

# Critical Thinking: Ethical Reasoning as Essential to Fairminded Critical Thinking, Part IV

By Linda Elder and Richard Paul

In the last three columns we introduced the idea of ethical reasoning, discussed its importance to education, and briefly dealt with a number of understandings essential to skilled ethical reasoning. In this column we continue this discussion. We distinguish between simple and complex ethical questions and reason through an example complex ethical question. Next we discuss the fact that, when dealing with complex ethical issues, data should often be analyzed from multiple perspectives. Finally, we illuminate some important ways in which humans distort information and facts to maintain their views or serve their interests (and in so doing, often reason unethically).

## Two Kinds of Ethical Questions

Ethical questions can be either simple or complex. Simple ethical questions are often definitional in nature, easily answered through applying an undisputable ethical principle or set of principles to a clear-cut set of facts. Complex ethical questions, on the other hand, require one to reason through more than one ethical perspective and come to reasoned ethical judgments. Ethical questions are complex when there are multiple ways of looking at the relevant information. Complex questions are therefore open for reasoned dialogue and debate. Both types of questions, however, require ethical reasoning.

### Simple

Ethical questions that are simple virtually answer themselves. Some examples:

- Is it cruel to subject an innocent creature to unnecessary suffering? (definitional)
- Is it unjust to deny someone a basic human right? (definitional)
- All things being equal, it is ethically wrong to lie? (definitional)
- Is it ethically wrong to torture animals for fun? (clear-cut case)
- Is it ethically wrong to torture people in order to exact a confession? (clear-cut case)
- Is it ethically wrong to use another person to serve your selfish interests? (clear-cut case)

### Complex

Questions that can be argued in more than one way (using ethical principles) are complex ethical questions. They require reasoning within multiple viewpoints.

Some examples:

- Under what conditions, if any, should animal experimentation be allowed?
- Is it ethically wrong to kill animals for food?
- To what extent should scientists be allowed to experiment with new viruses (when the virus they create might itself cause harm)?
- Under what conditions should people be kept artificially alive?

- To what extent do scientists have special ethical responsibilities to society?
- Are we ethically justified in engaging in unethical practices in our own defense because our enemies use them against us?
- To what extent am I ethically obligated to contribute to the health of the environment?
- Under what conditions, if any, is capital punishment ethically justifiable?

## A Hypothetical Example of Reasoning through a Complex Ethical Question

Consider, for example, the complex ethical question: Is euthanasia ever ethically justifiable? As people become conversant with the foundations of ethics, one would expect them to reason in ways that demonstrate sensitivity to ethical concepts and principles, the cases and situations to which ethical concepts and principles should be applied, and the need to exclude pseudo-ethical concepts and principles from their ethical reasoning (Paul & Elder, 2006). Here is a reconstruction of how someone might begin to reason regarding euthanasia, as he or she internalizes the foundations of ethical reasoning:

Some consider euthanasia absolutely wrong in all cases, others regard it as clearly right in some cases and wrong in others, and still others see it as a true ethical dilemma.

There are any number of situations in which euthanasia is not justified. To entertain the question of whether it is ever justified, however, one must reflect on the various conditions under which euthanasia seems plausible. For example, cases involving people who suffer intense pain from terminal diseases. Within this group are some who plead to end suffering by helping individuals end their lives (since, though in torment, they cannot end their lives without assistance).

Given the fact that a person so circumstanced is experiencing intense terminal suffering, one significant ethical concept relevant to this question is the concept of cruelty. Cruelty is defined by *Webster's New World Dictionary* as "causing, or of a kind to cause, pain, distress, etc...; the word 'cruel' implies indifference to the suffering of others or a disposition to inflict it on others." Cruelty, in this case, means "of a kind to cause" unnecessary pain. It means allowing an innocent person to experience unnecessary pain and suffering when one has the power to alleviate it—without sacrificing something of equal value. Another related ethical concept is compassion. To have compassion is to show deep sympathy for another, accompanied by the urge to help alleviate suffering. Being compassionate (and avoiding cruelty) requires striving to act so as to reduce or end the unnecessary pain and suffering of innocent persons and creatures. With this ethical principle in mind, we can seek to determine in what sense, and in what situations, refusing to assist a suffering person should be considered cruel.

Of course, another ethical principle that may be relevant to this issue is, "Life is good in itself and should be preserved." Most rational persons would argue that, all things being equal, life is good in itself and should be preserved. But that is a different matter from believing that life should be preserved no matter what the circumstances. It seems that this absolute principle can be defended only by using theological claims (such as "God has absolutely forbidden suicide under any and all conditions"). But this theological belief is relevant only to those who accept the religious doctrines underlying it. It is not an ethical imperative as such and should not be confused with one. No one who rejects a theological belief system—and everyone has this right—need accept any assertions dependent on it.

This excerpt includes three strengths: 1. The reasoner identifies the kind of case in which euthanasia is most plausible. 2. The reasoner identifies relevant ethical concepts and principles. 3. The reasoner recognizes that theological beliefs must not be used in ethical reasoning.

Of course, this reasoning is not “complete.” It does not settle the issue. The issue is too complex to be easily settled. Focusing on specific cases, learning how to identify relevant ethical concepts and principles, learning how to reason within multiple points of view, and learning how to exclude pseudo-ethical concepts are all essential components of skilled ethical reasoning. However, in a complex case such as the one presented, further questions will need to be asked. A wide number of actual and possible cases will need to be identified, described, and analyzed. The reasoner will need to consider objections from multiple viewpoints, as well as follow out the implications of each major position. Any number of unique situations might arise in which qualifications or modified ethical judgments are necessary.

### Complex Ethical Question Facts Should be Analyzed from Multiple Perspectives

When dealing with a simple ethical question, there is a clear-cut correct answer. But when faced with a complex ethical question, it is essential to analyze the data relevant to the question utilizing multiple perspectives. There are (typically) multiple viewpoints from which a complicated set of events can be viewed and interpreted. Openness to a range of insights from multiple points of view and a willingness to question one’s own are crucial to “objectivity.” To reason objectively through a complex or complicated ethical issue one must consider a wide range of relevant perspectives, obtain insights from all of them, identify weaknesses and partiality in each, and integrate what one has learned into a more comprehensive, many-sided whole. Each viewpoint should serve to “correct” exaggerations or distortions in the others and to add facts not highlighted by them.

### Discovering the Facts that Bear Upon an Ethical Issue

When reasoning through an ethical issue, one should be sensitive to the following sets of questions related to facts and perspectives:

1. What are the raw facts, the most neutral description of the essential features of the situation? If one describes the experience this way, and others disagree, what is the best approach to investigate the facts more fully?
2. What interests, attitudes, desires, or concerns influence peoples’ assessment of the ethical situation? Are they always aware of them? Why or why not?
3. How is one conceptualizing or interpreting the ethical situation in light of a personal viewpoint? How else might it be interpreted?

### The Uncritical Mind Systematically Distorts the Facts Underlying Ethical Issues

Ethical reasoning depends upon orienting oneself towards ethical issues in good faith, something the human mind cannot necessarily be trusted to do. For instance, the uncritical mind is unconsciously driven to identify the facts underlying ethical issues in accordance with the following unspoken, but deeply felt, maxims:

- “These are the facts because I believe them to be so.”
- “These are the facts because we believe them to be so.”
- “These are the facts because we want to believe them to be so.”
- “These are the facts because it serves our vested interest to believe them to be so.”

The critical mind consciously seeks the truth in accordance with the fol-

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lowing self-correcting maxims:

- “I believe it, but it may not be true.”
- “We believe it, but we may be wrong.”
- “We want to believe it, but we may be prejudiced by our desires or cultural limitations.”
- “It serves our vested interest to believe it, but our vested interest has nothing to do with the ethical reality.”

To develop as ethical reasoners people need to understand how beliefs such as these, operating at the unconscious level, may powerfully influence thought and actions in ethical situations.

### Conclusion

Becoming skilled at ethical reasoning is essential to living what Socrates phrased “the examined life.” It entails a number of important understandings largely missing in today’s classrooms. In this article and in this series on ethical reasoning more generally, we have only briefly dealt with a few of these understandings. In order to create fairminded critical societies on a broad-scale, ethics will need to be, not on the fringe, but at the very heart of human thinking.

### Reference

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

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