RICHARD PAUL AND LINDA ELDER

# The Thinker's Guide to ETHICAL REASONING

*Based on Critical Thinking Concepts and Tools*

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## The Function of Ethics—and Its Main Impediment

***"If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being."***

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*

The proper role of ethical reasoning is to highlight acts of two kinds: those which enhance the well-being of others—that warrant our praise—and those that harm or diminish the well-being of others—and thus warrant our criticism. Developing one's ethical reasoning abilities is crucial because there is in human nature a strong tendency toward egotism, prejudice, self-justification, and self-deception. These tendencies are exacerbated by powerful sociocentric cultural influences that shape our lives—not least of which is the mass media. These tendencies can be actively combated only through the systematic cultivation of fair-mindedness, honesty, integrity, self-knowledge, and deep concern for the welfare of others. We can never eliminate our egocentric tendencies absolutely and finally. But we can actively combat them as we learn to develop as ethical persons.

The ultimate basis for ethics is clear: Human behavior has consequences for the welfare of others. We are capable of acting toward others in such a way as to increase or decrease the quality of their lives. We are capable of helping or harming. What is more, we are theoretically capable of understanding when we are doing the one and when the other. This is so because we have the capacity to put ourselves imaginatively in the place of others and recognize how we would be affected if someone were to act toward us as we are acting toward others.

Thus nearly everyone gives at least lip service to a common core of general ethical principles—for example, that it is morally wrong to cheat, deceive, exploit, abuse, harm, or steal from others, that everyone has an ethical responsibility to respect the rights of others, including their freedom and well-being, to help those most in need of help, to seek the common good and not merely their own self-interest and egocentric pleasures, to strive in some way to make the world more just and humane.

Even young children have some idea of what it is to help or harm others. Unfortunately, children (like adults) tend to have a much clearer awareness of the harm done to them than of the harm they do to others:

- "That's not fair! He got more than I did!"
- "She won't let me have any of the toys!"
- "He hit me and I didn't do anything to him. He's mean!"
- "She promised me. Now she won't give me my doll back!"
- "Cheater! Cheater!"
- "It's my turn now. You had your turn. That's not fair."



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## Ethical Decisions Require Depth of Understanding

Unfortunately, mere verbal agreement on ethical principles alone will not accomplish important moral ends nor change the world for the better. Ethical principles mean something only when manifested in behavior. They have force only when embodied in action. Yet to put them into action requires intellectual skills as well as ethical insights.

The world does not present itself to us in morally transparent terms. We live in a world in which propaganda and self-deception are rife. Public discussion and media communication are not neutral centers of open debate. A tremendous amount of money is spent on persuading people to see the events of the world in one way rather than another. Furthermore, depending on the society and culture in which we are raised, we ourselves are strongly pre-disposed to see some persons and nations on the side of good and other persons and nations on the side of evil. Humans typically take themselves to be on the side of good and their enemies on the side of evil.

> ***"We must rid the world of evil."***
> ***"Now is the time to draw a line in the sand against the evil ones."***
> ***"Across the world and across the years, we will fight the evil ones, and we will win."***
> ***"You are either for us or against us."***
>
> President George Bush, 2002

In the everyday world, the ethical thing to do is sometimes viewed as obvious and self-evident when it should be a matter of debate, or, conversely, viewed as a matter of debate when it should be obvious and self-evident. One and the same act is often ethically praised by particular social, religious or political groups and ethically condemned by others.

Through example and encouragement, we can cultivate important intellectual traits. We can learn to respect the rights of others and not simply focus on fulfilling our desires. The main problem is not so much distinguishing between helping and harming, but our natural propensity to be focused almost exclusively on ourselves and those closely connected with us.

This is clear in the behavior of national, religious, and ethnic groups. Few groups, in fact, value the lives and welfare of others (other nations, other religions, other ethnic groups) as they value those of their own. Few think about the consequences to other groups of their own group's pursuit of money, power, prestige, and property. The result is that few people (in virtually any society) act consistently on ethical principles when dealing with "outsiders." A double standard in applying ethical principles to human life is virtually universal and often flagrant.

In short, ethical persons, however strongly motivated to do what is ethically right, can do so only if they know what is ethically right. And this they cannot do if they systematically confuse their sense of what is ethically right with self-interest, personal desires, or social taboos. Ethically motivated persons must learn the art of self- and social-critique, of ethical self-examination. They must recognize the pervasive everyday pitfalls of ethical judgment: moral intolerance, self-deception, and uncritical conformity.

Few have thought much about the difficulty of getting ethically relevant facts about the world. Few are skilled in tracing the implications of the facts they do have. And few



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can identify their own moral contradictions, or clearly distinguish their self-interest and egocentric desires from what is genuinely ethical. Few have thought deeply about their own ethical feelings and judgments, have tied these judgments together into a coherent ethical perspective, or have mastered the complexities of moral reasoning. As a result, everyday ethical judgments are often a subtle mixture of pseudo and genuine morality, ethical insight and moral prejudice, ethical truth and moral hypocrisy.

## Egocentrism as a Fundamental Barrier to Ethical Reasoning

The human tendency to judge the world from a narrow, self-serving perspective is powerful. Humans are typically masterful at self-deception and rationalization. We often maintain beliefs that fly in the face of the evidence. We often engage in acts that blatantly violate ethical principles. What is more, we feel perfectly confident in our righteousness.

In other words, humans naturally develop into narrow-minded, self-centered thinkers. In a way, this makes perfect sense. We feel our own pain; we don't feel the pain of others. We think our own thoughts; we do not think the thoughts of others. And as we age, we unfortunately do not naturally develop the ability to empathize with others, to consider points of view that conflict with our own. Consequently, we are often unable to reason from a genuinely ethical perspective.

Nevertheless, it is possible to learn to think critically through ethical issues. With practice and sound instruction, we can acquire the disposition and skills required to analyze and evaluate situations from opposing ethical perspectives.

At the root of virtually every unethical act lies some form and degree of self-delusion. And at the root of every self-delusion lies some flaw in thinking. For instance, Hitler confidently believed he was doing the right thing in carrying out egregious acts against the Jews. His actions were a product of the erroneous beliefs that Jews were inferior to the Aryan race, and that they were the cause of Germany's problems. In ridding Germany of the Jews, he believed himself to be doing what was in the best interest of his Germany. He therefore considered his actions to be ethically justified. His deeply flawed reasoning resulted in untold human harm and suffering.

We cannot develop as ethical persons if we are unwilling to face the fact that every one of us is prone to egotism, prejudice, self-justification, and self-deception and that these flaws in human thinking are the cause of much human suffering. Only the systematic cultivation of fair-mindedness, honesty, integrity, self-knowledge, and deep concern for the welfare of others can provide foundations for sound ethical reasoning.

Ethical reasoning entails doing what is right even in the face of powerful selfish desires. To live an ethical life, then, is to develop command over our native egocentric tendencies. It is not enough to advocate living an ethical life. It is not enough to be able to do the right thing when we ourselves have nothing to lose. We must be willing to fulfill our ethical obligations at the expense of our selfish desires and vested interests.

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## Pathological Dispositions Inherent in Egocentric Thought

Much of our ethical insight comes from an in-depth recognition of inconsistencies in human behavior—for example, saying one thing and doing another; applying one standard to ourselves and another standard to others. Ethical reasoning implies an awareness of interrelated pathological dispositions inherent in native egocentric thought. We need to identify these tendencies in our lives, determining which of them are the most prominent and which the least. As you read them, ask yourself whether you recognize these as processes that occur in your own mind (if you conclude, "not me!" think again):

- **egocentric memory:** the natural tendency to "forget" evidence that does not support our thinking and to "remember" evidence that does
- **egocentric myopia:** the natural tendency to think in an absolutist way within an overly narrow point of view
- **egocentric righteousness:** the natural tendency to see ourselves as in possession of "The Truth"
- **egocentric hypocrisy:** the natural tendency to ignore flagrant inconsistencies—between what we profess to believe and the actual beliefs our behavior implies, or between the standards we apply to ourselves and those we apply to others
- **egocentric oversimplification:** the natural tendency to ignore real and important complexities in the world in favor of simplistic notions when consideration of those complexities would require us to modify our beliefs or values
- **egocentric blindness:** the natural tendency not to notice facts and evidence that contradict our favored beliefs or values
- **egocentric immediacy:** the natural tendency to over-generalize immediate feelings and experiences, so that when one, or only a few, events in our life seem highly favorable or unfavorable, all of life seems favorable or unfavorable to us
- **egocentric absurdity:** the natural tendency to fail to notice when our thinking has "absurd" implications



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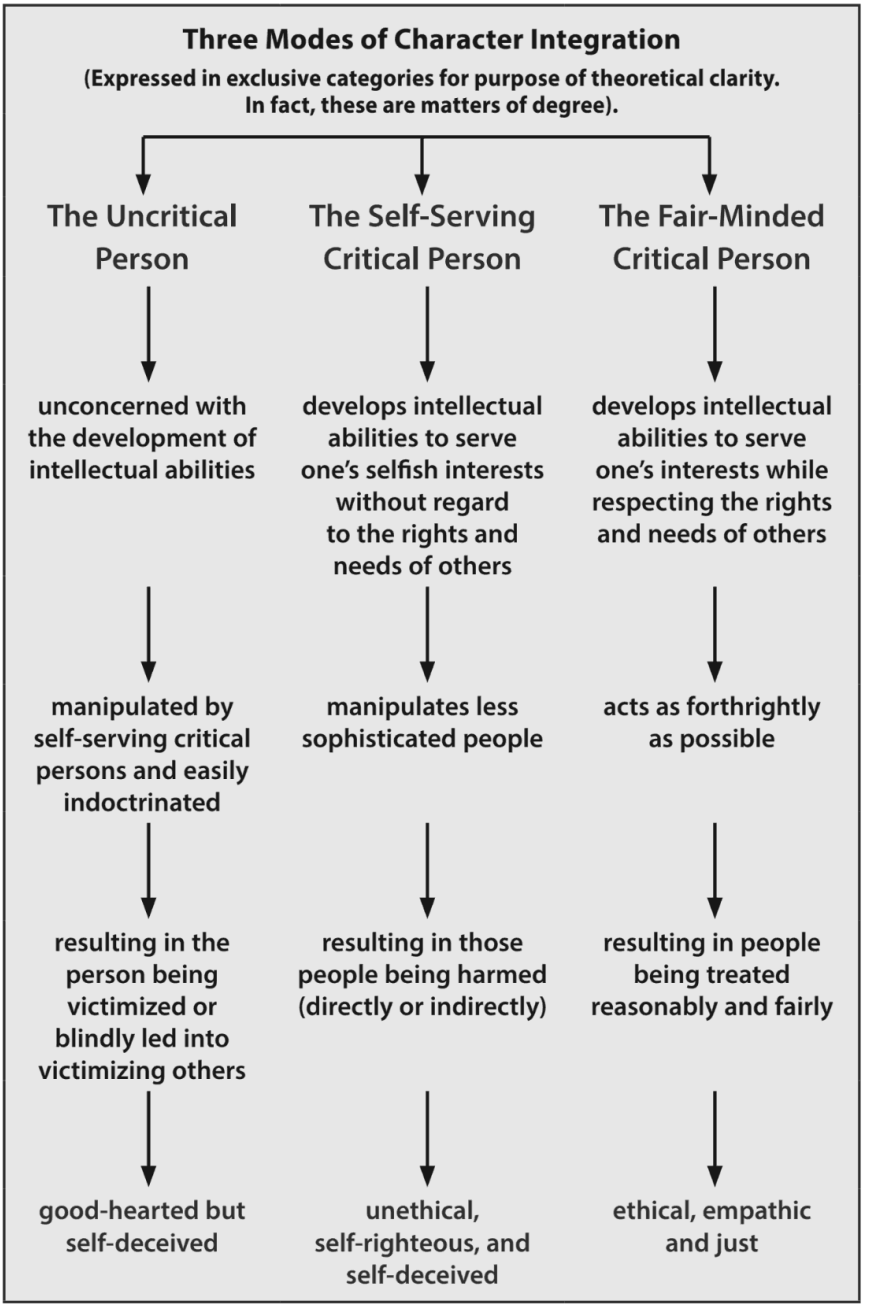




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## Ethics and Social Conventions

All of us are, in the first instance, socially conditioned. Consequently, we do not begin with the ability to critique social norms and taboos. Unless we learn to critique the social mores and taboos imposed upon us from birth, we will inherently accept those traditions as "right."

Consider the history of the United States. For more than a hundred years most Americans considered slavery to be justified and desirable. It was part of social custom. Moreover, throughout history, many groups of people, including people of various nationalities and skin colors, as well as females, children, and individuals with disabilities, have been victims of discrimination as the result of social convention treated as ethical obligation. Yet, all social practices violating human rights are rejected, and have been rejected, by ethically sensitive, reasonable persons no matter what social conventions support those practices.

## Socially or Culturally Variant Practices

Cultural diversity derives from the fact that there are an unlimited number of alternative ways for social groups to satisfy their needs and fulfill their desires. Those traditional ways of living within a social group or culture take on the force of habit and custom. They are handed down from one generation to another. To the individuals in a given group they seem to be the ONLY way, or the only REASONABLE way, to do things. And these social customs sometimes have ethical implications. Social habits and customs answer questions like this:

- How should marriage take place? Who should be allowed to marry, under what conditions, and with what ritual or ceremony? Once married what role should the male play? What role should the female play? Are multiple marriage partners possible? Is divorce possible? Under what conditions?
- Who should care for the children? What should they teach the children as to proper and improper ways to act? When children do not act as they are expected to act, how should they be treated?
- When should children be accepted as adults? When should they be considered old enough to be married? Who should they be allowed to marry?
- When children develop sensual and sexual desires, how should they be allowed to act? With whom, if anyone, should they be allowed to engage in sexual exploration and discovery? What sexual acts are considered acceptable and wholesome? What sexual acts are considered perverted or sinful?
- How should men and women dress? To what degree should their body be exposed in public? How is nudity treated? How are those who violate these codes treated?
- How should food be obtained and how should it be prepared? Who is responsible for obtaining food? Who for preparing it? How should it be served? How eaten?
- How is the society "stratified" (into levels of power)? How is the society controlled? What belief system is used to justify the distribution of scarce goods and services and the way rituals and practices are carried out?
- If the society develops enemies or is threatened from without, how will it deal with those threats? How will it defend itself? How does the society engage in war, or does it?
- What sorts of games, sports, or amusements will be practiced in the society? Who is



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allowed to engage in them?
- What religions are taught or allowable within the society? Who is allowed to participate in the religious rituals or to interpret divine or spiritual teachings to the group?
- How are grievances settled in the society? Who decides who is right and who wrong? How are violators treated?

Schools traditionally function as apologists for conventional thought; those who teach often inadvertently foster confusion between convention and ethics because they themselves have internalized the conventions of society. Education, properly so called, should foster the intellectual skills that enable students to distinguish between cultural mores and ethical precepts, between social commandments and ethical truths. In each case, when social beliefs and taboos conflict with ethical principles, ethical principles should prevail.

### Examples of confusion between ethics and social conventions:

- Many societies have created taboos against showing various parts of the body and have severely punished those who violated them.
- Many societies have created taboos against giving women the same rights as men.
- Many societies have socially legitimized religious persecution.
- Many societies have socially stigmatized interracial marriages.

These practices seem (wrongly) to be ethically obligatory to those socialized into accepting them.

## Ethics and Sexual Taboos

Social taboos are often matters of strong emotions. People are often disgusted when others violate a taboo. Their disgust signals to them that the behavior is unethical. They forget that what is socially repugnant to us may not violate any ethical principle but, instead, may merely differ from social convention. Social doctrines regarding human sexuality are often classic examples of conventions expressed as if they were ethical truths. Social groups often establish strong sanctions for unconventional behavior involving the human body. Some social groups inflict unjust punishments on women who do no more than appear in public without being completely veiled, an act considered in some cultures as indecent and sexually provocative. Sexual behaviors should be considered unethical only when they result in unequivocal harm or damage, not if they merely elicit religious and social shame or guilt. Michelangelo's *David* may shock a Puritan, but not for ethical reasons.

## Ethics and Political Ideology

A political ideology provides an analysis of the present distribution of wealth and power and devises strategies in keeping with that analysis. It provides either a "justification" of the present structure of power or a "critique." It seeks either to protect and maintain the way things are or to change them. It seeks to change things in small ways or in big ways. It compares the present to the past and both to a future it projects.

Conservative ideologies "justify" the status quo or seek a return to a previous "ideal" time. Liberal ideologies critique the status quo and seek to justify "new" forms of political



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arrangements designed to rectify present problems. Reactionary ideologies plead for a "radical" return to the past; revolutionary ideologies plead for a "radical" overturning of the fundamental ("corrupt") structures. Conservative ideologies consider the highest values to be private property, family, God, and country. Liberal ideologies consider the highest values to be liberty, equality, and social justice.

Ideological analyses have implications that should be assessed ethically. Put into action they often have profound negative effects on the well being of people.

Virtually all political ideologies speak in the name of the "people." Yet most of them, in fact, are committed to powerful vested interest groups who fund their election campaigns. The same people often end up ruling, independent of the "official" ideology. Thus, in the post-soviet power structure, many of those who were formerly powerful in the communist party are now among the most prominent and acquisitive neo-capitalists.

The bottom line is that politics and ethics are divergent concepts. Struggling against each other for power and control, political movements and interests often sacrifice ethical ideals for practical advantage. They often rationalize unethical acts as unavoidable necessities (for example, "forced on them" by their opponents). And they systematically use propaganda to further vested interest agendas.

## Ethics and the Law

Anyone interested in developing their ethical reasoning abilities must learn to differentiate ethics and the law. What is illegal may or may not be a matter of ethics. What is ethically obligatory may be illegal. What is unethical may be legal. There is no essential connection between ethics and the law.

Laws often emerge out of social conventions and taboos. And, because we cannot assume that social conventions are ethical, we cannot assume that human laws are ethical. What is more, most laws are ultimately made by politicians, who routinely confuse social values with ethical principles. As we have said, their primary motivation is, except in special cases, power, vested interest, or expediency. For example, (from 1900 through 1930), American politicians, in response to an electorate dominated by fundamentalist religious believers, passed laws which made it illegal for anyone, including doctors, to disseminate any information about birth control. The consequence was predictable: hundreds of thousands of poor and working class women suffered severe injuries or death from the effects of illegal drugs and unsanitary abortions. To "criminalize" behavior that goes against social conventions is one of the time-honored ways for politicians to get re-elected.[1]

### Examples of confusing ethics and the law:

- Many sexual practices (such as homosexuality) have been unjustly punished with life imprisonment or death (under the laws of one society or another).
- Many societies have enforced unjust laws based on racist views.
- Many societies have enforced laws that discriminated against women.
- Many societies have enforced laws that discriminated against children.

[1] The U.S. now has a higher percentage of its citizens in prison than any other country in the world (recently surpassing Russia).



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- Many societies have made torture and/or slavery legal.
- Many societies have enforced laws arbitrarily punishing people for using some drugs but not others.

## Acts that are Unethical In-and-of-Themselves

For any action to be unethical, it must inherently deny another person or creature some inalienable right. The following classes of acts are unethical in-and-of themselves. Any person or group that violates them is properly criticized from an ethical standpoint:

- SLAVERY: Owning people, whether individually or in groups.
- GENOCIDE: Systematically killing with the attempt to eliminate a whole nation or ethnic group.
- TORTURE: Inflicting severe pain to force information, get revenge or serve some other irrational end.
- SEXISM: Treating people unequally (and harmfully) in virtue of their gender.
- RACISM: Treating people unequally (and harmfully) in virtue of their race or ethnicity.
- MURDER: The pre-meditated killing of people for revenge, pleasure, or to gain advantage for oneself.
- ASSAULT: Attacking an innocent person with intent to cause grievous bodily harm.
- RAPE: Forcing an unwilling person to have intercourse.
- FRAUD: Intentional deception that causes someone to give up property or some right.
- DECEIT: Representing something as true which one knows to be false in order to gain a selfish end harmful to another.
- INTIMIDATION: Forcing a person to act against his interest or deter from acting in his interest by threats or violence.
- Putting persons in jail without telling them the charges against them or providing them with a reasonable opportunity to defend themselves.
- Putting persons in jail, or otherwise punishing them, solely for their political or religious views.

## We Must Learn to Distinguish Among Questions of Ethics, Social Conventions, Religion and the Law



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## How to Figure Out the Logic of an Ethical Question

Whenever you reason through an ethical question, you can use the following template, which highlights the elements of your reasoning. By doing so, you can better analyze and assess the parts of your thinking as you move through the question.

1. Considering my own rights and needs as well those of others in this situation, my **purpose** should be…(Here you are trying to determine the ethical goal you hope to reach. What do you want to accomplish?)
2. The key ethical **question**(s) I am trying to answer is/are… (Write out the issue you are facing in several ways until you have identified the precise ethical issue you need to reason through. Then formulate the key ethical question(s) embedded in the issue. Focus on the most important ethical questions. Make sure you take into account the point of view of relevant others in formulating the question.)
3. The most important **information** I will need to answer this ethical question is… (You should identify the information that will enable you to understand and take into account the needs and viewpoints of relevant others, as well as your own.)
4. The key ethical **concepts** and principles that should guide my thinking are… (Identify the ethical concepts and principles most relevant for reasoning through the issue. Do any of these concepts or principles compete for significance? If so, which should take precedence? Make sure you are using ethical principles and not social rules, religious doctrines, or laws to guide your thinking. See examples of ethical concepts on page 19.)
5. The main **assumptions** I am using in reasoning through this ethical issue are… (What are you taking for granted? Should you question your assumptions or are they justifiable in the context? How do your assumptions affect the way you see the ethical issue? Are there other reasonable assumptions you should begin with?)
6. The **points of view** I need to consider before coming to conclusions about this ethical issue are… (If the ethical issue you face is complex, you will need to consider more than one way of looking at the situation, and you will need to do so with an open-mind, not in a way that dismisses reasonable alternative views. What viewpoints would a reasonable person consider in reasoning through this issue?)
7. The main **inferences**/conclusions I am coming to in reasoning through this ethical issue are… (Is there more than one way to interpret the information? After considering all the information, what is the most reasonable answer to the ethical question? What alternative answers should you or have you considered?)
8. If I come to the conclusions stated in number seven above, some of the important **implications** for myself and others are… If I come to alternative conclusions, some of the important **implications** are… (What consequences are likely to follow if you act on the conclusions you have come to? What consequences are likely to follow if you act on alternative conclusions?)



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# Language as a Guide to Ethical Reasoning

Ideas are to humans like the air we breathe. We project them everywhere. Yet we rarely notice this. We use words and the ideas they express to create our picture of the world. What we experience we experience through ideas, often uncritically funneled into the categories of "good" and "evil." We uncritically assume ourselves to be good. We uncritically assume our enemies to be evil. We select positive terms to cover up the "indefensible" things we do. We select negative terms to condemn even the good things our enemies do. We often see the world in a distorted way, to our advantage. Our conceptualizations often result from indoctrination or social conditioning (our allegiances presented, uncritically of course, in positive terms).

Ideas, then, are our paths to both reality and self-delusion. We don't typically recognize ourselves as engaged in idea construction of any kind, whether good or ill. In our everyday life we don't experience ourselves shaping what we see and constructing the world to our advantage.

To the uncritical mind, it is as if people in the world came to us with our labels for them inherent in who they are. THEY are "terrorists." WE are "freedom fighters." All of us fall victim at times to an inevitable illusion of objectivity. Thus we see others not sharing a common human nature, but absolutistically as "friends" and "enemies," and accordingly "good" or "bad." Ideology, self-deception, and myth play a large part in our identity and how we think and judge. Our minds operate, however, as if we were simply neutral observers of reality. And to top it off, we often become self-righteous when our ideas are challenged.

To develop as ethical reasoners, we must take a new stand towards ourselves. We must come to recognize the ideas through which we see and experience the world. We must become the master of our own ideas. We must learn how to think with alternative ideas, and within alternative "world views." As general semanticists often say: "The word is not the thing! The word is not the thing!" If we are trapped in one set of concepts (ideas, words) then our thinking is trapped. Word and thing become one and the same in our minds. We are unable then to act as free and ethical persons.

The ideas we have formed in personal experience are often egocentric in nature. The ideas we inherit from social indoctrination are typically ethnocentric in nature. Both can limit our insight significantly. This is where understanding the ethical terms in our native language can help us.

The ideas we learn from academic subjects and from the study of distinctions inherent in the uses of language can take us beyond our personal egocentrism and social ideology. When we learn to think historically, sociologically, anthropologically, scientifically, and philosophically, we can come to see ignorance, prejudice, stereotypes, illusions, and biases in our personal thinking and in the thinking common in our society.

In addition, command of ethical distinctions implicit in established linguistic usage can have a significant influence upon the way we shape our experience. Through such command, for example, we distinguish ethics from religion, social convention and politics. This ability impacts the judgments we make and the way we interpret situations.

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