

## What We Ought to Do: Ethics as a Personal Decision-Making Model

Ask any ten people to define ethics and the answers received will likely be just as varied as the individuals themselves. Ethics, however, like many other abstract and widely misunderstood concepts, is not as objective as one might expect. While various definitions exist for “ethics”, clearly not all of them can be correct. Much more than just following the conscience or obeying the law, ethics is a set of values and standards – a decision-making model, at the most basic level – that can and should be constantly evolving as individuals gain more experience and knowledge and a deeper understanding of the world.

Socrates was the first to reduce ethics to one question: What ought one to do? Centuries later, every individual is still charged with answering this question in an ethical way. As humans, every day we are confronted with situations that require an ethical approach: Should I study hard or cheat on my exam? Should I tell the truth or a lie? Should I keep or return the money I found on the sidewalk? These are ethical questions that require active decision-making by a fully engaged member of society.

A permanent, concise definition of ethics, however, is difficult and probably impossible to pin down. It is by its very nature (and the nature of the world) always being shaped and molded by members of society. While we cannot say with complete certainty what ethics is, we can progress toward a clearer understanding of ethics by eliminating what it is not.

Many people mistakenly believe that ethics is the same as religion or other kind of moral code. Most religions do include ethics as a major part of their tenets, and most define ethics rather uniformly, but ethics is not and cannot be exclusively religious. If it were, only religious individuals could be ethical. Similarly, ethics should not be equated with doing what feels best. Feelings and ethics are often at odds simply because what feels best is very often not ethical at all.

Perhaps, then, ethics is the same as obeying laws? It is not quite true. The vast majority of systems of law throughout the world do feature some sort of merging of law with ethics, but they are not the same simply because laws are not always ethical. For example, two hundred years ago the American system of law still had slavery on the books as legal. Is slavery ethical? Despite its former legality, virtually everyone would agree that it is not and has never been. Another more global example is South Africa's apartheid laws, which were not repealed until very recently in human history. Apartheid, like slavery, was legal and perfectly normal but clearly not ethical. Therefore, someone who always follows the law cannot necessarily be described as ethical.

Religion, conscience and law cannot be relied upon to tell us what ethics is, so where should we look for the answer? Some people turn to society for clues as to what is ethical, but this is just as unreliable and arbitrary. Within any society, opinions are as numerous as individuals themselves and very often no real consensus is reached on a given issue. Take, for example, the highly controversial issue of the death penalty. Some people are strongly supportive of it, while others find it morally reprehensible. If we attempt to take our ethical cues from society, which side do we take? While all sides could probably make a strong ethical argument, it remains impossible to choose the truly ethical choice.

Undoubtedly, defining ethics is clearly a daunting task, and it is possible (even probable) that there is no one correct definition. According to Velasquez et al, ethics “refers to well-founded standards of right and wrong that prescribe what humans ought to do, usually in terms of rights, obligations, benefits to society, fairness, or specific virtues” (1987). They go on to explain that these standards are the same that keep people from murdering, stealing and otherwise causing harm; conversely, they also encourage people to be loyal, honest and basically good.

However, the most important part of Velasquez et al’s definition of ethics is “well-

founded”. They claim that ethics must, above all else, be “reasonable”, “consistent” and “solidly-based”. Laws are a slightly different story, but feelings, religion and societal consensuses can hardly ever be so charitably described. This is why it is impossible to take reliable ethical cues from any external entities: ethical standards – a person’s code for living as a thoughtful and contributing member of society - must be developed personally and individually in order to regularly make sense, be widely applicable and provide the individual with a dependable ethical compass with which to navigate.

Therefore, individuals should define their ethical code based on what standards seem to them most “reasonable”, “consistent” and “solidly-based”. This is a personal decision that cannot be reached without introspection and the discovery of inner conflict with the world. Ethics is characterized by differences of opinion; if it were not, there would be no need to debate its definition. A final personal definition of ethics cannot and probably should not ever be reached. As the world changes, values shift and new situations arise, individuals must always be reevaluating and rethinking their ethical code.

## Works Cited

Velasquez, M., Andre, C., Shanks, T., and Meyer, M. "What is Ethics?" *Issues in Ethics*. Fall 1987. 25 September 2010.

<http://www.scu.edu/ethics/practicing/decision/whatisethics.html>.