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2.

More specifically, a

professional ethic

is a particular code of rules and understand-

ings worked out by the members of a profession to govern their own practice. (See

Appendix on the Professions, below).

Ethical Principles

: Very general concepts that sum up a range of morals, values and vir

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tues, from which moral imperatives can be derived. We test our actions against

Rules,

our

rules against

Principles

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Sometimes Ethical Reasoning is helped by a decision procedure, or tem-

plate, suggesting a pattern of steps to follow in order to solve puzzling prob-

lems. Here are three that we have found useful.

1.3.1

ADAPT: An Approach to Moral Decision-Making

People naturally want to do good and avoid evil. For the most part, we limit our

attention to morality to the observance of certain interpersonal rules—of courtesy,

helpfulness, and respect for privacy, for instance—that serve to make daily life

more livable. But sometimes a condition comes to light that interrupts, imposes

itself upon, daily life. Consider the following case:

Hurricane Katrina has devastated New Orleans. Following the hurricane, which in itself

did not do as much damage as some had feared, the levees that protect the city broke,

and the city was immediately flooded. Many families, especially in Ward Nine and

others of the poorer districts, were stranded by the flood and in terrible danger—from

drowning, from disease (there was no potable water), from hunger, from lack of access

to health care, and eventually, from roving gangs. Somehow, they had to be gotten out of

there.

Why hadn’t they left earlier? As the hurricane closed in on the city, the mayor had

ordered a general (voluntary) evacuation, either to areas outside the city or as a last resort

to the Superdome. Experienced residents sized up the relative dangers of hunkering (or

sheltering) in place, risking severe winds, or of being evacuated by school bus to unpre-

pared areas outside of town, to a mobbed Superdome, or to some distant city, while their

property stood empty and unprotected. Many stayed.

Then the flooding started, and the mayor had ordered a general evacuation. All the

usual means of transportation were useless. Only boats could be used for evacuation,

so the National Guard was put into boats to bring the people out. The entire nation was

watching, angry that the residents had not been brought out earlier; there was a lot of pres-

sure to get the job done.

Then the difficulties began. Some residents willingly climbed into the boats with a

small well-organized pack of personal goods. Others would not leave without their pets.

Some of these were coerced into the boats and wept miserably the entire trip. Some had

aged spouses or parents who were too sick to move. Some pointed out that the gangs

would ravage their houses if they left, and refused to leave. What were the Guardsmen

to do? Herd them in at gunpoint? Respect their free choice and leave them in the flood,

perhaps to die?

Eventually more facts came to light: the Superdome had turned into a living hell when

it lost electricity and water; the places out of town were sometimes no more than camping

places under bridges, in the broiling heat of summer; the distant cities were less than wel-

coming to second and third waves of refugees. Meanwhile, as municipal, state and federal

governments feuded over who bore the ultimate responsibility for the mess, Ward Nine

was abandoned to its fate; it will probably never be completely rebuilt.

1.3

Definitions of the Terms of Ethics

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Cases and Decisions

The Katrina case, as we may call the situation, exhibits certain characteristics

that plague the moral life of the nation.

First: some condition is brought to light, some situation, or array of facts. This condition

captures our

attention

, alerts us to something that stands out from the background noise

of our lives as requiring our concern.

Second: that condition is discussed, the information is disseminated through the commu-

nity, a community

dialogue

is conducted where public opinion is actually formed. That

“community,” incidentally, may be as small as a family or as large, as in this case, as the

whole nation.

Third, the discussion incorporates the moral

assumptions

that guide our lives, ordinarily

without conscious thinking about. We do not have to reason out what we ought to do in

most situations; most of the moral work is already done. Lives have to be saved; that is

not in question.

Fourth,

proposals

for action are put forward and policies adopted. Decisions are made,

implementing the imperatives in a way appropriate to the situation that caught our

attention.

And Fifth, the results of the action are

tested

against the results expected. The test results

are fed back into the data from the initial situation: Was the action taken in fact appropri-

ate? Were the imperatives successfully implemented? Or should we go back to the draw-

ing board, and introduce new proposals for action or policy? The decision process, on

review, does not return to the starting point, but only asks after the effectiveness of the

policy for action—we have agreed about the ends of the proposed action, and now we

seek the most effective means.

From the above, we can put together a normal moral reasoning procedure, eas-

ily remembered in the acronym ADAPT:

Attention

Dialogue

Assumptions

Proposals

Test.