

# Everyday Ethics

## Morality Requires Regular Reflection on the Day-to-Day Decisions That Confront Us.

By Thomas Shanks, S.J.

<http://www.scu.edu/ethics/publications/iie/v8n1/everydayethics.html>

"Have you taken the mandatory training for business ethics?" Dilbert's manager asks the popular comic strip engineer one day. Without missing a beat, Dilbert turns from his cubicle's computer and responds, "No, but if you say I did, then you'll save some money on training, which you can spend to decorate your office." Obviously taken with this suggestion, the manager says, "Luckily, I haven't taken the training myself." Dilbert adds, "I hear it's mostly common sense anyway."

The ethics Dilbert is talking about might be called everyday ethics. As philosopher Mike Martin notes, the moral aspects of day-to-day living are "more direct, persistent, and urgent" than the global moral issues — immigration, capital punishment, welfare reform — we might be at ease discussing over the dinner table.

"Why is that?" Martin asks. These topics, he says, "evoke our genuine concern, and sometimes they require our immediate action. Because we lack the authority to settle these issues, however, we can maintain a comfortable distance between us and them."

That distance — and the comfort that comes with it — diminishes when we make ethics part of our everyday reflection, asking ourselves, How *am* I doing at "the art of human being" as artist Laurel Birch describes it? Ethics is intimately bound up with that art because, at its heart, are human relationships.

### How We Treat One Another

In *The Leadership Compass*, John Wilcox and Susan Ebbs write, "Moral behavior is concerned primarily with the interpersonal dimension of our behavior: how we treat one another individually and in groups — and, increasingly, other species and the environment." The key here is that morality brings us into contact with others and asks us to consider the quality of that contact.

How many times have we asked ourselves: Is that the way I should treat someone else? Is that the way someone else should treat me? Because we have the ability to be critical of our interpersonal behavior and our contact with animals in the physical world, we have the ability to develop codes and norms to guide that behavior. Those moral norms and codes, plus a set of virtuous character traits, are what we mean when we talk about ethics.

Ethics poses questions about how we ought to act in relationships and how we should live with one another. Ethics asks us to consider whether our actions are right or wrong. It also asks us how those character traits that help humans flourish (such as integrity, honesty, faithfulness, and compassion) play out in everyday living.

Ethical norms and principles have developed over time and across cultures as rational people of goodwill consider human relationships and how human beings act when they are at their best.

In the past few years, I've had the chance to talk with hundreds of people about humanity at its best — and worst — including students, parents, educators, lawyers, engineers, physicians and allied health providers, journalists and television producers, CEOs, CFOs, managers and employees in all sorts of businesses, community leaders and community

members at large, people rich and poor, and everyone in between. I've asked them to name the commonplace moral questions they confront in their day-to-day living or at work.

### **The Nitty-Gritty**

Just a few of their responses: Is it right to keep my mouth shut when I know a neighbor's child is getting into real trouble? How should I decide when it's time to put my parent in a nursing home? Do I release software I know isn't really ready? When's the right time to "let go" of my child? Is it right to be chronically late for meetings because I'm busy? Do I laugh at a sexist or racist joke? How ought I to love my spouse in the first year of marriage? In the 60th year?

Despite our many differences, we share these everyday questions; this is the common "stuff" of human living and interacting. We also share a hunger for ethical approaches to these questions. A *Times-Mirror* survey released a few years ago showed that, for the first time in a decade, Americans named ethics, or rather a decline in ethics, as one of the most important problems facing the United States, after crime, health care, and jobs. Ethics and drugs were tied for fourth and fifth place.

Most people would indeed like to live an ethical life and to make good ethical decisions, but there are several problems. One, we might call the everyday stumbling blocks to ethical behavior. Consider these: My small effort won't really make a difference. People may think badly of me. It's hard to know the right thing to do. My pride gets in the way. It may hurt my career. It just went by too quickly. There's a cost to doing the right thing.

Now, how would you respond if your own children were the ones making these excuses for their behavior? Oh, Mom, what I do won't really make a difference. Dad, I just didn't know what to do. Grandma, my friends won't like me. I won't get invited to anybody's home. I know I'll just never date again.

Put like this, ethics seems easier. But we still confront a practical obstacle--much as anti-smoking public service announcements did years ago. Research showed these ads were tremendously successful in getting people to recognize the addiction and want to kick the habit. The problem was that the ads didn't teach people how to do it.

### **The Five Questions: A Systematic Approach**

The same is true of ethics. People need a systematic way to approach living an ethical life. Here are five questions that, used daily, can help with the how-to of everyday morality.

**Did I practice any virtues today?** In *The Book of Virtues*, William Bennett notes that virtues are "habits of the heart" we learn through models--the loving parent or aunt, the demanding teacher, the respectful manager, the honest shopkeeper. They are the best parts of ourselves.

Ask yourself, Did I cross a line today that gave up one of those parts? Or was I, at least some of the time, a person who showed integrity, trustworthiness, honesty, compassion, or any of the other virtues I was taught as a child?

**Did I do more good than harm today?** Or did I try to? Consider the short term and long-term consequences of your actions.

**Did I treat people with dignity and respect today?** All human beings should be treated with dignity simply because they are human. People have moral rights, especially the fundamental right to be treated as free and equal human beings, not as things to be manipulated, controlled, or cast away.

How did my actions today respect the moral rights and the dignified treatment to which every person is entitled?

**Was I fair and just today?** Did I treat each person the same unless there was some relevant moral reason to treat him or her differently? Justice requires that we be fair in the way we distribute benefits and burdens. Whom did I benefit and whom did I burden? How did I decide?

**Was my community better because I was in it? Was I better because I was in my community?** Consider your primary community, however you define it--neighborhood, apartment building, family, company, church, etc. Now ask yourself, Was I able to get beyond my own interests to make that community stronger? Was I able to draw on my community's strengths to help me in my own process of becoming more human?

### **From Everyday Ethics to Moral Leadership**

This everyday ethical reflection must occur before we can effectively confront the larger moral questions. A person who wants to take moral leadership on global issues must, according to author Parker Palmer, "take special responsibility for what's going on inside his or her own self, inside his or her own consciousness, lest the act of leadership create more harm than good."

Palmer goes on to suggest that all of us can be leaders for good; the choice is ours:

We share a responsibility for creating the external world by projecting either a spirit of light or a spirit of shadow on that which is other than us. We project either a spirit of hope or a spirit of despair.... We have a choice about what we are going to project, and in that choice we help create the world that is.

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### **Further Reading**

Halberstam, Joshua. *Everyday Ethics: Inspired Solutions to Real-Life Dilemmas*. New York: Penguin Books, 1993.

Martin, Mike W. *Everyday Morality: An Introduction to Applied Ethics*. 2nd ed. Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1995.

Thompson, Mel. *Ethics*. Lincolnwood (Chicago), Ill.: NTC Publishing Group, 1994.

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