

## Ethical Reasoning for Difficult Decisions

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***Professionals who can use an ethical framework of reasoning will seldom make decisions that create needless suffering or damage.***

As children, we act from values instilled during our upbringing, and thereafter we make decisions based on "what feels right." As adults, we retain our ability to do this, but we can develop improved capacity for making wise decisions by learning to employ an ethical framework of reasoning. Those with such a framework have a huge life advantage over those who can act only based on what feels right.

Consider a scenario that plays out daily in various forms at every campus in the country.

An intelligent, attractive, and popular student overextends herself with activities, puts off completing an important graded paper for a day and thereby misses the deadline for submission. The syllabus and the assignment specify that no late papers can be accepted, but she realized that she could not meet all her obligations, and so moved her paper to a lower priority. She then did a good job of completing the paper, appeared in the professor's office on the afternoon of the day after the deadline, and apologized sincerely as she handed him the paper. The professor immediately recognized her as one of his brightest and most likable students in his class. Yet, he says: "I'm sorry, I can't accept this." The student never expected this reaction. She enjoys this professor and trusts him. What just happened? Is the professor being too rigid and possibly cruel?

An ethical decision minimizes damage and produces the greatest benefits. It is based on considering four directives: (1) beneficence—"do good," (2) nonmaleficence—"do no harm," (3) justice—"treat equals as equals" and (4) autonomy—"respect free will." Some directives will seem in conflict, and we must resolve them by considering the other directives. Note well: we must consider *all four* in an ethical decision. This framework of reasoning results from work over several centuries by philosophers, and it constitutes the basis for modern codes of ethics found in nearly every profession.

In the case above, we might well describe this student as a wonderful person with noble aspirations who would never intentionally cause harm. She exercised her autonomy to provide herself the extra day to work on the paper. However, she failed to consider the principle of justice. In doing so, she missed comprehending both the consequences of her choice and the position in which she was placing others.

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The professor wanted to do good by helping his student and recognized that by not accepting the paper he was doing harm by an action that will lower her grade. Yet, he considered this in the context of the other three directives. The student exercised her autonomy in her priorities. He must respect her choice to do that. Yet, he realized her

choice complicated his ability to exercise the directive of justice. Justice means that he must treat all his students equally, whether they are attractive, unattractive, popular, or unpleasant. Doing good as a special case for one student whom he likes requires his placing the rest of his class on a different standard. This could do immense damage to the learning environment as other students learn about this special treatment and feel devalued. The student exercised her autonomy, and her choice, not the professor's, produced consequences. In a sound ethical decision, he refuses to accept the paper.

In that moment, the professor is not doing what feels good. A pleasant moment for him would be the satisfaction of doing another a favor. Yet, if he acts in a way to make this a happy moment by smiling and saying "No problem, I understand what it means to be too busy," it would constitute an unethical decision. Had the student considered justice and the position she was putting the professor into, she would likely have chosen a different action through employing a reasoning system such as that shown in Figure 1. Doing what feels right in the moment often produces terrible consequences.

Ability to act ethically requires high-level reasoning abilities. It comes slowly and only through mindful practice.

	<b>Directives -- (must include all four)</b>			
	<b>Autonomy</b>	<b>Beneficence</b>	<b>Nonmaleficence</b>	<b>Justice</b>
<b>Well-founded ethical decision</b>	Includes and resolves fully in context with others. Considers all parties affected.	Includes and resolves fully in context with others. Considers all parties affected.	Includes and resolves fully in context with others. Considers all parties affected.	Includes and resolves fully in context with others. Considers all parties affected.
<b>Marginal ethical decision</b>	Considered but not resolved in context with other directives, or does not consider all parties affected	Considered but not resolved in context with other directives, or does not consider all parties affected	Considered but not resolved in context with other directives, or does not consider all parties affected	Considered but not resolved in context with other directives, or does not consider all parties affected
<b>Unacceptable ethical decision</b>	Not considered	Not considered	Not considered	Not considered

**Figure 1. Rubric for constructing an ethical decision. Addressing all four boxes in the top line constitutes a high quality response.**

**Reflective Exercises:**

1. A student working on a term paper discovers a pertinent paper on the web that has excellent information. The student cuts and pastes key pieces into his/her own paper without crediting the source. Analyze this action based on the four directives of ethics and decide if this violates ethics.
  
2. The professor reads the term paper above and immediately recognizes the source of key text derives from an uncredited paper. Place yourself in the role of the professor, use the four directives above and make an ethical decision for action. In the parties affected, consider the student, the other students in the class, and yourself as professor.
  
3. Students receive different grades on tests and assignments. Does this violate the directive of justice: “treat equals as equals?”
  
4. Visit the Code of Ethics of the American Psychological Association at <http://www.apa.org/ethics/code/index.aspx> and note its similarity to the directives (Figure 1) in this chapter. If during leisure time you Google the philosopher, “Immanuel Kant,” you will see how centuries-old philosophy forms the foundation of ethics in modern professional practice.
  
5. Complete the sentence as a short list: “When I act ethically as a scholar I....” List what you DO rather than what you do not do. As soon as you have three or four actions in your list, see how each one relates to the four directives in the rubric of this chapter.
  
6. Look at the following acts often associated with academic integrity and professional behavior. Some violate an ethical component, some violate more than one, and some violate none. Use the Figure 1 of this section to complete the following table.

<b>Action</b>	<b>Ethical Directive Violated, if any</b>
1. Cutting and pasting a photo from the Web into your report without crediting the source.	
2. Frequently coming to class late	
3. Presenting other people's ideas without giving them appropriate credit	
4. Allowing others to appropriate your ideas without due credit	
5. Studying together with your friends	
6. A professor assigning a grade based on how well he/she likes the student	
7. A student assigning a rating on a student form based upon how well he/she likes the professor	

8. Buying a term paper from a commercial web service to submit as your work	
9. Making up facts and figures and offering them as evidence in a report	
10. Humiliating a fellow student who gives a wrong answer or is a slow learner	
11. Treating others pleasantly (kiss up) or unpleasantly (kick down) according to their social or job status.	
12. Citing in good faith a paper or speech that you later discover was plagiarized.	
13. Gossiping about a co-worker or supervisor	
14. Frequently missing class	
15. Half-heartedly working with a colleague because of their race or gender orientation	
16. Refusing to help another person because of his/her attractiveness or general popularity in the class, school or community.	
17. "Coasting" and not contributing to team on a team project.	
18. Being on a team and not doing something about a member's "coasting" and not contributing.	

7. Visit <http://www.usc.edu/student-affairs/student-conduct/aiquiz.html> and take USC's "Quiz on Academic Integrity." Did any answers that you furnished conflict with the answers the site provided?

8. When you encounter a difficult decision, return to this chapter, screen your dilemma through the four ethical directives, and then decide your action.

## References

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