



# Introduction

## I. Terrorism as Background for Moral Decision-making (p. 1)

A. Terrorism is a fact of life around the world; acts in one country are headline news everywhere:

1. Anders Behring Breivik killed 77 people and wounded 242 in Norway on July 22, 2011.
2. Attackers from Pakistan entered Mumbai, India from November 26-29, 2011 and killed 164 people, wounding 308.
3. A train bombing in Madrid, Spain by two Moroccans killed 191 and injured 1,858 on March 11, 2004.
4. Timothy McVeigh used a truck bomb to kill 168 people and injure 800 in Oklahoma City on April 19, 1995.

B. Potential responses to violent, deadly cases like these in a media ethics class are usually argued passionately without making much headway.

1. Response no. 1: evocative, expressive level, with no justifying reasons—case by case decision-making that finally retreats to the law (response does not examine the method of moral decision-making)
2. Response no. 2: systematic ethical deliberation that analyzes the stages of decision-making, focuses on the real levels of conflict, and makes defensible ethical decisions.

C. Any decision involves sorting out of values.

1. Values reflect our assumptions about social life and human nature. Each value influences our discourse and reasoning on moral issues, since to value something means to consider it desirable.
2. Types of values include: aesthetic, professional, logical, sociocultural, and moral.
3. Values may be stated in both positive and negative terms.
4. There may be multiple values at stake in any given situation.

D. All media professionals hold values that direct their professional behavior.

1. News people hold values such as immediacy, skepticism, and independence.
2. In Oklahoma, TV viewers, family members and reporters valued the law, and therefore, McVeigh's punishment.
3. News media value the distribution of information but also recognize the value of human dignity in tragedy.
4. The reporter's personal anger toward the terrorist may confront the political value of a right to a fair trial.

E. We do ethical analysis by looking for guidelines, and we quickly learn to create an interconnected model.

1. Ascertain the facts/circumstances and define what happened.
2. Determine what values motivated the decision.
3. Appeal to an ethical principle.
4. Choose loyalty to one social group instead of to another.

## **II. The Potter Box Model of Reasoning (p. 3)**

A. The Potter Box is a model for social ethics that was formulated by Ralph Benajah Potter, Harvard Divinity School.

B. Steps in Analysis (four quadrants): As we move from one quadrant to the next we construct our "action guide." Using the Norway attacks as our example, we try to determine what happened and the right action to take as media.

1. Define the situation (the relevant details of the attacks, information on Breivik's family and his formative years; his psychiatric profile; the delay of the police in getting to the island).
2. What values were involved in the decision? (Obeying the law; compassion for victims; social values of a peaceful response by the public; Breivik's white supremacy values; the professional value of a public's right to know)
3. What ethical principles are being applied? (Telling the truth of the case as a categorical imperative; other-regarding care given the depth of the tragedy.)
4. Choose loyalties – for whom did the press do all this? (For themselves, their careers; for the audience to inform; for our subscribers to generate headlines; for our profession to be fair and balanced while enterprising; for society in general to focus on the innocent victims)

C. The Potter Box is a circle, an organic whole. It is not a random set of isolated questions, but an interconnected system.

D. The Potter Box may be used to adopt policy guidelines to govern future behavior in similar circumstances. The model allows for serious reflection of decisions made by media organizations.

E. The Potter Box allows one to consider both universal grounds (overarching theories) and community mores involved in making ethical decisions.

F. The Potter Box helps the student of media ethics systematically approach moral decision-making and sort out competing values, ethical principles and loyalties involved in any situation.

G. The Potter Box helps us to sharpen our moral analysis and thereby enhance the debates in media ethics. It helps us to better understand the logic of social ethics and thereby validate our choices in media practice over the long term.

H. The four quadrants (definition, value, principles, and loyalties) instruct media practitioners to develop normative ethics rather than resort to emotional responses with no justifying reasons.

### **III. Using Ethical Principles (p. 9)**

A. Disagreements often result from our seeing the actual events differently.

B. Also, our values need to be isolated and accounted for since several values are usually involved, and they all can shape the decision-making process.

1. Values are the frame of reference that helps us make sense of our ethical decisions.
2. Values motivate human action and are located deeply within the human will and emotions, whereas ethics involves critical reasoning about moral questions

C. Quadrants 3 (Ethical Principles) and 4 (Loyalties) help us think critically about potentially conflicting messages we received from Quadrant 2 (Values).

D. As an ethical decision-maker, you must introduce certain ethical principles (described in Section IV). Such principles will help you to make sense of your values and loyalties.

E. In the context of the Potter Box, no conclusion can be morally justified without a clear demonstration that an ethical principle shaped the final decision.

F. The two quadrants on the left side (definition and values) explicate what actually happens (i.e., they are descriptive). The two quadrants on the right side (principles and loyalties) concern what “ought” to happen (i.e., they are normative).

G. The purpose of sound ethical reasoning is to draw responsible conclusions that yield justifiable actions. Ethical norms and principles can help one to accomplish this task.

H. One of the most important tasks for instructors and students is learning which theory is the most powerful under what conditions—thus, a one-approach-fits-all-model is counterproductive to critical thinking.

I. Louis Hodges organizes all various ethical principle options into five categories—ethical theories based on virtue, duty, utility, rights, and love. These master theories are not canonical, that is, they aren't a body of self-evident truths without contradiction.

## IV. Ethical Guidelines (p. 13)

A. Aristotle's Mean ("Moral virtue is a middle state determined by practical wisdom"):

1. Aristotle's emphasis is moderation or temperance.
2. Something is only bad if it is practiced or done in excess or extreme (e.g., in journalism, the sensational is to be avoided and the virtues of balance, fairness and equal time are recognized).
3. Practical wisdom is moral discernment, a knowledge of the proper ends (telos) of conduct and the means of attaining those ends.
4. Not every action or every emotion lends itself to a middle state. Some things are intrinsically wicked and should be avoided—they are always wrong (e.g., two extremes are to murder or burn down his house, so I will take the middle state and merely beat him up).

B. Confucius' Golden Mean

1. Confucius developed the theory of the mean before Aristotle.
2. Confucius rooted his ethical theory in virtue. Human excellence depended on character and balance rather than on social position.

C. Kant's Categorical Imperative ("Act on that maxim which you will to become a universal law")

1. Kant's categorical imperative implies that what is right for one is right for all: "Act only that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."
2. Kant gives a true test of a genuine moral obligation: Question: Do you want your decision to be applied universally?
3. "Categorical" means unconditional and without exception or allowance for extenuating circumstances. Moral law is binding on all rational beings. Certain actions are therefore always wrong: e.g., cheating, stealing, and dishonesty. Benevolence and truth-telling are always and universally right.
4. The Categorical Imperative is inherent in human beings and is apprehended not by reason but through conscience (i.e., it is a higher truth).
5. Kant's system is called "deontological ethics," from the Greek word for duty (deon). His system reduces ethics to duty. The Categorical Imperative must be obeyed even to the sacrifice of all natural inclinations and socially accepted standards.
6. Sir David Ross constructed a form of duty-based ethics in which right actions were considered "prima-facie duties"—obligations self-evident upon first viewing.

D. Islam's Divine Commands (Justice, human dignity, and truth are unconditional duties).

1. Muhammad of Arabia recorded duty ethics based on unconditional imperatives commanded by Allah. The ethics command the right and prohibit the wrong.
2. The system of ethics revealed in the holy Qur'an is comprehensive for all of life and include patience, moderation, trust, love, and prudence.
3. The Qur'an emphasizes justice as the essence of Islam.
4. The second major principle in Islam is a respect for human dignity that is rooted in the sacredness of human nature.
5. Truth is a pillar of Islamic ethics that is at the center of human affairs and fundamental to Islamic communication.
6. The First International Conference of Muslim Journalists mandated that Muslims in the media should follow the Islamic rules of conduct.

E. Mill's Principle of Utility ("Seek the greatest happiness for the aggregate whole")

1. Mill's principle suggests right is what will yield the best consequences for the welfare of human beings.
2. The morally right alternative produces the greatest balance of good over evil. All that matters ultimately in determining the right and wrong choice is the amount of good promoted and evil restrained.
3. John Stuart Mill (1806–1873): happiness is the sole end of human action (telos) and the test by which conduct ought to be judged.
4. Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832): preventing pain and promoting pleasures are for Bentham and Mill the only desirable ends.
5. Pluralist Utilitarianism: other values besides pure happiness possess intrinsic worth—values such as friendship, knowledge, health, and symmetry. Thus, rightness or wrongness is assessed in terms of the total amount of value ultimately produced.
6. There are two kinds of utility: act and rule utilitarianism.

(a) Act utility is the greatest good in specific case. For example, will a particular action in a particular situation result in a balance of good over evil?

(b) Rule utility asks which general rule yields the greatest utility in any given situation.

F. Rawls's Veil of Ignorance ("Justice emerges when negotiating without social differentiations")

1. Rawls considers fairness as the fundamental idea in the concept of justice. Fairness means quantity: everyone in the same union doing similar work should receive the same percentage of pay.
2. Eliminating arbitrary distinctiveness expresses fairness in its basic sense.
3. The Veil of Ignorance helps ensure fairness and equity in any situation. The veil asks that all parties "step back from real circumstances into an 'original position' behind a barrier where roles and social differentiations are eliminated."
4. As people negotiate social agreements in the situation of imagined equality behind the veil, they inevitably seek to protect the weaker party and minimize risks.
5. Two principles emerge from the Veil of Ignorance:

(a) The first principle calls for a maximal system of equal basic liberty.

(b) The second principle involves all social goods other than liberty and allows inequalities in the distribution of these goods only if they act to benefit the least advantaged party.

G. Judeo-Christian: Persons as Ends (“Love your neighbor as yourself”)

1. Ultimately humans stand under only one moral command or virtue: to love God and humankind. All other obligations, though connected to this one, are considered derivative.
2. The command to love your neighbor is normative, an “ought” (St. Augustine: “divine love is the supreme good”).
3. Humans are created in the image of God, the more loving they are the more like God they are. Love is a principle of action. (Heinrich Emil Brunner: “Remain in love.”)
4. Christian tradition introduced agape—unselfishness, other-regarding care and other-directed love that is distinct from friendship, charity, benevolence, and other weaker notions. Human beings have unconditional value apart from shifting circumstances. “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

H. Nel Noddings’ Relational Ethics (“the ‘one-caring’ attends to the ‘cared for’ in thought and deeds”)

1. Caring rejects the “ethics of principle as ambiguous and unstable,” and insists that human care should play the central role in moral decision-making.
2. Ethics begins with particular relations, and there are two primary parties in any relation: the “one-caring” and the “cared for.”
3. Three central dimensions are emphasized in this caring ethic: engrossment, motivational displacement, and reciprocity.

## **V. To Whom is Moral Duty Owed? (Loyalties) (p. 26)**

\* NOTE: The Potter Box upper-right Quadrant deals with loyalties. We must ask, where do our ultimate loyalties reside? Often, conflicts arise between the rights of one person or group and those of others.

A. Responsible moral decision-making requires that we clarify which parties are going to be influenced by our decision and which ones we feel obligated to support. The following categories of loyalties and obligations are examined in this book:

1. Duty to ourselves: maintaining our integrity and following our conscience.
2. Duty to clients/subscribers/supporters: considering our obligation to those who help pay the bills.
3. Duty to our organization or firm: loyalty to our employer and its code of ethics.
4. Duty to professional colleagues: following mutual standards for the media industries we work in.

5. Duty to society: social responsibility and wrestling with the public good and the “public’s right to know.”

B. The media practitioners’ moral obligation to society is stressed as critically important.

C. The loyalty quadrant provides a pivotal juncture in moral discourse and indicates that conceptual analysis can hardly be appraised until one sees the implications for institutional arrangements and relevant social groups.

D. Thus, the line of moral decision-making we follow has its final meaning in the social order.

E. Considered judgments do not derive directly from normative principles but are woven into a set of obligations one assumes toward certain segments of society.

## **VI. Who Ought to Decide? (p. 28)**

A. At each phase of moral decision-making (i.e., quadrant of the Potter Box), the issue of “who should be accountable for the decision?” is raised.

B. Numerous decision-makers are involved in any moral decision involving the media.

C. Individuals cannot get lost in the process—the individual is the authentic moral agent and is therefore responsible.

D. The “corporate obligation” must be considered as well. Individuals within the organization are co-responsible for the actions taken by an organization. However, ultimate responsibility rests on the individuals.

E. Gross attacks and broad generalizations about the entire media being responsible usually obscure more than they enlighten. Such generalizations allow individuals to hide beyond the corporate cover.