We do not begin life with the ability to

critique social norms and taboos. Yet unless we learn to critique the social mores and taboos imposed upon us from birth, we will accept those traditions as unquestionably “right.”

For instance, many western countries once 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 conventions wrongly treated as ethically obligatory.

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 often legitimate unethical behaviors.

Schools traditionally (and unintentionally) function as apologists for conventional thought; academics often inadvertently foster confusion between conventional morality and universal ethics. In doing so they fail to lay a foundation for education that emancipates the mind. They fail to foster the intellectual skills that enable students to distinguish cultural mores from ethical precepts, social commandments from ethical truths. They, along with their students, fail to see that whenever social beliefs and taboos conflict with ethical principles, ethical principles should prevail. They fail to see categorical distinctions essential to all ethical reasoning.

Examples of social conventions confused with ethics:

- 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.

Acts That are Unethical In-and-of-Themselves

For any action to be unethical, it must deny another person or creature some inalienable right. Such unethical acts include slavery, genocide, sexism, racism, murder, assault, rape, fraud,

deceit, intimidation, imprisoning people for acts that are not in themselves unethical, and torturing animals.

Conclusion

Unspeakable suffering occurs because the logic of ethical reasoning is obscured in many human interactions. Humans don't tend to think critically about ethics, religion, ideology, social conventions and the law. The result is that most people often fail to see how what they consider a matter of "ethics" is often not grounded in ethical principles. The categorical distinctions running through this article document some of the essential understandings indispensable for skilled ethical reasoning. Thus, much should be clear: as long as we continue to confuse these very different domains of thought, we will never have the foundations for creating a just world.

This article can be found on the website of the Foundation for Critical Thinking, published November 19, 2011

To learn more about ethical reasoning see: *The Thinker's Guide to Understanding the Foundations of Ethical Reasoning* by Richard Paul and Linda Elder, 2006.