

Ethical Decision-Making and the Best, Most Loving Use of Your Time

How do you make moral choices? According to a text called *Philosophy: The Basic Issues*, by Klemke, Kline and Hollinger there are five basic ways people make decisions:

- Going by “gut instinct,” “moral intuition” or “conscience”—this is called ethical intuitionism.
- Following certain moral principles or laws, such as the Golden Rule—ethical theories dealing with principles are called deontological theories.
- Following divine laws or commandments, or accepting some form of religious authority—this is called the divine command theory of morality.
- Going by what you consider your own self-interest, the main question being, “What’s in it for me?” This is known as ethical egoism.
- Making your decision based on the expected consequences. This is known as “utilitarianism” or “consequentialism. One form of utilitarianism seeks the greatest good for the greatest number of people.

In another book, I read about a sixth method:

- Procrastinating, so as to let the situation or other people make the decision for you.

I can even imagine a seventh approach:

- Discerning through a period of prayer or meditation. (Or perhaps this is a combination of the Divine command approach and ethical intuitionism.)

To me, there are several interesting questions: How do I normally make my ethical choices? How do the people close to me make their choices? Are some approaches better than others? How can one know if one has used the right approach or made the right decision? How often does one have the opportunity to make an ethical choice?

When I think about my own decision-making, I think I tend to use a combination of all the approaches. So the very interesting question is, why do I use one approach in one situation and another approach in another situation? I suppose I use intuition at first, but if it feels like there is any question of the right way to go, then I would look for a principle that related. However, if more than one principle applied and especially if it is a

big decision, I would go with discernment and prayer. But if the choice potentially had a major long-range impact on a lot of people, I would consider it in terms of the consequences. But if it seemed that most of the impact would be personal, I might just decide, based on what's in it for me. Probably, the rules I use for choosing my approach to making a decision are much more complex.

When I explained these theories to a group, one person commented that he thought people really just calculated what's best for them, and then thought of some principle to back it up in case they needed to justify their actions to someone else.

Regarding the idea of what's in it for me: Are you considering your self in terms of your immediate desires, or your long-range best interest? And does your long-range best interest involve to some extent pursuing the greatest good for the greatest number of people.

The interesting thing about people who use their intuition or go by their conscience, is that a lot of their choices when taken over time, look very bad. For example, I've spoken with several committed Christians who would never do anything unfair; in fact they are very generous. But they have no qualms about taking from the environment without returning what they take. In the same way, without careful consideration, a lot of basically good people take from the economy or community or political system, and thereby indirectly harm their neighbor.

I suspect that many people try to automate the process of making ethical decisions. I know that I do. I don't want to agonize, or spend a lot of time on a decision, so I make some decisions to handle all similar situations by the same "homemade" rule.

An interesting question is, "How often does one have the opportunity to make a moral choice?" If you think that I mean major life decisions, for example having an abortion, you might say very infrequently. But if you think of moral choice in terms of temptations, major and minor, you might realize that you make moral choices several times a day. But if you consider how interrelated everything is, perhaps almost every decision—from eating another donut, to sit up straight, to brushing your teeth—is an ethical decision.

Since you will be making decisions about how to do more good, it will help you to "judge your judgment," to understand how you make your decisions.

Exercise 1

1. List at least four recent decisions involving relationships, money, and how you spend your spare time—some time commitments that you made.
2. Try to figure out which of the seven strategies in this article you routinely use to help you make decisions.

Exercise 2

1. Think of someone you personally know who you respect for the quality of their ethics and how they live their life. They would be someone you'd like to emulate.
2. Try to figure out what style of decision-making they use. If you can't figure it out, you might ask them.
3. Ask yourself (or them) what else seems to contribute to their ability to make good ethical decisions. Perhaps some experience or role models have helped shape and perfect their abilities.
4. Try to sum up the new concepts or methods that they use in a sentence or two, for each concept or method. Then go back to Exercise One and apply it to the four situations. Try to imagine how they would have approached the decision, and try to image how things might have turned out.

Exercise 3

Repeat Exercise Two with some famous person who you'd like to emulate. Read a short online biography, perhaps at Wikipedia, to get a fresh glimpse of their lives.