

Critical Thinking: Ethical Reasoning and Fairminded Thinking, Part I

By Richard Paul and Linda Elder

The development of ethical reasoning abilities is vitally important—both for living an ethical life and creating an ethical world. In columns over the last several years we have focused on the foundations of critical thinking. In this and the next few columns, we set out some of the foundations of ethical reasoning (Paul & Elder, 2006a). Our aim is to introduce some important intellectual tools and understandings for insightfully reasoning through ethical issues and problems.

By teaching critical thinking without ethics one runs the risk of inadvertently fostering sophistic rather than fairminded critical thinking. In fact, students often commonly become skilled in critical thinking without developing the understandings requisite to living an ethical life. These students develop intellectual skills which enable them to get what they want without being bothered with how their behavior might affect others.

The human mind intrinsically seeks that which it perceives to be in its own interests (without necessarily concerning itself with the rights and needs of others). Developing ethical sensitivities requires cultivating the mind to go beyond innate selfishness to consideration of the rights and needs of others. One needs to understand ethical reasoning; cultivate ethical capacities; and integrate ethical understandings with critical thinking skills, abilities, and traits.

There are many reasons why students lack ethical reasoning abilities. For example, most students (and indeed most people) confuse ethics with behaving in accordance with social conventions, religious beliefs, and the law. Most do not see ethics as a domain unto itself, a set of concepts and principles to guide determining what behavior helps or harms sentient creatures. Most students do not recognize that ethical concepts and principles are universally defined, through such documents as the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, and that these concepts and principles are transcultural and transreligious.

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 students base ethical conclusions on religious or cultural standards, they exemplify a misunderstanding of ethics in a fundamental sense.

It is essential that students learn to use shared ethical concepts and principles as guides in reasoning through common ethical issues. There is a wide array of important ethical concepts implicit in virtually every natural language. For instance, all spoken languages contain synonyms for desirable ethical traits such as being kind, openminded, 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 (Paul & Elder, 2006b, 2009).

The Function and Roots of Ethics

The proper role of ethical reasoning is to highlight acts of two kinds: those that enhance the well-being of others—which warrant praise—and those that harm or diminish the well-being of others—and thus warrant 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 all lives—not least of which is the mass media. These tendencies can be actively combated only through the systematic cultivation of fairmindedness, honesty, integrity, self-knowledge, and deep concern for the welfare of others. Although it is impossible to eliminate egocentric tendencies absolutely and finally, one can actively combat them and learn to develop as an ethical person.

The ultimate basis for ethics is clear: Human behavior has consequences for the welfare of others. Individuals are capable of acting toward others in such a way as to increase or decrease the quality of their life, and, theoretically, to understand when they are doing one or the other. This is so because people have the capacity to put themselves imaginatively in the place of others and recognize how they would be affected if actions were reversed.

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!”

Ethical Decisions Require Depth of Understanding

Unfortunately, mere verbal agreement on ethical principles 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; rather, 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 one's society and culture of origin, each individual is strongly predisposed 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, con-

versely, 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. The main problem is not so much distinguishing between helping and harming but humans' natural propensity to be focused almost exclusively on themselves and their close affiliates.

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. 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 is impossible 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 social and self-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, and 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 and often maintain beliefs that fly in the face of the evidence. People often engage in acts that blatantly violate ethical principles and, what is more, feel confidently righteous in doing so.

In other words, humans naturally develop into narrow-minded, self-centered thinkers. In a way, this makes perfect sense. Individuals feel their own pain, not the pain of others and think personal thoughts, not the thoughts of others. Also, the ability to empathize with others—to consider conflicting points of view—unfortunately does not naturally develop with age. Consequently, people 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, one 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 country. He therefore considered his actions to be ethically justified. His deeply flawed reasoning resulted in untold human harm and suffering.

It is impossible to develop as ethical persons without facing 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 fairmindedness, 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 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 one has nothing to lose. People must be willing to fulfill ethical obligations even at the expense of selfish desires and vested interests.

Conclusion

In this column we have briefly introduced ethical reasoning and argued for its importance in instruction. We have highlighted native egocentrism as a fundamental barrier to ethical reasoning. In the next few columns we will continue the discussion of ethical reasoning, with part two focused on the importance of distinguishing ethics from modes of thought: namely theology, social conventions, and the law.

References

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