

## **ETHIC: A procedure for ethical decision making within Society & Environment**

Sue Knight & Carol Collins, University of South Australia

### **Abstract**

When teaching social and environmental education topics such as the treatment of refugees, global warming, child labour or animal rights, we surely do so with the aim of promoting ecological sustainability or social justice. We argue that achieving such aims essentially involves raising ethical questions: What are our moral obligations to people seeking asylum, to future generations or people who are geographically distant and culturally different from us, or to animals farmed for the production of food? Yet, fear of indoctrination and worries about conflicting parental values often leads to teachers shying away from raising and dealing with such questions in the Society & Environment classroom. In this paper we describe the theoretical underpinnings of a model designed to support students to make well reasoned ethical decisions about even such complex and controversial ethical issues. The ETHIC model safeguards us against the charge of indoctrination while allowing us to meet the fundamental aims of the Society & Environment curriculum area.

### **Introduction**

When we teach a Society and Environment topic such as Refugees or Global warming, it is clear that we aim to do more than teach facts. We **do**, of course, want students to grasp both the science and politics of Global Warming. These are factual or, more carefully, *empirical* understandings, as they include knowledge of scientific theories (for example, theory about the causes of global warming) as well as specific facts (for example, the average mean global temperatures over the last 100 years). Similarly, in tackling the refugee issue, we want to help students understand the circumstances (historical, political and geographical) which have led to the displacement of people, to understand too the conditions obtaining within refugee camps, the role of the UNHCR in repatriating refugees, the international obligations borne by countries like Australia towards refugees and the policies of successive Australian governments in relation to the treatment of both onshore and offshore refugees. Again, these are all empirical understandings. But we are aiming at more than this. We want students to use these empirical understandings as a basis for forming *their own thoughts* about the appropriateness of our treatment of refugees or of our responses to climate change, at both individual and governmental levels. And even more: we want students' thinking to lead to action; action for social justice, or for ecological sustainability.

It is clear that what we are aiming for here is *ethical* action; it is action which not only affects others (and so is in the ethical as distinct from the non-ethical domain), but which is aimed at the common good (and as such, has a least one hallmark of the morally good). Yet underlying such action is a process of ethical thinking, of ethical decision making: in judging the appropriateness of current policies on refugees or global warming students are, in fact, judging the moral rightness or

wrongness of such policies. Our aim in this paper is to spell out the theoretical foundations of a process of reasoned ethical decision making, which provides a bridge between empirical understandings and the taking of action in the broad social interest, and which, we submit, is generally overlooked in S & E classrooms.

### **Approaches to ethical decision making**

It is worth beginning our discussion of ethical decision making by noting what is perhaps obvious: *viz.* that some methods of ethical decision making are better than others. Examples make this point clear. A child might decide to go ahead and tease a classmate on the grounds that it is fun to do so; a businesswoman might decide to market dishonestly a product she knows to be harmful on the grounds that doing so will make her rich. Such decisions are reached by a process which involves considering one's own interests to the exclusion of the interests of others, or at least, putting one's own interests far above those of others, and we feel strongly that this reasoning process is flawed.

Consider too, the example of a man who takes on the role of suicide bomber on the grounds that this is what God demands of him; or a citizen who argues that whaling (or honour killing) is morally right, because it is part of his culture. Again, we have good reason to judge such reasoning as defective: the process amounts to a simple appeal to authority, and as is well known, appeal to authority can never count as adequate justification. Regan (2000, p.259) puts it clearly:

Even if there is a moral authority, those who are not...authorities can have no reason for thinking that there is one unless the judgements of the supposed authority can be checked for their truth and reasonableness, and it is not possible to do this unless what is true or reasonable...[is] known independently of what this supposed authority said. An example...might make this point clearer. A plumber proves his "authority as a plumber" not merely by what he says, but by the quality of his work.... **After** we have come to know, on independent grounds, that a particular plumber's judgement is reliable, **then** [and only then] we have reason to rely on his judgement in the future. The same is true of the authority of one's judgements in, say...morality (emphasis in the original).

What is more, justifying ethical decisions on the basis of a mere appeal to authority brings with it very real social dangers, as history attests. (Think of Nazism, for example.)

And a final example: a university lecturer argues that we cannot condemn the practice of slavery or that of female genital mutilation because such condemnation simply expresses a cultural preference. Moral right and wrong are determined by cultural norms; there are no independent grounds on which to base moral judgements, no objective evidence to which we could appeal, in the way that (say) factual evidence about the effect of tobacco on lungs and blood vessels provides objective evidence that smoking is harmful. As a consequence we must **refrain**

from the making of moral judgements; we must instead be tolerant of moral views which differ from our own.

We think there is good reason to question such relativist reasoning. For as Rachels (in Cahn, 2000) points out, while attention to particular examples makes relativism appear an enlightened attitude, a shift in focus reveals its dangers all too clearly. In a multicultural society we find many different cultural practices: different food practices, different ways of caring for the aged, different family systems and the society is undoubtedly the richer for it. But suppose the focus shifts to other examples: the practice of selling children into slavery, or, closer to home, bullying. Surely these are examples which demand that ethical judgements be made. We feel strongly that such practices are morally wrong, whether they occur within our society or some other, and our conviction here is arguably as strong as our confidence in a well founded empirical claim, say, that smoking causes lung cancer.

### ***Reasoned ethical decision making***

We must ask ourselves then, **why** we feel confident that ethical judgement is necessary in cases of slavery or bullying. The answer surely lies in the significant harm that such practices bring. Here we find a form of evidence on which to base ethical judgements. Generalising from these examples, it seems plausible to argue that ethics is grounded in good and harm (suffering); moreover, that human beings, and indeed all sentient beings, share common capacities for suffering and for wellbeing. This idea is captured in the notion of a 'common humanity', also described in the literature as the notion of 'equal human [or moral] worth' (Gaita, 2000; Singer, 2007). The idea leads to two further insights:

First, that reasoned ethical decision making involves an **equal** consideration of **the interests of all those (at least all those humans) affected by one's actions**; and

Secondly, that the activity of **empathising with others** is central to the process of reasoned ethical decision making.

Further, the idea delivers the notion of human rights, although it is important to emphasise that (as Singer has famously argued elsewhere) many other living creatures also suffer, and have varying capacities for well being. We must take this argument seriously, and broaden the scope of our moral consideration to include levels of moral concern appropriate to sentient beings' differing capacities for suffering and well being.

Of course, recognising harm and wellbeing as the basis of ethical reasoning does not, in itself, provide us with a moral decision-making procedure. But there are a number of other well established elements of ethical justification on which we can draw. To return to an earlier example, dishonest marketing, whatever the wider costs, might well result in benefit to a vendor. However, the long lasting harm caused to the wider population far outweighs this good. It is also necessary then, to **weigh up harm and wellbeing** here, where, as indicated above, the interests of each individual affected by the action (including the agent's) count as equally important.

In addition, reasoned ethical decision making involves taking both **circumstances and facts into account**. The point is best made by means of examples. We begin with circumstance, and offer two examples. First, the 'infanticide' example:

In the past, infanticide was a common practice within many indigenous groups. Such groups had rules of this kind: *When the number of babes-in-arms rises to (say) 20, the next baby born is to be left to die*. The reason for such rules was this: The groups each had clearly demarcated territories; geographical limits beyond which they could not go in search of food. Having occupied these territories for centuries, the groups had learned that their territories would support so many individuals, and no more; that if the numbers in their groups increased beyond this limit, the streams would be fished out, so that there would be none left to spawn next season... and so on. For the good of the whole group then (i.e. to save a large number of individuals), they would sacrifice one. And they would judge that this was the right thing to do *in the circumstances in which they found themselves*. In different circumstances (say, the circumstances in which we find ourselves) they would have had no need of such a rule.

A second, more familiar example to illustrate 'taking circumstances into account' is that of sacrificing the lives of some individuals in war, to save the lives of a great many others. Nicholas Monsarrat (1975), in his novel *The Cruel Sea*, describes the following situation:

During World War 2, a troop carrier is steaming across the Atlantic with a thousand or so troops on board. Suddenly the look-out signals to the captain that he can see half a dozen men in the water, in what appear to be American lifejackets, some distance ahead, and he gives a rough estimate of their position. At the same time, the captain receives a message from his radar operator – there appears to be a large mass on the ocean floor at coordinates x, y, which corresponds pretty well with the position given by the lookout. The captain reasons that the mass is an enemy submarine, and that the sailors have been placed in the water as a trap to entice him to bring his ship into a direct-hit position. He reasons further that should they take a direct hit, all 1000 of them would die, and that he dare not risk it. So, with great regret, he changes course, leaving the men in the sea (Monsarrat, 1975).

Again, in different circumstances, he would have had no need to make such a hard decision.

Reasoned ethical decision making also requires that the agent **take the relevant facts into account**; that is, that she **gather information relevant to a determination of the likely effect of her actions on others**. Again, an example will make this point clear. Suppose two colleagues, Fred and Peter, are arguing over whether capital punishment is justified in cases of first degree murder. Peter argues as follows: 'I don't like the idea of the State taking a life, but I think capital punishment is justified in such cases, because it would act as a deterrent to others, thus saving many, many lives that would otherwise be lost.'

Fred responds with this argument: ‘You’re wrong: if you look carefully at the research that has been done, looking at American states which have had capital punishment, abolished it, and then brought it back, (or comparing states *with* capital punishment with states *without* capital punishment), you find no difference in the incidence of first degree murder. The facts show that the threat of execution does NOT act as a deterrent, and the reason is that murder is almost always a crime of passion: would-be murderers do not, on the whole, sit down calmly before the act to think, ‘What will happen to me if I do this?’.’ If Peter’s only reason for supporting capital punishment is the one he has given, then he will have to withdraw his support for the practice: he has his facts wrong. (The disagreement between Fred and Peter here is a factual, not a moral, disagreement.)

Finally, reasoned ethical judgement relies (as the name implies) on the application of **logical reasoning, or thinking**, that is on the formulation of relevant arguments with premises which are both true and strong enough to support their conclusions. Such arguments are necessary to the deduction of consequences and the weighing up of good and harm.

These five elements of reasoned ethical decision making are captured in the following acronym:

### **The ETHIC model for reasoned ethical decision making**

**(Knight & Collins)**

<b>Equal consideration</b>	<b>Recognising</b> <i>common capacities</i> for suffering and well being; the importance of <b>empathy</b> , <i>i.e.</i> <i>imagining</i> what it would be like to be in another’s place
<b>Thinking</b>	<b>Logical reasoning:</b> to deduce consequences and to weigh up good and harm
<b>Harm</b>	<b>Recognising suffering and well being</b> as the basis of ethical judgement
<b>Information</b>	Getting the <b>facts</b> straight
<b>Circumstances</b>	Taking <b>circumstances</b> into account

## **ETHIC in the classroom**

In discussing the procedures of ethical decision making we have focused on spelling out the theoretical underpinnings of the five key elements contained in the ETHIC model. This is an important first step. As teachers of social and environmental education we need to think through the various approaches commonly used in the making of ethical judgements; to reflect on the shortcomings and dangers of merely appealing to a moral authority or slipping into the trap of moral relativism, for example. We must also consider and understand the processes of *reasoned* ethical decision making if we are to be effective in supporting our students to apply such procedures when making moral decisions about social and environmental issues. While the practical classroom application of the ETHIC model is the subject of a future paper, it is worth noting here that the model was designed as a foundation or guide for the teacher to draw on when discussing ethical issues with her students, rather than a quick, step-by-step process for students to work through. Very briefly, the role of the teacher here is to highlight the elements of ETHIC as they arise naturally during ethical inquiry discussions, and to help students come to understand the significant progress that can be made in finding answers to ethical questions when we look to the facts of the matter, consider the issue from other perspectives, take circumstances into account, and so on. (See Collins, 2009, for a description of this approach to ethical inquiry implemented in an upper primary class on the topics of the treatment of animals and reality television).

## **Conclusion**

To sum up: If, as we have argued, our aim in teaching a Society and Environment topic such as Refugees or Global Warming is to have students act ethically, that is to act in the broad social interest, it is essential that students are introduced to the elements and procedures of reasoned ethical decision making. If our aim is to have students acting for social justice or sustainability, we had better equip them with the tools required to make a conscious, rational decision to act in such ways. We submit that the ETHIC model provides a sound basis for the making of such decisions.

## REFERENCES

- Collins, C (2009) 'Opening disciplinary doors in *Studies of Society & Environment: Asking and answering Guiding Ethical Questions*', *The Social Educator*, (27), 2, pp. 5-12.
- Gaita, R (2000) 'Racism: The Denial of a Common Humanity' *A Common Humanity*, The Text Publishing Company, Melbourne, pp. 57 – 72.
- Monsarrat, N (1975) *The Cruel Sea*, Cassel and Company Ltd.
- Rachels, J (2000) 'The Challenge of Cultural Relativism' in Cahn, S. *Exploring Philosophy: An Introductory Anthology*, Oxford University Press, New York, pp. 245 - 255.
- Regan, T., (2000). 'How Not to Answer Moral Questions' reprinted in Stephen M. Cahn, ed (2000) *Exploring Philosophy: An Introductory Anthology*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Singer, P (2007) 'Famine, Affluence and Morality', in Schafer-Landau, R., *Ethical Theory*, Blackwell Publishing, Malden, MA, pp. 506 – 512.