

The Thinker's Guide
to

Understanding the
Foundations of
**Ethical
Reasoning**

Based on Critical Thinking Concepts & Tools

By Dr. Richard Paul and Dr. Linda Elder

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
Center for Critical Thinking



Linda Elder
Foundation For Critical Thinking

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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.

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.

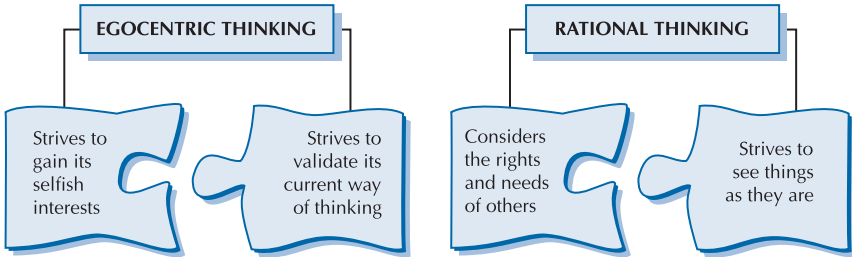
Nevertheless, it is possible to learn to think critically through ethical issues. With practice and sound instruction, we can acquire the disposition and skills required to analyze and evaluate situations from opposing ethical perspectives.

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

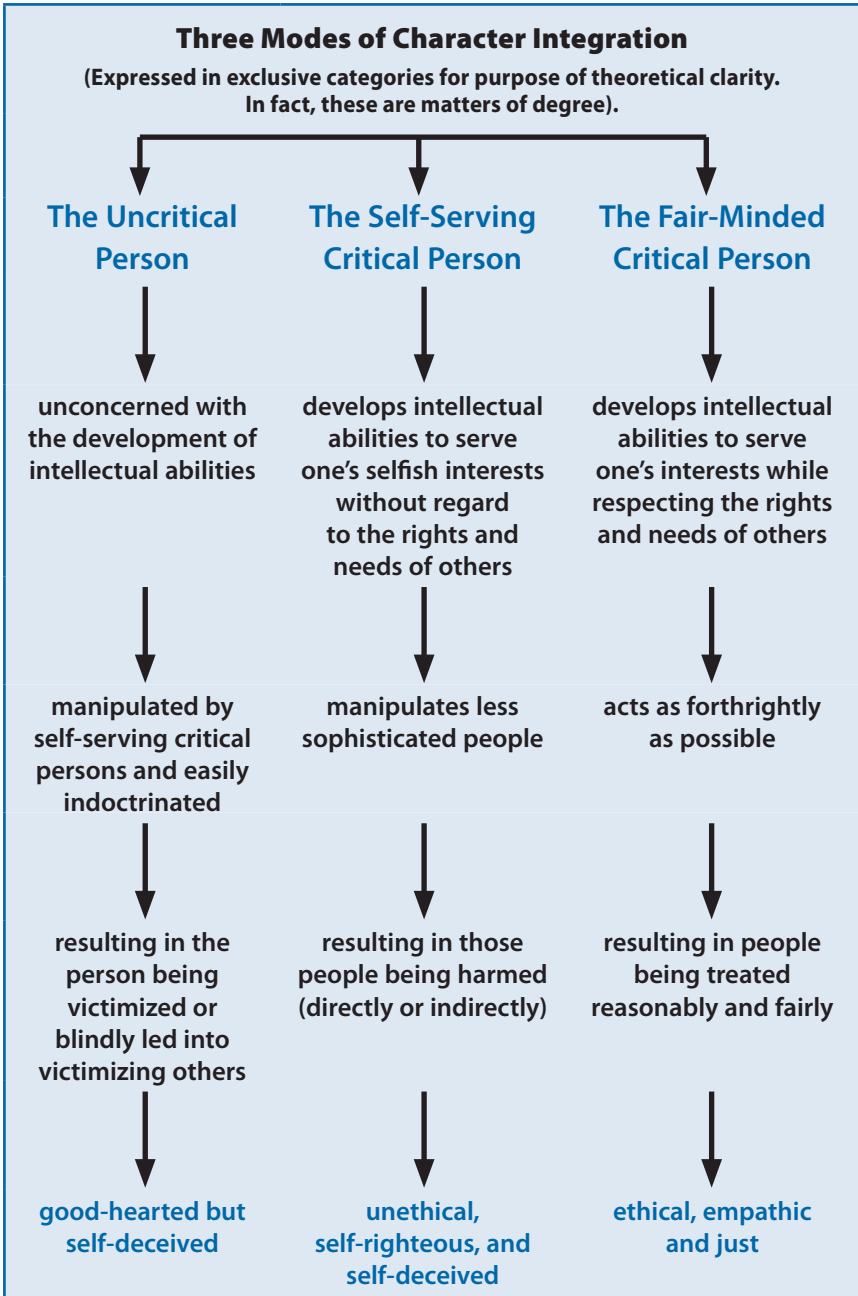
thing when we ourselves have nothing to lose. We must be willing to fulfill our ethical obligations at the expense of our selfish desires and vested interests.



Pathological Dispositions Inherent in Egocentric Thought

Much of our ethical insight comes from an in-depth recognition of inconsistencies in human behavior—for example, saying one thing and doing another; applying one standard to ourselves and another standard to others. Ethical reasoning implies an awareness of interrelated pathological dispositions inherent in native egocentric thought. We need to identify these tendencies in our lives, determining which of them are the most prominent and which the least. As you read them, ask yourself whether you recognize these as processes that occur in your own mind (if you conclude, “not me!” think again):

- **egocentric memory:** the natural tendency to “forget” evidence that does not support our thinking and to “remember” evidence that does
- **egocentric myopia:** the natural tendency to think in an absolutist way within an overly narrow point of view
- **egocentric righteousness:** the natural tendency to see ourselves as in possession of “The Truth”
- **egocentric hypocrisy:** the natural tendency to ignore flagrant inconsistencies—between what we profess to believe and the actual beliefs our behavior implies, or between the standards we apply to ourselves and those we apply to others
- **egocentric oversimplification:** the natural tendency to ignore real and important complexities in the world in favor of simplistic notions when consideration of those complexities would require us to modify our beliefs or values
- **egocentric blindness:** the natural tendency not to notice facts and evidence that contradict our favored beliefs or values
- **egocentric immediacy:** the natural tendency to over-generalize immediate feelings and experiences, so that when one, or only a few, events in our life seem highly favorable or unfavorable, all of life seems favorable or unfavorable to us
- **egocentric absurdity:** the natural tendency to fail to notice when our thinking has “absurd” implications



The Problem of Pseudo-Ethics

The Sociocentric Counterfeits of Ethical Reasoning

Skilled ethical thinkers routinely distinguish ethics from other domains of thinking such as those of social conventions (conventional thinking), religion (theological thinking), politics (ideological thinking) and the law (legal thinking). Too often, ethics is confused with these very different modes of thinking. It is not uncommon, for example, for highly variant and conflicting social values and taboos to be treated as if they were universal ethical principles.

Thus, religious ideologies, social “rules,” and laws are often mistakenly taken to be inherently ethical in nature. If we were to accept this amalgamation of domains, then by implication every practice within any religious system would necessarily be ethical, every social rule ethically obligatory, and every law ethically justified.

If religion defined ethics, we could not then judge any religious practices—e.g., torturing unbelievers or burning them alive—as unethical. In the same way, if ethical and conventional thinking were one and the same, every social practice within any culture would necessarily be ethically obligatory—including social conventions in Nazi Germany. We could not, then, condemn any social traditions, norms, and taboos from an ethical standpoint—however ethically bankrupt they were. What’s more, if the law defined ethics, then by implication politicians and lawyers would be considered experts on ethics and every law they finagled to get on the books would take on the status of a moral truth.

It is essential, then, to differentiate ethics from other modes of thinking commonly confused with ethics. We must remain free to critique commonly accepted social conventions, religious practices, political ideas, and laws using ethical concepts not defined by them. No one lacking this ability can become proficient in ethical reasoning.

Ethics and Religion

Theological reasoning answers metaphysical questions such as:

- What is the origin of all things? Is there a God? Is there more than one God? If there is a God, what is his/her nature? Are there ordained divine laws expressed by God to guide our life and behavior? If so, what are these laws? How are they communicated to us?
- What must we do to live in keeping with the will of the divine?

Religious Beliefs Are Culturally Variant

Religious variability derives from the fact that theological beliefs are intrinsically subject to debate. There are an unlimited number of alternative ways for people to conceive and account for the nature of the “spiritual.” The *Encyclopedia Americana*, for example, lists over 300 different religious belief systems. These traditional ways of believing adopted by social groups or cultures often take on the force of habit and custom. They are then handed down from one generation to another. To the individuals in any given group, their particular beliefs seem to them to be the ONLY way, or the only REASONABLE way, to conceive

of the “divine.” They cannot see that their religious beliefs are just one set among many possible religious belief systems.

Examples of theological beliefs confused with ethical principles:

- Members of majority religious groups often enforce their beliefs on minorities.
- Members of religious groups often act as if their theological views are self-evidently true, scorning those who hold other views.
- Members of religious groups often fail to recognize that “sin” is a theological concept, not an ethical one. (“Sin” is theologically defined.)
- Divergent religions define sin in different ways (but often expect their views to be enforced on all others as if a matter of universal ethics).

Religious beliefs, when dominant in a human group, tend to shape many, if not all, aspects of a person’s life—with rules, requirements, taboos, and rituals. Most of these regulations are ethically neither right nor wrong, but simply represent social preferences and culturally subjective choices.

It is every person’s human right to choose his or her own religious orientation, including, if one wishes, that of agnosticism or atheism. That is why there is a provision (Article 18) in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights concerning the right to change one’s religious beliefs:

“Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief...”

Beliefs about divinity and spirituality are notoriously divergent and should therefore be non-compulsory. There is no definitive way to prove any one set of religious beliefs to the exclusion of all others. For that reason religious freedom is a human right. One can objectively prove that murder and assault are harmful to persons, but not that non-belief in God is.

That ethical judgment must trump religious belief is shown by the undeniable fact that many persons have been tortured and/or murdered by people motivated by religious zeal or conviction. Indeed religious persecution is commonplace in human history. Humans need recourse to ethics in defending themselves against religious intolerance and persecution.

Consider this example: If a religious group were to believe that the firstborn male of every family must be sacrificed, every person in that group would think them-selves ethically obligated to kill their firstborn male. Their religious beliefs would lead them to unethical behavior and lessen their capacity to appreciate the cruel nature of their acts.

Furthermore, a society must be deemed unethical if it accepts among its religious practices any form of slavery, torture, sexism, racism, persecution, murder, assault, fraud, deceit, or intimidation. Remember, atrocities have often been committed during religious warfare. Even to this day, religious persecution and religiously motivated atrocities are commonplace. No religious belief as such can justify violations of basic human rights.

In short, theological beliefs cannot override ethical principles. We must turn to ethical principles to protect ourselves from intolerant and oppressive religious practices.

Ethics and Social Conventions

All of us are, in the first instance, socially conditioned. Consequently, we do not begin with the ability to critique social norms and taboos. Unless we learn to critique the social mores and taboos imposed upon us from birth, we will inherently accept those traditions as “right.”

Consider the history of the United States. For more than a hundred years most Americans considered slavery to be justified and desirable. It was part of social custom. Moreover, throughout history, many groups of people, including people of various nationalities and skin colors, as well as females, children, and individuals with disabilities, have been victims of discrimination as the result of social convention treated as ethical obligation. Yet, all social practices violating human rights are rejected, and have been rejected, by ethically sensitive, reasonable persons no matter what social conventions support those practices.

Socially or Culturally Variant Practices

Cultural diversity derives from the fact that there are an unlimited number of alternative ways for social groups to satisfy their needs and fulfill their desires. Those traditional ways of living within a social group or culture take on the force of habit and custom. They are handed down from one generation to another. To the individuals in a given group they seem to be the *ONLY* way, or the only *REASONABLE* way, to do things. And these social customs sometimes have ethical implications. Social habits and customs answer questions like this:

- How should marriage take place? Who should be allowed to marry, under what conditions, and with what ritual or ceremony? Once married what role should the male play? What role should the female play? Are multiple marriage partners possible? Is divorce possible? Under what conditions?
- Who should care for the children? What should they teach the children as to proper and improper ways to act? When children do not act as they are expected to act, how should they be treated?
- When should children be accepted as adults? When should they be considered old enough to be married? Who should they be allowed to marry?
- When children develop sensual and sexual desires, how should they be allowed to act? With whom, if anyone, should they be allowed to engage in sexual exploration and discovery? What sexual acts are considered acceptable and wholesome? What sexual acts are considered perverted or sinful?
- How should men and women dress? To what degree should their body be exposed in public? How is nudity treated? How are those who violate these codes treated?

- How should food be obtained and how should it be prepared? Who is responsible for obtaining food? Who for preparing it? How should it be served? How eaten?
- How is the society “stratified” (into levels of power)? How is the society controlled? What belief system is used to justify the distribution of scarce goods and services and the way rituals and practices are carried out?
- If the society develops enemies or is threatened from without, how will it deal with those threats? How will it defend itself? How does the society engage in war, or does it?
- What sorts of games, sports, or amusements will be practiced in the society? Who is allowed to engage in them?
- What religions are taught or allowable within the society? Who is allowed to participate in the religious rituals or to interpret divine or spiritual teachings to the group?
- How are grievances settled in the society? Who decides who is right and who wrong? How are violators treated?

Schools traditionally function as apologists for conventional thought; those who teach often inadvertently foster confusion between convention and ethics because they themselves have internalized the conventions of society. Education, properly so called, should foster the intellectual skills that enable students to distinguish between cultural mores and ethical precepts, between social commandments and ethical truths. In each case, when social beliefs and taboos conflict with ethical principles, ethical principles should prevail.

Examples of confusion between ethics and social conventions:

- Many societies have created taboos against showing various parts of the body and have severely punished those who violated them.
- Many societies have created taboos against giving women the same rights as men.
- Many societies have socially legitimized religious persecution.
- Many societies have socially stigmatized interracial marriages.

These practices seem (wrongly) to be ethically obligatory to those socialized into accepting them.

Ethics and Sexual Taboos

Social taboos are often matters of strong emotions. People are often disgusted when others violate a taboo. Their disgust signals to them that the behavior is unethical. They forget that what is socially repugnant to us may not violate any ethical principle but, instead, may merely differ from social convention. Social doctrines regarding human sexuality are often classic examples of conventions expressed as if they were ethical truths. Social groups often establish strong sanctions for unconventional behavior involving the human body. Some social groups inflict unjust punishments on women who do no more than appear in public without being completely veiled, an act considered in some cultures as indecent and sexually provocative. Sexual behaviors should be considered unethical only when they result in unequivocal harm or damage.

Ethics and Political Ideology

A political ideology provides an analysis of the present distribution of wealth and power and devises strategies in keeping with that analysis. It provides either a “justification” of the present structure of power or a “critique.” It seeks either to protect and maintain the way things are or to change them. It seeks to change things in small ways or in big ways. It compares the present to the past and both to a future it projects.

Conservative ideologies “justify” the status quo or seek a return to a previous “ideal” time. Liberal ideologies critique the status quo and seek to justify “new” forms of political arrangements designed to rectify present problems. Reactionary ideologies plead for a “radical” return to the past; revolutionary ideologies plead for a “radical” overturning of the fundamental (“corrupt”) structures. Conservative ideologies consider the highest values to be private property, family, God, and country. Liberal ideologies consider the highest values to be liberty, equality, and social justice.

Ideological analyses have highly significant ethical implications. Put into action they often have profound effects on the well being of people. What is more, the ideologies officially espoused by politicians are often widely different from the personal ends they pursue. Virtually all political ideologies speak in the name of the “people.” Yet most of them, in fact, are committed to powerful vested interest groups who fund their election campaigns. The same people often end up ruling, independent of the “official” ideology. Thus, in the post-soviet power structure, many of those who were formerly powerful in the communist party are now among the most prominent and acquisitive neo-capitalists.

The bottom line is that politicians rarely act for ethical reasons. Struggling against each other for power and control, political movements and interests often sacrifice ethical ideals for practical advantage. They often rationalize unethical acts as unavoidable necessities (for example, “forced on them” by their opponents). And they systematically use propaganda to further vested interest agendas.

Ethics and the Law

Anyone interested in developing their ethical reasoning abilities should be able to differentiate ethics and the law. What is illegal may or may not be a matter of ethics. What is ethically obligatory may be illegal. What is unethical may be legal. There is no essential connection between ethics and the law.

Laws often emerge out of social conventions and taboos. And, because we cannot assume that social conventions are ethical, we cannot assume that human laws are ethical. What is more, most laws are ultimately made by politicians, who routinely confuse social values with ethical principles. As we have said, their primary motivation is, except in special cases, power, vested interest, or expediency. For example, (from 1900 through 1930), American politicians, in response to an electorate dominated by fundamentalist religious believers, passed laws which made it illegal for anyone, including doctors, to disseminate any information about birth control. The consequence was predictable: hundreds of thousands of poor and working class women suffered severe injuries or death from the effects

of illegal drugs and unsanitary abortions. To “criminalize” behavior that goes against social conventions is one of the time-honored ways for politicians to get re-elected.¹

Examples of confusing ethics and the law:

- Many sexual practices (such as homosexuality) have been unjustly punished with life imprisonment or death (under the laws of one society or another).
- Many societies have enforced unjust laws based on racist views.
- Many societies have enforced laws that discriminated against women.
- Many societies have enforced laws that discriminated against children.
- Many societies have made torture and/or slavery legal.
- Many societies have enforced laws arbitrarily punishing people for using some drugs but not others.

Acts that are Unethical In-and-of-Themselves

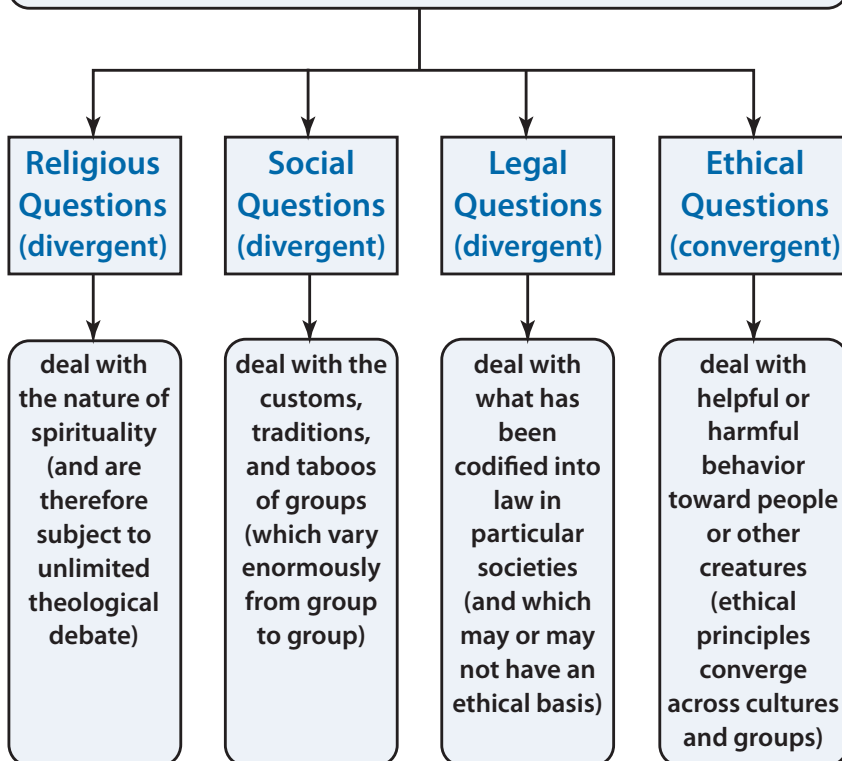
For any action to be unethical, it must inherently deny another person or creature some inalienable right. The following classes of acts are unethical in-and-of themselves. Any person or group that violates them is properly criticized from an ethical standpoint:

- **SLAVERY:** Owning people, whether individually or in groups.
- **GENOCIDE:** Systematically killing with the attempt to eliminate a whole nation or ethnic group.
- **TORTURE:** Inflicting severe pain to force information, get revenge or serve some other irrational end.
- **SEXISM:** Treating people unequally (and harmfully) in virtue of their gender.
- **RACISM:** Treating people unequally (and harmfully) in virtue of their race or ethnicity.
- **MURDER:** The pre-meditated killing of people for revenge, pleasure, or to gain advantage for oneself.
- **ASSAULT:** Attacking an innocent person with intent to cause grievous bodily harm.
- **RAPE:** Forcing an unwilling person to have intercourse.
- **FRAUD:** Intentional deception that causes someone to give up property or some right.
- **DECEIT:** Representing something as true which one knows to be false in order to gain a selfish end harmful to another.
- **INTIMIDATION:** Forcing a person to act against his interest or deter from acting in his interest by threats or violence.
- Putting persons in jail without telling them the charges against them or providing them with a reasonable opportunity to defend themselves.
- Putting persons in jail, or otherwise punishing them, solely for their political or religious views.

¹ The U.S. now has a higher percentage of its citizens in prison than any other country in the world (recently surpassing Russia).

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

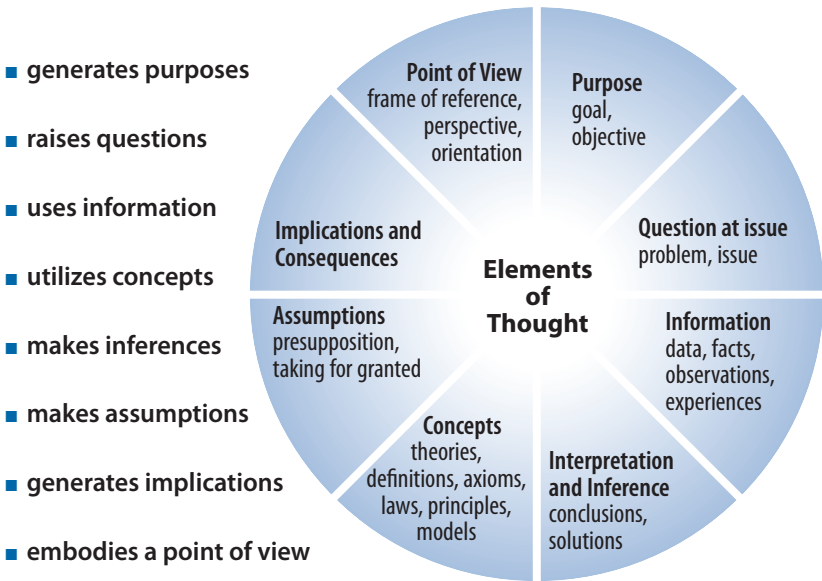
If we are ever to reach a point in human development where skilled ethical reasoning is the norm, each of us must cultivate in ourselves the ability to determine whether any belief system, practice, rule, or law is ethical. To be skilled at ethical reasoning means to develop a conscience not subservient 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.



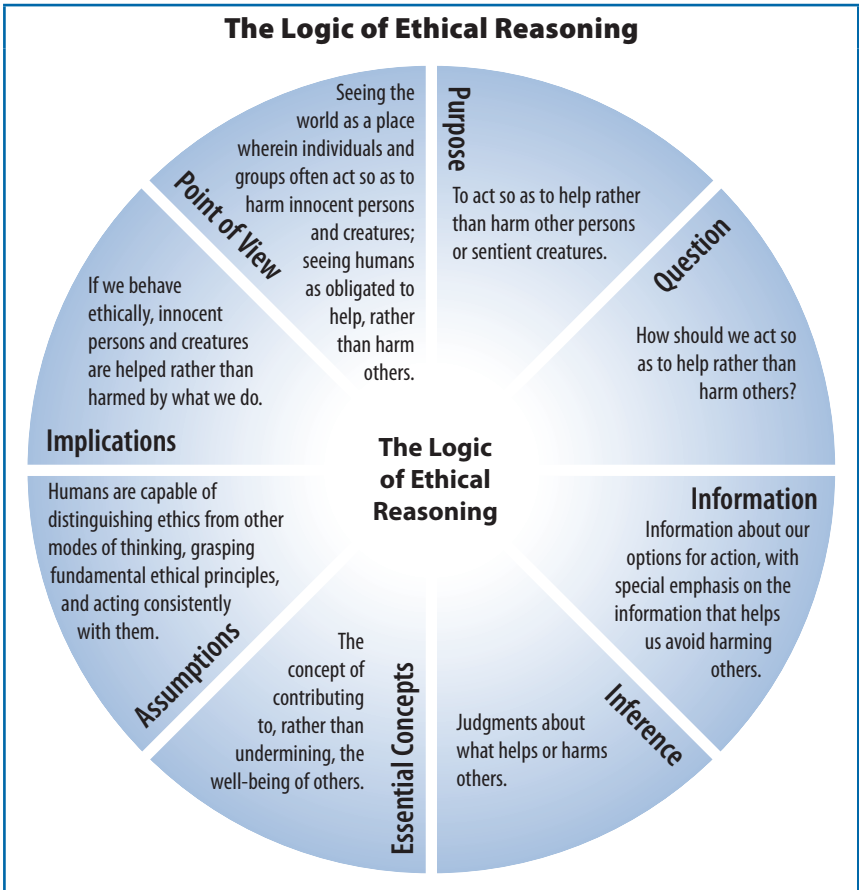
The Elements of Ethical Reasoning

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:



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.



How to Figure Out the Logic of an Ethical Question

Whenever you reason through an ethical question, you can use the following template, which highlights the elements of your reasoning. By doing so, you can better analyze and assess the parts of your thinking as you move through the question.

1. Considering my own rights and needs as well those of others in this situation, my **purpose** should be... (Here you are trying to determine the ethical goal you hope to reach. What do you want to accomplish?)
2. The key ethical **question(s)** I am trying to answer is/are... (Write out the issue you are facing in several ways until you have identified the precise ethical issue you need to reason through. Then formulate the key ethical question(s) embedded in the issue. Focus on the most important ethical questions. Make sure you take into account the point of view of relevant others in formulating the question.)
3. The most important **information** I will need to answer this ethical question is... (You should identify the information that will enable you to understand and take into account the needs and viewpoints of relevant others, as well as your own.)
4. The key ethical **concepts** and principles that should guide my thinking are... (Identify the ethical concepts and principles most relevant for reasoning through the issue. Do any of these concepts or principles compete for significance? If so, which should take precedence? Make sure you are using ethical principles and not social rules, religious doctrines, or laws to guide your thinking. See examples of ethical concepts on page 19.)
5. The main **assumptions** I am using in reasoning through this ethical issue are... (What are you taking for granted? Should you question your assumptions or are they justifiable in the context? How do your assumptions affect the way you see the ethical issue? Are there other reasonable assumptions you should begin with?)
6. The **points of view** I need to consider before coming to conclusions about this ethical issue are... (If the ethical issue you face is complex, you will need to consider more than one way of looking at the situation, and you will need to do so with an open-mind, not in a way that dismisses reasonable alternative views. What viewpoints would a reasonable person consider in reasoning through this issue?)
7. The main **inferences/conclusions** I am coming to in reasoning through this ethical issue are... (Is there more than one way to interpret the information? After considering all the information, what is the most reasonable answer to the ethical question? What alternative answers should you or have you considered?)
8. If I come to the conclusions stated in number seven above, some of the important **implications** for myself and others are... If I come to alternative conclusions, some of the important **implications** are... (What consequences are likely to follow if you act on the conclusions you have come to? What consequences are likely to follow if you act on alternative conclusions?)

Language as a Guide to Ethical Reasoning

Ideas are to us 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 way of seeing things. What we experience we experience through ideas, often funneled into the categories of “good” and “evil.” We assume ourselves to be good. We 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 conceptualize things personally by means of experience unique to ourselves (often distorting the world to our advantage). We conceptualize things socially as a result of indoctrination or social conditioning (our allegiances presented, 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 illuminating or distorting. 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 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. We apply ideas, however, as if we were simply neutral observers of reality. We often become self-righteous when our ideas are challenged.

To develop as ethical reasoners, 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 judgements 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.²To identify them, we need only refer to a good dictionary. In this section we list some ethical concepts. Refer to the glossary for a more detailed list.

Doing ethical good involves: promoting kindness, compassion, understanding, open-mindedness, forbearance, tolerance, forgiveness, mercy, benevolence, thoughtfulness, considerateness, civility, respect, generosity, charity, empathy, justice, impartiality, even-handedness, 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 do good and avoid doing harm 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.

²We 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.

Concepts Depicting Ethical Behavior or Motivation

Going Beyond What is Obligatory to Improve the Lives of Others

Generous	Philanthropic
Unselfish	Humanitarian
Charitable	Benevolent
Altruistic	

Dealing With People Objectively in Order to Be Fair

Understanding	Unbiased
Impartial	Dispassionate
Equitable	Objective

Relating to People in Ethically Appropriate Ways

Civil	Forbearing
Polite	Tolerant
Courteous	Tactful
Respectful	

Being Forthright and Honest

Honest	Loyal
Truthful	Faithful
Integrity	Trustworthy

Relating to People in Commendable Ways

Friendly	Gracious
Obliging	Tender
Cordial	Warm
Kind	Warm-hearted
Gentle	

Being Willing to Forgive in Order to Alleviate Suffering

Forgive	Exonerate
Pardon	Compassionate
Absolve	Merciful

Acting Out of a Concern to Behave Ethically

Scrupulous	Open-minded
Honorable	Evenhanded
Upright	

Acting Out of a Concern for the Feelings of Others

Sympathetic	Compassionate
Empathetic	Considerate
Understanding	

Concepts Depicting Unethical Behavior or Motivation

Using Intellectual Skills to Get Others to Act Against their Own Best Interest		
Cunning	Double-dealing	Mislead
Sly	Cheat	Beguile
Crafty	Defraud	Delude
Trickery	Swindle	Betray
Wily	Dupe	Misrepresent
Duplicitous	Deceive	Use Subterfuge
Ignoring the Rights and Needs of Others to Get What You Want		Rigidity of Mind Which Keeps People from Being Ethical
Selfish	Grasping	Prejudice
Self-conceit	Acquisitive	Unfair
Self-aggrandizement	Covetous	Bias
Greedy	Egotistic	Chauvinist
Avaricious		Narrow-minded
		Jingoist
		Bigot
		Small-minded
		Zealot
		Intolerant
		Fanatic
Causing Emotional Discomfort		Causing Pain or Suffering
Disrespectful	Heartless	Unkind
Rude	Impatience	Merciless
Ill-mannered	Insensitive	Dominate
Discourteous	Petty	Rancorous
Unkind	Belligerent	Tyrannize
Uncivil	Bellicose	Malignant
Dishonor	Pugnacious	Oppress
Hateful	Quarrelsome	Pitiless
Callous	Contentious	Bully
		Ruthless
		Hurt
		Vicious
		Cruel
		Malicious
		Brutal
		Ill-willed
		Inconsiderate
		Malevolence
		Inhuman
Refusing to Tell the Truth Due to Self-Interest		Unethical Behavior that Results From a Perceived Grievance
Dishonest	Hypocritical	Holding a Grudge
Deceitful	Disingenuous	Revengeful
Lying	False	Vindictive
Untruthful	Disloyal	Spiteful
Insincere		Vengeful

Basic Ethical Principles Emerge From Ethical Concepts

Ethical principles are implicit in ethical concepts. They should be a guiding force in ethical reasoning. To become skilled in any domain of reasoning we must understand the principles that define that domain. To be skilled in mathematical reasoning, we must understand fundamental mathematical principles. To be skilled in scientific reasoning, we must understand fundamental scientific principles (principles of physics, of chemistry, of astronomy, and so on). In like manner, to be skilled in ethical reasoning, we must understand fundamental ethical principles. Of course, in many cases identification and 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 we ourselves routinely violate is clearly a violation of the basic principle implied by the concept of integrity. Treating others as if they were worth less than we take ourselves to be worth 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 because we think they are guilty and ought to confess.

Complicated ethical questions arise when conflicting ethical principles seemingly apply to the same case and we are in a dilemma as to which should be given precedence. In those cases we should engage in dialogical reasoning between conflicting ethical perspectives. We should judge the reasoning used by each perspective as we would in any other multi-logical question open to reasonable debate. Of course, whether or not a question is or is not multi-logical may itself be a matter of dispute. Most importantly, we must approach complex cases with intellectual humility, avoiding the tendency toward self-righteousness in applying ethical principles.

Universal Ethical Principles

As we have said, ethical principles, are inherent in ethical concepts. Most ethical principles are clear, though their application to complicated cases may not be. Among the most clear-cut ethical principles are the following: that it is ethically wrong to cheat, deceive, exploit, abuse, harm, or steal from others, that we have 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 our own self-interest and egocentric pleasures, and to strive to make the world more just and humane.

There is no nation, no religion, and no ethnic group that openly argues for the right to cheat, deceive, exploit, abuse, harm, or steal from others. Neither is there anyone who publicly attempts to justify slavery, genocide, torture, terrorism, denial of due process, politically motivated imprisonment, sexism, racism, murder, assault, rape, fraud, deceit, or intimidation. Of course, all groups violate some (if not many) of these principles, covering up such violations with misleading uses of language. All groups are skilled in telling their

story in self-serving and self-justifying ways. The problem, then, is not that we lack ethical principles. The problem is that we are naturally adept at hiding our own violations of them.

For example, the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights, established on December 10, 1948 by the General Assembly of the United Nations, articulates universal ethical principles. Every nation without exception has signed it. It globally defines the domain of ethics. It consists of a preamble, a general proclamation, and 30 detailing articles. Here is the proclamation and part of the preamble:

THIS UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction.

The recognition of inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice, and peace in the world... Disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people.

This declaration was conceived as “a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations.” It is a good example of explicit ethical principles. Here are a few of the principles laid out in the 30 articles of the declaration:

- All humans are born free and equal in dignity and rights.
- Everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of person.
- No one shall be held in slavery or servitude.
- No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment or punishment.
- Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family.
- Everyone has the right to education.
- Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.
- Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kinds, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, or status.
- All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law.

Though the principles outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights are universally accepted in theory, virtually every country violates them (though not to the same degree). For example, on October 5, 1998, the New York Times (“Amnesty Finds

‘Widespread Pattern’ of U.S. Rights Violations,” p. A11) reported that Amnesty International was citing the United States for violating fundamental human rights. According to the Amnesty International report, “police forces and criminal and legal systems have a persistent and widespread pattern of human rights violations” in the United States.

In the report, Amnesty International protested a U.S. failure “to deliver the fundamental promise of rights for all.” The report states, “Across the country thousands of people are subjected to sustained and deliberate brutality at the hands of police officers. Cruel, degrading, and sometimes life-threatening methods of constraint continue to be a feature of the U.S. criminal justice system.” Pierre Sane, Secretary General of Amnesty International for six years, said, “We felt it was ironic that the most powerful country in the world uses international human rights laws to criticize others but does not apply the same standards at home.”

At the level of action, then, verbal agreement on general principles is not enough. There are too many ways in which humans can rationalize their rapacious desires and feel justified in taking advantage of those weaker or less able to protect themselves. There are too many forces in human life—social groups, religions, political ideologies—generating behavioral norms that ignore, distort, or override core ethical principles. In short, in a world where force and power are the ultimate determinants of what happens, universally “accepted” ethical principles do not translate into the reality of a just world.

Two Kinds of Ethical Questions

Ethical questions can be either simple or complex. Simple ethical questions are either definitional in nature, or are 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 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 ethical questions are questions that can be argued in more than one way (using ethical principles). 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, we 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. Here is a reconstruction of how someone might begin to reason regarding euthanasia, as he or she internalized the foundations of ethical reasoning:

“Some consider euthanasia absolutely wrong in all cases, others regard it as clearly right in some cases, 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, we must reflect on the various conditions under which euthanasia seems plausible. For example, we must consider cases involving people who suffer intense pain from terminal diseases. Within this group are some who plead with us to end their suffering by helping them 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 you have 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 us to ‘strive 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:

- The reasoner identifies the kind of case in which euthanasia is most plausible.
- The reasoner identifies relevant ethical concepts and principles.
- 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 above, 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.

The Significance of Facts and Perspective

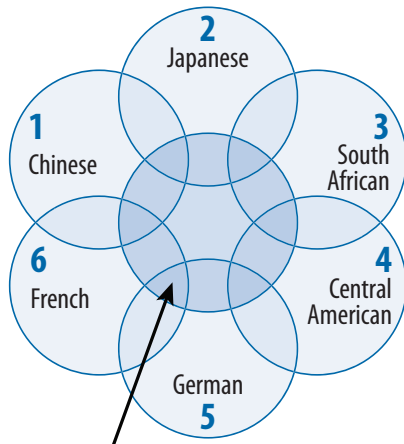
When dealing with a simple ethical question, there is a clear-cut correct answer. But when faced with a complex ethical question, it is essential to analyze the data relevant to the question utilizing multiple perspectives. There are (typically) multiple viewpoints from which a complicated set of events 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.” This can be suggested in the diagram on page 26 illustrating how multiple points of view may stand in relation to the same set of events. 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.

Ethical Facts are Often Distorted or Ignored By Mainstream News³

Because it is profit oriented, the mainstream news is fundamentally driven by what sells to readers. Many ethical issues are therefore distorted by the mainstream news media, as they seek to present news in a form that validates prior beliefs and perceptions of their audience. That our country is “good” and our enemies “bad” is axiomatic in virtually all mainstream news coverage.

Furthermore, if objectivity or fairness in the construction of news stories is considered equivalent to presenting all the facts and only the facts (“All the news that’s fit to print”), then objectivity and fairness is an illusion. No human knows more than a small percentage of the facts and it is not possible to present all the facts (even if one did know them). It isn’t even possible to present all the important facts, for even if we knew all the facts, there would still be many competing criteria for determining what is “important.” We must therefore always ask, with respect to media coverage that has ethical implications and our national identity at stake: “What has been left out of this article?” “How might I think differently if different facts had been highlighted here?” “What if this article had been written by those who oppose us, our enemies?”

Multiple Points of View with Respect to a Given Set of Facts



The total set of facts relevant to understanding a given set of events

Note:

- Only some of the facts are highlighted in any point of view
- All points of view ignore or play down some facts
- No single point of view provides total understanding
- Understanding multiple viewpoints increases insight

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

³ For a more complete analysis of the problem of media bias and propaganda in international news, see the mini-guide on this problem published by the Foundation for Critical Thinking.

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 its 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.

The logic behind bias and propaganda in presenting the facts relevant to ethical issues is simple. Humans typically bring to situations some orientation, perspective, or point of view. Their orientation tends to color what they see and how they see it. But the truth of what is happening in any given situation is almost always more complicated than perceived by persons with a personal or vested interest in the situation. To do justice to ethical issues, we must keep our minds open to multiple ways of describing what has “happened.” We must seek out the facts pointed out by our enemies as they make their case against us and not simply focus on the facts that support our outlook.

The Uncritical Mind Systematically Distorts the Facts Underlying Ethical Issues

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 following 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 truth.”

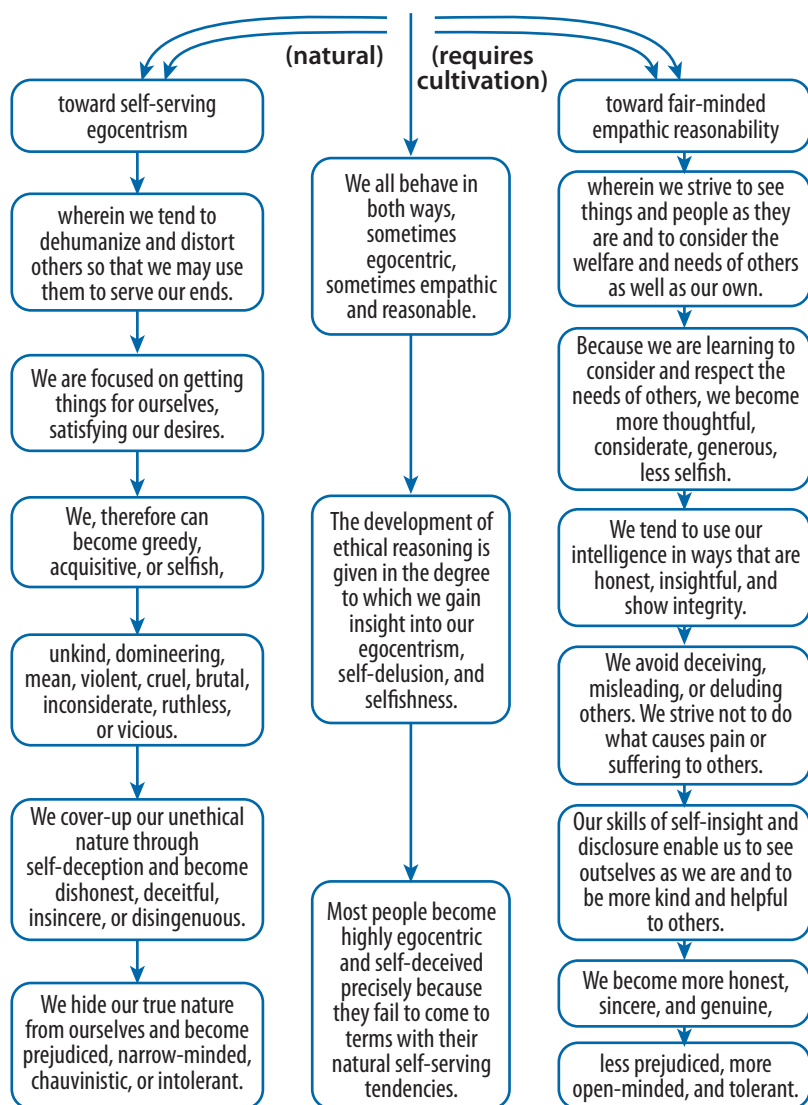
Discovering the Facts that Bear Upon an Ethical Issue

When reasoning through an ethical issue, we must 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, how can we investigate the facts more fully?
2. What interests, attitudes, desires, or concerns influence the way I am viewing the ethical situation? Am I always aware of them? Why or why not?
3. How am I conceptualizing or interpreting the ethical situation in light of my viewpoint? How else might it be interpreted?

The Logic of Developing as an Ethical Thinker

We are All Drawn in Two Directions



Intellectual Standards for Assessing Ethical Reasoning

Ethical reasoning must meet the same intellectual standards that apply to other domains of knowledge. If our ethical reasoning is to be sound, it must be clear, accurate, precise, relevant, deep, broad, logical and non-trivial. Here are brief elaborations of some important intellectual standards along with questions one can ask in applying the standards:

Clarity: understandable, the meaning can be grasped

(We cannot agree or disagree with ethical reasoning that is not clear to us.)

- How clear is our ethical reasoning?
- Do we need to clarify our purpose?
- Are we clear about the ethical concepts we are using in our reasoning?
- Do we need to further elaborate any point?
- Do we need to give further examples?
- Do we need to introduce clarifying analogies or illustrations?

Accuracy: free from errors or distortions, true

(If ethical reasoning includes inaccurate information, it is flawed.)

- How accurate is our ethical reasoning?
- Is any feature of the situation misrepresented or distorted?
- Do we provide complete information?
- Can we truthfully say that we are using ethical principles to guide our reasoning, or are we using social, religious or legal directives instead?

Precision: exact to the necessary level of detail

(We often cannot reason through ethical issues while lacking specifics and details.)

- Does our reasoning lack essential details and specifics?
- Should we add any?
- Do we need more details in this question to adequately address the ethical issue?

Relevance: relating to the matter at hand

(Ethical reasoning is distorted if it uses irrelevant concepts or facts.)

- Is any of what we are saying unconnected to the key ethical questions we need to consider?
- Do we need to introduce further ethical concepts or principles?
- What viewpoints are relevant to the ethical issue?
- Are we sure this information is relevant to the ethical question?
- How does this or that comment bear upon the ethical issue?

Depth: containing complexities and interrelationships

(Superficial reasoning that fails to address complexities in an ethical issue is flawed.)

- Are we addressing the ethical situation and posing the ethical question in such a way as to do justice to the complexities inherent in the matter or are we oversimplifying the situation?
- What factors make this a difficult ethical problem?
- What are some of the complexities in this ethical question?
- What are some of the difficulties we face in reasoning through it?

Breadth: encompassing multiple viewpoints

(Ethical reasoning is flawed when the reasoner ignores relevant points of view.)

- Have we considered all relevant viewpoints or have we left out a point of view germane to the ethical question?
- What other perspectives must we consider to do justice to the ethical issue?
- Do we need to look at this ethical problem in other ways?

Logic: the parts make sense together, no contradictions

(Humans often think in self-contradictory ways, using double standards. Both integrity and logic require that we consistently apply ethical standards.)

- Are we reasoning consistently?
- Or is our reasoning self-contradictory?
- Do our conclusions follow from the evidence?
- What is likely to happen if we act on the ethical issue in this way or that?
- Is this the most logical way of looking at the ethical issue?

Significance: focusing on the important, not the trivial

(Reasoning in support of vested interests often treats relatively insignificant matters as of high ethical significance while playing down issues of significance.)

- Are we focusing on the most significant ethical dimensions of the issue?
- Are we trivializing what is ethically significant or overstating the significance of what should be given little consideration?
- Is this the most important ethical problem to consider?
- What ethical concepts and principles are most importantly relevant to the issue?
- Which of these facts should be given the most weight?

Fairness: justifiable, not self-serving (or egocentric)

(Self-centeredness and selfish interest leading to self-deception are among the most significant barriers to sound ethical reasoning.)

- Are we treating all relevant viewpoints with consistency?
- Are we accurately and fairly representing the positions with which we disagree?
- Do we have a vested interest in distorting alternative viewpoints?
- Have we examined our thinking for prejudice?

Ethical Reasoning Abilities

Ethical Affective Dimensions

- exercising independent ethical thought and judgment
- developing insight into ethical egocentrism and sociocentrism
- exercising ethical reciprocity
- exploring thought underlying ethical reactions
- suspending ethical judgement

Cognitive Dimensions: Ethical Macro-Abilities

- avoiding oversimplification of ethical issues
- developing one's ethical perspective
- clarifying ethical issues and claims
- clarifying ethical ideas
- developing criteria for ethical evaluation
- evaluating ethical authorities
- raising and pursuing root ethical questions
- evaluating ethical arguments
- generating and assessing solutions to ethical problems
- identifying and clarifying ethical points of view
- engaging in Socratic discussion on ethical issues
- practicing dialectical thinking on ethical issues

Cognitive Dimensions: Ethical Micro-Skills

- distinguishing facts from ethical principles, values, and ideas
- using critical vocabulary in discussing ethical issues
- distinguishing ethical principles or ideas
- examining ethical assumptions
- distinguishing ethically relevant from ethically irrelevant facts
- making plausible ethical inferences
- supplying evidence for an ethical conclusion
- recognizing ethical contradictions
- recognizing ethical implications and consequences
- refining ethical generalizations

Essential Ethical Traits

Ethical Humility

Awareness of the limits of one's ethical insight, including sensitivity to circumstances in which one's native egocentrism is likely to function self-deceptively; sensitivity to bias and prejudice in, and limitations of, one's viewpoint. Ethical humility is based on the recognition that no one should claim to know more than one actually knows. It does not imply spinelessness or submissiveness. It implies the lack of ethical pretentiousness, boastfulness, or conceit, combined with insight into the strengths and weaknesses of the logical foundations of one's beliefs.

Ethical Courage

The willingness to face and assess fairly ethical ideas, beliefs, or viewpoints to which we have not given serious hearing, regardless of our strong negative reaction to them. This courage arises from the recognition that ideas considered dangerous and absurd are sometimes rationally justified (in whole or in part), and that ethical conclusions or beliefs espoused by those around us or inculcated in us are sometimes false or misleading.

Ethical Empathy

Having a consciousness of the need to imaginatively put oneself in the place of others in order to genuinely understand them. We must recognize our egocentric tendency to identify truth with our immediate perceptions or longstanding beliefs. This trait correlates with the ability to accurately reconstruct the ethical viewpoints and reasoning of others and to reason from ethical premises, assumptions, and ideas other than our own. This trait also requires that we remember occasions when we were ethically wrong despite an intense conviction that we were right as well as consider that we might be similarly deceived in a case at hand.

Ethical Integrity

Recognition of the need to be true to one's own ethical thinking, to be consistent in the ethical standards one applies, to hold one's self to the same rigorous standards of evidence and proof to which one holds one's antagonists, to practice what one ethically advocates for others, and to honestly admit discrepancies and ethical inconsistencies in one's own thought and action.

Ethical Perseverance

Willingness and consciousness of the need to pursue ethical insights and truths despite difficulties, obstacles, and frustrations, firm adherence to ethical principles despite irrational opposition of others, a sense of the need to struggle with confusion and unsettled questions over an extended period of time, to achieve deeper ethical understanding or insight.

Fairmindedness

Willingness and consciousness of the need to entertain all ethical viewpoints sympathetically and to assess them with the same intellectual standards without reference to one's own feelings or vested interests, or the feeling or vested interests of one's friends, community, or nation; implies adherence to ethical standards without reference to one's own advantage or the advantage of one's group.

Conclusion

We have set out in this guide, as far as we are able, the foundations of ethical reasoning. Those foundations are not difficult to understand. The difficulty lies in the interplay of egocentric individuals with sociocentric groups. This interplay typically results in individuals internalizing group beliefs. Social ideology is then perceived as the truth. Individuals are unable to think beyond the beliefs of their society and culture. Ethical concepts are hopelessly confused with theological, ideological, and legal ones. This confusion often keeps people from doing what is ethically right.

If we recognize this universal problem and the basic logic of ethics, we can begin to develop the quality of our ethical reasoning. That is, if we choose, we are capable of learning to recognize when we are acting so as to enhance the well-being of others and when we are acting so as to harm them.

To do this, we must do the following:

1. **Learn to recognize the difference between ethical reasoning, and its counterfeits:** religious thinking (based on theology), conventional thinking (based on social folkways and taboos), political thinking (based on ideology), and legal thinking (based on political processes and social pressures).
2. **Learn to analyze ethical reasoning into its eight structural components:** purpose, question, information, inferences, concepts, assumptions, implications, point of view.
3. **Learn to assess ethical reasoning** for its clarity, accuracy, precision, depth, breadth, logic, and significance.
4. **Learn to distinguish simple and complex ethical questions.**
5. **Learn to use ethical terms with care and precision.**
6. **Develop ethical reasoning abilities.**
7. **Develop ethical traits.**

In other words, developing as an insightful ethical reasoner takes time and practice. It is an integral part of becoming an educated person and critical thinker. Through this mini-guide we have attempted to shed light on the foundations of ethical reasoning and thus on the components essential to human ethical development. These foundations enable one to recognize that ethical reasoning need not be a mystery. They bring ethics down to earth, to our basic capacity to recognize what harms and enhances the well being of sentient creatures.

Glossary⁴

Embedded in everyday uses of the English language are a multiplicity of concepts or terms that enable educated speakers of the language to identify ethical and unethical thought and behavior. In other words, established uses of language enable reasonable persons to distinguish acts that harm from those that enhance human welfare and the welfare of other sentient creatures. The first section of this glossary contains a network of terms that imply a wide range of negative ethical motivation and/or behavior, while the second contains a network of terms that imply a wide range of positive ethical motivation and/or behavior. We are confident that the definitions and/or commentary on terms in the first two sections can be corroborated in languages other than English by attending to synonyms in virtually any dictionary of an alternative language. For each term, only meanings relevant to ethics were included. This list is not intended to be all-inclusive, but rather to demonstrate the wide scope of ethical terms in everyday use in natural languages.

We have expanded our commentary for some of the terms that shed light in a general way on the motivation behind unethical and ethical behavior. These include egocentricity, ethnocentricity, egotism, rationalization, self-deception, self-interest, vested interest, sociocentricity, consistency, and fair-mindedness. When humans act in ways named by the negative ethical terms below, they engage in deception to hide from themselves and others the true nature of their behavior.

Negative Ethical Terms

Acquisitive: exerting effort to pursue wealth or material possessions to an excessive degree.

Avaricious: greed for money or riches, miserly. Implies a lack of concern for how one's monetary greed impacts the rights or needs of others.

Base: implies a putting of one's own interests ahead of one's obligations, especially due to greed or cowardice.

Beguile: implies the use of wiles to entice people into accepting what they should question; cheating or tricking someone for self-serving ends.

Bellikose: implies a warlike or hostile nature, suggesting a readiness to fight for any reason, however unjustified.

Belligerent: implies a readiness to fight or quarrel; to behave in an aggressively hostile way.

Betray: implies a breaking of faith with someone, while appearing to be loyal, or to lead astray, to seduce and then desert.

Bias: a form of prejudice usually implying an unjustifiable mental leaning in favor of or against someone or something.

Bigot: a person who holds blindly and intolerantly to a particular creed, opinion or belief system.

⁴ The definitions in this glossary were adapted primarily from entries in *Webster's New World Dictionary*.

- Brutal:** implies savage cruelty, violence, ruthlessness, that is devoid of any consideration for the feelings or well being of another.
- Bully:** a person who hurts, frightens, or tyrannizes over those smaller or weaker; to brow-beat, hurt or frighten one weaker than oneself.
- Callous:** lacking pity or mercy, insensitive to the feelings or well being of others.
- Chauvinistic:** showing militant, unreasoning, and boastful devotion to one's country, race, gender, etc., with contempt for other country's races, genders, etc., fanatic patriotism or jingoism.
- Cheat:** implies dishonesty or deception in dealing with someone in order to obtain some advantage or gain.
- Chicanery:** the use of clever but tricky or cunning talk in order to deceive, especially in legal actions.
- Covetous:** greed for something another person possesses, causing one to feel negative emotions if one fails to get that possession.
- Crafty:** implies artful cunning in contriving stratagems and subtle deceptions to achieve self-serving ends.
- Cruel:** causing unjustifiable pain and suffering to others, or deliberately seeking to do so without mercy or pity; enjoying the suffering of others.
- Cunning:** implies a cleverness or shrewd skillfulness at deception or circumvention.
- Deceive:** implies deliberate misrepresentation of facts by words or actions, generally to further one's ends.
- Defraud:** chiefly a legal term, stresses the use of deliberate deception in criminally depriving a person of his rights, such as property, money, etc.
- Delude:** to fool someone so completely that he accepts what is false as true, usually for unethical purposes.
- Discourteous:** impolite or rude, acting with indifference to the feelings of others.
- Dishonest:** implies the act of telling a lie, or of cheating, deceiving, stealing, etc. A person is dishonest when he tells a lie or is not forthcoming because he is motivated to protect his vested or selfish interest. Dishonesty would not apply to situations in which telling the truth would entail harming an innocent person. See lying.
- Disingenuous:** not straightforward, not candid or frank, insincere. People are usually disingenuous when they have a vested or personal interest in withholding the truth.
- Disloyal:** implies a breach of allegiance to someone. When disloyalty emerges from hypocrisy and bad faith, it is ethically wrong. However, disloyalty may emerge from one's ethical responsibility.
- Disrespectful:** discourteous, impolite, rude, demonstrating lack of respect for a person.

- Deceitful:** implies an intent to make someone believe what isn't true, as by giving a false appearance, deluding, misleading, using fraud etc. Deceit is a subtle and underhanded way of manipulating others to serve one's selfish interest.
- Domineering:** to rule over others in a harsh or arrogant way.
- Dupe:** to fool or cheat someone for personal gain.
- Duplicitous:** characterized by hypocritical cunning or deception; double-dealing.
- Egocentricity:** a tendency to view everything in relationship to oneself; to confuse immediate perception (how things seem) with reality; the tendency to be self-centered, or to consider only oneself and one's own interests; selfishness. One's desires, values, and beliefs (seeming to be self-evidently correct or superior to those of others) are often uncritically used as the norm of all judgment and experience. Egocentricity is one of the fundamental impediments to critical thinking and to sound ethical thinking. As one learns to think critically in a fair-minded way, one learns to become less egocentric and more just.
- Egotism:** constant excessive concern with oneself; selfish, self-centered.
- Ethnocentricity:** a tendency to view one's own race or culture as privileged, based on the belief that one's own group is superior to all others. Ethnocentrism is a form of egocentrism extended from the self to the group. Much uncritical or selfish critical thinking is either egocentric or ethnocentric in nature. ('Ethnocentrism' and 'sociocentrism' are used synonymously, for the most part, though 'sociocentricity' is broader, relating to any social group, including, for example, sociocentricity regarding one's profession.) Most humans privilege the beliefs, norms, and practices of their own culture.
- False friend:** stresses failure in devotion to someone who has a moral claim to one's support.
- Fanatic:** suggests the unreasonable over-zealousness of one who goes to absurd lengths to maintain or carry out unreasonable beliefs.
- Favoritism:** ignoring the rights, needs or desires of someone or some group in favor of some other person or group who one unjustifiably privileges.
- Fraud:** suggests deliberate deception in dishonestly depriving a person of rights, property, etc.
- Grasping:** unscrupulous eagerness for gain; seizing upon every opportunity to get what one wants (without respect to the rights, needs or desires of others).
- Greedy:** an insatiable desire to possess or acquire wealth or property far beyond what one needs or deserves; wanting or taking all one can get with no thought of the needs of others.
- Grudge:** a strong, continued feeling of hostility or ill will against someone over a real or perceived grievance, usually associated with unjustifiable resentment and petulance.

Hateful: feeling or showing hate; malicious; malevolent. A related word, *hatemonger*, refers to a propagandist who seeks to provoke hatred and prejudice, especially against minority groups.

Heartless: acting in a way insensitive to the feelings of others, lacking kindness, pitiless.

Hypocritical: pretending to be better than one is; assuming a false appearance of piety and virtue; insincere. Hypocrisy occurs whenever people expect others to meet a standard higher than what they require of themselves.

Ignoble: not noble in character; dishonorable, base, mean; suggests a lack of essential moral qualities.

Ill-mannered: rude or impolite; a tendency to treat others with disrespect.

Impatience: unreasonable annoyance due to reasonable delay.

Inhuman: stresses complete absence of the qualities expected of an ethically-sensitive person, qualities such as compassion, mercy, and benevolence.

Inconsiderate: without thought or consideration for others; implies a disregard for the feelings and circumstances of others and a lack of concern for their suffering.

Insincere: deceptive or hypocritical; not to be trusted. Insincerity often applies to situations where people are presenting themselves as forthright and honest when they are not being so.

Insensitive: an unfeeling response to those whose plight warrants our sympathy.

Intimidate: to force or deter by use of threats or violence.

Intolerance: lack of reasonable acceptance or respect for the opinions or beliefs of others, or for persons of other races, ethnicity, countries, backgrounds, etc.; bigoted.

Lying: to make a statement that one knows is false, especially with the intent to deceive. (Note: lying is sometimes justified when telling the truth would lead to harming the well being of an innocent person or persons).

Malice: implies deep-seated unjustifiable animosity that delights in seeing or causing others to suffer.

Malevolence: implies unfriendly or hostile feelings such as dispose one to wish harm on others.

Malignity: suggests extreme and virulent malevolence that is relentless in expressing itself.

Mean: ignoble, base, small-minded; pettily or contemptibly selfish, bad-tempered, disagreeable, or malicious; suggests a contemptible pettiness of character or conduct.

Menace: stresses the frightening or hostile character of that which threatens unjustifiably.

Merciless: having, feeling or showing no mercy or pity; cruel.

Murder: the malicious or premeditated killing of one human being by another; to kill inhumanely or barbarously, as in warfare.

Narrow-minded: looking at situations, people, groups in a provincial, biased, or limited way, causing one to distort reality; to fail to fully and completely see things as they are due to limitations in one's perspective.

Oppress: to trouble or plague people by a cruel or unjust use of power, to rule harshly.

Personal contradiction: an inconsistency in one's personal life, wherein one says one thing and does another, or uses a double standard, judging oneself and one's friends by an easier standard than that used for people one doesn't like; typically a form of hypocrisy accompanied by self-deception.

Pettiness: having or showing a tendency to make much of small matters; mean or small-minded.

Pitiless: callous refusal to be moved or influenced by the suffering of those one has wronged.

Prejudice: a judgment, belief, opinion, point of view—favorable or unfavorable—formed before the relevant facts are known; resistant to evidence and reason, or in disregard of facts which contradict it. Self-announced prejudice is rare. Prejudice almost always exists in obscured, rationalized, socially validated, functional forms. It enables people to sleep peacefully at night even while flagrantly abusing the rights of others. It enables people to get more of what they want, or to get it more easily. It is often sanctioned with a superabundance of pomp and self-righteousness.

Pugnacious: connotes aggressiveness and a willingness to initiate a fight.

Quarrelsome: suggest pettiness and eagerness to fight for little or no reason.

Racism: any program or practice of discrimination based on the belief that one race is superior to others in intelligence, character, etc., and that the superior race should remain pure.

Rancor: a continuing and bitter hate or ill will; deep spite or malice.

Rape: forcing a person to have sexual intercourse against that person's will.

Rationalize: to devise socially plausible explanations or excuses for one's actions, desires, and beliefs, when these are not one's actual motives. To rationalize is to give reasons that seem sound but are not honest and accurate. Rationalization is often used in situations in which one is pursuing one's vested interests while trying to maintain the appearance of high moral purpose. Politicians, for instance, are continually rationalizing their actions, implying that they are acting from high motives when they usually are acting as they are because they have received large donations from vested interest groups that profit from the action taken. Those who held slaves often rationalized that slavery was justified because the slaves were like children and had to be taken care of. Rationalization is a defense mechanism egocentric persons use to get what they want without having to face the true nature of their motivation. Rationalizations enable us to keep our actual motives beneath the level of consciousness.

- Rude:** implies a deliberate lack of consideration for others' feelings and connotes insolence or impudence.
- Ruthless:** implies a cruel and relentless disregard for the rights or welfare of others while pursuing a self-interested goal.
- Self-aggrandizement:** the act of making oneself more powerful, wealthy, etc., especially in a ruthless way.
- Self-centered:** overly-occupied or concerned with one's own affairs; selfish.
- Self-conceit:** too high an opinion of oneself, which may lead to inadvertently or deliberately unethical acts.
- Self-deception:** deceiving one's self about one's true motivations, character, identity, etc. One possible definition of the human species is "The Self-Deceiving Animal." Self-deception is a fundamental problem in human life and the cause of much human suffering. Overcoming self-deception through self-critical thinking is a fundamental goal of fair-minded critical thinking.
- Self-indulgence:** indulgence of one's own desires.
- Self-opinionated:** stubbornly and irrationally holding to one's opinions.
- Selfish:** overly concerned with one's own welfare or interests with little or no concern for others.
- Selfish interest:** pursuing what is perceived of as to one's advantage without regard for the rights and needs of others. To be selfish is to seek what one desires without due consideration for others. Being interested in one's personal welfare is one thing; trampling on the rights of others is another. As fundamentally egocentric creatures, humans are naturally given to pursue their selfish interests, using rationalizations and other forms of self-deception to disguise their true motives and the true character of what they are doing. To develop as fair-minded critical thinkers is to actively work to diminish the power of one's native selfishness, without sacrificing any of one's legitimate concern for one's welfare and long-term good.
- Sexism:** discrimination against, and prejudicial stereotyping of, women.
- Slavery:** implies absolute subjection to another; ownership by one person of another.
- Sly:** implies working to achieve one's ends by evasiveness, insinuation, furtiveness, or duplicity.
- Small-mindedness:** a form of narrow-minded pettiness and vindictiveness focusing on one's own interests.
- Social contradiction:** an inconsistency between what a society preaches and what it practices. In every society there is some degree of inconsistency between its image of itself and its actual character. Social contradiction typically correlates with human self-deception on the social or cultural level. Critical thinking is essential for the recognition of inconsistencies, and recognition is essential for reform and eventual integrity.

- Sociocentricity:** the assumption that one's own social group is inherently and self-evidently superior to all others. When a group or society sees itself as superior, and so considers its views as correct or as the only reasonable or justifiable views, and all its actions as justified, there is a tendency to presuppose this superiority in all of its thinking and thus, to think closed-mindedly. Dissent and doubt are viewed in a negative light and are usually considered disloyal and rejected. Few people recognize the sociocentric nature of much of their thought.
- Spite:** suggests a mean desire to hurt, annoy, or frustrate others, usually through petty vindictive acts.
- Spiteful:** a strong negative feeling toward another characterized by an inclination to hurt, humiliate, annoy or frustrate; implies a mean or malicious vindictiveness.
- Subterfuge:** suggests an artifice or stratagem used to deceive others in evading something or gaining some end.
- Swindle:** stresses the winning of a person's confidence in order to cheat or defraud him of money or property.
- Terrorize:** implies deliberate intention to cause fear by threat or intimidation.
- Thoughtless:** inconsiderate; not considerate of the rights and need of others.
- Torture:** inflicting severe pain upon someone to force a confession, get information, or to get revenge.
- Trickery:** implies the use of tricks or ruses in fraudulently deceiving others.
- Tyrannize:** rule with absolute and arbitrary power; to use authority harshly or cruelly; to be oppressive.
- Uncivil:** implies a disregarding of respectful treatment of others.
- Unfair:** any action that is partial, biased, or unjust.
- Unkind:** not sympathetic to or considerate of others; harsh, severe, cruel.
- Untruthful:** a softened substitute for lying, especially with reference to statements, reports, etc. To be untruthful is unethical when one is serving one's vested or selfish interest, but not when one is protecting an innocent person. See lying.
- Vested interest:** 1) involvement in promoting personal advantage, usually at the expense of others. 2) People functioning as a group to pursue collective selfish goals and exerting influences that enable them to profit at the expense of others. Many groups that lobby politicians do so to gain money, power, and advantage by the enactment of laws that specially favor them. The term 'vested interest' classically contrasts with the term 'public interest.' A group that lobbies Congress in the public interest is not seeking to gain special advantage for a comparative few, but protection for virtually all or the large majority. Preserving the quality of the air is a public interest. Building cheaper cars by including fewer safety features is a vested interest (it makes more money for car manufacturers). See selfish interest.

Vengeful/revengeful: Similar to vindictive, but more directly stresses the strong impulse to action and the actual seeking of vengeance.

Vindictive: tending to seek revenge on anyone who fails to do one's will, however unjustified one's will is.

Violence: unjust or callous use of force or power, as in physically inflicting pain and suffering on others.

Violent: acting with great physical force so as to injure another; often implies lack of control of one's emotions in the process.

Wily: implies the deceiving or ensnarement of others by subtle stratagems or ruses.

Zealot: implies extreme or excessive devotion to a cause and vehement activity in its support. Whereas a bigot holds blindly to his beliefs, a zealot goes beyond bigotry by acting on his beliefs in support of his "cause."

Positive Ethical Terms

Altruistic: implies a putting of the welfare of others before one's own interests and therefore stresses freedom from selfishness.

Attentive: showing constant thoughtfulness through repeated acts of consideration.

Benevolent: implies a charitable or altruistic inclination to do good.

Benign: suggests a mild or kindly nature and is especially applied to a gracious superior.

Charitable: implies the giving of money or other help to those in need.

Civil: polite or courteous, especially in merely a formal way; to refrain from rudeness.

Commiseration: implies deeply felt and openly expressed feelings of pity.

Compassion: to show deep sympathy for another, accompanied by the urge to help alleviate suffering.

Compunction: implies a twinge of consciousness for a wrong doing.

Condolence: implies a formal expression of sympathy with another in sorrow.

Considerateness: being concerned with someone's feelings and circumstances, particularly in helping them avoid stress, pain and suffering.

Consistency: to think, act, or speak in agreement with what has already been thought, done, or expressed; to have intellectual or moral integrity. Human life and thought are often subject to inconsistency, hypocrisy, and contradiction. We often say one thing and do another, judge ourselves and our friends by one standard and our antagonists by another, lean over backwards to justify what we want or negate what does not serve our interests. Similarly, we often confuse desires with needs, treating our desires as equivalent to needs, putting what we want above the basic needs of others. Logical and moral consistency are fundamental values of fair-minded critical thinking. Social conditioning and native egocentrism often obscure social contradictions, inconsistency, and hypocrisy.

- Courteous:** goes beyond civility and politeness to a sincere consideration of others that springs from an inherent thoughtfulness.
- Devotion:** suggests the giving up or applying of oneself to some commendable purpose.
- Dispassionate:** implies the absence of passion or strong emotion, hence connotes disinterested judgment.
- Empathy:** actively imagining oneself in the mind of another person in order to fully understand that other person; evenhandedness: impartial, fair, just.
- Exonerate:** to free from the imputation of guilt; declare or prove blameless; to relieve of the blame for a wrongdoing.
- Fair:** treating both or all sides alike without reference to one's own feelings or interests; just implies adherence to a standard of rightness or lawfulness without reference to one's own inclinations; impartial and unbiased both imply freedom from prejudice for or against any side; dispassionate implies the absence of passion or strong emotion, hence, connotes disinterested judgment; objective implies a viewing of persons or things without reference to oneself, one's interests, etc.
- Fair-mindedness:** a cultivated disposition of mind that enables the thinker to treat all perspectives relevant to an issue in an objective manner. It implies having a consciousness of the need to treat all viewpoints alike, without reference to one's own feelings or selfish interests, or the feelings or selfish interests of one's friend's, community or nation. It implies adherence to intellectual standards without reference to one's own advantage or the advantage of one's group.
- Faithful:** implies continued steadfast adherence to a person to which one is bound by oath, duty, or obligation. The situation would determine the extent to which being faithful would have ethical or unethical implications.
- Forbearance:** to control oneself under provocation; keep oneself in check.
- Forgiveness:** inclination to give up resentment against or the desire to punish; to stop being angry with.
- Friendly:** kindly, amicable, showing good will.
- Generous:** willing to give or share; usually implies a willingness to give liberally or in abundance.
- Gentle:** kindly, serene, patient; not violent, harsh or rough.
- Gracious:** having or showing kindness, courtesy; being merciful or compassionate.
- Guilt:** a painful feeling of self-reproachment resulting from a belief that one has done something wrong or unethical. Guilt is often associated with doing something contrary to social customs when one's behavior is not in fact ethically wrong.
- Honesty:** implies complete fairness and openness in one's dealings with others and stresses freedom from deceit or fraud.

- Honorable:** implies a keen sense of, and strict adherence to, what is considered ethically right.
- Humanitarian:** implies direct concern with promoting the welfare of humanity, especially through reducing pain and suffering.
- Impartial:** implies freedom from prejudice for or against any side.
- Integrity:** implies an incorruptible soundness of moral character, especially as displaying in fulfilling trusts.
- Justice:** implies adherence to a standard of rightness without reference to one's own inclinations.
- Kind:** behaving in a sympathetic, friendly, gentle, tenderhearted, or generous way.
- Kindly:** in a kind manner; characteristically kind.
- Loyal:** implies undeviating allegiance to a person, cause, institution, etc., which one feels morally bound to support or defend. The situation would determine whether loyalty would lead to ethical or unethical implications.
- Mercy:** a refraining from harming or punishing offenders, enemies, persons in one's power; kindness in excess of what may be demanded by fairness; forbearance and compassion; implies a kindness or forbearance, as in punishing offenders, in excess of what may be demanded by fairness; connoting kindness and sympathy to those in distress.
- Misgiving:** implies a disturbed state of mind resulting from a loss of confidence as to whether one is doing what is right.
- Moral:** relating to, dealing with, or capable of making the distinction between right and wrong in conduct.
- Noble:** having or showing high moral qualities or ideals.
- Objective:** implies a viewing of persons or situations without reference to one's own interests.
- Obliging:** implies a ready, often cheerful, desire to be helpful.
- Open-minded:** free from prejudice or bias, having a mind open to new ideas.
- Pardon:** to excuse a person for some minor fault; to release from further punishment for a crime.
- Philanthropic:** implies interest in general human welfare, especially as shown in large-scale gifts to charities, etc.
- Polite:** suggests a positive observance of etiquette in social behavior.
- Probity:** suggests honesty or rectitude that is tried and proved.
- Qualm:** implies a painful feeling of uneasiness arising from a consciousness that one is or may be acting wrongly.

- Reciprocity:** the act of entering empathically into the point of view or line of reasoning of others; learning to think as others do and by that means sympathetically assessing that thinking. (Reciprocity requires creative imagination as well as intellectual skill and a commitment to fairmindedness.)
- Remorse:** a deep, tortured sense of guilt felt over a wrong that one has done.
- Respect:** to show consideration for; to avoid intruding upon or interfering with.
- Scruple:** a feeling of hesitancy, doubt, or uneasiness arising from difficulty deciding what is ethically right.
- Scrupulous:** implies meticulous conscientiousness with regard to the morality of one's actions, aims, etc.
- Self-reproach:** blaming oneself for a perceived wrong-doing. Like guilt, self-reproach, may or may not result from an ethical wrong-doing.
- Selfless:** devoted to others' welfare or interests and not one's own; unselfish; altruistic.
- Self-sacrificing:** sacrificing oneself or one's interests for the benefit of others.
- Sympathy:** implies such kinship of feeling as enables one to really understand or even share the sorrow of another; entering into another's mental state or feelings.
- Tactful:** dealing with persons or difficult situations with a delicate sense of what is fitting and thus avoiding giving offense.
- Tender:** implies a softness or gentleness in one's relations with others that is expressive of warm affection, concern, etc.
- Thoughtful:** inclined to anticipate the needs and desires of others in order to make them comfortable.
- Tolerance:** implies the propensity to recognize and respect others' beliefs, practices, etc., without sharing them; freedom from bigotry or prejudice.
- Trustworthy:** implies that one can depend on another to be honest, reliable, just, and living a life of integrity.
- Unbiased:** implies freedom from prejudice for or against any side.
- Unselfish:** putting the good of others above one's own interests, altruistic, generous.
- Understanding:** sympathetic awareness of or rapport with.
- Upright:** implies an unbending moral straightness and integrity.
- Veracity:** specifically characterized by honesty as displayed in habitual truthfulness.
- Virtuous:** implies a morally excellent character connoting justice and integrity.
- Vindicate:** to clear a person through evidence of the unfairness of the charge.
- Warm-hearted:** suggests a sympathetic interest or affection characterized by cordiality, generosity, etc.

Universal Declaration of Human Rights

On December 10, 1948 the General Assembly of the United Nations adopted and proclaimed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights the full text of which appears in the following pages. Following this historic act the Assembly called upon all Member countries to publicize the text of the Declaration and “to cause it to be disseminated, displayed, read and expounded principally in schools and other educational institutions, without distinction based on the political status of countries or territories.”

PREAMBLE

Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world, Whereas disregard and contempt for human rights have resulted in barbarous acts which have outraged the conscience of mankind, and the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief and freedom from fear and want has been proclaimed as the highest aspiration of the common people,

Whereas it is essential, if man is not to be compelled to have recourse, as a last resort, to rebellion against tyranny and oppression, that human rights should be protected by the rule of law,

Whereas it is essential to promote the development of friendly relations between nations, Whereas the peoples of the United Nations have in the Charter reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women and have determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom,

Whereas Member States have pledged themselves to achieve, in co-operation with the United Nations, the promotion of universal respect for and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms,

Whereas a common understanding of these rights and freedoms is of the greatest importance for the full realization of this pledge,

Now, Therefore

THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY

proclaims

THIS UNIVERSAL DECLARATION OF HUMAN RIGHTS as a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction.

Article 1.

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Article 2.

Everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. Furthermore, no distinction shall be made on the basis of the political, jurisdictional or international status of the country or territory to which a person belongs, whether it be independent, trust, non-self-governing or under any other limitation of sovereignty.

Article 3.

Everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person.

Article 4.

No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms.

Article 5.

No one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.

Article 6.

Everyone has the right to recognition everywhere as a person before the law.

Article 7.

All are equal before the law and are entitled without any discrimination to equal protection of the law. All are entitled to equal protection against any discrimination in violation of this Declaration and against any incitement to such discrimination.

Article 8.

Everyone has the right to an effective remedy by the competent national tribunals for acts violating the fundamental rights granted him by the constitution or by law.

Article 9.

No one shall be subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or exile.

Article 10.

Everyone is entitled in full equality to a fair and public hearing by an independent and impartial tribunal, in the determination of his rights and obligations and of any criminal charge against him.

Article 11.

(1) Everyone charged with a penal offense has the right to be presumed innocent until proved guilty according to law in a public trial at which he has had all the guarantees necessary for his defense.

(2) No one shall be held guilty of any penal offense on account of any act or omission which did not constitute a penal offense, under national or international law, at the time

when it was committed. Nor shall a heavier penalty be imposed than the one that was applicable at the time the penal offense was committed.

Article 12.

No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation. Everyone has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.

Article 13.

(1) Everyone has the right to freedom of movement and residence within the borders of each state.

(2) Everyone has the right to leave any country, including his own, and to return to his country.

Article 14.

(1) Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution.

(2) This right may not be invoked in the case of prosecutions genuinely arising from non-political crimes or from acts contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

Article 15.

(1) Everyone has the right to a nationality.

(2) No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality.

Article 16.

(1) Men and women of full age, without any limitation due to race, nationality or religion, have the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to marriage, during marriage and at its dissolution.

(2) Marriage shall be entered into only with the free and full consent of the intending spouses.

(3) The family is the natural and fundamental group unit of society and is entitled to protection by society and the State.

Article 17.

(1) Everyone has the right to own property alone as well as in association with others.

(2) No one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his property.

Article 18.

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.

Article 19.

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Article 20.

- (1) Everyone has the right to freedom of peaceful assembly and association.
- (2) No one may be compelled to belong to an association.

Article 21.

- (1) Everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, directly or through freely chosen representatives.
- (2) Everyone has the right of equal access to public service in his country.
- (3) The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this will shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures.

Article 22.

Everyone, as a member of society, has the right to social security and is entitled to realization, through national effort and international co-operation and in accordance with the organization and resources of each State, of the economic, social and cultural rights indispensable for his dignity and the free development of his personality.

Article 23.

- (1) Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favourable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.
- (2) Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work.
- (3) Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection.
- (4) Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests.

Article 24.

Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay.

Article 25.

- (1) Everyone has the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services, and the right to security in the event of unemployment, sickness, disability, widowhood, old age or other lack of livelihood in circumstances beyond his control.
- (2) Motherhood and childhood are entitled to special care and assistance. All children, whether born in or out of wedlock, shall enjoy the same social protection.

Article 26.

- (1) Everyone has the right to education. Education shall be free, at least in the elementary and fundamental stages. Elementary education shall be compulsory. Technical and professional education shall be made generally available and higher education shall be equally accessible to all on the basis of merit.

(2) Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace.

(3) Parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children.

Article 27.

(1) Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.

(2) Everyone has the right to the protection of the moral and material interests resulting from any scientific, literary or artistic production of which he is the author.

Article 28.

Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized.

Article 29.

(1) Everyone has duties to the community in which alone the free and full development of his personality is possible.

(2) In the exercise of his rights and freedoms, everyone shall be subject only to such limitations as are determined by law solely for the purpose of securing due recognition and respect for the rights and freedoms of others and of meeting the just requirements of morality, public order and the general welfare in a democratic society.

(3) These rights and freedoms may in no case be exercised contrary to the purposes and principles of the United Nations.

Article 30.

Nothing in this Declaration may be interpreted as implying for any State, group or person any right to engage in any activity or to perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms set forth herein.

Building a Community of Intellectual Excellence

The Center for Critical Thinking and Moral Critique and the Foundation for Critical Thinking, two sister educational non-profit organizations, work closely together to promote educational reform. We seek to promote essential change in education and society through the cultivation of fairminded critical thinking. Critical thinking is essential if we are to get to the root of our problems and develop reasonable solutions. After all, the quality of everything we do is determined by the quality of our thinking.

Whereas society commonly promotes values laden with superficial, immediate “benefits,” critical thinking cultivates substance and true intellectual discipline. Critical thinking asks much from us, our students, and our colleagues. It entails rigorous self-reflection and openmindedness—the keys to significant change. Critical thinking requires the cultivation of core intellectual virtues such as intellectual humility, perseverance, integrity, and responsibility. Nothing of real value comes easily; a rich intellectual environment—alive with curious and determined students—is possible only with critical thinking at the foundation of the educational process.

We do not just advocate educational and social reform based on critical thinking, we develop and build practical alternatives. In a world of accelerating change, intensifying complexity, and increasing interdependence, critical thinking is now a requirement for economic and social survival. Join us as we strive to make critical thinking a core social value and a key organizing concept for all education.

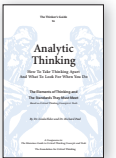
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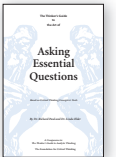
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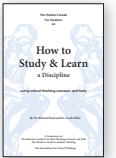
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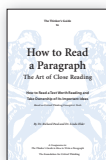
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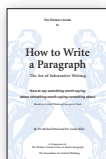
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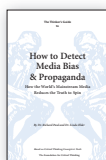
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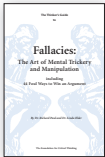
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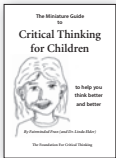
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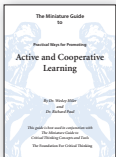


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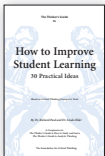


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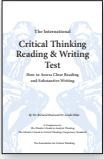
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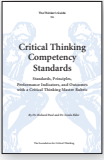
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The Foundation for Critical Thinking

The Foundation for Critical Thinking seeks to promote essential change in education and society through the cultivation of fair-minded critical thinking, thinking predisposed toward intellectual empathy, humility, perseverance, integrity, and responsibility. A rich intellectual environment is possible only with critical thinking at the foundation of education. Why? Because only when students learn to think through the content they are learning in a deep and substantive way can they apply what they are learning in their lives. Moreover, in a world of accelerating change, intensifying complexity, and increasing interdependence, critical thinking is now a requirement for economic and social survival. Contact us to learn about our publications, videos, workshops, conferences, and professional development programs.

About the Authors

Dr. Linda Elder is an educational psychologist who has taught both psychology and critical thinking at the college level. She is the President of the Foundation for Critical Thinking and the Executive Director of the Center for Critical Thinking. Dr. Elder has done original research into the relation of thought and emotion, the cognitive and the affective, and has developed an original theory of the stages of critical thinking development. She has authored and co-authored a series of articles on critical thinking including a column on critical thinking for the *Journal of Developmental Education*. She has co-authored two books on critical thinking. She is a dynamic presenter with extensive experience in leading seminars on the relationship between the human mind and critical thinking.



Dr. Richard Paul is a major leader in the international critical thinking movement. He is Director of Research at the Center for Critical Thinking, and the Chair of the National Council for Excellence in Critical Thinking, author of seven books and more than 200 articles on critical thinking. Dr. Paul has given hundreds of workshops at the K–12 level and made a series of eight critical thinking video programs for PBS. He served as Professor of Philosophy (teaching critical thinking classes) at Sonoma State University for more than twenty years. His views on critical thinking have been canvassed in *New York Times*, *Education Week*, the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *American Teacher*, *Educational Leadership*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News and World Report*, and *Reader's Digest*.



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