

**CHAPTER I ESSAY****Cases and Moral Systems: An Essay**

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Case studies are wonderful vehicles for ethics discussions. Some of their great strengths include helping discussants

1. Appreciate the complexity of newsroom decision making
2. Understand the context within which difficult decisions are made
3. Track the consequences of choosing one action over another
4. Learn both how and when to reconcile and how and when to tolerate divergent points of view

However, when case studies are misused, these great strengths become their fundamental weaknesses. Case studies are vehicles for an ethics discussion, not its ultimate destination. The purpose of an ethics discussion is to teach discussants how to "do ethics"; that is, to teach them processes by which they can practice and improve their own critical decision-making abilities. Each discussant should, through the use of the case-study vehicle, reach the end point: a reasoned response to the issue at hand.

When the discussion stops short of this point, it is often because the destination has been fogged in by one or more myths of media case discussions:

**Myth #1: Every opinion is equally valid.**

Not true. The best opinion (conclusion) is the one that is best supported by judicious analysis of fact and theory. In an ethics discussion, it is the one that best addresses the morally relevant factors of the case. An action has morally relevant factors if it is likely to cause some individual to suffer an evil that any rational person would wish to avoid (such as death, disability, pain, loss of freedom or pleasure), or if it is the kind of action that generally causes evil (such as deception, breaking promises, cheating, disobedience of law, or neglect of duty) (see Gertz 1988).

**Myth #2: Since we can't agree on an answer, there is no right answer.**

It's tough to take into account all of the various points of view when working through a case. One way people avoid doing this is to refuse to choose among the different perspectives. But this retreat to fatalistic subjectivism is not necessary. It may be that there are a number of acceptable answers. But there will also be many wrong answers—many approaches that the group can agree would be unacceptable. When discussants begin to despair of ever reaching any agreement on a right answer or answers, it is time to reflect on all of the agreement that exists within the group concerning the actions that would be out of bounds.

**Myth #3: It hardly matters if you come up with the "ethical thing to do" since people ultimately act out of their own self-interest anyway.**

The point of ethical reflection is to find and deal with those situations when one should not simply do that which benefits oneself. Acting ethically means to refrain from causing unjustified harm, even when prudential concerns must be set aside.

Any institution supported by society, manufacturing firms and media corporations as well as medical centers, provides some services that merits that support. No matter what the service, practitioners or companies that act only in short-term interest, for instance to make money, will not last long. Free-market pragmatism, as well as ethics, dictates that it makes little sense to ignore the expectations of consumers and of the society at large.

The guidelines below can serve as a map for an ethics discussion. They are helpful to have when discussants are working through unfamiliar terrain toward their individual end points. They can also help discussants detour around the myths discussed earlier.

As the case is discussed, check to see if these questions are being addressed:

1. What are the morally relevant factors of the case?
  - a) Will the proposed action cause an evil, such as death, disability, pain, loss of freedom or opportunity, or a loss of pleasure, that any rational person would wish to avoid?
  - b) Is the proposed action the sort of action, such as deception, breaking promises, cheating, disobedience of law, or disobedience of professional or role-defined duty, that generally causes evil?
2. If the proposed action is one described above, is a greater evil being prevented or punished?
3. If so, is the actor in a unique position to prevent or punish such an evil, or is that a more appropriate role for some other person or profession?
4. If the actor followed through on the action, would he be allowing himself to be an exception to a rule that he thinks that everyone else should follow? If so, then the action is prudential, not moral. One way to test this out is for journalists to ask how they would react if a person in another profession did what they are thinking of doing. Would the journalists applaud the action, or would they write an exposé?
5. If, at this point, the proposed action still seems justified, consider if a rational, uninvolved person would appreciate the reason for causing harm. Are the journalists ready to state, explain, and defend the proposed action in a public forum?