An Introduction to Ethical Thinking

This document is designed as an introduction to thinking ethically. We all have an image of our better selves-of how we are when we act ethically or are "at our best." We probably also have an image of what an ethical community, an ethical business, an ethical government, or an ethical society should be. Ethics really has to do with all these levels-acting ethically as individuals, creating ethical organizations and governments, and making our society as a whole ethical in the way it treats everyone.

What is Ethics?

Simply stated, ethics refers to standards of behavior that tell us how human beings ought to act in the many situations in which they find themselves-as friends, parents, children, citizens, businesspeople, teachers, professionals, and so on.

It is helpful to identify what ethics is NOT:

- Ethics is not the same as feelings. Feelings provide important information for our ethical choices. Some people have highly developed habits that make them feel bad when they do something wrong, but many people feel good even though they are doing something wrong. And often our feelings will tell us it is uncomfortable to do the right thing if it is hard.
- Ethics is not religion. Many people are not religious, but ethics applies to everyone. Most religions do advocate high ethical standards but sometimes do not address all the types of problems we face.
- Ethics is not following the law. A good system of law does incorporate many ethical standards, but law can deviate from what is ethical. Law can become ethically corrupt, as some totalitarian regimes have made it. Law can be a function of power alone and designed to serve the interests of narrow groups. Law may have a difficult time designing or enforcing standards in some important areas, and may be slow to address new problems.
- Ethics is not following culturally accepted norms. Some cultures are quite ethical, but others become corrupt-or blind to certain ethical concerns (as the United States was to slavery before the Civil War). "When in Rome, do as the Romans do" is not a satisfactory ethical standard.
- Ethics is not science. Social and natural science can provide important data to help us make better ethical choices. But science alone does not tell us what we ought to do. Science may provide an explanation for what humans are like. But ethics provides reasons for how humans ought to act. And just because something is scientifically or technologically possible, it may not be ethical to do it.

Why Be Ethical?

People have lots of reasons for being ethical:
- There is inner benefit. Virtue is its own reward.
- There is personal advantage. It is prudent to be ethical. It's good business.
- There is approval. Being ethical leads to self-esteem and the respect of peers.
- There is religion. Good behavior can please or help serve a deity.
- There is habit. Ethical actions can fit in with upbringings or training.
Why Identifying Ethical Standards is Hard

There are two fundamental problems in identifying the ethical standards we are to follow:
1. On what do we base our ethical standards?
2. How do those standards get applied to specific situations we face?

If our ethics are not based on feelings, religion, law, accepted social practice, or science, what are they based on? Many philosophers and ethicists have helped us answer this critical question. They have suggested at least five different sources of ethical standards we should use.

Five Sources of Ethical Standards

The Utilitarian Approach

Some ethicists emphasize that the ethical action is the one that provides the most good or does the least harm, or, to put it another way, produces the greatest balance of good over harm. The ethical corporate action, then, is the one that produces the greatest good and does the least harm for all who are affected—customers, employees, shareholders, the community, and the environment. Ethical warfare balances the good achieved in ending terrorism with the harm done to all parties through death, injuries, and destruction. The utilitarian approach deals with consequences; it tries both to increase the good done and to reduce the harm done.

The Rights Approach

Other philosophers and ethicists suggest that the ethical action is the one that best protects and respects the moral rights of those affected. This approach starts from the belief that humans have a dignity based on their human nature per se or on their ability to choose freely what they do with their lives. On the basis of such dignity, they have a right to be treated as ends and not merely as means to other ends. The list of moral rights—including the rights to make one's own choices about what kind of life to lead, to be told the truth, not to be injured, to a degree of privacy, and so on—is widely debated; some now argue that non-humans have rights, too. Also, it is often said that rights imply duties—in particular, the duty to respect others' rights.

The Fairness or Justice Approach

Aristotle and other Greek philosophers have contributed the idea that all equals should be treated equally. Today we use this idea to say that ethical actions treat all human beings equally—or if unequally, then fairly based on some standard that is defensible. We pay people more based on their harder work or the greater amount that they contribute to an organization, and say that is fair. But there is a debate over CEO salaries that are hundreds of times larger than the pay of others; many ask whether the huge disparity is based on a defensible standard or whether it is the result of an imbalance of power and hence is unfair.

The Common Good Approach

The Greek philosophers have also contributed the notion that life in community is a good in itself and our actions should contribute to that life. This approach suggests that the interlocking relationships of society are the basis of ethical reasoning and that respect and compassion for all others—especially the vulnerable—are requirements of such reasoning. This approach also calls attention to the common conditions that are important to the welfare of everyone. This may be a system of laws, effective police
and fire departments, health care, a public educational system, or even public recreational areas.

**The Virtue Approach**

A very ancient approach to ethics is that ethical actions ought to be consistent with certain ideal virtues that provide for the full development of our humanity. These virtues are dispositions and habits that enable us to act according to the highest potential of our character and on behalf of values like truth and beauty. Honesty, compassion, generosity, tolerance, fidelity, integrity, fairness, self-control, and prudence are all examples of virtues. Virtue ethics asks of any action, "What kind of person will I become if I do this?" or "Is this action consistent with my acting at my best?"

**Putting the Approaches Together**

Each of the approaches helps us determine what standards of behavior can be considered ethical. There are still problems to be solved, however.

The first problem is that we may not agree on the content of some of these specific approaches. We may not all agree to the same set of human and civil rights.

We may not agree on what constitutes the common good. We may not even agree on what is a good and what is a harm.

The second problem is that the different approaches may not all answer the question "What is ethical?" in the same way. Nonetheless, each approach gives us important information with which to determine what is ethical in a particular circumstance. And much more often than not, the different approaches do lead to similar answers.

**Making Decisions**

Making good ethical decisions requires a trained sensitivity to ethical issues and a practiced method for exploring the ethical aspects of a decision and weighing the considerations that should impact our choice of a course of action. Having a method for ethical decision making is absolutely essential. When practiced regularly, the method becomes so familiar that we work through it automatically without consulting the specific steps.

The more novel and difficult the ethical choice we face, the more we need to rely on discussion and dialogue with others about the dilemma. Only by careful exploration of the problem, aided by the insights and different perspectives of others, can we make good ethical choices in such situations.

We have found the following framework for ethical decision making a useful method for exploring ethical dilemmas and identifying ethical courses of action.

**Obstacles to Ethical Decision Making: Common Rationalizations**

We judge ourselves by our best intentions, our noblest acts and our most virtuous habits. But others tend to judge us by our last worst act. So in making tough decisions, don't be distracted by rationalizations. Here are some of the most common ones:

*If It's Necessary, It's Ethical*

This rationalization rests on the false assumption that necessity breeds propriety. The approach often leads to ends-justify-the-means reasoning and treating non-ethical tasks or goals as moral imperatives.
The False Necessity Trap
As Nietzsche put it, "Necessity is an interpretation, not a fact." We tend to fall into the "false necessity trap" because we overestimate the cost of doing the right thing and underestimate the cost of failing to do so.

If It's Legal and Permissible, It's OK
This substitutes legal requirements (which establish minimal standards of behavior) for personal moral judgment. This alternative does not embrace the full range of ethical obligations, especially for individuals involved in upholding the public trust. Ethical people often choose to do less than the maximally allowable, and more than the minimally acceptable.

It's Just Part of the Job
Conscientious people who want to do their jobs well often fail to adequately consider the morality of their professional behavior. They tend to compartmentalize ethics into two domains: private and occupational. Fundamentally decent people thereby feel justified doing things at work that they know to be wrong in other contexts. They forget that everyone's first job is to be a good person.

It's All for a Good Cause
People are especially vulnerable to rationalizations when they seek to advance a noble aim. "It's all for a good cause" is a seductive rationale that loosens interpretations of deception, concealment, conflicts of interest, favoritism and violations of established rules and procedures.

I Was Just Doing It for You
This is a primary justification for committing "little white lies" or withholding important information in personal or professional relationships, such as performance reviews. This rationalization pits the values of honesty and respect against the value of caring. An individual deserves the truth because he has a moral right to make decisions about his own life based on accurate information. This rationalization overestimates other people's desire to be "protected" from the truth, when in fact most people would rather know unpleasant information than believe soothing falsehoods. Consider the perspective of people lied to: If they discovered the lie, would they thank you for being thoughtful or would they feel betrayed, patronized or manipulated?

I'm Just Fighting Fire With Fire
This is the false assumption that promise-breaking, lying and other kinds of misconduct are justified if they are routinely engaged in by those with whom you are dealing. Remember: when you fight fire with fire, you end up with the ashes of your own integrity.

It Doesn't Hurt Anyone
Used to excuse misconduct, this rationalization falsely holds that one can violate ethical principles so long as there is no clear and immediate harm to others. It treats ethical obligations simply as factors to be considered in decision-making, rather than as ground rules. Problem areas: asking for or giving special favors to family, friends or public officials; disclosing nonpublic information to benefit others; using one's position for personal advantage.

Everyone's Doing It
This is a false, "safety in numbers" rationale fed by the tendency to uncritically treat cultural, organizational or occupational behaviors as if they were ethical norms, just because they are norms.

It's OK If I Don't Gain Personally
This justifies improper conduct done for others or for institutional purposes on the false assumption that personal gain is the only test of impropriety. A related but narrower view is that only behavior resulting in improper financial gain warrants ethical criticism.
I've Got It Coming
People who feel they are overworked or underpaid rationalize that minor "perks" — such as acceptance of favors, discounts or gratuities — are nothing more than fair compensation for services rendered. This is also used as an excuse to abuse sick time, insurance claims, overtime, personal phone calls and personal use of office supplies.

I Can Still Be Objective
By definition, if you've lost your objectivity, you can't see that you've lost your objectivity! It also underestimates the subtle ways in which gratitude, friendship and the anticipation of future favors affect judgment. Does the person providing you with the benefit believe that it will in no way affect your judgment? Would the person still provide the benefit if you were in no position to help?

A Framework for Ethical Decision Making

STAGE ONE: PREPARE
Every decision takes some thought and organization before the decision is made. In order to create an atmosphere in which effective decisions can be made and implemented the following is helpful, when at all possible:

- **Identify the Issues**: In order to begin to consider it, determine what general issues are involved. Is it a health issue, justice issue, educational issue, economic issue. Usually there are at least several issues involved. Getting an idea of them before you begin will help focus the dialogue.
- **Preparing the Environment**: Create an atmosphere of caring as you deliberate. Be sure the location and atmosphere is conducive to honest, open discussion. Try to eliminate or reduce as far as possible, any potentially coercive influences.
- **Preparing Yourself**: Be aware of your personal prejudices, feelings and stress level as you respond. Be honest with yourself about how those factors can affect your decision-making ability.
- **Preparing Others**: Identify those involved with the ethical problem and involve them in the decision-making as appropriate. Cooperation will be better assured if those involved in the outcome are included in the process. Listen to their stories before you proceed. Being sensitive to the needs of all involved.

STAGE TWO: ASSESS
Facts are different than value and policy issues although these three matters often become confused. They need to be identified particularly when the decision is an ethical one. In order to determine the pertinent facts and values, it is important to first determine the type(s) of ethical problem(s) involved. Ask yourself:

- **What type of ethical problem(s) is involved?** Is it an ethical dilemma, ethical stress, a matter of the locus of authority and/or a justice issue? By determining the type of problem and the issues involved (Stage 1, Step 1) it will be easier to identify the facts and values relevant to the case.
- **What are the relevant facts?** Identify only those facts pertinent to the case and its resolution, and present them without judgment or bias.
- **What are the relevant values?** Identify the values involved: The type of problem will help identify the types of values. For example, a dilemma will necessitate identifying supportable but opposing actions; issues of justice will require looking at the type of justice involved (distributive vs. non-comparative) and any possible distribution methods of that justice. Identify what appropriate ethical principles, values and virtues should be utilized in making this decision? Are there obligations and duties owed?
- **What policy concerns should be considered?** What laws, regulations, policies, etc. are applicable to
the case? How might they impact the decision-making and the outcome?

STAGE THREE: DECIDE

Ethical decision-making is not easy, but many problems can be solved with creativity and thought. Using the fact, value and policy issues that you identified in the assessment, do the following:

- Gather as many creative solutions as possible. Use brainstorming where you don’t evaluate suggestions until the end of the idea-generation process.
- Evaluate the suggested solutions until you come up with the most usable ones. Then identify the ethical and political consequences. Remember, you can’t turn your ethical decision into action if you are not realistic regarding the constraints of institutions and political systems.
- When possible, arrive at your decision by consensus so that others will support the action.
- Identify the best solution. If there are no workable solutions, be prepared to say so and say why. If ethics can’t be implemented because of politics someone needs to know. If there are no answers because the ethical dilemma is unsolvable the appropriate people need to know that also.

STAGE FOUR: IMPLEMENT

Ethics without action is just talk. In order to act make sure that you communicate what needs to be done:

- Share your individual or group decision with the appropriate parties. Where possible seek their cooperation.
- Implement the decision.

STAGE FIVE: REFLECT

Perfect ethical decisions are seldom possible. However, we can learn from past decisions and try to make them better in the future, particularly when they lead to policy making. To do this:

- In a caring atmosphere, review the data and the ramifications of the decision.
- Review the process of making the decision. Would you do it in the same way next time?
- Were the appropriate people involved? Was the process of implementation effective?
- Should the decision become policy or do you need more cases and data before that step should occur?
- Learn from your successes as well as your mistakes.
- Be prepared to review your decision at a later time if the facts or issues change.

This framework for thinking ethically is adapted from the original work of the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University, *Five Stages of Ethical Action* (2009) by Barbara C. Thornton, Ph.D. at the University of Nevada-Reno Dept. of Health Ecology as well as *Making Ethical Decisions* (2009) by the Josephson Institute of Ethics.