

Summary of Major Concepts

What does the word ethical mean? According to Webster's Third New International Dictionary (1993) it means:

Relating to or involving questions of right and wrong; being in accord with approved standards of behavior or a socially or professionally accepted code; conforming to professionally endorsed principles and practices.

Ethical includes: morals, values, tolerance, and discipline; all these terms are sometimes used interchangeably with *ethics*.

The core values undergirding ethical thinking are the principles of:

1. Nonmaleficence – Do no harm;
2. Beneficence – Promote good;
3. Justice – Equality and right; fairness.

Rushworth Kidder suggests that decision-making is driven by our core values, morals and integrity, and that some decisions fall into one of two categories: Moral Temptations and Ethical Dilemmas.

Moral Temptations

A moral temptation is a decision about right vs. wrong and is based clearly on the core values that each person possesses. There are three ways of being wrong:

- Violation of the law;
- Departure from the truth;
- Deviation from moral rectitude.

Decisions about right vs. wrong can be assessed by testing the idea according to the following principles:

The Legal Test: Is law-breaking involved? If yes, the issue is one of obedience to the enforceable laws of the land, as opposed to the unenforceable canons of moral code. If the answer is, "Yes it is legal" there are three other tests for thinking about right vs. wrong:

1. The Stench Test: Does this course of action have about it an indefinable odor of corruption that makes you recoil? This is a "gut test" and a "gut level" determination. Always listen to your gut because it tests your internal code of morality at the psychological level.
2. The Front Page Test: How would you feel if news about what you are about to do appeared tomorrow morning on the front pages of the nation's newspapers? What would be your response if a decision made in private suddenly became public? This is a test of your social mores.
3. The Mom Test: "If I were my Mother, what would I do?" or "If Mom knew about this, what would she think?" This is about the moral exemplar who cares deeply about you and means a great deal to you. Put yourself in another's shoes and think about what you are on the verge of doing. It might well be wrong.

All these fall into the category of Moral Temptation, or Right vs. Wrong.

Ethical Dilemmas

Ethical Dilemmas are defined by Kidder at “right vs. right” and “at the heart of our toughest choices.” It is “right,” on the one hand, to protect the Spotted Owl, and “right,” on the other hand, to protect jobs. They are genuine dilemmas precisely because each side is firmly rooted in our basic, core values. When people encounter these tough choices, it is rarely because they are facing a moral temptation (that is, a choice between right vs. wrong).

Kidder’s Four Paradigms for Understanding Ethical Dilemmas:

1. Truth vs. Loyalty: Truth, for most people, is conformity with facts or reality. Loyalty involves allegiance to a person, corporation or body of people, a government, or set of ideas to which one owes fidelity. It is right to stand on truth. It is right to be loyal.
2. Individual vs. Community: Individualism assumes that in a society where each person vigorously pursues his own interests, the social good would automatically emerge. As such, the rights of the individual are to be preserved. By “community” it is meant that the needs of the majority outweigh the interests of the individual. Communities speak to us in a moral voice. They lay claims on their members. It is right to consider the individual. It is right to consider the community.
3. Short-Term vs. Long-Term: Short-term concerns are usually associated with the satisfaction of current needs in such a way as to preserve the possibility of a future. Long-term concerns are usually defined by the projection of future interests in such a way that there will be ample means to meet future required needs. It is right to think and plan short-term. It is right to think and plan long-term.
4. Justice vs. Mercy: Justice urges us to stick by our principles, hold to the rules despite the pressures of the moment, and pursue fairness without attention to personalities or situations. Mercy urges us to care for the peculiar needs of individuals case by case and to seek benevolence in every way possible. It is right to be merciful. It is right to enforce justice.

How is understanding the type of dilemma helpful?

- It helps us separate right from wrong;
- It helps us cut through mystery, complexity, and confusion;
- it helps us strip away extraneous detail and get to the heart of the matter.

Once the dilemma is identified it is often very helpful to understand how one thinks about ethical decisions.

Resolution Principles

Kidder draws from the field of Moral Philosophy to describe different ways of thinking about ethical decision making. He describes three:

1. Ends Based: Known to philosophers as “utilitarianism,” this principle is best known by the maxim “Do whatever produces the greatest good for the greatest number.”

2. Rules Based: This principle is best known as the “categorical imperative.” Rules exist for a purpose: they promote order and justice and should be followed. Follow the principle that you want others to follow. “Stick to your principles and let the chips fall where they may.”

3. Care Based: Putting love for others first. It is most associated with the Golden Rule: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

Once it is determined that the problem is not a right vs. wrong, one might say an ethical dilemma exists. One examines how one is thinking about the situation and begins to try and resolve the dilemma.

The Ethical Decision Making Process

Kidder lays out nine checkpoints for Ethical Decision Making:

1. Recognize there is a moral issue;
2. Determine the actor (who does the problem belong to?);
3. Gather the relevant facts;
4. Test for right vs. wrong issues;
5. Test for right vs. right paradigms;
6. Apply the resolution principles;
7. Investigate the “trilemma” option;
8. Make the decision;
9. Revisit and reflect on the decision.

The paradigms describe ethical problems as an “either/or” -- either Truth or Loyalty, either Justice or Mercy. Frequently, as stated in step 7 of the checkpoints, there is a third option. Kidder calls this the “trilemma” option. Is there a third option that addresses the questions and supports both sides in this “right vs. right” argument? Can I create a “Win-Win” in this situation? “Win-Win” is the best obvious choice and step 7 is especially important to the process.

Step 8 is also extremely important and is the most frequently overlooked step in the process. People tend to process the problem but never make a decision or act. It is important to come to a conclusion, decide, and act, and then revisit and reflect.

Kidder, R. M. (1996). *How good people make tough choices: Resolving the dilemmas of ethical living* (1st Fireside ed.). New York: Simon & Schuster.