Thinking Ethically: A Framework for Moral Decision Making

Developed by Manuel Velasquez, Claire Andre, Thomas Shanks, S.J., and Michael J. Meyer

Moral issues greet us each morning in the newspaper, confront us in the memos on our desks, nag us from our children's soccer fields, and bid us good night on the evening news. We are bombarded daily with questions about the justice of our foreign policy, the morality of medical technologies that can prolong our lives, the rights of the homeless, the fairness of our children's teachers to the diverse students in their classrooms.

Dealing with moral issues is often perplexing. How, exactly, should we think through an ethical issue? What questions should we ask? What factors should we consider?

The first step in analyzing moral issues is obvious but not always easy: Get the facts. Some moral issues create controversies simply because we do not bother to check the facts.

Facts by themselves only tell us what is; they do not tell us what ought to be. In addition to getting the facts, resolving an ethical issue also requires an appeal to values.

Ethical Problem Solving

- Once facts have been ascertained, consider five questions when trying to resolve a moral issue:
  1) What benefits and what harms will each course of action produce, and which alternative will lead to the best overall consequences?
  2) What moral rights do the affected parties have, and which course of action best respects those rights?
  3) Which course of action treats everyone the same, except where there is a morally justifiable reason not to, and does not show favoritism or discrimination?
  4) Which course of action advances the common good?
  5) Which course of action develops moral virtues?

These questions do not provide an automatic solution to moral problems. They are not meant to. The questions are merely meant to help identify most of the important ethical considerations. In the end, we must deliberate on moral issues for ourselves, keeping a careful eye on both the facts and on the ethical considerations involved.

This article updates several previous pieces from Issues in Ethics by Manuel Velasquez - Dirksen

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