

Systematic Moral Analysis

This video introduces the concept of systematic moral analysis. Systematic moral analysis is a tool that helps us to think through ethically complex situations. The process of systematic moral analysis as described in the video is predicated on moral rule violations, which result in harm to another person or persons. To learn more about the different types of harms and when harm is justified, watch *Causing Harm*.

Rationalizations can play a major role in the process of systematic moral analysis, often to defend unethical or questionable practices. To learn more about rationalizations and other related behavioral ethics concepts, watch *GVV Pillar 7: Reasons & Rationalizations*, *In It to Win: Jack & Framing*, *Being Your Best Self, Part 2: Moral Decision Making*, *Conformity Bias*, and *Moral Imagination*.

The case studies covered on this page offer four examples of systematic moral analysis. These case studies and their accompanying discussion questions can help students think through and apply systematic moral analysis in their own lives. “Pardoning Nixon” examines Gerald Ford’s process to make the controversial decision to issue Richard Nixon a full pardon. “Reporting on Robin Williams” explores journalists’ decisions to cover actor Robin Williams’s suicide in 2014 in such great detail, leading many to argue that such reporting violated the family’s privacy. “Digital Downloads” details the legal and ethical dimensions of choosing to download unauthorized copies of copyrighted music. “Sacking Social Media in College Sports” examines the controversial decision by a head football coach to ban his players from using Twitter.

Terms defined in our ethics glossary that are related to the video and case studies include: deontology, conformity bias, consequentialism, framing, moral agent, moral imagination, moral myopia, rationalizations, subject of moral worth, utilitarianism, and values.

For more information on concepts covered in this and other videos, as well as activities to help think through these concepts, see Deni Elliott’s workbook *Ethical Challenges: Building an Ethics Toolkit*, available for free download at the link below. This workbook explores what ethics is and what it means to be ethical, offering readers a variety of exercises to identify their own values and reason through ethical conflicts. Activities that encourage readers to reason through their own systematic moral analyses may be found beginning on page 35. Information and exercises related specifically to deception and cheating begin on page 42.



Discussion Questions

1. How would you describe the process of systematic moral analysis described in the video? What are the steps involved in the decision-making process?
2. How would you describe your own process of moral analysis?
3. Why is it important to engage in a thorough process of conceptualization before justification?
4. What is the difference between justification and rationalization? Can you think of examples that highlight the difference?
5. How might personal beliefs or values affect the process of systematic moral analysis?
6. Imagine you are given the opportunity to borrow someone else's work and you know it will lead to a higher grade on your assignment. What would you do and why?
7. Describe a situation in which you had to make a complex ethical decision. How did you think through the situation before taking action? If you faced the same situation again, what, if anything, would you do differently?

Additional Resources

Elliott, Deni. 2003. "Moral Responsibilities and the Power of Pictures." In *Images that Injure: Pictorial Stereotypes in the Media*, edited by Paul Martin Lester and Susan Dente Ross, 7-14. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers.

Elliott, Deni. 2007. *Ethics in the First Person: A Guide to Teaching and Learning Practical Ethics*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishing.

Elliott, Deni. 2008. "Systematic Moral Analysis." In *Ethical Challenges: Building an Ethics Toolkit*, 35-44. Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse.

Elliott, Deni, and David Ozar. 2010. "An Explanation and a Method for the Ethics of Journalism." In *Journalism Ethics: A Philosophical Approach*, edited by Christopher Myers, 9-24. New York: Oxford University Press.

Gert, Bernard. 2004. *Common Morality: Deciding What to Do*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Gert, Bernard, Charles M. Culver, and K. Danner Clouser. 2006. *Bioethics: A Systematic Approach*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Werhane, Patricia H., Laura Pincus Hartman, Crina Archer, Elaine E. Englehardt, and Michael S. Pritchard. 2013. *Obstacles to Ethical Decision-Making: Mental Modes, Milgram and the Problem of Obedience*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

Transcript of Narration

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“Students know cheating is wrong, and that it’s a violation of school policy to smuggle notes into an exam, or to copy a neighbor's answers. But what if a friend, who’s failing the class, asks you for answers to a test? Or if you see someone you don't know cheating? Does it matter if you report it or not?”

Systematic Moral Analysis, or SMA for short, is a tool that helps us think through ethically complex situations before taking action. And it can also help us analyze the ethical dimensions of a complex situation after the fact. Consider this scenario: Some people in your class got a copy of last year's final. You know that at least half the class has already looked at the questions. Now, you're offered a copy. What should you do?

The first step of SMA is conceptualization, which involves determining who might be harmed and how. If no one is likely to be harmed, then there's no ethical problem. But how do we really know if we're about to cause harm? 20th Century Philosopher Bernard Gert developed a list of 10 moral rules that can help us identify ethically questionable acts.

- 1) Do not kill.
- 2) Do not cause pain.
- 3) Do not disable.
- 4) Do not deprive of freedom or opportunity.
- 5) Do not deprive of pleasure.
- 6) Do not deceive.
- 7) Keep your promises.
- 8) Do not cheat.
- 9) Obey the law.
- 10) Do your duty.

So, if you decide to take a peek at the old exam, then you're violating Rule #8: Do Not Cheat. According to Gert, cheating causes harm because "the cheater gains an advantage over other participants in the activity, by violating the rules that everyone is expected to follow."

You're also violating Rule #10: Do Your Duty. As a student in the class, you have a responsibility to abide by the rules that you agreed to follow that were set out by the professor and the university. You are violating Rule #6: Do Not Deceive. Your professor, and anyone who reviews your transcript, will

assume that you earned your grade honestly. You've misled them to a false conclusion. That's deception. You're also violating Rule #7: Keep Your Promise by breaking the promise you've made to the university under the honor code.

And you're causing harm to students who haven't seen the old exam by violating Rule #4: Do not deprive of freedom or opportunity. You're depriving them of the freedom, or, in this case, the opportunity, to have their work evaluated in an honest comparison with others in the class. They'll be unfairly harmed by grade inflation caused by the cheating. So clearly, looking at last year's test is ethically questionable.

The second step of SMA is justification, which helps determine whether breaking a moral rule prevents a greater harm from occurring or whether the harm you are causing legitimately addresses a more significant harm that was already caused. The goal of justification is to determine the action that 1) causes the least harm to others 2) can withstand public scrutiny, and 3) would be ethically permissible for anyone in a similar situation.

So what if there were a publicly known rule that students should cheat whenever they are not likely to get caught? Well, this would threaten the integrity of the class and weaken the value of a degree from the university. It would also destroy the university's ability to certify that students graduate with the knowledge that they need in their field. A general rule that allows academic cheating cannot be justified. And, if you can't do something without making a secret exception for yourself, SMA tells us, "Don't do it."

SMA encourages us to consider alternative courses of action that would minimize harm. For example, you could tip off the professor anonymously and suggest that they consider re-writing the exam. Or you could ask the professor to distribute the old test to everyone in the class. That way, no student would have an unfair advantage and it would give everyone a chance to know what the professor thinks is most important.

Systematic Moral Analysis doesn't provide one right answer, but it does help us fully evaluate a situation, think through possible courses of action, and avoid negative consequences that might not have occurred to us at the start."