



The Miniature Guide

to

Understanding the Foundations of

# Ethical Reasoning

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Based on

*Critical Thinking Concepts & Principles*

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.

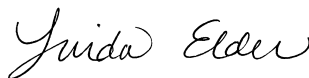
In addition to the ability to distinguish purely ethical terms from those that are theological or conventional, skilled ethical reasoning presupposes the same range of intellectual skills and traits required in other domains. One must be skilled in breaking reasoning down into its component parts. One 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



Linda Elder

# Analytic Table of Contents

**The Function of Ethics—and Its Main Impediment.** (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 which harm or diminish the well-being of others—and thus warrant our criticism. The study of ethical reasoning is crucial given the powerful human tendency toward egotism, prejudice, self-justification, and self-deception. To develop ethically, these tendencies must be resisted and diminished.) . . . . . 2–6

**The Problem of Pseudo-Ethics—the Sociocentric Counterfeits of Ethical Reasoning.** (Religious thinking {based on theology}, conventional thinking {based on social folkways and taboos}, political thinking {based on ideology and vested interest}, and legal thinking {based on political processes and social pressures} are commonly confused with ethical thinking. Yet these forms of thought, locked as they are in endless conflict, cannot provide foundations for universal ethical principles.) . . . . . 7–13

**The Elements of Ethical Reasoning.** (Ethical reasoning has the same basic structures that underlie all reasoning. If we are to reason well, we must learn to identify and assess our use in ethical reasoning of these intellectual structures.) . . . . . 14

**The Logic of Ethical Reasoning.** (There is a logic to ethical reasoning, just as there is a logic to mathematical, scientific, and medical reasoning... For example, whenever we reason ethically, we think for some ethical purpose, from some ethical point of view, based on some ethical assumptions, leading to some ethical implications or consequences.) . . . . . 15–16

**Language as a Guide to Ethical Reasoning.** (Ethically reasoning requires an accurate understanding of universal ethical concepts and principles. Such concepts and principles are implicit in hundreds of ethical terms in the language we speak.) . . . . . 17–23

**Two Kinds of Questions.** (Some ethical questions have definitive answers; others require reasoned judgment. When reasoning through an ethical question, we need to determine whether it is simple or complex.) . . . . . 23–25

**The Significance of Facts and Perspective.** (Ethical reasoning requires an accurate understanding of the facts relevant to an ethical question as well as a command of the most reasonable ways those facts can be interpreted.) . . . . . 25–27

**Intellectual Standards for Assessing Ethical Reasoning.** (Ethical reasoning must meet the same intellectual standards that apply to other domains of knowledge. For example, sound ethical reasoning must be clear, accurate, precise, relevant, logical and non-trivial. In some cases, it must also deal with complexities and reason within multiple viewpoints.) . . . . . 28–29

**Ethical Reasoning Abilities.** (There are intellectual abilities essential to ethical reasoning.) . . . . . 31

**Essential Ethical Traits.** (There are intellectual/ethical qualities of mind essential to ethical reasoning.) . . . . . 32

**Conclusion.** . . . . . 33

## Appendices:

- a) Glossary of Ethical Concepts . . . . . 34–41
- b) United Nations Declaration of Human Rights. . . . . 42–45

## 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 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.

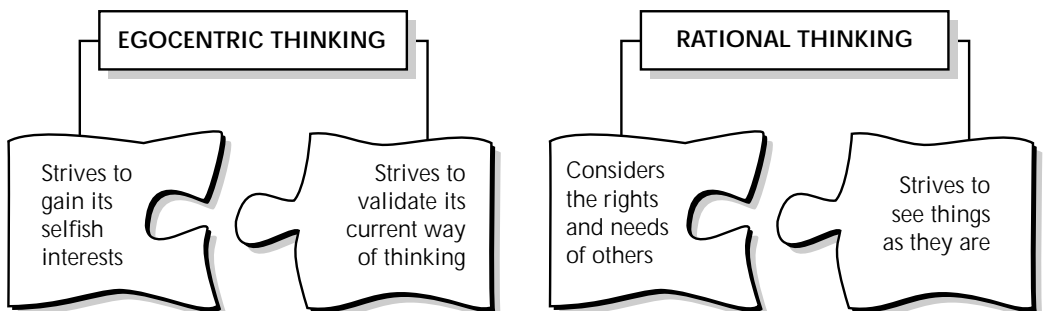
In other words, humans naturally develop into narrow-minded, self-centered thinkers. In a way, this makes perfect sense. We feel our own pain; we don't feel the pain of others. We think our own thoughts; we do not think the thoughts of others. And as we age, we unfortunately do not naturally develop 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.

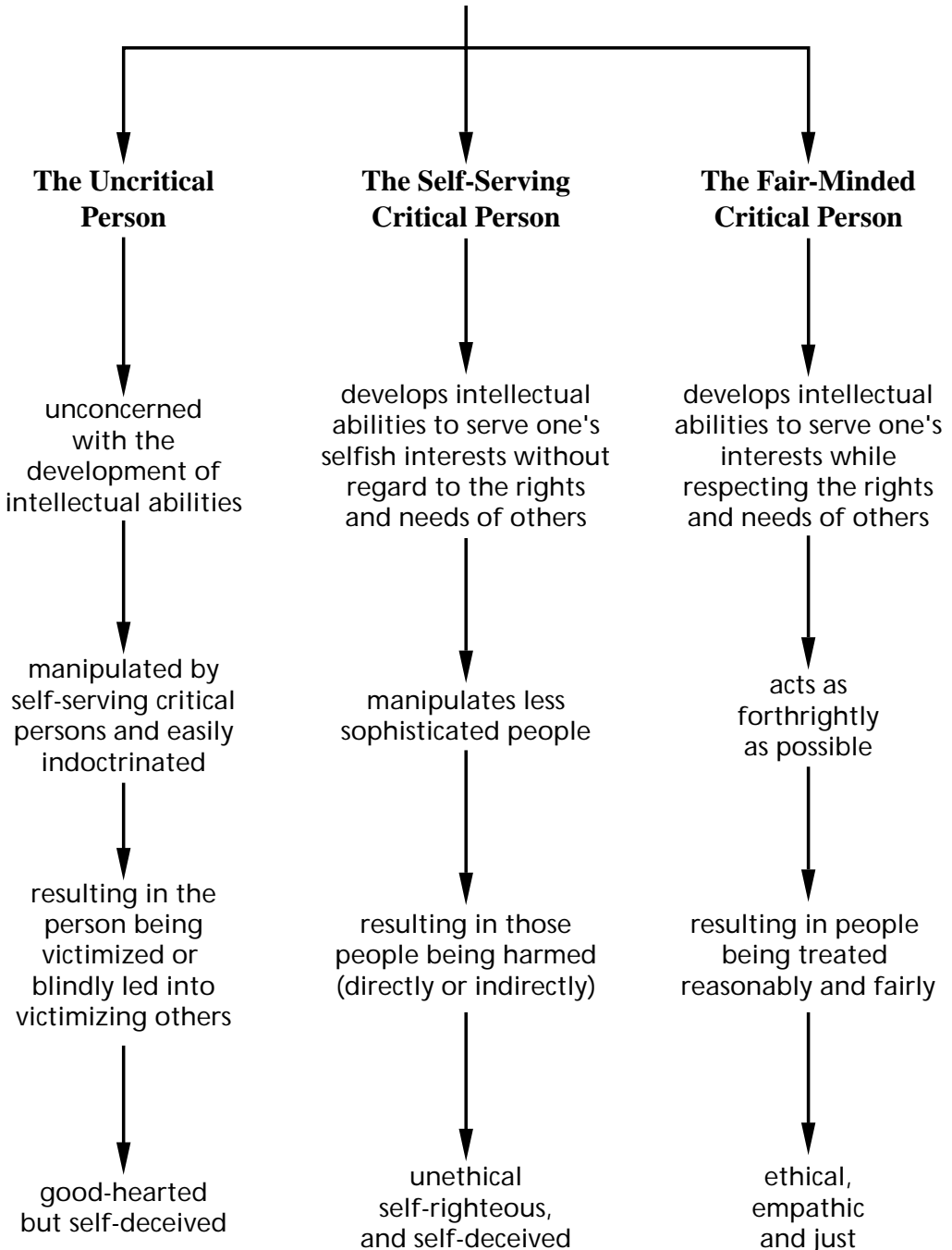
Ethical reasoning entails doing what is right even in the face of powerful selfish desires. To live an ethical life, then, is to develop command over our native egocentric tendencies. It is not enough to advocate living an ethical life. It is not enough to be able to do the right thing when we ourselves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



## ***Three Modes of Character Integration***

(Expressed in exclusive categories for purpose of theoretical clarity.

In fact, these are matters of degree).



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

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.

