

How Good People Make Tough Choices: Resolving the Dilemmas of Ethical Living

By Rush Kidder

Difficult Decisions are tough. Ethics is not a blind impartiality, doling out right and wrong according to some stone-cold canon of ancient and immutable law. **It's a warm and supremely human activity that cares enough for others to want right to prevail.**

In a sense, then, ethical fitness is like character—which, we've been told, is what you are in the dark, when no one's looking. Lord Moulton's definition of ethics as "obedience to the unenforceable" helps us understand such obligations.

Ethical codes are helpful – here are some examples:

- **The Boy Scout Law.** A Scout is: Trustworthy Loyal Helpful Friendly Courteous Kind Obedient Cheerful Thrifty Brave Clean Reverent
- **The West Point Honor Code.** Among the most concise of ethical codes, the U.S. Army's statement takes just thirteen words to define the Academy's standard: "A cadet does not lie, cheat, or steal, or tolerate those who do."
- **The Rotary Four-Way Test.** The linchpin of Rotary International's ethical practice, this code takes form in still another syntax: a series of questions. "Of the things we think, say, or do," this test asks,
 - Is it the TRUTH?
 - Is it FAIR to all concerned?
 - Will it build GOODWILL and BETTER FRIENDSHIPS?
 - Will it be BENEFICIAL to all concerned?

Really tough choices don't center on right versus wrong. They involve right versus right. We can call right-versus-right choices "ethical dilemmas". They are genuine dilemmas precisely because each side is firmly rooted in one of our basic, core values.

Four such dilemmas are so common to our experience that they stand as models, patterns, or paradigms. They are:

1. **Truth versus loyalty**
 - – Honesty/Integrity vs. Commitment & promise keeping
2. **Individual versus community**
 - – "Me" vs. "Them"
3. **Short-term versus long-term**
 - – Now vs. Then, and the consequences for each
4. **Justice versus mercy**
 - – fairness/equity vs. love & compassion

How to solve

Ends-based thinking. Known to philosophers as utilitarianism, this principle is best known by the maxim **“Do whatever produces the greatest good for the greatest number of people.”** Utilitarianism examines possible results and picks one that produces the most good over the greatest range.

Rule-based thinking. Often associated with the German philosopher Immanuel Kant, this principle is best known by what Kant somewhat obtusely called “the categorical imperative” Simply put, that means, **“Follow only the principle that you want everyone else to follow.”**

Care-based thinking. Putting love for others first, this third principle manifests in the Golden Rule: **“Do to others what you would like them to do to you.”**

Moral judgement

Lawrence Kohlberg who, in studies of boys between ten and sixteen undertaken in the 1950s, first found that children’s responses to hypothetical moral dilemmas could be categorized into his “six stages of moral judgment”

1. **In Stage One**, Kohlberg finds no higher reason for doing right than fear of punishment or respect for authority.
2. **Stage Two** is characterized by increasing individualism and a sense of equal exchange and fairness. These two stages Kohlberg labels “Pre-conventional.”

In the two following “Conventional” stages, children increasingly take account of others.

3. **In Stage Three**, they pay special attention to the expectations of those around them and the stereotypes of “good” behavior. They also develop a sense of caring based on the Golden Rule and on values such as trust, loyalty, respect, and gratitude.
4. **By Stage Four**, recognizing for the first time that a generalized moral system defines the rules and roles, they strive to fulfill agreed-upon duties.

The final “Post-conventional” or “Principled” stages rise toward universal moral precepts.

5. **In Stage Five**, while still believing that values are largely relative to one’s own group, adults uphold these values out of regard for a social contract that requires obedience to shared laws. Asked what is right, they turn to utilitarianism, striving to make rational calculations of the greatest good for the greatest number.
6. **Stage Six**, moving beyond such calculations, sees the development of personal commitment to universal moral principles such as justice, equal human rights, and individual dignity.

So, how do we resolve dilemmas?

The following nine steps, or checkpoints, suggest an orderly sequence for dealing with the admittedly disorderly and sometimes downright confusing domain of ethical issues.

1. **Recognize that there is a moral issue.** This step is vitally important for two reasons. First, it requires us to identify issues needing attention, rather than to brush past them without another look. Second, it requires us to sift genuinely moral questions from those that merely involve manners and social conventions—or that take us into realms of conflicting values that are not so much moral as economic, technological, or aesthetic.
2. **Determine the actor.** If this is a moral issue, whose is it? Is it mine? The operative distinction here is not whether I am or am not involved. In matters of ethics, we're all involved. The question is not whether I am involved but whether I am responsible—whether I am morally obligated and empowered to do anything in the face of the moral issues raised.
3. **Gather the relevant facts.** Good decision-making requires good reporting. That is especially true in making ethical decisions. Because ethics does not happen in a theoretical vacuum but in the push and pull of real experience, where details determine motives and character is reflected in context.
4. **Test for right-versus-wrong issues.** Does the case at hand involve wrongdoing? The **legal test** asks whether lawbreaking is involved. The **regulations test** may kick in even when the law is silent. Are there clearly understood and widely shared codes of conduct with a profession—a journalist's need to protect sources, a real-estate agent's obligation to recognize that a potential client "belongs" to a colleague who made a prior contact? **The stench test**, relying on moral intuition, is a gut-level determination. Does this course of action have about it an indefinable odor of corruption that makes you (and perhaps others) recoil and look askance? **The front-page test** asks, "How would you feel if what you are about to do showed up tomorrow morning on the front pages of the nation's newspapers?" **The Mom test** asks, "If I were my mother, would I do this?" The focus here is not only on your mother, of course, but on any moral exemplar who cares deeply about you and means a lot to you.
5. **Test for right-versus-right paradigms.** If the issue at hand passes the right-wrong tests, the next question is, What sort of dilemma is this?
6. **Apply the resolution principles.** Once the choice between the two sides is clearly articulated, the three resolution principles can be brought to bear: the ends-based or utilitarian principle; the rule-based or Kantian principle; and the care-based principle based on the Golden Rule.

7. **Investigate the “trilemma” options.** This step, listed here for convenience, can kick into action at any point throughout this process. Is there, it asks, a third way through this dilemma?
8. **Make the decision.** This step, surprisingly, is sometimes overlooked. Perhaps that’s because the intellectual wrestling required in the previous steps can seem exhaustive, leaving little energy for the final decision.
9. **Revisit and reflect on the decision.** When the tumult and shouting have died and the case is more or less closed, go back over the decision-making process and seek its lessons.