

# The ethical cycle

Ethics problems are difficult to solve. It is very hard to come up with a general strategy to tackle ethics problem. But there is one such strategy: the ethical cycle. We'll discuss it in this chapter.

## 1 The ethical cycle

### 1.1 Ill-structured problems

Mainstream ethics has been dominated by **rational foundationalist approaches**. They try to search for one, or a limited number, of basic moral principles that can solve every ethical problem. However, they fail to see that solving ethical problems is really rather complex. This is because moral problems are **ill-structured problems**.

You may wonder, what characterizes ill-structured problems? Well, ill-structured problems have no definitive formulation of the problem, they may embody an inconsistent problem formulation, and they can only be defined during the process of solving the problem. Also, ill-structured problems don't have just one perfect solution. Instead, they may have several alternative satisfactory solutions. Thus, solving ill-structured problems is not only about analyzing the problem and choosing/defending a certain solution. Instead, it is also about finding new solutions. (This is called **synthetic reasoning**.)

### 1.2 The ethical cycle

Although solving ethical problems is complex, we do need a systematic approach to solve them. This prevents the application of mere gut-feeling and other shortcuts. And luckily, there is such a systematic approach: the **ethical cycle**. The ethical cycle is displayed in figure 1. It consists of five important steps, which will now be discussed.

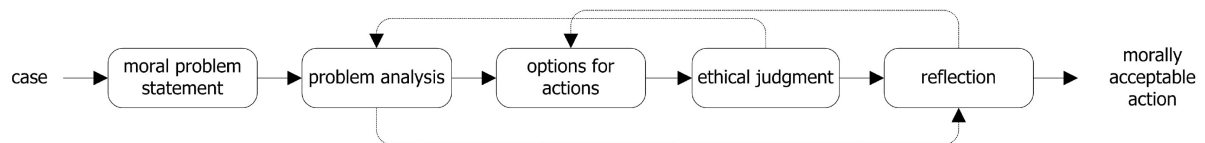


Figure 1: The ethical cycle.

1. The start of the ethical cycle is the **formulation of a moral problem**. A special case of a moral problem is the **moral dilemma**. In this case, there are two positive moral values/norms that cannot be fully realized at the same time. Instead, one action only realizes one moral value, while another action realizes the other moral value. But in real life, there are often more options for actions. So, in the ethical cycle we will mainly just consider basic moral problems.

A good moral question/problem statement must meet three conditions. It must clearly state what the problem is, it must state for whom it is a problem, and it must be clear why/how it is a moral problem. However, it will often not be possible to fully formulate the moral problem precisely when the ethical cycle is started. In this case, we can start with a relatively vague formulation, and try to make it clearer as we solve the problem.

2. Secondly, there is the **problem analysis**. During this step, the relevant elements of the moral problem are described. There are three important elements: the interests of the stakeholders, the relevant moral values and the relevant facts. Sadly, facts aren't always entirely clear. If this is the

case, then we can formulate things in a hypothetical form. ‘If  $x$  is the case, then choose action  $A$ . If  $y$  is the case, choose  $B$ .’

3. Next, we need to **generate possible options for actions**. During this step creativity is of major importance. Also, the **strategy of cooperation** can be useful to find alternatives. In this strategy, stakeholders are consulted for possible actions to solve the problem. This may often lead to win-win situations. And, next to the standard options, the option of whistle-blowing should also be kept in mind as a last resort.
4. During the **ethical evaluation** step, the moral acceptability of the various options for action is evaluated. This can be done on the basis of **formal frameworks** and **informal frameworks**. Formal frameworks include codes of conduct and ethical theories like utilitarianism, duty ethics, etcetera. Examples of informal frameworks are **intuition** and **common sense**. When using intuition, you choose the action that is intuitively most acceptable. When using common sense, you weigh the options for the possible actions, in the light of the relevant values. You then choose the best action.
5. Different ethical frameworks don’t always lead to the same conclusion. Therefore, a **reflection** on the outcome of the previous step is necessary. The result of this step should be a choice for one of the possible actions. One approach for reflection is the **wide reflective equilibrium**. The basic idea of this method is that different ethical judgments are weighed against each other and brought into equilibrium.

Central to reflection is argumentation. Arguments for/against ethical frameworks can be positioned at two levels. On the **first level**, you can criticize the ethical frameworks themselves in general. On the **second level**, you can argue about the concrete situation in which certain frameworks have been applied.

It must be noted that the ethical cycle is a cycle. So, it’s no shame to go back a few steps to, for example, adjust the problem formulation. Instead, that is the goal of the ethical cycle! (Why else would they call it a cycle?)

### 1.3 Moral deliberation

The ethical cycle is often performed by an individual. But in real life, the chosen action will often affect other individuals as well. One may wonder whether it is justified that one person’s choices affect other person’s lives.

One way to solve this problem, is by engaging in a **moral deliberation** with the people involved. By discussing the ethical cycle with other involved people, you will be able to make a more educated choice. And, you will not have to choose about other people’s lives without them being able to at least give their opinions.