

# Frame of Mind

## The 'How-To' of Best Ethical Thinking

Our last article (*AGD Impact*, January 2010) described six common, yet very different, styles of addressing conflict: "War," "Adjudication," "Arbitration," "Mediation," "Ethics Dialogue," and "Community Discernment." We claimed that for the dental profession to respond effectively to the complex social-ethical challenges it currently faces, it is critical for dentists to identify the characteristics that distinguish these different styles of addressing conflict and to make deliberate efforts to focus on talking about ethics with their colleagues. Unless dentists strive to build what we called an "ethics dialogue" in collaboration with other dentists, including those with different views, they will continue to feel (and to be) ethically isolated from one another. This means not talking to only like-minded dentists when dentists really want to address the societal challenges that dentistry faces. Indeed, we proposed, the very unity of this profession depends on such ethics dialogue and the effort to achieve the ideal that we called "Community Discernment" within the profession regarding the challenges it faces.

Knowing the attributes of excellent ethical dialogue can help dentists initiate a successful, collaborative discussion with others, especially those who initially disagree with us. In this essay, we will describe eight characteristics of ethical thinking at its best and indicate how they can be incorporated into our ethics dialogue with one another.

The ethics literature offers a number of ways to describe the best ethical thinking. We believe the simplest approach is to focus on the most common things that prevent our ethical thinking from being complete and thorough and reflect backwards from these deficits to arrive at a description of the

characteristics that define ethical thinking at its best.

First, we need to be clear about the word "ethical." Examining what this word means can get very complex, but for our present purposes, a fairly general idea about what "ethical" means will be sufficient. "Ethical," here, will simply mean what ought or ought not to be done when someone's well-being, rights, duties, principles, virtues, or ideals are at stake. We don't want our description of the best ethical thinking and excellent ethics dialogue colored with any particular set of ethical values, rules, principles, rights, or ideals. Our assumption is that our descriptions include characteristics of the best ethical thinking no matter what particular standards of rightness or wrongness are being considered. We hope that describing these eight characteristics of the best ethical thinking will lead us directly to a description of excellent ethics dialogue.

Our descriptions of the first four characteristics are based on work by James R. Rest, a leading psychologist of ethical learning (or, in the academic literature, "moral development"). Using his theoretical framework (with a little adjusting), we propose that the first four characteristics of the best ethical thinking are: "Thorough and Accurate Ethical Awareness," "Sound Ethical Reasoning," "Appropriate Motivation," and "Effective Implementation." In addition, we propose our own four characteristics of the best ethical thinking: "Consolation," "Short-term and Long-term Coherence," "Affirmation of the Ethical Thinker As an Active Source of Ethical Conduct," and "Common Effort for Shared Goals."

**1** "Thorough and Accurate Ethical Awareness." We have all been in situations in which we missed something that was ethically significant and resulted in a deficit in ethical judgment. Sometimes it "just happens." Maybe we overlooked it because we have a pattern of blindness to a particular thing. Perhaps we discount certain reactions or feelings from others as not being very important. Or, without noticing, we downplayed or ignored our actions because our own point of view is so different from someone else's. But whether the deficit is situational or part of a pattern, such deficits need to be remedied if one wants to do excellent ethical thinking.

To achieve excellent ethical thinking, we must be aware of what is at stake ethically in a situation.

We want you to participate in ethics dialogue. Send your comments, along with your name, degree, and city/state to *AGD Impact*, 211 E. Chicago Ave., Ste. 900, Chicago, IL 60611-1999 or e-mail [impact@agd.org](mailto:impact@agd.org).



"Thorough and Accurate Ethical Awareness" is the ability to grasp everything that is ethically significant about a situation, to appreciate it from the perspective of whatever ethical values, principles, duties, rights, ideals, or virtues might be involved in it, and to understand the situation from the perspective of every player who is likely to be affected by it. (Mr. Rest's name for this condition is "moral sensitivity," which stresses how much our awareness in a situation depends on what we bring to it.)

In addition, reflection on our own experiences of incomplete or faulty awareness makes it clear that getting others' help is often a useful way to correct an awareness deficit. By doing this, parties participating in excellent ethical dialogue will help one another test the thoroughness and accuracy of their awareness of whatever is ethically at stake in the discussion. They will offer help to one another when a deficit in awareness seems to be present, and they will welcome such help if they have missed something important. Obviously, such help must be offered respectfully to retain the relationship of partners-in-dialogue (rather than a game of one-upmanship). But until both parties agree that they have uncovered all the ethical "data" in a situation, their ethical thinking together will come up short. So working together toward "Thorough and Accurate Ethical Awareness" is a necessary part of all excellent ethics dialogue.

**2**"Sound Ethical Reasoning." A second characteristic of the best ethical thinking is "Sound Ethical Reasoning," that is, thinking that leads to well-reasoned ethical judgments. Oftentimes, a person who has thorough and accurate awareness about a situation will have ethical "data" of several different kinds (e.g., rules and rights, benefits and harms, and ideals and virtues) that must be processed. Arriving at a well-reasoned judgment about what ought or ought not to be done depends on having a range of ethical reasoning skills for processing those different kinds of data correctly. Most adults have developed some skills for making well-reasoned ethical judgments, but very few people have thought much about how moral judgments are reached or noticed that different thought patterns are needed to properly process different kinds of ethical data and how to put them together in a sound ethical judgment. Consider, for example, the differences between judgments based on character/virtue and those based on respecting people's rights, or the difference between judgments about maximizing values and minimizing harms and judgments based on conforming to rules. These different kinds of ethical data lead to sound ethical judgments by different paths of reasoning.

When ethical questions are complicated, people can often help one another by listening carefully to other's processing of the ethical "data" and looking at the judgments they are considering to see if all the ethical data are accounted for. We can then propose other possibilities as we search together for clear, well-constructed reasons for the judgments we are making. Fortunately, adult ethical thinkers frequently have different strengths in their ethical thinking and respectful ethics dialogue can give each party the other's help in testing

the soundness of his or her ethical thinking and in examining the implications of his or her judgments.

In addition, in matters of *professional* ethics and regarding the issues of *social* ethics that prompted our discussion of ethics dialogue, there are ethics scholars, professional organizations, and others who have developed concepts and distinctions that often help ethical reflections and bring greater clarity to complex ethical judgments.

**3**"Appropriate Motivation." A third characteristic of the best ethical thinking is "Appropriate Motivation" to do what one ought to do. Even when a person is fully aware of what is ethically at stake in a situation and forms a well-reasoned judgment about what ought to be done, the person still may not be motivated to act accordingly.

Here, "appropriate" refers to motivation that conforms to the accepted motivational standards of one's commitments, including one's role as a health care professional. So "Appropriate Motivation" refers to habitual dispositions to perceive, evaluate, judge, choose, and act steadily and dependably in accordance with the values, rights, principles, and ideals appropriate to one's role. Motivation is not just a passing whim, but something substantial and enduring. As a person matures, motivation typically develops into something fairly stable and then, over time, ordinarily changes much more gradually through added experience and new challenges. Sometimes, however, it changes significantly in a very short period of time. The elements of a person's motivation are not usually obvious to casual acquaintances, even if they work with or encounter the person socially on a regular basis, especially because each person's professional motivation is embedded in a much more complex set of stable patterns. To make accurate judgments about another person's motivation, we ordinarily need a significant amount of frequent, personal exchange. And, even if you judged another to have improper motivation, it would not be realistic to expect to magically rectify another person's motivational deficit in a short period of time unless you and the other party already have a significant personal relationship.

So without a pre-existing personal relationship of some depth, we should be very cautious about making assumptions regarding the motivations of our partner(s) in ethics dialogue. A motivational assumption one can make with confidence, however, is that one's partner is equally committed to growing together toward the best ethical thinking that both parties are capable of under the circumstances. Without this motivation, obviously, the ethics dialogue will not go far. This component of motivation is not very dramatic and may seem rather humdrum, but it is a commitment that far more dentists need to make on a regular basis for the sake of their profession and its future.

**4**"Effective Implementation." This characteristic refers to the act of effectively carrying out one's ethical decision. It has two components. One involves knowing how to carry out what we have determined ought to be done, and the other involves addressing emotional limitations.

People sometimes discover—particularly in complex institutional and professional settings—that they do not know how to do what they have determined they ought to do. They may lack a particular kind of skill or technical ability, or they may lack the capability to communicate effectively with someone who is difficult. A person may know they need assistance but not know how to get it. They may know that they must interact with the systems of a particular institution but not know how to get the systems to work as needed. Addressing these kinds of hurdles involves getting practical advice as ethical thinking that is otherwise excellent can fall short of its goal without assistance from others.

On the emotional side, a person may have to confront powerful fears or a powerful sense of hopelessness in order to actually do what the person has judged ought to be done. Sometimes, we may find inspiration by thinking about our heroes who have overcome fear or hopelessness; other times, the only way to overcome our fears is to ask for help. For this kind of help, it is important to have people in our lives that we can trust with our fears and who will not think less of us for sometimes hesitating—as all normal humans do—about actually doing what we have determined ought to be done.

A sense of impotence or hopelessness in the face of powerful social forces can make progress in addressing these ethical challenges appear nearly impossible. Even if the partners in dialogue are not close friends, but simply fellow professionals who share many of the same personal commitments, they can refer to each other in mutual support to address these feelings. What is perhaps most helpful to dentists in implementing ethics dialogue on difficult social issues is the opportunity to address the frustration and seek helpfulness together.

**5** “Consolation.” The fifth characteristic of the best ethical thinking is not easy to name. We will call it “Consolation,” stressing the two Latin ancestors of this word: *solari*, “to soothe” and *con-*, “together.” Perhaps the hardest part of making a judgment in a difficult ethical matter is how lonely it often feels. If we are being conscientious, we know the choice to act in one way or another will be ours, not someone else’s; that means that once we have made a decision, we must act and put our decision before all the world.

Excellent ethics dialogue can help this step feel less lonely. While no one else can make our choices for us, it is possible to share the work of careful ethical thinking and judging that are the starting points for our best choices. We do not always need to think alone. It is an important support, a “Consolation,” to know that other thoughtful people are willing to share in the ethical thinking that brings us to our decision.

So as dentists struggle to understand and judge the complex ethical issues of dental practice and the complex social ethical questions that face the dental profession, in respectful ethics dialogue they can begin to share the burden of careful ethical thinking and judging. They can offer one another “Consolation” through this effort.

**6** “Short-term and Long-term Coherence.” The best ethical thinking eventually makes sense to the one doing it and to others as well. The story of what was ethically at stake, our judgments, our motivation, and our efforts to implement our decision and overcome hindrances needs to make sense not only as a proper response to that particular situation, but also as a meaningful component of the decision-maker’s life as a whole. The best ethical thinking reflects a person’s integrity.

It is often hard to get our thinking about complex ethical situations to connect coherently with the rest of our lives. “If I ever do decide this,” we might say to ourselves, “How will I ever explain it, even to myself, much less to others?” When we are unable to turn our ethical reflections into a story that fits our understanding of ourselves and that can be shared with others, this lack of coherence can be very painful. But a partner in ethics dialogue can sometimes see the thread that ties the parts together better than we can ourselves. So another benefit of ethics dialogue is help in making our ethical thinking connect with who we are. When the issues we discuss are complex for both of us (as they inevitably are for co-professionals dealing with complex social circumstances), a shared effort to help each other find coherence with who we are in our ethical thinking can be very valuable.

**7** “Affirmation of the Ethical Thinker As an Active Source of Ethical Conduct.” The best ethical thinking is not an isolated individual activity. It is always situated within the workings of larger social systems. This is particularly true of ethical thinking that seeks to address complex social systems such as those impacting the dental profession today. The two remaining characteristics of the best ethical thinking focus specifically on the social settings in which ethical thinking occurs.

We have all passed some part of our lives within or in close contact with institutions that viewed us as simply passive beings. In such settings, our proper role was doing as we were told rather than functioning as active ethical thinkers and decision-makers; our actions were viewed as flowing from the system of which we were a part rather than from our own ethical judgments and choices. Such institutions tell us to never mind thinking and judging; rather, one should “just do this and don’t do that.”

The best ethical thinking happens in social settings in which the thinker is affirmed as an active source of ethical conduct, as someone whose actions flow from his or her own ethical thinking and decision-making. Viewing oneself as an active source of ethical conduct, though, is not always easy, especially in adverse situations where so much depends on other persons helping us deal with the counter-messages we receive from the situation. So another component of excellent ethics dialogue is the mutual support that partners in dialogue offer each other in the conviction that each is an active source of ethical conduct in the face of counter-messages.

**8** “Common Effort for Shared Goals.” The eighth characteristic of the best ethical thinking is also the social setting; it addresses the ways that our efforts at careful ethical thinking

can be hindered by injustices we experience around us, especially injustices directly connected to the ethical issues we are considering. While not said very often, the best ethical thinking occurs when the social context is one of "Common Effort for Shared Goals."

Viewing one's social situation as one of "Common Effort for Shared Goals" involves viewing relevant others as trusted supporters rather than competitors or adversaries. This is often a hard view to maintain, especially in the face of powerful, impersonal institutions and social systems beyond any one individual's control. It is rendered even more difficult when others' reasons for acting are not known.

Partners in dialogue, however, can offer one another help in this connection. They sometimes have insight or information into the relevant social situation. But even when they are not able to help one another with thoughtful supporting judgment, they can help an aggrieved party do his or her ethical thinking more clearly and carefully. So attention to one another's needs regarding this aspect of the best ethical thinking is important for those striving for excellent ethics dialogue.

It is important to know that the ethics dialogue is itself a social setting. It is a place in which each party's considering him or herself—and being considered by the other—as an active source of ethical conduct can be mutually affirmed and where each one's ability to see the dialogue as itself a "Common Effort for Shared Goals" can be supported. That is, these last two characteristics are not only important in relation to the larger social context of the partners' ethical thinking, they are also important contributors to the success of the ethics dialogue itself.

In this article, we have been describing an ideal. A vision of the ideal is essential as a guide for those engaged in ethics dialogue. We hope the eight characteristics described here will help dentists to dialogue more effectively and more frequently about the complex ethical issues that face the dental profession. ♦



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