

Critical Thinking: Ethical Reasoning as Essential to Fairminded Critical Thinking, Part III

By Richard Paul and Linda Elder

In the last two columns we introduced the idea of ethical reasoning and discussed its importance to education. We dealt with the problem of egocentric thinking as a barrier to ethical reasoning. And we focused on the importance of distinguishing ethics from other modes of thought with which it is often confused, namely social conventions, religious ideologies, and the law. In this column we focus on language as a guide to ethical reasoning, pointing out that ethical concepts, and their implications, are implicit in ordinary or natural languages (as distinguished from technical languages). We also discuss the connection between ethical concepts and principles.

As students come to better understand the relationship between language and ideas, and as they learn to identify ethical concepts (and their opposites), they are progressively better able to reason ethically. They can better identify when they or others are using ideas in ways that harm, or might harm, sentient creatures.

Taking Command of the Ideas through Which We See the World

Ideas are to humans like the air they breathe. They project them everywhere, yet rarely notice this. Individuals use words and the ideas they express to create a personal picture of the world. Human experience is understood through ideas, often uncritically funneled into the categories of “good” and “evil.” Most uncritically assume themselves to be good and uncritically assume their enemies to be evil. People select positive terms to cover up the “undefensible” things they do, select negative terms to condemn even the good things their enemies do, and often see the world in a distorted way to personal advantage. Conceptualizations often result from indoctrination or social conditioning (with allegiances presented, uncritically, of course, in positive terms).

Ideas, then, present paths to both reality and self-delusion. It is unusual for anyone to recognize oneself as engaged in idea construction of any kind, whether for good or ill. In everyday life one doesn’t consciously experience shaping what one sees and constructing the world to one’s advantage.

To the uncritical mind, it is as if people in the world surface with prescribed labels for them inherent in who they are. THEY are “terrorists.” WE are “freedom fighters.” All fall victim at times to an inevitable illusion of objectivity. This view sees 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 everyone’s development of thinking and judging behavior. Individuals’ minds operate, however, as if each person was simply a neutral observer of reality. And to top it off, people often become self-righteous when their ideas are challenged.

Developing as ethical reasoners requires taking a new stance towards oneself. People must come to recognize the ideas through which they see and experience the world and become the master of those ideas. One must learn 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!” Being trapped in one set of concepts (ideas, words) leads to trapped thinking. Word and thing become one and the same making one unable then to act as a free and ethical person.

Ideas formed in personal experience are often egocentric in nature. Ideas inherited from social indoctrination are typically ethnocentric in nature. Both can limit one’s insight significantly. This is where understanding the ethical terms in a native language can help.

Ideas learned from academic subjects and from the study of distinctions inherent in the uses of language can provide a perspective beyond personal egocentrism and social ideology. Learning to think historically, sociologically, anthropologically, scientifically, and philosophically, allows one to see ignorance, prejudice, stereotypes, illusions, and biases in personal thinking and in common societal thinking.

In addition, command of ethical distinctions implicit in established linguistic usage can have a significant influence upon the way an individual shapes experience. Such a command allows one to distinguish ethics from religion, social convention, and politics. This ability impacts personal judgments and interpretation of situations.

Fundamental Ethical Concepts Are Embedded in Natural Languages

To reason well through an ethical question or issue requires identifying and applying the ethical concepts relevant to it. But where does one find these concepts? They are inherent in all natural languages, such as German, French, Japanese, and English. To identify them, one need only refer to a good dictionary.

Doing ethical good involves promoting kindness, compassion, understanding, open-mindedness, tolerance, forgiveness, mercy, considerateness, civility, respect, generosity, empathy, justice, impartiality, integrity, and fair-play. Doing harm involves: thoughtlessness, egocentricity, cruelty, injustice, greed, domination, selfishness, disrespect, prejudice, narrow-mindedness, hypocrisy, insensitivity, meanness, brutality, malice, hatred, spite, vindictiveness, avarice, discrimination, small-mindedness, duplicity, insincerity, callousness, heartlessness, viciousness, ruthlessness, intolerance, pettiness, dishonesty, fraudulence, deceit, violence, sadism, cheating, and lying.

One must understand and become sensitive to such ideas that shed light on the difference between acting in an ethical or unethical manner in order to act ethically. To maximize the good and minimize harm to others, it is imperative to learn to monitor and assess personal thoughts, feelings, dispositions, and actions. One must become skilled in identifying egocentric behaviors, self-serving actions, and/or self-deceptive perspectives. Individuals must recognize how common it is for humans to act without respect for the rights and needs of others and how often people behave like those they condemn. Ethical thinkers see the “good” in enemies and the “evil” in themselves. As William Graham Sumner has said, “that we are good and others evil is never true.” Everyone is a mixture of both.

Basic Ethical Principles Emerge From Ethical Concepts

After understanding ethical concepts, it becomes clear that ethical principles are implicit in them. Ethical principles should be a guiding force in ethical reasoning. To become skilled in any domain of reasoning one must understand the principles that define that domain. To be skilled in mathematical reasoning, it is critical to understand fundamental mathematical principles. To be skilled in scientific reasoning, it is essential to understand fundamental scientific principles (principles of physics, of chemistry, of astronomy, and so on). In like manner, to be skilled in ethical reasoning, it is imperative to understand fundamental ethical principles. In many cases identification/application of ethical principles is simple. In some cases it is not.

Consider some simple cases. Lying about, misrepresenting, or distorting the facts to gain a material advantage over others is clearly a violation of the basic principle implied by the concept of honesty. Expecting others to live up to standards that one routinely violates is clearly a violation of the basic principle implied by the concept of integrity. Treating others as if they were worth less than oneself is a violation of the principles implied by the concepts of integrity, justice, and equality. It is unethical to kill people to get their money or to torture people due to assuming they are guilty and ought to confess.

Complicated ethical questions arise when conflicting ethical principles seemingly apply to the same case: Which should be given precedence? In those cases one should engage in dialogical reasoning between conflicting ethical perspectives. Judge the reasoning used by each perspective as in

Concepts Depicting Ethical Behavior or Motivation

Going Beyond What is Obligatory to Improve the Lives of Others		Dealing With People Objectively in Order to Be Fair	
Generous	Philanthropic	Understanding	Unbiased
Unselfish	Humanitarian	Impartial	Dispassionate
Charitable	Benevolent	Equitable	Objective
Altruistic			

Relating to People in Ethically Appropriate Ways		Being Forthright and Honest	
Civil	Forbearing	Honest	Loyal
Polite	Tolerant	Truthful	Faithful
Courteous	Tactful	Integrity	Trustworthy
Respectful			

Relating to People in Commendable Ways		Being Willing to Forgive in Order to Alleviate Suffering	
Friendly	Gracious	Forgive	Exonerate
Obliging	Tender	Pardon	Compassionate
Cordial	Warm	Absolve	Merciful
Kind	Warm-hearted		
Gentle			

Acting Out of a Concern to Behave Ethically		Acting Out of a Concern for the Feelings of Others	
Scrupulous	Open-minded	Sympathetic	Compassionate
Honorable	Evenhanded	Empathetic	Considerate
Upright		Understanding	

any other multilogical question open to reasonable debate. Of utmost importance is approaching complex cases with intellectual humility, avoiding the tendency toward self-righteousness in applying ethical principles.

Conclusion

Ethical reasoning requires a certain kind of fitness of mind which can be gained only through understanding the foundations of ethical reasoning and

regularly applying them in ethical situations. In this column we have focused on the foundational idea that in all natural or ordinary languages there are concepts that identify what is ethically good as well as concepts which identify that which is ethically harmful. These concepts have been developed by humans over thousands of years. Yet, most students are unaware of both the role that concepts play in human thought and the ethical concepts implicit in ordinary languages. Consequently they are often unaware of the extent to which their ideas lead them to behave ethically or unethically. As students learn the role of ethical concepts in ethical reasoning, and as they see that ethical principles emerge from ethical concepts, they have a better and better chance of reasoning ethically in situations which call on them to do so. Of course, these concepts must be understood in relationship with a constellation of ethical foundations.

Reference

Paul, R., & Elder, L. (2006). *The thinker's guide to understanding the foundations of ethical reasoning*. Dillon Beach, CA: Foundation for Critical Thinking

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