

A Beginning Discussion of Ethics

Objective A: Students will define the terms truth, values, morality, ethics as a beginning point to identify and understand how values shape human judgment.

Objective B: Generate a discussion about these ideas in order for students to gain a better insight into the terms and develop a foundation for further discussion of literature.

1. Truth is a relative to personal point of view. As such it changes and shifts. Your truth is not necessarily my truth.
2. Truth is a solid, fixed idea. It exists beyond culture and time and as such is the same for everyone everywhere.

Activity #1

Respond to the ideas above. Can you think of an argument which supports each of the two ideas about truth? Make a T-chart as a small group or as a large class which offers arguments for both views.

Activity #2

Look at the list of eleven virtues below and rank them in order of their importance to you.

Virtues Ranking

- Courage
- Truth
- Honesty
- Friendship
- Family
- Wealth
- Humor
- Loyalty
- Responsibility
- Faith
- Life

What to do with the Rankings

- Ask how varied to they expect other students rankings to be from their own. Why is that?
- Are these the same rankings that you would expect yourself to give 5, 10, 25 years from now? Why is that? Does that cause you to rethink your responses to activity #1?
- Your ranking of values directly though subconsciously determines your decision making. The things that are important/valuable to you will be the things that you work hardest to achieve and protect. Dilemmas occur when you experience a conflict between two or more of these values. Dilemmas are not always a choice between two opposite values but often between two equal seeming outcomes. The dilemma results because you have difficulty choosing one course and its likely outcome over another course and its likely outcome.

Activity #3

Look at the following 2 commands.

Thou shalt not steal.

Thou shalt not kill.

What value is underlying the command? Do you agree that these commands are always to be followed? Are there any situations where you would be in favor of modifying the command? Why is it important for people to be able to modify such commands? Why shouldn't they?

Activity #4

Ethical Dilemmas: Use these for class/small group/individual discussion work. A good deep thought activity is to set up a T-chart for the arguments pro and con for a particular course of action and to also have the students identify who the primary beneficiary would be of a particular course of action. Also, students could dig deeper to identify and rank the values suggested by a particular course of action.

Dilemma Template

Dilemma in brief: _____

Possible Courses of action (minimum of 2)

Justification Arguments for 1st course of action:

- Argument #1 in favor _____

Primary Beneficiary from _____

This course of action _____

Because... _____

Underlying values suggested by this choice of action

Justification Arguments for 1st course of action:

- Argument #2 in favor _____

Primary Beneficiary from _____

This course of action _____

Because... _____

Underlying values suggested by this choice of action

Justification Arguments for 2nd course of action:

- Argument #1 in favor _____

Primary Beneficiary from _____

This course of action _____

Because... _____

Underlying values suggested by this choice of action

Justification Arguments for 2nd course of action:

- Argument #2 in favor _____

Primary Beneficiary from _____

This course of action _____

Because... _____

Underlying values suggested by this choice of action

Sample Dilemmas

- A friend confides to you that he has committed a particular crime and you promise never to tell. Discovering that an innocent person has been accused of the crime, you plead with your friend to give himself up. He refuses and reminds you of your promise. What should you do? In general, under what conditions should promises be broken?
- Jim has the responsibility of filling a position in his firm. His friend Paul has applied and is qualified, but someone else seems even more qualified. Jim wants to give the job to Paul, but he feels guilty, believing that he ought to be impartial. That's the essence of morality, he initially tells himself. This belief is, however, rejected, as Jim resolves that friendship has a moral importance that permits, and perhaps even requires, partiality in some circumstances. So he gives the job to Paul. Was he right?
- A madman who has threatened to explode several bombs in crowded areas has been apprehended. Unfortunately, he has already planted the bombs and they are scheduled to go off in a short time. It is possible that hundreds of people may die. The authorities cannot make him divulge the location of the bombs by conventional methods. He refuses to say anything and requests a lawyer to protect his fifth amendment right against self-incrimination. In exasperation, some high level official suggests torture. This would be illegal, of course, but the official thinks that it is nevertheless the right thing to do in this desperate situation. Do you agree? If you do, would it also be morally justifiable to torture the mad bomber's innocent wife if that is the only way to make him talk? Why?
- Roger Smith, a quite competent swimmer, is out for a leisurely stroll. During the course of his walk he passes by a deserted pier from which a teenage boy who apparently cannot swim has fallen into the water. The boy is screaming for help. Smith recognizes that there is absolutely no danger to himself if he jumps in to save the boy; he could easily succeed if he tried. Nevertheless, he chooses to ignore the boy's cries. The water is cold and he is afraid of catching a cold -- he doesn't want to get his good clothes wet either. "Why should I inconvenience myself for this kid," Smith says to himself, and passes on. Does Smith have a moral obligation to save the boy? If so, should he have a legal obligation ["Good Samaritan" laws] as well?
- In Victor Hugo's *Les Miserables*, the hero, Jean Valjean, is an ex-convict, living illegally under an assumed name and wanted for a robbery he committed many years ago. [Actually, no -- he is only wanted for breaking parole.] Although he will be returned to the galleys -- probably [in fact, actually] for life -- if he is caught, he is a good man who does not deserve to be punished. He has established himself in a town, becoming mayor and a public benefactor. One day, Jean learns that another man, a vagabond, has been arrested for a minor crime and identified as Jean Valjean. Jean is first tempted to remain quiet, reasoning to himself that since he had nothing to do with the false identification of this hapless vagabond, he has no obligation to save him. Perhaps this man's false identification, Jean reflects, is "an act of Providence meant to save me." Upon reflection, however, Jean judges such reasoning "monstrous and hypocritical." He now feels certain that it is his duty to reveal his identity, regardless of the disastrous personal consequences. His resolve is disturbed, however, as he reflects on the irreparable harm his return to the galleys will mean to so many people who depend upon him for their livelihood -- especially troubling in the case of a helpless woman and her small child to whom he feels a special obligation. He now reproaches himself for being too selfish, for thinking only of his own conscience and not of others. The right thing to do, he now claims to himself, is to remain quiet, to continue making money and using it to help others. The vagabond, he comforts himself, is not a worthy person, anyway. Still unconvinced and tormented by the need to decide, Jean goes to the trial and confesses. Did he do the right thing?
- A fat man leading a group of people out of a cave on a coast is stuck in the mouth of that cave. In a short time high tide will be upon them, and unless he is unstuck, they will all be drowned except the fat man, whose head is out of the cave. [But, fortunately, or unfortunately, someone has with him a stick of dynamite.] There seems no way to get the fat man loose without using [that] dynamite which will inevitably kill him; but if they do not use it everyone will drown. What should they do?
- In the novel *Sophie's Choice*, by William Styron (Vintage Books, 1976 -- the 1982 movie starred Meryl Streep & Kevin Kline), a Polish woman, Sophie Zawistowska, is arrested by the Nazis and sent to the Auschwitz death camp. On arrival, she is "honored" for not being a Jew by being allowed a choice: One of her children will be spared the gas chamber if she chooses which one. In an agony of indecision, as both children are being taken away, she suddenly does choose. They can take her daughter, who is younger and smaller. Sophie hopes that her older and stronger son will be better able to survive, but she loses track of him and never does learn of his fate. Did she do the right thing? Years later, haunted by the guilt of having chosen between her children, Sophie commits suicide. Should she have felt guilty?