

The Thinker's Guide
to

Understanding the
Foundations of
**Ethical
Reasoning**

Based on Critical Thinking Concepts & Tools

By Dr. Richard Paul and Dr. Linda Elder

The Foundation for Critical Thinking

Why a Mini-Guide on Ethical Reasoning?

The development of ethical reasoning abilities is vitally important—both for living an ethical life and creating an ethical world. In this miniature guide, we set out the foundations of ethical reasoning. Our aim is to introduce the intellectual tools and understandings necessary for reasoning through ethical issues and problems in an insightful manner.

Unfortunately, most people confuse ethics with behaving in accordance with social conventions, religious beliefs, and the law. Most people do not see ethics as a domain unto itself, a set of concepts and principles that guide us in determining what behavior helps or harms sentient creatures. Most people do not recognize that ethical concepts and principles are universally defined, through such documents as the UN Declaration of Human Rights, and that these concepts and principles are transcultural and trans-religious. One need not appeal to a religious belief or cultural convention to recognize that slavery, genocide, torture, sexism, racism, murder, assault, fraud, deceit, and intimidation are all ethically wrong. Whenever we base ethical conclusions on religious or cultural standards, we separate ourselves from those who hold contrary religious or cultural beliefs. It is critical, therefore, that we use shared ethical concepts and principles as guides in reasoning through common ethical issues.

We can find a wide array of important ethical concepts by reviewing the terms available for ethical discourse in virtually every natural language. All spoken languages contain synonyms for desirable ethical traits such as being kind, open-minded, impartial, truthful, honest, compassionate, considerate, and honorable. They also contain hundreds of negative ethical traits such as being selfish, greedy, egotistical, callous, deceitful, hypocritical, disingenuous, prejudiced, bigoted, spiteful, vindictive, cruel, brutal, and oppressive. The essential meanings of these terms are not dependent on either theology or social convention. Living an ethical life emerges from the fact that people are capable of either helping or harming others, of contributing to or damaging the quality of their lives.

In addition to the ability to distinguish purely ethical terms from those that are theological or conventional, skilled ethical reasoning presupposes the same range of intellectual skills and traits required in other domains. One must be skilled in breaking reasoning down into its component parts. One must be proficient in assessing reasoning for its clarity, accuracy, relevance, depth, breadth, and logicalness. One must be intellectually humble, intellectually perseverant, and intellectually empathic.

This mini-guide will not automatically make anyone an ethical person. But it does provide an essential foundation, without which ethical discussion will often end in hopeless disputation or discouraging contradiction and misunderstanding. Developing as an insightful ethical reasoner and person takes time and much practice. No one can do this work for us.

Sincerely,



Richard Paul
Center for Critical Thinking



Linda Elder
Foundation For Critical Thinking

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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.”

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.

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 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 highly significant ethical implications. Put into action they often have profound effects on the well being of people. What is more, the ideologies officially espoused by politicians are often widely different from the personal ends they pursue. 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 politicians rarely act for ethical reasons. 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 should be able 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

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