

# AN INTRODUCTION TO THE FOUR ETHICAL LENSES: AN EXPERIENTIAL APPROACH<sup>1</sup>

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## INTRODUCTION

Ethics is best defined as actions that reflect our core values. As we explore how to make good decisions – ethical decisions that are based on core values and commitments – we discover that often dilemmas are caused by situations where core values are in tension. At the highest level, we have four core values that are often in tension. First is the tension between the individual and the group: when should we emphasize the rights of the individual and when should the group be favored. Second is the tension between rationality and sensibility: when should we embrace reason and seek justice and when should we follow our heart and grant mercy.

Secondly, as we explore both the ethical theories of the philosophers as well as how to put the theories into practice, into action, four primary approaches – four ethical lenses – emerge. As various schools of philosophical thought sought to answer the question, “what is an ethical action,” different questions were asked leading to the four core values being given different priorities. The pattern that emerges is that each of the four lenses emphasizes two of the four primary values and thus has a different definition of an ethical action.

<i>Rationality</i>	
Rights Based Theories (Deontological Theories)	Relationship Based Theories (Justice/Systems Theories)
<i>An ethical action is doing one's duty and following ethical standards of action.</i>	
Results Based Theories (Teleological Theories)	Reputation Based Theories (Virtue Theories)
<i>An ethical action is one where the act creates the greatest good for the greatest number.</i>	<i>An ethical action is one which is consistent with a good character.</i>
<i>Sensibility</i>	

## ETHICAL LENS INVENTORY

<sup>1</sup>Adapted from Baird, Catharyn. *Everyday Ethics: Making Hard Choices in a Complex World*. Denver, CO: Tendril Press, 2005.

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The first step to being an effective ethical person is to know which of the four lenses is our home lens, which of the values are consistently the most important to us. The *Ethical Lens Inventory*™ is a tool that helps individuals assess which particular values they believe are the most important and thus which lens is their preferred lens. As each of us live and accumulate experience, we develop our own sense of balance among the four core values – deciding which value should take priority most of the time. Unless we have developed self-awareness, we then unknowingly use the tools of that lens to make ethical decisions.

As we learn both about our own preferred lens or perspective and recognize that others will see the world differently and choose a different course of action, we begin to understand the nature of ethical conflicts. Because of the difference in perspective, people can choose conflicting but perfectly ethical solutions to the same situation. We also discover that people might choose the same course of action but for very different reasons. Harmonizing the various reasons for acting is usually easier than harmonizing different approaches to ethical decision-making.

Knowing one's own ethical preference is the first step to being able to work through difficult situations. The second step is to have a repeatable decision model that helps sort out the value conflicts. The *Baird Decision Model*™ helps people navigate the thicket of thorny dilemmas.

#### *BAIRD DECISION MODEL*

Knowing that four different perspectives to ethical decision making have been part of our heritage doesn't help us figure out what to do in a particular situation. Thus, a decision model is useful to work through the real problems that face us.

The *Baird Decision Model*™ was developed to provide a tool for people to apply the principles of the lenses to specific problems. Baird adapted the highly technical model of Bernard Lonergan, a post-modern philosopher, to meet the needs of non-philosophers who are seeking a method to help them choose the best course of action in the face of conflicting values.

#### *Step 1: Be Attentive*

- Attend to the context: The first step is to figure out what the facts of the situation are. Also included in the determination of the context is being aware of our own world view that colors our interpretation of the facts. The biases may come because of personal experience (facing racial discrimination), particular knowledge (training as an accountant), or personal weakness (tending to see everything as a personal threat to well being).
- Identify the viewpoint of the ethical actor: Each ethical lens presumes that the ethical actor will have a different viewpoint. As each of the lenses are introduced, the various viewpoints will be explored. As one answers a question using the tools of the lens, one should try to take the recommended vantage point in the decision process.

- Pinpoint the issue: Every ethical dilemma has a central question to be answered, an issue to be resolved. As we become skilled in identifying the issue, we are able to work through problems in a more thoughtful way.

#### *Step 2: Be Intelligent*

- Determine the stakeholders: All ethical decisions are relational, because varying parties are directly affected by the decision. Stakeholders include the shareholders of the company, employees and customers, competitors and vendors, as well as interested community members.
- Explore the values in tension: A major piece to the puzzle is determining which values are in tension. Because all values are important and because we use different words for similar values, mastering this step is key to effective decision making.
- Identify options for action: This step can either be done first and then the principles of the lenses can be applied against the options or we can let the options emerge as we work through the analysis. Different options for action will emerge as preferable depending on the which lens is used, which principles are applied.

#### *Step 3: Be Reasonable*

- Evaluate the data: As we gather the data, some of it will be trustworthy and some will not. The person making the decision should examine both the logic of the arguments as well as the credibility of the information (or person giving the information) that is the basis for the dilemma.
- Apply ethical content: Each lens asks different questions and has its own criteria for determining which action counts as an ethical act. The majority of the analysis will be spent asking questions from the vantage point of the particular ethical lens.
- Overlay moral content: Any decision has to meet both community standards – defined as ethics – and our personal standards – defined as morals. Learning to identify and then resolve any conflict between the community norms (rules for acting) and our own personal sense of morality is important if we are going to be responsible adults.

#### *Step 4: Be Responsible*

- Correct for bias: As we make our final decision, we have to see if we have any bias in the decision process that is negatively impacting our clarity of thought. These biases can either arise because of our blind spots – the personal weaknesses we just don't see – or because of our hubris – our belief that we are not accountable for our actions like other people.

- Attend to the common good: Each of the lenses requires that we evaluate both how the decision will impact us as well as other individuals and the community at large. The most ethical decisions are those which support interdependent communities while treating all individuals with respect and dignity.
- Act with courage: This step may seem obvious, but sometimes people lack the moral courage to act and so just let the situation take care of itself – or not. When we have worked through a dilemma, we then have confidence to act in the face of criticism or uncertainty.

*Step 5: Be Reflective*

- Continuous Improvement: After we have acted, we need to check back to see if the results or fall-out were intended or not. We can explore where we did not see clearly, analyze carefully, or act appropriately. Learning to impersonally evaluate our actions helps us become ever more skilled in decision making.
- Become self-aware: The practice of mindfulness helps us move toward personal integrity and wholeness. The practice of mindfulness involves stopping, reflecting, and noticing whether or not decisions reflected our own sense of meaning and purpose in our world. We can also determine whether we treated the stakeholders with respect and dignity.

*FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE*

The *EthicsGame* simulations will provide an opportunity to explore ethical dilemmas through the four lenses using the *Baird Decision Model*. Each of the simulations follows the above decision model and applies the criteria of the four different lenses, with the Veritas University simulations being the most accessible and the Core Values simulation being the most advanced. Bonus points are awarded based on how well the participant follows the criteria of the decision model and the ethical content of the four lenses – not on whether they agree or disagree with the process.

Participants will find that the portion of the simulation where they are asked to analyze the problem from their own preferred lens is the easiest. The most difficult will be the analysis using the lens that is the diagonal opposite of the preferred lens.

Carefully reading each section helps us notice the differences and similarities in approach. Then, when we either analyze a problem in class or work through a simulation, the questions will make more sense. As we become more skilled, the analysis will become easier. We are then on our way to greater self-awareness and ethical mastery.