Ethics

Personal rules for behavior.

Ethics are rules for behavior, based on beliefs about how things should be. Ethical statements involve: 1) assumptions about humans and their capacities; 2) logical rules extending from these assumptions; and 3) notions of what is good and desirable.

Ethical systems (sets of rules for acceptable behavior) concern the “shoulds” and “should nots” of life, the principles and values on which human relations are based.

The assessment of whether a behavior is ethical is divided into four categories, or domains: consequences, actions, character, and motive. In the domain of consequences, a behavior is determined to be “right” or “wrong” based on the results of the action, whereas the domain of actions looks only at the act itself. The domain of character looks at whether a person’s overall character is ethical; a person who is deemed as “virtuous” has consistently ethical behavior. The motive domain evaluates a person’s intentions, regardless of the consequences. It considers whether the person intended to do good, even if the result was bad. A behavior may be deemed “ethical” according to one domain of assessment, but appear “unethical” according to another. For example, a poor person steals a small amount of food to feed her starving child from a wealthy, well-fed person who does not even notice that the food is missing. This act would be considered ethical in the domain of consequences, since the child can be fed, and motive, since the person is caring for her child, but unethical in the domain of actions, because stealing in itself is wrong. The poor person’s general behavior would have to be evaluated to determine whether she is ethical in the domain of character.

Ethics can also be divided into two main schools, absolutism and relativism. Absolutists believe that ethical rules are fixed standards (for example, stealing is always wrong, no matter what the circumstances). Relativists, on the other hand, believe that all ethics are subject to context (for example, stealing may be wrong in certain circumstances but not in others). Few people are actually pure absolutists or pure relativists, but rather fall somewhere along the spectrum between the two extremes, tending towards one or the other. Most who tend towards absolutism will allow for special circumstances and bend the rules on occasion, while those who tend towards relativism will admit to some universal standards that form a “bottom line” of behavior.

In order to develop ethical maturity, people must have moral awareness and moral agency (or autonomy). Moral awareness is the ability to recognize the ethical element of a given situation. For some, eating beef is simply an act of appetite and habit, with no thought given to its ethical implications. For others, whether to eat beef is a complicated moral question involving the ethics of land use (grazing cattle vs. growing food crops), conservation (the destruction of rainforests to increase grazing grounds), and the global economy (the transformation of underdeveloped countries into cattle farms for Western industrialized nations). Moral agency or autonomy means the freedom to choose between alternative behaviors. A person cannot develop ethical maturity without being able to choose from alternatives. Without moral awareness and moral agency, ethics become meaningless because behaviors are simply automatic, or forced.

The question of moral agency becomes complicated by the tendency to equate ethical behavior with obedience. Because humans first learn ethics as small children from adult authority figures, our initial understanding of ethics is “obeying.” When we do what adults want us to, we are told we are “good.” If we disobey, we are “bad.” Some people never outgrow this, continuing throughout life to believe that being “good” means obeying external authorities. These people have never developed a sense of moral agency, even though they are capable of making choices. A prime example of this dilemma is the numerous soldiers and citizens who carried out or assisted in the torture and murder of millions of Jews, Russians, gays, and others in the Holocaust of World War II. Do their claims that they were “just following orders” exempt them from ethical responsibility? Likewise, in situations of oppression where people have been traumatized into blind obedience to their oppressors, are the oppressed ethically responsible for their actions, or do they lack moral agency? These are difficult questions with no clear answers, but they do illuminate the essential character of freedom to choose in the development of ethical maturity.

Ethical maturity involves accepting full responsibility for one’s ethical choices and their consequences. An ethically mature person obeys her or his own, inner authority (or conscience), rather than an outside authority figure. Moving from the infantile state of externally determined obedience to the mature state of self-determin-
nation is a long and difficult process, however. In her 1994 book, psychologist Elizabeth McGrath presents nine stages of ethical development.

- **Stage 1** = The person sees the world in polar terms of we-right-good versus they-wrong-bad. Right answers for everything are known to an authority whose role is to mediate or teach them.

- **Stage 2** = The person perceives diversity of opinion and uncertainty and accounts for these as confusion engendered by poorly qualified authorities or as exercises designed to encourage individuals to find their own system.

- **Stage 3** = The person accepts diversity and uncertainty as legitimate, but only as temporary conditions in areas for which the authority has not yet found an answer. The perceived uncertainty on the part of the so-called experts makes the person anxious. Therefore, this stage does not last long.

In Stages 1-3, ethical choices are based completely on obedience to external authorities. A person in these stages of ethical development is rigid in their beliefs and defensive when challenged, because there is no internal sense of confidence. The person’s ethics are not grounded in any self-determined understanding of right and wrong, but rather in the dictates of outside authorities. When the infallibility of those authorities comes into question, the anxiety produced either pushes the person on to Stage 4, or back to the unquestioning stance of Stage 1. Some people never progress beyond the first three stages of ethical development.

The biggest shift in ethical understanding comes between Stages 3 and 4, if the person chooses to progress rather than regress. At this point, blind obedience to absolute, externally determined codes of behavior is thrown off and replaced with extreme relativism. As the person matures further, this extreme relativism is gradually modified. In McGrath’s words:

- **Stage 4** = The person perceives that legitimate uncertainty and diversity of opinion are extensive and concludes that all people have a right to their own opinions. The person rejects ethical authorities in favor of a thoroughgoing relativism in which anyone’s opinion, including the individual’s, is as good, true, or reliable as anyone else’s.

- **Stage 5** = The person perceives all knowledge and values, including those of formerly recognized ethical authorities, as contextual and relativistic and relegates dualistic right-wrong functions to a subordinate status by placing them in context.

In other words, Stage 4 reasoning makes “right” and “wrong” meaningless with a completely relativistic, anything-goes ethical stance. In Stage 5, however, “right” and “wrong” return, not as absolutes as in the first three stages, but as contextual concepts.

The next steps in ethical maturity involve taking responsibility for one’s own ethical choices, leading eventually to a solid, well-reasoned, ethical self-determination.

- **Stage 6** = The person recognizes that he or she must orient himself or herself in a relativistic world through a personal commitment, as distinct from unquestioned or unconsidered commitment to simple belief in certainty.

- **Stage 7** = The person makes an initial, limited commitment.

- **Stage 8** = The person experiences the initial implications of commitment and explores the subjective issues of responsibility.

- **Stage 9** = The person assumes responsibility for his or her beliefs and realizes that commitment is an ongoing, unfolding activity.

The ethically mature person understands that ethical maturity is not a final achievement but a lifelong process of growth and development.

Ethics are acquired from the day of our birth until the day of our death. At first, ethics are absorbed through parent-child relationships and the imitation of adult behavior. Children should interact with warm, caring, ethically mature adults during their first years of life to promote positive ethical development. Parents and teachers have a strong impact on children through the tenor of their relationships with children and with each other. Adults most often try to promote ethical behavior in children by establishing rules and codes of behavior through rewards and punishments. However, experts have found that this is much less effective than modeling and personal interaction.

Ethics are also acquired through labeling and sexual roles. People most often live up to the labels they are given, especially children. If a child is labeled “delinquent,” she or he will incorporate that label and behave accordingly. If, on the other hand, a child is labeled “well-behaved,” he or she will fulfill that expectation. Sexual roles also confer labels; “masculine” and “feminine” carry distinct expectations in nearly every culture, which children learn to conform to or rebel against early on. To become ethically mature, a person must struggle past assigned labels and roles to develop a freely chosen sense of identity, from which will grow the ethical code.

Two other important sources of ethical development are the practice of ethical behaviors and social interaction. Adults can help promote positive ethical development in children by creating opportunities for the children to make age-appropriate ethical choices and experience the consequences of those choices. It is also impor-