Ethics Background

This section of the primer provides an overview of some of the features of ethics as a discipline.

The materials in this section are designed to introduce students to the scholarly study of ethics and some of the language and concepts that are used in the field. These resources should help students to investigate the relationship between their position on issues and the various ethical perspectives.

The **Process of Ethical Inquiry** flow chart provides a visual representation of some of the elements of ethical analysis. The flow chart that follows demonstrates the components of ethical inquiry in graphical form. The elements of awareness, ethical background, reasoning, decision-making, motivation, and action/evaluation, are explained/explored in more detail in the summary that follows the chart.

Several points link to material discussed in the Strategies section. For example, the element of awareness can be explored through the strategies of Narrative Ethics, and the Decision-Making Model can be used when reasoning and deciding on the best course of action.
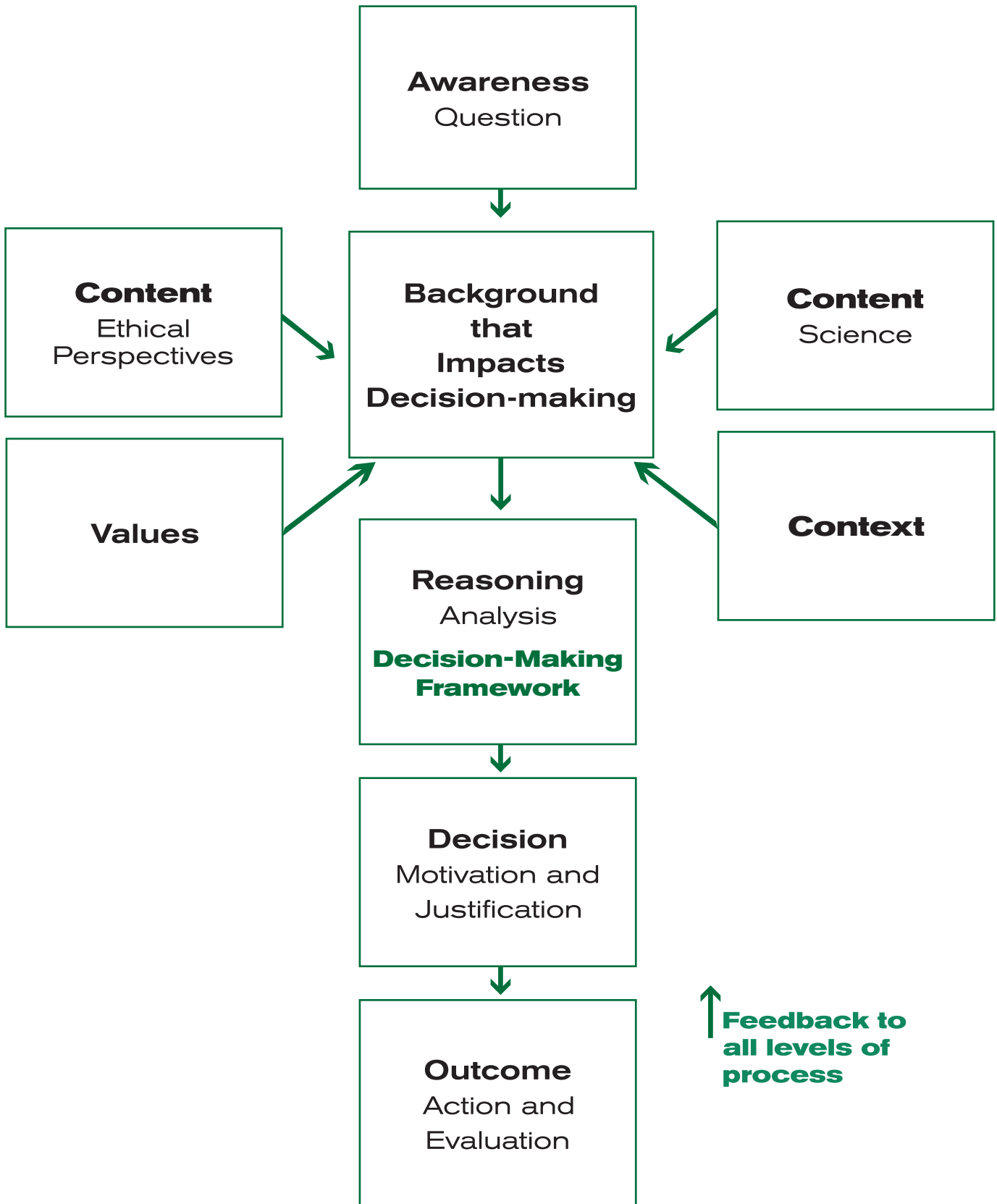
The ethical perspectives provide background on the ethical dimensions of an issue, but other background information (values, context, and especially science content) must also be considered.

Several **One Page Summary Sheets** suitable for use with students are provided. Each of these provides information on commonly used ethical perspectives. These perspectives all represent efforts to understand, organize, and structure moral life. Each of these offers a framework that helps human beings determine which human actions are morally right or morally wrong.

The **Comparison of Main Ethical Perspectives** table shows how the ethical approaches relate to one another.

The **Background Reading: Ethical Perspectives and Theories** provides an overview of ethics, morals, and values, as well as a comparison of different perspectives.

The Process of Ethical Inquiry

Awareness
Question

Content
Ethical Perspectives

Background that Impacts Decision-making

Content
Science

Values

Reasoning
Analysis
Decision-Making Framework

Context

Decision
Motivation and Justification

Outcome
Action and Evaluation

Feedback to all levels of process

The Process of Ethical Inquiry Flow Chart provides a visual representation of the steps involved in analyzing and responding to an ethical issue related to science. The following components are part of the sequence diagrammed:

1. Awareness: Questioning

SENSITIVITY: Being able to recognize the issues and frame the question. Moral analysis begins when there is confusion about competing alternatives for action, when values of stakeholders conflict, and when none of the alternatives are entirely satisfactory for resolving the dilemma.

2. Background: Ethical Perspectives and Values

Many elements influence the background that goes into decision-making. These include:

Science Content – presented in classroom and/or researched by students.

Ethical Content - presented in classroom (discussion of perspectives and theories) and/or researched by students.

The Ethics Background Summary for students presented in this section provides background information on ethical content.

Context - the cultural, legal, social, historical context

Values - the values brought by the students themselves, based on family values, religious values, cultural values, etc. Because values differ for each student, each student will bring their own perspectives and ideas into the process.

3. Reasoning: Using Frameworks and Critical Thinking Tools

JUDGMENT: The student makes a judgment about what course of action is morally right (or fair, or just, or good), thus prescribing a potential course of action regarding what ought to be done.

The student analyzes the situation and takes a logical and critical approach to reasoning through the problem.

Decision-Making Frameworks are useful in helping to structure student thinking about a problem.

4. Decision: Motivation and Justification

MOTIVATION: Personal Responsibility/Commitment
The student makes the decision to do what is morally right.

5. Action and Evaluation

CHARACTER: Perseverance / Implementation

The student implements the moral course of action decided upon and evaluates the outcome. The cycle may be repeated.

Based in part on materials modified from Dr. Kelly Fryer-Edwards, University of Washington Department of Medical History and Ethics, and from the Four Component Model of Morality (Rest 1984).

Moral Rules and Duties
(Deontological Ethics)

Summary

In this perspective the focus is on the nature of an ACT itself, and not what happens as a result of that action.

The emphasis is on being motivated by moral duties and acting in accordance with them. Respect for persons is also stressed in this view.

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) was a major proponent and developer of this approach to ethics. Kant formulated a 'categorical imperative' (a command that is absolutely binding, without exceptions), and stated it in several ways:

1. *"One must act only in such a way that one could will one's act to become a universal law or rule (maxim)".*
   One should act only in ways that would be acceptable if everyone else acted that same way.

2. *"Act in such a way that always the action treats humanity never simply as a means, but at the same time as an end".*
   One should not treat persons as a means to an end only, where the outcome is the only concern.

Kant distinguishes between perfect and imperfect duties. Perfect duties must always be done – do not commit suicide, do not kill innocents, do not lie, etc. Imperfect duties must only sometimes be done – develop our talents and ourselves, contribute to the welfare of others.

Contributions

- Offers consistent principles or rules
- Treats persons as ends in themselves and never only as a means to an end
- Recognizes individual rights

Challenges

- Does not offer a way to deal with conflicting obligations
- Perfect duties permit no exceptions, which can sometimes be morally difficult to reconcile
- Does not offer much guidance about forming and applying moral rules in a real life setting

Virtues

Summary

This perspective focuses on the CHARACTER of the individual and his or her attitudes or traits.

Examples of virtues are honesty, courage, integrity, trustworthiness, wisdom, temperance, and justice.

Actions that are morally virtuous conform to a model set of attributes valued or inherent in a particular community.

It is the virtue that makes an act right or wrong. The individual must work to cultivate virtuous traits to ensure that he or she will act morally rightly.

Virtue ethics emphasizes that our actions both build and reflect our character and core commitments. It is an ancient theory from classic Greek ethics.

Contributions

- Broadens the perspective beyond that of the ACT to include the CHARACTER of the individual
- Encourages the identification and cultivation of human excellence, a prerequisite for good living. Specific virtues are identified as prerequisite for the practice of good medicine, good nursing, good science, etc.
- Is compatible with ethical principles

Challenges

- Lack of consensus regarding the essential virtues
- Skeptics question whether good character or virtue can be taught
- Virtue is of a very personal nature
- An agent can be of good character and do wrong - or be of bad character and do right - virtue theory does not explain this fact very effectively

Outcomes
(Consequentialist, Utilitarian)

Summary

The focus of this perspective is on the CONSEQUENCES of the action.

The morally appropriate act is one that maximizes the amount of whatever outcome is deemed good and identified as intrinsically valuable, useful, or desirable.

Consequentialists seek to bring about the greatest good for the greatest number of people.

English philosophers Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill were crucial in the development of utilitarianism as a form of consequentialist ethics. In its most simplistic and traditional form, utilitarianism identifies "pleasure" as the good that must be maximized and "pain" as the evil that must be minimized. Utilitarians want to maximize happiness so they determine which actions will have the best outcome in terms of happiness or pleasure, and act so as to bring them about. Moral action is that which results in good or desirable consequences. The rightness of the act is measured by the good or bad consequences it brings about – more good is better. Contemporary utilitarian philosophers identify other values as "good" such as friendship, health, knowledge, etc.

Terms associated with consequentialism: Utility, consequences, ends, outcomes, cost/benefit analysis, "the ends justify the means"

Contributions

- Considers the interests of all persons equally
- Directs attention to the consequences of actions
- Offers a familiar form of reasoning – thinking about consequences to guide actions
- Can be used to establish public policy

Challenges

- Bad acts with good consequences might be permissible
- Ignores or does not do justice to the particular and morally significant relationships that make up our lives – the highly personal nature of "duty"
- Interests of majority can override the rights of minorities
- Makes people responsible for too much; requires too broad a view Must take into account ALL people and ALL consequences
- Hard to determine what counts as a benefit or a harm, hard to compare benefits/harms

Principles — Respect, Justice, Nonmaleficence, Beneficence

Summary

The focus of this perspective is on the four PRINCIPLES supported by or compromised by the question or issue at hand.

Philosophers Tom Beauchamp and Jim Childress identify four principles that form a commonly held set of pillars for moral life.

Respect for Persons/Autonomy	Acknowledge a person's right to make choices, to hold views, and to take actions based on personal values and beliefs
Justice	Treat others equitably, distribute benefits/burdens fairly.
Nonmaleficence (do no harm)	Obligation not to inflict harm intentionally; In medical ethics, the physician's guiding maxim is "First, do no harm."
Beneficence (do good)	Provide benefits to persons and contribute to their welfare. Refers to an action done for the benefit of others.

Contributions

- Draws on principles or pillars that are a part of American life – familiar to most people, although not by their philosophical term
- Compatible with both outcome-based and duty-based theories (respect for persons and justice are duty-based, while nonmaleficence and beneficence are outcome-based).
- Provides useful and fairly specific action guidelines
- Offers an approach that is appropriate for general bioethics and clinical ethics
- Requires weighing and balancing – flexible, responsive to particular situations

Challenges

- Lacks a unifying moral theory that ties the principles together to provide guidelines
- Principles can conflict and the theory provides no decision-making procedure to resolve these conflicts
- Difficult to weigh and balance various principles
- Autonomy in some cultures refers to individual autonomy, while in others refers to group/family/community autonomy

Adapted with permission from Laura Bishop, Ph.D., Kennedy Institute of Ethics, Georgetown University

Care

Summary

The focus of this perspective is on RELATIONSHIPS, POWER, and on understanding the STRUCTURES underlying situations. Ethicists using this perspective might examine these aspects of an issue:

1. Vulnerable Populations

- Who makes up the most vulnerable populations?
- Ethical analysis should focus on these populations, because how they are treated in a society reflects the morals of that society.

2. Importance of Experience

- What are the personal and collective experiences of the individuals considered?
- Knowledge that comes from experience is valuable

3. Underlying Structure

- What is the underlying structure of the situation? (Looking at the structure gets us away from labeling 'good' or 'bad' people.)
- How does the structure drive certain aspects of the situation? Is the structure itself oppressive?
- What is being ignored? Is my attention being distracted? Should I be suspicious?
- Who benefits? At whose expense? What is being left out?

4. Relationships

- What are the qualities of the relationships?
- 'Right-relationships' honor the dignity of human beings and are based on mutual benefit instead of domination.

Contributions

- Provides a balance to principle-based approaches
- Provides context

Challenges

- Power structures are not always evident
- Lacks rules or principles that are easy to apply

Comparison of Main Ethical Perspectives

Ethical THEORY	MORAL RULES and DUTIES	VIRTUES	OUTCOMES	PRINCIPLES	CARE
Other Names	Duty-Based (Deontological) or Rights-Based Ethics	Virtue-based Ethics	Consequentialist Ethics (Utilitarian)	Principle-Based Ethics	Care-based Ethics
Focus	Act	Agent	Consequence	Context	Power/ Relationships
Description	Actions (independent of consequences) are right or wrong. We are all obliged to fulfill our duties and to act to fulfill these duties	Attitudes, dispositions, or character traits enable us to be and to act in ways that develop our human potential (for example, honesty, trustworthiness, integrity, faithfulness, etc.)	Consequence of actions or policies must uphold the well-being of all persons directly or indirectly affected. Choose actions producing greatest overall benefits	Four principles form a set of pillars for moral life; respect for persons/ autonomy, justice, beneficence (do good), and nonmaleficence (do no harm)	Focuses on relationships and underlying power structures within a situation
What would a person from such an approach say?	"Whenever I am _____, I shall _____ _____. Whenever anyone is _____ _____, he or she will _____ _____," "The ends do not justify the means."	"What is ethical is what develops moral virtues in ourselves and our community." "It takes a virtuous person to act in a virtuous manner; if you always act in a virtuous manner, you are a virtuous person."	"Of any two actions, the most ethical one will produce the greatest balance of benefits." "The ends do justify the means."	"Uphold the pillars whenever possible according to the situation." "Take the agent, act, and consequence all into consideration and proceed in the path that follows the principles."	"What is not being said?" "What are the underlying power relationships and how do they influence actions?" "How can we value relationships?"
Some Contributions	-Offers consistent rules to follow -Recognizes role-related duties in society	Encourages cultivation of human excellence	-Directs attention to consequences -Considers interests of all persons equally	-Requires balancing -Draws on principles familiar to American life	-Provides counterpoint to principle-based approaches -Looks at context
Some Challenges	Sometimes obligations conflict	Lack of consensus regarding essential virtues	-Bad acts are permissible -Interests of the majority can override minority -Can't predict all outcomes	Principles can conflict	-Power structures not always evident -Lacks easily applied rules/ principles

Adapted with permission from Laura Bishop, Ph.D., Kennedy Institute of Ethics, Georgetown University, and Wendy Law, Ph.D., Fred Hutchinson Cancer Research Center.

Background Reading:
More on Virtues

Virtue ethics has several roots, but the most commonly cited is Aristotle's *Ethics*. Based on his writing, we get a theory of ethics that is both embodied in actions and situated in particular contexts. Specifically, ethics for Aristotle is *enacted* in the sense that our actions communicate our values; our behaviors reflect our core beliefs. If I say that honesty is important to me, but you find out later I have been withholding information from you, my actions have not been consistent with my stated core beliefs. Lying is wrong, not because there are rules or principles that advise against it, or because of the consequences (I'll get caught), but because lying isn't consistent with other values and practices I value (integrity, honesty). From a virtue ethics perspective, inconsistency would be unethical; it may also mean that a different ethical framework was guiding my decision making (e.g. consequences or duties).

According to Aristotle, we also develop our character through our actions. So, by practicing kindness or compassion, I become a kind or compassionate person. Character and core values emerge through our actions and daily choices as our lives continue, rather than being something we are born with, or something that is instilled at an early age. The developmental aspect of becoming virtuous is important for ethics education. It means that sometimes we must practice the actions before they are second nature, but through practicing (enacting) we form habits of mind; in turn, habits of mind shape our character.

As described above, virtue ethics is grounded in the way we are in the world. It is also responsive to particular contexts. For Aristotle, there were no hard and fast rules about what behaviors or actions were ethical or unethical. The nature of the action must be contextually judged. Virtue ethics requires individuals be responsive to the situation and consider how their actions in this particular context will reflect their core purpose. Because context matters, the idea of what counts as consistency may be more difficult to sort out. That is, what may look like withholding information (and therefore, potentially lying) is actually done as an act of compassion. One core value (compassion) might hold primacy over another (honesty) in a given situation. How do we know which should trump? It comes back to which enacts your core purpose. More on that next…

Defining Characteristics

We have already been introduced to the idea that for Aristotle, ethics is embodied in actions and situated in particular contexts. To press this further, a key characteristic of virtue ethics is that the answer to the question, "What is the right thing to do?" comes in response to considering, "What is my core purpose, and which option reflects that core purpose?" For example, consider your role as a teacher preparing future scientists and researchers. You can

help promote ethical development by asking the following kinds of questions of your students imagining themselves in that future role: if I am a researcher faced with a dilemma – I have conflicting findings in 2 of the 3 experiments I have run. Can I just thrown out the third experiment that does not confirm my hypothesis, or do I have to run another experiment to try and understand the findings? – I need to ask myself: what kind of researcher am I? What do I value in science? What kind of contributions will I be able to stand behind when I am publishing in the scientific literature and advancing science?

The question of core purpose is tied to both personal and professional roles and responsibilities. Personally, we all have roles as citizens of the world and have ideas about what kind of world we want to live in. Professionally, we are part of a larger group of teachers and scientists with core beliefs and commitments. For Aristotle, we could ask even the most basic question: what is our core purpose as human beings? The answer for him was: flourishing. Therefore, any right action was the action that promoted human flourishing. Asking which course of action enacts our core purpose as a citizen, or as a teacher, reminds us that our actions are part of a larger whole and have implications beyond ourselves. Thinking about virtue ethics this way is important for helping move beyond what can be narrowly introspective (my character, the virtues I possess) to considerations of how we are interconnected. This is particularly evident in the work of teaching, where the virtues you enact on a daily basis in the classroom go a long way toward role modeling for students the kinds of behaviors and choices that are ethically desirable.

Challenges

Since the crux of Virtue Ethics turns on how we each define our core purpose, disagreements can be difficult to resolve if we face competing roles and purposes. If, for example, one researcher thinks that his core purpose is to solve unanswered scientific questions and another believes her core purpose is to ameliorate public health disease, they may initially disagree about which grants to pursue, which research agenda to focus on, which methods to employ, and so forth. We can see that neither person is wrong, as they are both enacting their core purposes. However, they will not find middle ground unless they shift the conversation to a different focus. Because virtue ethics asks us to move from core purposes, these two researchers could talk explicitly about their own commitments and could explore possible projects that would focus on interesting scientific questions that had public health implications.

A further challenge arises within virtue ethics as all of us embody more than one role and therefore, must enact more than one set of core purposes at any one time. Someone may be a citizen, a sibling, a member of an institution, teacher, and researcher. Ideally, all of those core commitments will be in alignment. However, situations arise where they do not and you will be asked to put one role and core

purpose ahead of another. For example, if your sibling needed access to a cancer therapy only available within a placebo-controlled randomized clinical trial, your commitment to your sibling might cause you to break the random assignments to ensure she was enlisted in the therapeutic arm of the study. However, in your role as researcher, you would be committed to objectivity in methods and design and to fair recruitment. Breaking the code would go against these beliefs. What can you do? Which role takes primacy depends on the context, and in this case, it depends on your relationship to the study. If the study is yours, or one you are involved with, then your role as researcher comes first. If you are not involved with the study, you can advocate for your sibling's health to the best of your ability.

Significance

The strength of the ethical frameworks comes from being able to use them together as needed. While you must act within the rules and your duties, and with consideration of consequences, virtue ethics is the framework that brings it home. From this perspective, we identify the actions that will help foster and preserve our own, and our profession's, integrity. It is the framework that asks you: will I be able to sleep at night having made this decision? Am I acting in ways that I can be proud of? Virtue ethics requires us to do a fair amount of reflection on what is important to us, and as such, is a critical step in any ethical decision making process.

Thought Questions

What kind of citizen do you want to be? What kind of world do you want to live in? What kind of teacher do you want to be? What kind of development do you want to promote in your students? What kinds of projects do you want to contribute to? How will you know if your daily choices are enacting your core purpose? What resources can you use to help support you or guide you as you move in a direction that is important to you?

Background Reading:
Ethical Perspectives and Theories
How Does Ethics Differ from Morals and Values?

The terms values, morals, and ethics are often used interchangeably. However, there are some distinctions between these terms that are helpful to make.

- **Values** signify what is important and worthwhile. They serve as the basis for moral codes and ethical reflection. All individuals have their own values based on many aspects including: family, religion, peers, culture, race, social background, gender, etc. Values guide individuals, professions, communities, and institutions. One expression of values might be that 'Life is sacred.'

- **Morals** are codes of conduct governing behavior. They are an expression of values reflected in actions and practices. Morals can be held at an individual or communal level. For example, 'One should not kill' provides a guideline for action based upon values.

- **Ethics** provides a systematic, rational way to work through dilemmas and to determine the best course of action in the face of conflicting choices. Ethics attempts to find and describe what people believe is right and wrong, and to establish whether certain actions are actually right or wrong based on the all the information available. For example, ethics might address a question such as 'If killing is wrong, can one justify the death penalty or kill in self-defense?'

What Are Some Different Ethical Perspectives?

Ethicists defend their positions by using different ethical perspectives and theories. Five of the major perspectives are described here.

- **Moral Rules**
  An action is right if it follows certain fundamental moral rules. In Rules-based perspectives, the important feature is that an action itself should be considered, not what happens as a result of that action. This theory emphasizes moral duties and obligations as well as moral rights. Examples of commonly used rules are not to treat people as only a 'means to an end' and to 'treat others as you would like to be treated yourself'. Someone arguing from a rules-based perspective might say that his or her moral rule or duty is to 'always avoid killing'.

- **Virtues**
  An action is right if it conforms to a model set of attributes inherent in a particular community. Virtues-based ethics looks at the overall character that is considered desirable by a community. It then asks, 'what would the virtuous person do?' Ancient Greeks identified certain virtues that are

still widely recognized today as important such as compassion, honesty, courage, and forgiveness. Virtue ethics looks at the whole person and their behaviors over their lifetime in many situations. For example, killing may not be considered in harmony with a virtuous character that emphasizes forgiveness.

- ## Outcomes
  An action is right if good consequences outweigh bad consequences. Outcome-based approaches look at the results of actions in determining whether they are ethical or not. Often this theory will look for solutions that will create the greatest 'good' for the greatest number. For example, killing some people may be justified under this perspective if many more will be saved as a result.

- ## Principles
  An action is right if it follows the principles:

  Respect: Respect individuals and their autonomy (right to make independent choices).

  Beneficence: Be of benefit

  Non-maleficence: Minimize harm

  Justice: Treat others equitably, distribute benefits/burdens fairly

  The principles provide a combination of rules and outcomes-based perspectives. For example, respect for individuals and justice are focused more on rules, and beneficence and non-maleficence require looking at the outcome of an action. The principles are widely used in biomedical ethics. Suppose a person who was dying wished to be killed. The principle of autonomy might be interpreted to say that in order to respect that individual's wish, they should be killed. However, suppose the patient had asked a doctor to do the killing. A doctor who had vowed not to harm others might invoke the principle of non-maleficence and decide they could not kill the patient.

- ## Care
  An action is right if it acknowledges the importance and value of interpersonal relationships. Care ethics also looks at the underlying power structures of a situation. For example, an ethicist using the perspective of care might look at how an oppressive or exploitative social structure may underlie an act of killing.

Each of these perspectives allows different questions to be asked of an ethical dilemma. For example, in looking at different solutions one might ask, "Which one provides the greatest good for the greatest number?" "Which solutions are the most fair to the parties involved?", or "Which are consistent with moral rights and duties?" Familiarity with these perspectives can provide you with a language to describe and defend your position, and help you see how your arguments align with established philosophical perspectives.