"It is only a few rare and exceptional men who have that kind of love toward mankind … that makes them unable to endure patiently the general mass of evil and suffering, regardless of any relation it may have to their own lives. These few, driven by sympathetic pain, will seek, … some new system of society by which life may become richer, more full of joy and less full of preventable evils…

—BERT RAND RUSSELL, 1919, Proposed Roads to Freedom
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
Understanding the Foundations of Ethical Reasoning

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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.) 4–8

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.) 9–15

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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.
### Three Modes of Character Integration

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

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Uncritical Person</th>
<th>The Self-Serving Critical Person</th>
<th>The Fair-Minded Critical Person</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>unconcerned with the development of intellectual abilities</td>
<td>develops intellectual abilities to serve one’s selfish interests without regard to the rights and needs of others</td>
<td>develops intellectual abilities to serve one’s interests while respecting the rights and needs of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>manipulated by self-serving critical persons and easily indoctrinated</td>
<td>manipulates less sophisticated people</td>
<td>acts as forthrightly as possible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>resulting in the person being victimized or blindly led into victimizing others</td>
<td>resulting in those people being harmed (directly or indirectly)</td>
<td>resulting in people being treated reasonably and fairly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>good-hearted but self-deceived</td>
<td>unethical, self-righteous, and self-deceived</td>
<td>ethical, empathic and just</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Elements of Ethical Reasoning

Ethical reasoning has the same basic structures that underlie all reasoning. If we are to reason well ethically, we must learn to identify and assess our use in ethical reasoning of these basic intellectual structures.

Here is the basic idea: Whenever we think, we think for a purpose within a point of view based on assumptions leading to implications and consequences. We use ideas and theories to interpret data, facts, and experiences in order to answer questions, solve problems, and resolve issues. In other words, all thinking:

- generates purposes
- raises questions
- uses information
- utilizes concepts
- makes inferences
- makes assumptions
- generates implications
- embodies a point of view

Through our understanding of these elements, we can better analyze ethical reasoning. We can target our ethical purposes. We can formulate our ethical questions in various ways to identify the question that best embodies the issue. We can determine whether we have the information we need to solve the ethical problem. We can identify the inferences we are making and consider alternative inferences or conclusions. We can figure out the ethical concepts and principles we are using to reason through the issue. We can check our assumptions before coming to conclusions. We can determine whether more than one ethical viewpoint needs to be considered. And we can follow out the ethical implications of our decisions.
Language as a Guide to Ethical Reasoning

Ideas are to humans like the air we breathe. We project them everywhere. Yet we rarely notice this. We use words and the ideas they express to create our picture of the world. What we experience we experience through ideas, often uncritically funneled into the categories of “good” and “evil.” We uncritically assume ourselves to be good. We uncritically assume our enemies to be evil. We select positive terms to cover up the “indefensible” things we do. We select negative terms to condemn even the good things our enemies do. We often see the world in a distorted way, to our advantage. Our conceptualizations often result from indoctrination or social conditioning (our allegiances presented, uncritically of course, in positive terms).

Ideas, then, are our paths to both reality and self-delusion. We don’t typically recognize ourselves as engaged in idea construction of any kind, whether good or ill. In our everyday life we don’t experience ourselves shaping what we see and constructing the world to our advantage.

To the uncritical mind, it is as if people in the world came to us with our labels for them inherent in who they are. THEY are “terrorists.” WE are “freedom fighters.” All of us fall victim at times to an inevitable illusion of objectivity. Thus we see others not sharing a common human nature, but absolutistically as “friends” and “enemies,” and accordingly “good” or “bad.” Ideology, self-deception, and myth play a large part in our identity and how we think and judge. Our minds operate, however, as if we were simply neutral observers of reality. And to top it off, we often become self-righteous when our ideas are challenged.

To develop as ethical reasoners, we must take a new stand towards ourselves. We must come to recognize the ideas through which we see and experience the world. We must become the master of our own ideas. We must learn how to think with alternative ideas, and within alternative “world views.” As general semanticists often say: “The word is not the thing! The word is not the thing!” If we are trapped in one set of concepts (ideas, words) then our thinking is trapped. Word and thing become one and the same in our minds. We are unable then to act as free and ethical persons.

The ideas we have formed in personal experience are often egocentric in nature. The ideas we inherit from social indoctrination are typically ethnocentric in nature. Both can limit our insight significantly. This is where understanding the ethical terms in our native language can help us.

The ideas we learn from academic subjects and from the study of distinctions inherent in the uses of language can take us beyond our personal egocentrism and social ideology. When we learn to think historically, sociologically, anthropologically, scientifically, and philosophically, we can come to see ignorance, prejudice, stereotypes, illusions, and biases in our personal thinking and in the thinking common in our society.

In addition, command of ethical distinctions implicit in established linguistic usage can have a significant influence upon the way we shape our experience. Through such command, for example, we distinguish ethics from religion, social convention and politics. This ability impacts the judgments we make and the way we interpret situations.
Fundamental Ethical Concepts Embedded in Natural Languages
To reason well through an ethical question or issue requires that we identify and apply the ethical concepts relevant to it. But where do we find these concepts? They are inherent in all natural languages. To identify them, we need only refer to a good Doing ethical good involves: promoting kindness, compassion, understanding, open-mindedness, forbearance, tolerance, forgiveness, mercy, benevolence, thoughtfulness, considerateness, civility, respect, generosity, charity, empathy, justice, impartiality, evenhandedness, integrity, and fair-play.

Doing harm involves: thoughtlessness, egotism, egocentricity, cruelty, injustice, greed, domination, selfishness, disrespect, prejudice, narrow-mindedness, inconsiderateness, hypocrisy, unkindness, insensitivity, meanness, brutality, malice, hatred, spite, vindictiveness, mercilessness, avarice, bigotry, discrimination, chauvinism, small-mindedness, duplicity, insincerity, callousness, heartlessness, viciousness, ruthlessness, intolerance, unfairness, favoritism, pettiness, trivial-mindedness, dishonesty, cunning, deception, fraudulence, deceit, fanaticism, disingenuousness, violence, sadism, cheating, and lying.

To act ethically we must understand and become sensitive to ideas, such as those above, that shed light on the difference between acting in an ethical or unethical manner. If we are to act so as to maximize the good and minimize the harm we do to others, we must learn to monitor and assess our own thoughts, feelings, dispositions, and actions. We must become skilled in identifying when we are being egocentric or acting within a self-serving and/or self-deceptive perspective. We must recognize how common it is for humans to act without respect for the rights and needs of others. We must recognize how often we behave like those we condemn. We must come to see the “good” in our enemies and the “evil” in ourselves. As William Graham Sumner has said “That we are good and others evil is never true.” Each of us is a mixture of both.

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2 We use the expression “natural language” to contrast with “technical language.” German, French, Japanese, and English are “natural” languages. The languages of physics, chemistry, and math are “technical” languages. Natural languages are in use in everyday life and enable us to use its terms to think in an unlimited multiplicity of ways, including, for example, in a religious, social, political, ethical, or personal way.
The media (in every country around the world) focuses on what its readers personally care about. Thus, even if its readers are irrational in some belief (e.g., harbor some irrational hate), that belief (that hatred) will nevertheless be treated as rational by the home media. Hence, when slavery was commonly accepted in the United States, the media presented slavery as “natural.” When the country became divided, the media divided in its presentation of the “facts” (each paper presenting as right what the majority of its readers believed to be right).

Consider how the media deals with what is “shocking” or “exciting” or “disgusting” or “delightful” to it readers. For example, a woman sun-bathing on a beach with bare breasts is commonplace on the French Riviera. She is therefore not condemned and her story is not treated as “news.” But the same woman would be arrested and punished for sun-bathing in a similar way at a beach in Lebanon. She therefore is condemned and her story is treated as “news.” But bare breasted sun bathing is neither ethical nor unethical. It is a question of cultural convention.

To effectively analyze and assess media coverage of an ethical issue, we need to:

- identify the viewpoint from which a particular news story or historical account is constructed, as well as the audience for which it is written
- recognize what viewpoints the story is negating or ignoring and why, and
- distinguish the raw facts behind the story from the interpretation and spin put on the facts

When we do this, we are able to exercise greater independence of judgment. We aren’t manipulated by conceptual distortions that would lead us to misunderstand ethical issues.
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