

A Framework for Ethical Decision Making

Ethics or morality poses questions about how we ought to act and how we should live. It asks, "According to what standards are these actions right or wrong?" It asks, "What character traits (like honesty, compassion, fairness) are necessary to live a truly human life?" It also asks, "What concerns or groups do we usually minimize or ignore? And why might that be?" Admitting our blindness is the beginning of vision.

Step One: Recognize a Moral Issue

- Is there something wrong personally, interpersonally, or socially? Is there conflict that could be damaging to people? to animals or the environment? to institutions? to society?
- Does the issue go deeper than legal or institutional concerns? What does it do to people as persons who have dignity, rights, and hopes for a better life together?

Step Two: Get the Facts

- What are the relevant facts of the case?
- What individuals and groups have an important stake in the outcome? What is at stake for each? Do some have a greater stake because they have a special need (e.g., those who are poor or excluded) or because we have special obligations to them? Are there other important stakeholders in addition to those directly involved?
- What are the options for acting? Have all the relevant persons and groups been consulted? If you showed your list of options to someone you respect, what would that person say?

Step Three: Evaluate the Alternative Actions from Various Moral Approaches

- Which option will produce the most good and do the least harm?
- Which option respects the rights and dignity of all stakeholders? Even if not everyone gets all they want, will everyone still be treated fairly?
- Which option would promote the common good and help all participate more fully in the goods we share as a society, as a community, as a company, as a family?
- Which option would enable the deepening or development of those virtues or

character traits that we value as individuals? as a profession? as a society?

Step Four: Make A Decision

[After taking into account the two questions below]

- Considering these perspectives, which of the options is the right thing to do?
- If you told someone you respect why you chose this option, what would that person say?

Step Five: Act, then Reflect on the Decision Later

- How did it turn out for all concerned? If you had to do it over again, what, if anything, would you do differently?