The Thinker’s Guide to
Understanding the Foundations of
ETHICAL REASONING
Based on Critical Thinking Concepts & Tools

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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.”
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
Three Modes of Character Integration

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

The Uncritical Person
- unconcerned with the development of intellectual abilities
- manipulated by self-serving critical persons and easily indoctrinated
- resulting in the person being victimized or blindly led into victimizing others
- good-hearted but self-deceived

The Self-Serving Critical Person
- develops intellectual abilities to serve one's selfish interests without regard to the rights and needs of others
- manipulates less sophisticated people
- resulting in those people being harmed (directly or indirectly)
- unethical, self-righteous, and self-deceived

The Fair-Minded Critical Person
- develops intellectual abilities to serve one's interests while respecting the rights and needs of others
- acts as forthrightly as possible
- resulting in people being treated reasonably and fairly
- ethical, empathic and just
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.
The Logic of Ethical Reasoning

Purpose
To act so as to help rather than harm others.

Question
How should we act so as to help rather than harm others?

Information
Information about our options for action, with special emphasis on the information that helps us avoid harming others.

Implications
Humans are capable of distinguishing ethics from other modes of thinking, grasping fundamental ethical principles, and acting consistently with them.

Assumptions
If we behave ethically, innocent persons and creatures are helped rather than harmed by what we do.

Point of View
Seeing the world as a place wherein individuals and groups often act so as to harm innocent persons and creatures; seeing humans as obligated to help, rather than harm others.

Essential Concepts
Judgments about what helps or harms others.

The concept of contributing to, rather than undermining, the well-being of others.
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