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# ETHICAL DECISION MAKING

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QUALITY ENHANCEMENT PLAN

WEBBER INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY  
and the ST. ANDREWS CAMPUS

**Student Handbook**

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# Student Handbook Introduction

Dear Student,

Welcome! As a freshman at our university, you will be part of the very first year of our Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP). This handbook is designed to give you some necessary resources for using Ethical Decision Making in your classes and also provides information about the tools your instructors will use for assessment.

Let's begin with some FAQs...

## **What is the QEP?**

A QEP is a Quality Enhancement Plan. The regional accrediting body, SACS-COC (Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools), requires its member institutions to develop and implement a five-year plan that addresses a well-defined and focused topic or issue pertaining to the enhancement of student learning outcomes.

As part of the accreditation reaffirmation process, Webber International University and its branch campus, St. Andrews, must create a Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP). This plan centers on a chosen topic and provides a way for the institution to establish benchmarks or learning outcomes for students. These outcomes or benchmarks will be assessed each year to determine how well the students are able to meet the outcomes.

Our QEP has two main goals: 1. Students will use ethical knowledge and concepts in resolving an ethical dilemma and 2. Students will demonstrate improvements in their ability to use their ethical decision making skills to address ethical dilemmas.

## **Why is the QEP important?**

The QEP is a plan of action developed by the faculty, staff, students, and administrators that gives the university an opportunity to improve undergraduate student learning.

## **What is the topic of our QEP?**

The topic of our QEP is Ethical Decision Making. Throughout the year, you will be presented with assignments in various classes, activities, and events that center around this topic. We will be using Thomson's (2011) Integrative Model of Ethical Decision Making (See page--) as a framework for our QEP.

### **What does it mean to me?**

Graduates of institutions of higher education will be faced with many professional issues or problems, especially in the context of today's ever-changing society. Therefore, institutions have an obligation to ensure that their graduates are able to think critically and make ethical decisions so that they can become responsible citizens.

You will see the Ethical Decision Making topic in many of your general education classes, as well as some classes in your major. You will complete assignments that are directly tied to using ethical knowledge to resolve ethical dilemmas. You will also be required to attend activities such as lectures or movies that pertain to this topic. Finally, you will be assessed on your ability to think critically and demonstrate improvement in your ability to address ethical dilemmas.

### **What will be assessed and how?**

In classes that are designated as QEP courses, you will be discussing various ethical problems. You will also be given an assignment or activity that requires you to demonstrate your ethical decision making skills. These assignments or activities will be assessed using the **VALUE Rubric and Critical Thinking Rubric**. Your instructors may use a separate rubric for grading purposes. The Value Rubric and Critical Thinking Rubric will only be used to analyze how well you are meeting the goals and objectives of the QEP and will not impact your grade. Your instructors will use their own grading methods as set out in their course policies.

In addition to the rubrics, you will be administered the **Defining Issues Test (Version 2)** as a pre-test during orientation week. Your scores will be recorded and tracked. Prior to graduation you will be administered the same test again as a post-test, and your results will be analyzed and compared. These tests will not impact your grades and are for QEP assessment purposes only.

Finally, each semester, you will be required to attend specific QEP-designated co-curricular activities. **Student surveys** will be administered after each activity. At the end of each semester, the Office of Institutional Effectiveness and Research will collect the surveys and compile the data. All students must attend at least one movie and one debate/seminar per semester.

## **What is a “Good Conversation?”**

Throughout the QEP, references are made to “good conversations.” They are a required component of our theoretical framework. The idea of “good conversations” comes from Grace Thompson’s (2011) study and her ethical decision-making model. They require you to apply critical thinking and ethical reasoning to engage with an ethical dilemma.

In the QEP designated courses you will take, your professors will be working to provide opportunities for and facilitating “good conversations.” These will be thoughtful discussions which will require critical thinking to grapple with ethical problems and apply ethical decision-making skills.

In this section, Dr. Timothy Verhey provides an in-depth discussion of ethical thinking, which will help shape the good conversations taking place in your classes. You will also find thought-provoking questions, which may be used as starting points for good conversations.

## **Good Conversations: Ethical Decision-making and Critical Thinking**

**Timothy A. Verhey**  
**Assistant Professor of Religious Studies and Philosophy**

### **CONDITIONS FOR ETHICAL THINKING: YOU ARE NOT ALONE**

Human beings are social creatures who need each other. We need each other, not only to attain the basic requirements of life (food, shelter, protection, etc.), but also because the most meaningful and satisfying aspects of human life have to do with our relationships with one another (i.e. love, companionship, mutual service).

While other people are necessary for our well-being, they also pose a threat to it. We can hurt other people, just as they can hurt us.

#### **Questions (Each question is follow by a final one: *What, therefore, should we do?*):**

- How shall we live together in the midst of our mutual need and shared vulnerability?
- What does it mean to be human?
- What do we know? What do we believe? What is the difference?

### **FOUNDATIONS OF ETHICAL THINKING: COMMUNITY**

Our ideas about how to live a human life are inherited from the people around us. For example, our families, cultures, and religious traditions embody particular ways of living together that shape how we think, act, and relate to the people who inhabit the world with us. Additionally, ideas, dispositions, and behaviors are also reinforced in schools and other communities of practice (i.e. Boy/Girl Scouts, Sports Teams, Clubs, etc.).

In these communities, we learn important character traits like honesty, hard work, mutual respect, helpfulness, and service. Our ethical deliberation depends upon the beliefs, values, and rules of conduct we inherit from our communities. They all teach us how to live in a world with others and how to become people who embody characteristics that are suited to the various communities in which we participate. All of these communities that shape us provide the foundations for *ethics*.

#### **Questions (Each question is follow by a final one: *What, therefore, should we do?*):**

- What can and should we expect from other people?

- What does a fulfilling life entail?
- What sorts of relationships ought we to have and with whom?
- How should we resolve our disagreements with others?

### CHARACTERISTICS OF ETHICAL THINKING: PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY

As we move toward the development of ethical thinking built on the communal foundations mentioned above, it is important to recognize the differences between *prudential thinking* and *conventional thinking*.

- **Prudential thinking** is one way of asking myself what I should do. But, it has a very narrow focus: what is good for me. All human beings are concerned about themselves and what consequences various decisions will have for their own well-being.
- **Conventional thinking** is another way of asking myself what I should do, but it is rooted in community. Conventional thinking asks, what does my community expect of me? We are social selves and some of the most comforting and fulfilling aspects of our existence are found through conformity to the norms and expectations of our communities.
- **Ethical Thinking** arises when we are faced with a dilemma in which what we should do is unclear. Ethical thinking is concerned with what I owe to other people, irrespective of what is good for me. It places my life and actions within the context of my community and considers the obligations I have to others.

**Questions (Each question is follow by a final one: *What, therefore, should we do?*):**

- Must the need for social order conflict with the need for individual liberty? What, therefore, should we do?
- How do we discern the good from the bad?

### EMERGENCE OF ETHICAL THINKING: DILEMMAS

Ethical thinking is usually provoked by ethical dilemmas that force us to critically examine the conventional norms and expectations of our society.

- **Novel Situations** raise questions that conventional thinking cannot resolve. They require critical thinking and demand that we take personal responsibility for how we live in relationship with others.
- **Conflicting Norms** happens when the things we value, the rules we follow, the goals we pursue, and the dispositions we nurture come into conflict with one another. Conflicting norms give rise to ethical thinking and force us to think critically, weigh or options, and take personal responsibility for our actions.

- **Encountering Difference** occurs when norms and expectations of one of our communities differs from another community. Because we belong to multiple communities, and because we belong to a diverse global community that brings us into contact with people from differing backgrounds, values, religions, and cultures, there will be times that we are forced to critically examine and evaluate the norms and standards of different communities, embrace a particular set of values, goals, and provide sound reasoning for our choices.

**Questions (Each question is follow by a final one: *What, therefore, should we do?*)**

- Should we act differently in various contexts or should we conform ourselves to the expectations of the particular community we find ourselves in at that moment?
- Are there fundamental values, rules of behavior, and dispositions that we should embrace in every context and circumstance?
- How do we understand the sacred?

## **TOOLS OF ETHICAL THINKING: ETHICAL THEORIES**

Socrates (470-399 BCE) gave birth to ethical thinking in the western world. He questioned the conventions of his society (now called the Socratic method). Dissatisfied with the answer “that is the way we do things here,” he asked deeper questions: What should we do and why should we do it? This was the beginning of ethical thinking. Socrates has inspired generations of ethical thinkers who confronted the conventional wisdom of the age with critical questions. There are numerous ethical approaches and theories, but they can be narrowed down to three fundamental approaches to ethical decision-making: **teleological, deontological, and areteological**.

- **Teleological theories** of ethical decision-making focuses on the ***consequences or outcomes of particular ethical decisions***. These theories consider the outcome we are aiming at through our actions.
- **Deontological Theories** argue that we have ***a duty to follow certain rules of behavior regardless of the consequences***. Deontological theories disagree on the particular rules that human beings should follow, as well as and the particular foundations for those rules, but they all agree that human beings have a duty to follow certain ethical rules regardless of the consequences.
- **Areteological Theories** concern themselves with helping people identify and develop the ethical skills. Areteological theories of ethical decision-making assume that people become ethically excellent in much the same way athletes become excellent players and team-mates—by developing the right set of skills.

**Questions (Each question is follow by a final one: *What, therefore, should we do?*)**

- What will the consequences be for me and for others?
- What is good for people? What is good for communities?
- What does true human flourishing require and what actions will contribute to or detract from it?
- Does human happiness entail more than just having pleasure and avoiding pain?
- What are the foundations of the rules we follow in our various communities? What justifies them?

## CONTEXT OF ETHICAL THINKING: GOOD CONVERSATIONS

Given the variety of ethical theories and the diversity of perspectives regarding what is good, right, and excellent in human life, ethical thinking can feel overwhelming, even hopeless.

**Ethical relativism** assumes that since there is no way to hold ourselves or others accountable for our thoughts or actions, everyone should be free to think and do whatever they want while refraining from judging what anyone else thinks or does.

While it is true that all people are shaped by different communities and are prone to think and act differently due to varying backgrounds and experiences, there are several reasons to resist the temptation to embrace ethical relativism.

- **First, ethical relativism prevents us from becoming mature people** who take responsibility for their own lives and decisions by offering reasons for thinking, acting, and living in the way they do.
- **Second, ethical relativism prevents us from living in community with others.** In order to live together, we must have a shared understanding of what it means to be a community. Ethical relativism would provide two options: chaos or forced conformity. True community depends upon mature, responsible people coming to some level of agreement with one another by offering reasons to one another about what kind of a community they should have.

Though we must admit that people think differently about how people should live and what people should do, this does not prevent us from engaging in **good conversations** about ethical decision-making.

Although we are unlikely to resolve all our differences through good conversations, we can:

1. Think about how to approach a particular ethical issue or dilemma and become more aware of our core ethical beliefs and values
2. Become more aware of and empathetic toward alternative ethical points of view
3. Critically evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of various approaches to ethical decision-making
4. Revise and refine our own ethical views and thereby become more responsible people

5. Develop, clarify, and refine the areas where we agree, laying the foundations for a community of responsible selves, while noting areas where we continue to disagree, which will lay the groundwork for future good conversations.

Good conversation about ethical dilemmas is a never-ending process. And this is where good conversations are fundamentally different from moral relativism: Where moral relativism shuts down conversation, good conversations opens up deliberation about tough questions. The University does not expect you to achieve personal responsibility or true community in four years. Instead, we will help to prepare you for a lifetime of increasingly better conversations that will draw you deeper into personal responsibility and true community.

**Questions (Each question is follow by a final one: *What, therefore, should we do?*):**

- What are the obligations of the educated citizen?
- How do we create and use the past?

## The Integrative Model of Ethical Decision Making

As part of the QEP process, a theoretical framework had to be chosen for instructional strategies. The Integrative Model of Ethical Decision Making (Thomson, 2011) was chosen because it combines critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and problem-solving, which will help facilitate students' acquisition and mastery of ethical decision making skills.

The Thomson's (2011) study found that introducing this framework into lesson plans alongside critical thinking and opportunities for "good conversations" (dialogical reasoning), learners were better able to identify bias in their own conclusions, increase their awareness of ethical issues, apply deontological<sup>1</sup> and teleological<sup>2</sup> evaluations, and apply the skills they learned through good conversations in resolving an ethical dilemma (79).

Listed below are the six steps of The Integrative Model of Ethical Decision Making (Thomson, 2011). Integrating these steps into lesson plans and providing opportunities for "Good Conversations" will help students achieve progress in cultivating their ethical decision-making skills.

Step 1: Recognize presence of a moral issue

Step 2: Identify Internal and External Influence (Subjective norms)

Step 3: Establish Good Conversations

Step 4: Identify Alternatives

Step 5: Make Ethical Judgements

Step 6: Determine Moral Intent and Engage in Moral Behavior

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<sup>1</sup> Deontological Ethics is a theory of morality whereby decision-making is based on one's duty to follow rules regardless of consequences

<sup>2</sup> Teleological ethics is a theory of morality whereby decision-making is based on one's duty to achieve a good or desired outcome

Thomson, G.S. (2011). Good conversations: An enhanced model to teach business ethics. *Journal of International Education Research*, 7(1), 77-93.

## In Conclusion...

As students, you will someday graduate and prepare to make your way in the world. Undoubtedly, you will be bombarded with tough choices and examples of people making unethical decisions. In many cases, those decisions will come at the expense of others due to poor ethical reasoning or blind acceptance of the social norms.

Recognizing an ethical dilemma and being able to apply critical and ethical thinking are essential for making sound decisions. When people know when to think about an issue in terms of its ethical implications, “they are then able to use sound ethical reasoning to criticize commonly accepted, yet unethical, social conventions, religious practices, political ideas, and laws” (Elder, 1999).

The ability to make ethical decisions is an important part of being a contributing member of society and is essential to practitioners of any academic discipline. Learning to thoughtfully evaluate the beliefs governing your ethical decision-making is a challenging task. With a solid framework, such as the one chosen for our QEP, you will be able to engage in good conversations, grapple with ethical dilemmas, and gain the tools you need to make sound ethical decisions and become responsible, conscientious citizens.

### References

Elder, L. (1999). Critical thinking: Teaching the foundations of ethical reasoning. *Journal of Developmental Education*, 22(3), 30.