

## Awareness: Ethical Questions

### Summary

Students learn the characteristics of ethical questions through structured examples. Three 'practice sheets' allow students to first clarify how an ethical question differs from other questions, then to identify ethical questions among other types of questions in a particular context, and lastly how to ask ethical questions that apply to a specific situation.

### What constitutes an Ethical Question?

Ethical questions involve or imply the words 'ought' or 'should'. They involve consideration of conflicting moral choices and dilemmas, with several alternative solutions, none of which is without some challenging or problematic aspect. They arise because of our social responsibilities to others in our community and because our behavior is capable of influencing the welfare of others. Conflicts among principles and values held by different individuals or groups generate such questions.

**Student Handouts:** Ethical Question Practice Sheets.

1. Overview - Questions: Background Characteristics
2. Ethical Questions #1: Distinguishing Ethical Questions from Other Kinds of Questions
3. Ethical Questions #2: Distinguishing Ethical Questions Within a Scenario
4. Ethical Questions #3: Asking Ethical Questions

### Teacher Instructions

Introduce different types of questions (Scientific, Religious/Cultural, Legal, or Ethical) by having students brainstorm what the defining characteristics of each are. Remind them that questions may be of more than one type, and that other types of questions also exist. Lead them through discussion to the characteristics described on the Overview sheet. The Overview may be a helpful resource to them when they are completing the Practice Sheets.

Note that the sheets are intended to encourage discussion, and there are not always necessarily 'right' answers, but there are answers that are better-reasoned than others.

Question	Characteristics
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Scientific</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Asks testable questions about the natural world.</li> <li>• Can be explored through scientific inquiry and observation.</li> <li>• Relies on empirical and measurable evidence.</li> </ul> <p>Example: How does a kidney function in the body?</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Religious/Cultural</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Asks us what would be in line with a particular religious belief or practice, or the common practices of a particular culture.</li> </ul> <p>Example: What does my religion or culture say about whether it is acceptable to donate a kidney?</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Legal</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Asks us what the law says about a particular issue.</li> <li>• Ethics may inform the law, but sometimes laws are unethical and sometimes the ethically right thing to do may be illegal.</li> </ul> <p>Example: Is it legal to sell kidneys in the United States?</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Ethical</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask us what the 'right' thing to do is – what we 'should' or 'ought' to do – in the face of a moral dilemma.</li> <li>• Often arises out of a conflict in values among individuals or groups.</li> <li>• Requires moral reflection (making evaluations and judgments about responsibilities, rights, duties, values, and principles).</li> </ul> <p>Example: Should individuals who donate kidneys be allowed to choose who their organs should go to?</p>

**Practice Sheet #1:  
Distinguishing an Ethical Question from Other Kinds of Questions**

Question	Ethical, Religious/ Cultural, Legal, Other	Reason
Under what conditions should people be kept artificially alive?	Ethical, Religious	Can be answered by moral reflection related to what it means to be a 'person' and who should have responsibility for someone else's life. Can also be influenced by religious beliefs.
What type of diet allows for the best athletic performance?		
Is killing someone always illegal?		
Is killing a murderer justified?		
What is the most appropriate way to worship?		
Should people be able to select the sex of their child in advance?		
How can a child's sex be determined in advance of their birth?		
How should we decide who receives organ transplants?		
At what age should people marry?		
Are same-sex marriages constitutional?		
What ice cream flavor should I buy?		

## Possible Answers

## Practice Sheet #1

Question	Ethical, Religious/ Cultural, Legal, Other	Reason
Under what conditions should people be kept artificially alive?	Ethical, Religious	Can be answered by moral reflection related to what it means to be 'person' and who should have responsibility for someone else's life. Can also be influenced by religious beliefs.
What type of diet allows for the best athletic performance?	Scientific	Can be answered by scientific analysis and testing.
Is killing someone always illegal?	Legal	Can be answered by examining the law.
Is killing a murderer justified?	Ethical	Asks us to consider what is fair when a life has been taken by another.
What is the most appropriate way to worship?	Religious	Depends on religious and/ or spiritual views.
Should people be able to select the sex of their child in advance?	Ethical	Asks us to consider how much control we should have over natural biological processes.
How can a child's sex be determined in advance of their birth?	Scientific	Asks us about a technical process for determining the sex of a child.
How should we decide who receives organ transplants?	Ethical	Can be answered by considering the value we place on the lives of different individuals, as well as considering what is fair.
At what age should people marry?	Religious/Cultural	Asks about cultural conventions. Religious teachings may also have bearing on the question.
Are same-sex marriages constitutional?	Legal	Asks us about whether a practice is legal according to our constitution.
What ice cream flavor should I buy?	Other	This question is a matter of personal preference even though the word 'should' is present.

**Practice Sheet #2**

<b>Scenario</b>	<b>Questions that arise from the scenario</b>	<b>Type</b> (Scientific, Religious, Cultural, Legal, Ethical, Other)
<p>Example: You are driving over the speed limit because you need to take someone to the hospital who is in need of urgent care.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How fast over the speed limit can you legally go?</li> <li>2. How fast do people usually drive over the speed limit?</li> <li>3. Is it acceptable to risk harming others in order to benefit one who is clearly in need?</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Legal</li> <li>2. Cultural</li> <li>3. Ethical</li> </ol>
<p>Your brother/sister is very ill and needs medication you cannot afford, so you steal it.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.</li> <li>2.</li> <li>3.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.</li> <li>2.</li> <li>3.</li> </ol>
<p>Your friend wants you to try performance-enhancing drugs.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.</li> <li>2.</li> <li>3.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.</li> <li>2.</li> <li>3.</li> </ol>
<p>You apply for a job and the employer requests access to your health records, including genetic tests you may have had.</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.</li> <li>2.</li> <li>3.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1.</li> <li>2.</li> <li>3.</li> </ol>

## Possible Answers

## Practice Sheet #2

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Example: You are driving over the speed limit because you need to take someone to the hospital who is in need of urgent care.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How fast over the speed limit can you legally go?</li> <li>2. How fast do people usually drive over the speed limit?</li> <li>3. Is it acceptable to risk harming others in order to benefit one who is clearly in need?</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Legal</li> <li>2. Cultural</li> <li>3. Ethical</li> </ol>
Your brother/sister is very ill and needs medication you cannot afford, so you steal it.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What kind of illness does your sibling have?</li> <li>2. Why is the medication not affordable?</li> <li>3. Is it ever right to steal, even if you have a great need?</li> <li>4. What legal consequences come from stealing the medication?</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Scientific</li> <li>2. Cultural/Other</li> <li>3. Ethical</li> <li>4. Legal</li> </ol>
Your friend wants you to try performance-enhancing drugs.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. What are the effects of the drugs on your body?</li> <li>2. Is it fair to others if you are taking them and competing?</li> <li>3. Are the drugs legal?</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Scientific</li> <li>2. Ethical</li> <li>3. Legal</li> </ol>
You apply for a job and the employer requests access to your health records, including genetic tests you may have had.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. How does a genetic test work?</li> <li>2. Who should have access to your healthcare information?</li> <li>3. Is it legal for an employer to use genetic test information in hiring?</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Scientific</li> <li>2. Ethical</li> <li>3. Legal</li> </ol>

**Practice Sheet #3:  
Ethical Questions that Arise from the Scenario**

For each scenario, identify one or more ethical questions.

Scenario	Ethical Questions that Arise from the Scenario
<p>Your classmate asks to see your homework because they didn't finish theirs.</p>	<p>Should you or should you not let them? Is it fair to the others in the class? What harm can it cause to you or others?</p>
<p>Your classmate asks to see your homework because they didn't finish theirs. They were in the hospital all night with their sick mother.</p>	
<p>Your classmate asks to see your homework because they didn't finish theirs. You have previously asked them for their work and you two are friends.</p>	
<p>You need to decide whether to kill one person to save the lives of many people.</p>	

**Possible Answers**

**Practice Sheet #3:  
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<p>Your classmate asks to see your homework because they didn't finish theirs.</p>	<p>Should you or should you not let them? Is it fair to the others in the class? What harm can it cause to you or others?</p>
<p>Your classmate asks to see your homework because they didn't finish theirs. They were in the hospital all night with their sick mother.</p>	<p>Is it fair to let someone copy your homework, even if they have had difficult personal circumstances?</p>
<p>Your classmate asks to see your homework because they didn't finish theirs. You have previously asked them for their work and you two are friends.</p>	<p>Should you let someone copy your homework if you have asked for theirs? What are your duties to your friend?</p>
<p>You need to decide whether to kill one person to save the lives of many people.</p>	<p>Is it ever right to kill someone? Does it matter that you will save many lives if you kill one?</p>