Eight Key Questions for Ethical Reasoning in Action

Understanding the Concepts

Fairness

Humans, and some other species, have an innate sense of fairness. Children often use an "it's not fair" argument in situations that seem unjust or inequitable, often when feeling like someone else did not get (or did get) what they deserve (i.e. siblings, friends). Raising the idea of fairness as an ethical question, you can dive more deeply into discussions of justice, questioning how you can actively create environments and policies that provide opportunities for fairness for individuals and groups, including those outside your usual "in group." Examine your biases and attempt to understand others. Ask questions about what is just and equitable for you ***and others*** in each situation.

Outcomes

If you've ever made a pros and cons list when you are trying to make a tough decision, you are attempting to weigh possible outcomes. Often these are short-term consequences you anticipate happening as a result of your choice. To extend this concept to ethical reasoning, add in considerations of long-term outcomes for you and all others in the situation. Remember that outcomes need not be only negative or short-sited. Also remember that outcomes are difficult to predict; however, they are an equally important consideration among the eight key questions.

Responsibilities

You have likely learned the value of being a responsible person and taking responsibility for your actions. You may also think of a responsibility as a task or chore, something for which you will be held accountable. Generally, most of us think of a responsibility as something to ***do***. A more nuanced understanding of responsibilities includes a moral duty to other human beings (e.g. performing CPR or calling for help if you see someone in distress) and voluntary obligations you have stemming from certain roles (e.g. son, daughter, sibling, employee, student, pet owner). As you make decisions, think about what you may owe to others in the situation because of these duties and obligations.

Character

If you participated in pre-school, scouts, youth religious programs, 4-H, or other developmental programs for children and young people, you learned values such as respect, honesty, compassion, kindness, and loyalty. As an adult, you are confronted with many opportunities to decide what kind of person you want to be, what you value or find important, what you stand for or represent. These opportunities multiply in college. You can think about the kind of person you aspire to be and act accordingly. You can expand thoughts of character beyond yourself to the character of your family, student group, class project group, JMU community, and even to the scale of the character of a nation or the world. When deciding, consider how this choice will represent you, your group, your college, your country. Will you respect that person looking back at you in the mirror?

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Liberty

Many of us equate liberty with a statue and freedom, especially personal freedom, or having the freedom to make our own choices. As a new college student, you're likely experiencing an increased sense of personal freedom right now. For liberty considerations in ethical reasoning, think about how your decision (or policies or rules) may affect *others'* autonomy and freedom. Does a choice you're making unnecessarily limit someone else's liberty? Another nuanced way to include liberty in your ethical thinking is considering if others involved have the opportunity to consent or did consent. Liberty is a specific type of right and should be part of an ethical thinker's decision making process.

Empathy

You may have heard the quote from Mary Lathrap's poem, *Judge Softly*, "take the time to walk a mile in his moccasins." Empathy is an active imagining what it must be like to feel what that person feels, to see what that person sees, to have walked the same path. Asking yourself and others these empathy questions will challenge your reflex to judge quickly, to decide quickly about another person or group of people. Extend empathy beyond the people you care about, beyond the groups to which you belong, and beyond those people whom you deem worthy of your care or concern. Practice having the capacity for empathy, even in situations where you may initially think it isn't deserved or possible. Use your imagination.

Authority

When you hear the word, "authority," you may think of your parents or a boss, maybe even law enforcement. To use the concept of authority in ethical reasoning, ask yourself who the legitimate authorities in each situation are, such as a law; an expert like a doctor, lawyer or scientist; a supervisor; a religious figure or god; a government official with jurisdiction; etc. After determining who or what legitimate authority should be part of your decision, use their guidance to help you think through what you should do. Remember that not all people in positions of authority are or should be considered legitimate or relevant to your decision. Multiple authorities may provide conflicting guidance. For example, a law may conflict with the advice your boss gives you. Determining the most ethical path includes considering what legitimate authorities might expect you to do.

Rights

Most would agree that human beings have a right to basic needs, such as food, water, and safety. You may believe you have a right to do what you want whenever you want; to say whatever is on your mind. When thinking through an ethical situation, also consider others' rights, especially the rights of groups of people. Many marginalized groups have historically had their rights ignored, in policy making and in day-to-day seemingly small decisions. Think about what innate or human rights are at stake; what social rights should be considered? Does someone or a group of people have a legal right you should include as part of your thought process? Ask yourself and others if a certain decision infringes upon or respects others' rights.