

Aim for Integrity

Brief: When we are judged as "having integrity" and others perceive that we predictably act according to the values, beliefs, and principles we claim to hold, we strengthen our ethos and power to persuade.

Learning Objective: Define "integrity" and understand its role in achieving credibility.

Key Terms:

- Integrity: From the Latin adjective "integer," meaning whole or complete. When applied to human behavior, it refers to unity between what we say and what we do.
- Normative ethical theories: Reason-based ways to measure whether decisions are ethical.
- Utilitarianism: A normative ethical theory that suggests an ethical action is one whose consequence achieves the greatest good for the greatest number of people.
- Deontology: A normative ethical theory that suggests an ethical action is one that adheres to rules or obligations associated with our duty to others.
- Virtue Theory: A normative ethical theory that suggests the character of the decision-maker reflects the training they received growing up.

What is Integrity?

Integrity—that is, unity between what we say and what we do—is a highly valued trait. The word "integrity" evolved from the Latin adjective "integer," meaning whole or complete. When we're in integrity, we possess an inner sense of "wholeness" deriving from qualities such as honesty and consistency of character. When others judge us as "having integrity," they perceive that we predictably act according to the values, beliefs, and principles we claim to hold.

To act with consistency over time, we need to make the choice to adhere to consistent standards of behavior, also known as a code of ethics. Being a person of integrity means striving to be the best person you can be in all your interactions with others. It means you practice what you preach, walk the talk, and do what you believe is right based upon reason.

Nearly all systems of religious belief stress the building blocks of engaging others with respect, empathy, and honesty. These foundational beliefs, in turn, prepare us for the codes of ethical behavior that serve as ideal guides. Still, we need not subscribe to any religious faith to hold that ethical behavior is necessary. Just by virtue of being human, we all share obligations to one another, and principal among these is the requirement that we treat others with fairness and dignity.

Ends, Means, and Character

How, then, should we behave? Philosophy and science help us answer this question. From philosophy, three different perspectives, called "normative ethical theories," help us assess whether our decisions are ethical on the basis of reason.

Utilitarianism

The first normative approach examines the ends, or consequences, a decision produces in order to evaluate if those ends are ethical. Variations on this approach include utilitarianism, teleology, and consequentialism. For example, utilitarianism suggests that an ethical action is one whose consequence achieves the greatest good for the greatest number of people. So if we want to make an ethical decision, we should ask ourselves who is helped and harmed by it.

Deontology

The second approach does examine the means, or actions, we use to carry out a decision. An example of this approach is “deontology,” which essentially suggests that it is the means that lend nobility to the ends. Closely associated with the eighteenth-century German philosopher Immanuel Kant, deontology contends that each of us owes certain duties to others (*deon* is a Greek word for duty or obligation) and that certain universal rules apply to every situation and bind us to these duties. In this view, whether our actions are ethical depends only on whether we adhere to these rules. Thus, the means we use is the primary determinant of ethical conduct.



A portrait of Immanuel Kant

Virtue Theory

The third normative approach, typically called “virtue theory,” focuses on the character of the decision-maker—a character that reflects the training we receive growing up. In this view, our ethical analysis of a decision is intimately connected with the person we choose to be. It is through the development of habits, the routine actions in which we choose to engage, that we are able to create a character of integrity and make ethical decisions. For example, if a two-year-old is taught to take care of and return borrowed toys—even though this runs contrary to every instinct they have—they may continue to perfect their ethical behavior. As an adult, they can influence others through their personal ethos and power of persuasion.

From Concept to Action

Based on virtue theory, can you identify training you received as a child that has become the basis of the ethical decisions you make today?

OER IMAGE SOURCES:

“Immanuel Kant.” Wikimedia Commons. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Kant_gemaelde_3.jpg. Accessed 14 November 2018. [Public Domain]

OER TEXT SOURCES:

“Being a Professional of Integrity.” OpenStax CNX. <https://cnx.org/contents/kUrGbuHs@3.1:FsaajM1v@3/1-1-Being-a-Professional-of-Integrity>. Accessed 14 November 2018. [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 License]

“Integrity.” Wikipedia. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Integrity>. Accessed 14 November 2018. [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 3.0 Unported License]