Creativity, Ethics, and Society

Robert J. Sternberg

Abstract

In this article, I consider relationships between creativity and ethics, and how they apply in society. I argue that ethical reasoning requires creative thinking at various junctures. I present an 8-step model of ethical reasoning, delineating how creativity can be applied at various steps. Finally, I draw conclusions about how the model can be applied in instruction.

***Keywords*:** Creativity; ethics and society; ethical reasoning; innovative teaching; psychology; moral development.

Creativity is the generation of ideas that are novel and good or useful in some way. Ethics is a set of rules of moral conduct. Creativity and ethics are often viewed as having nothing to do with each other. One can be creative without being ethical (e.g., dictators who find ingenious ways to abuse their populations to stay in power); and one can be ethical without being creative (e.g., people who do exactly what they are told by their religious mentors without thinking about why they are doing it). To get ahead in today's world—at least in many occupations—one needs to be creative. That is, one needs to have ideas others do not have and create new markets for new services and products other individuals or companies have not yet not envisioned. In order to stay ahead, one needs to be ethical. The world has a long list of people who have risen to the top and then fallen because they lacked a sense of ethics and ended up, at best, fallen off their pedestals, and at worst, in prison.

The quintessential recent example of creativity in the total absence of ethics is Bernard Madoff, now in prison for the rest of his life. Year after year, he was able creatively to fool people into believing that he was making money for them. As is so often true of creative but unethical people who rise to the top, he was found out and disgraced, and lost a son to suicide in the process. The problem is that, the higher you rise, the more your behavior is scrutinized and the more likely you are, therefore, to suffer a loss of reputation if you have acted in unethical ways.

Sometimes, to behave ethically itself requires creativity. Situations can be constructed in which the expectation is that one will follow an unethical crowd or be made to regret, in one way or another, that one did not. Such situations have been studied in psychological research.

Two key psychological studies involved placing participants in ethically challenging situations. The studies had in common that they did not directly reveal to the participants that the situations would be ethically challenging. One set of experiments was originally conducted by Yale psychologist Stanley Milgram during the 1960s (see Milgram, 2010). Milgram and his colleagues asked participants to deliver electric shocks to "learners" in what were alleged to be verbal-learning experiments. Unbeknownst to the participants, the shocks were imaginary and were never delivered. The second study, conducted in 1971 by Stanford psychologist Philip Zimbardo (see Zimbardo, 2008), randomly divided subjects into the roles of guards and prisoners. The "guards" were to watch over the "prisoners." Within a brief period of time, the guards started acting like sadistic prison guards, and the prisoners started acting like cowed prisoners.

The behavior of the participants was ethically challenging as well as challenged. The studies placed the participants in difficult ethical situations and most participants did not acquit themselves particularly well. The studies themselves were ethically challenged because it was impossible fully to debrief participants. It is not enough simply to tell participants that they were subjects in experiments and so as a result their ethically challenged behavior was really all right. The participants had to go through their lives knowing that, given the opportunity, some of them acted in ways that by any reasonable standard were ethically unacceptable and potentially dangerous to others.

It is ironic that two of the most creative and widely cited studies ever done in psychology both were ethically challenging for the experimenters as well as for the participants. Milgram did not and could not debrief his participants properly: No matter what they were told, they could and probably would go through their lives knowing that, had the experiment not involved a deception, they might have killed the "learner" in the experiment. Zimbardo could not properly seek informed consent, because he did not realize how brutal the "guards" in his study would be toward the "prisoners" and so he could not warn participants of what might and, in fact, did happen. If either of these studies, at least as done in their original form, were submitted to an institutional review board today, it is extremely unlikely either would be approved. The studies show that creativity and ethics do not necessarily go together, and often do not. One easily can be creative without being ethical.

In this essay, I will concentrate on the opposite side of this argument: that in daily experience, it is hard (although certainly not impossible) to be ethical without being creative. In real life, ethical decisions often require creative thinking.

Creativity and ethics often do not automatically go together. Creativity has a dark side (see Cropley, Cropley, Kaufman, & Runco, 2010; Sternberg, 2010a), as revealed by Adolph Hitler and Josef Stalin. Merely asserting the importance of ethical behavior also can have a dark side, as revealed by hypocritical television preachers such as Jim Bakker, who was convicted of fraud in 1989. In this essay, I seek explicitly to address the creative aspects of ethical reasoning. The basic thesis is that ethical reasoning is difficult in part because it often requires a level of creative thinking that the individual doing the ethical reasoning lacks. More centrally, both ethical action and creative action often require people to defy the crowd. When we fail to teach our children to think creatively, we may therefore be inadvertently may be ill-preparing them for a life in which they will need to be ethical.

Not all ethical challenges are as demanding as those in the Milgram and Zimbardo studies. Yet people act unethically in many less challenging situations. Why? Two psychological researchers sought to answer this question.

The Bystander Effect

Latané and Darley (1970) were interested in understanding the kinds of situations in which bystanders observing individuals in trouble would intervene. They demonstrated that, contrary to the expectations of most people, bystanders intervene to help someone in trouble only under very limited circumstances. For example, if bystanders think that someone else might intervene, the bystanders tend to stay out of the situation. Consider, as an example, someone whose car has broken down and who, as a result, finds him or herself stranded on a road. Bystanders are more likely to intervene if the motorist is stranded on a lonely country road than if the motorist is stuck on a major highway with hundreds of cars speeding by. Under the latter circumstance, people leave it to (often imaginary) others to help.

Latané and Darley even showed that students of divinity who were about to deliver a lecture on the parable of *The Good Samaritan* were no more likely than other bystanders to help a person in distress who was in need of—a good Samaritan! If the student passed an individual on the ground and obviously in distress, the student was more likely to help if he or she was not rushed, but less likely to help if there was little time before the lecture was due to begin.

A number of investigators have queried whether there might be some inner "intelligence" or ethical ability that is dispositional in nature. Gardner (1999) wrestled with the question of whether there is some kind of existential or even spiritual intelligence that guides people through challenging life dilemmas. In the end, he concluded that there is no distinct "spiritual intelligence." Coles (1998), on the other hand, argued for a moral intelligence in children as well as adults. Both Jean Piaget (1932) and Lawrence Kohlberg (1984) believed that children and adolescents pass through successive stages of moral reasoning. In other words, as children grow older, they advance through successive levels of sophistication in dealing with moral questions. Some individuals will advance faster and further than others. As a result, adults will demonstrate individual differences in achieved levels of moral development. Harkness, Edwards, and Super (1981), however, have questioned whether the stages posed by Kohlberg can be applied to culturally diverse groups of individuals. This is a

central question that remains to this day unresolved.

In contrast to the Kohlberg, Gilligan (1982) argued that Kohlberg's stage model overly emphasizes development of principles of universal justice over a psychology of caring and compassion. In particular, she proposed that men are more attuned to issues of universal justice and women to issues of caring and compassion. There is no strong evidence for her assertion.

Some believe that ethical reasoning has a large nonrational component (e.g., Rogerson, Gottlieb, Handelsman, Knapp, & Younggren, 2011). However, I claim here that ethical reasoning can be largely rational, but usually is not because people fail to follow through on the complete set of steps needed to reach an ethical conclusion. Moreover, they often fail to follow through because they lack sufficient creative imagination to reach such a conclusion.

A Model of Ethical Reasoning and its Relation to Creativity

Drawing in part upon the Latané-Darley (1970) model of bystander intervention, I have constructed a stepwise model of ethical behavior that applies to a variety of ethical problems. The model specifies the specific skills students and others need to reason and then behave ethically.

The basic premise of the model is that it is far harder to behave ethically than one would expect simply on the basis of what we learn from our parents, from school, and from our religious training (Sternberg, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c). To intervene in an ethically challenging situation, individuals must go through a series of steps. Unless all of the steps are completed, the individuals are not likely to behave in an ethical way, regardless of the amount of training they have received in ethics, and regardless of their levels of other types of skills. The example I will draw on most is genocides, such as in Rwanda (1994) and Darfur (2003) , where there is a potential for outside intervention but the intervention in fact never happens, or happens only to a minor extent. However, the example need not be so dramatic: People who become aware of unethical behavior in their everyday work settings often do not report it. The case of the disgraced former football coach Jerry Sandusky at Penn State University (2012) exemplifies this point. When officials were aware of a child molester among them, most did nothing for many years to stop him.

According to the proposed model, enacting ethical behavior is much harder than it would appear to be because it involves multiple, largely sequential, steps. To behave ethically, the individual has to:

1. *Recognize that there is an event to which to react;*
2. *Define the event as having an ethical dimension;*
3. *Decide that the ethical dimension is of sufficient significance to merit an ethics-guided response;*
4. *Take responsibility for generating an ethical solution to the problem;*
5. *Figure out what abstract ethical rule(s) might apply to the problem;*
6. *Decide how these abstract ethical rules actually apply to the problem so as to suggest a concrete solution;*
7. *Prepare for possible repercussions of having acted in what one considers an ethical manner; and*
8. *Act.*

Consider each step in turn:

1. Recognize that there is an event to which to react

In cases where there has been an ethical transgression, the transgressors often go out of their way to hide the fact that there is even an event to which to react. For example, many countries hide the deplorable conditions of their political prisoners. During World War II, The Nazis hid the existence of death camps and referred to Jews, Roma, and other peoples merely as being "resettled." In 1994, The Rwandan government tried to cover up the massacre of the Tutsis and also of those Hutus who were perceived as sympathetic to the Tutsis. Jerry Sandusky at Penn State went out of his way to act like a normal guy with a special caring and fondness for children. In fact, he was mercilessly abusing children, taking advantage of his position as a coach to lure children to him. The goal of the transgressors is to obscure the fact that anything is going on that is even worth anyone's attention.

The situation as described by the offending agent may be different from the actual situation. Put another way, one has to be creative in contemplating possibilities other than the one presented by those who wish to cover up their transgressions. One has to recognize the obfuscation that transgressors try to create.

When some people hear their political, educational, or religious leaders talk, they typically do not believe there is any reason to question what they hear. After all, they are listening to authority figures. In this way, leaders, and especially cynical and corrupt leaders, may lead their followers to accept corruption and even disappearances as nonevents. It requires an extra creative step to consider other possibilities, and many people will not decide for creativity in this and other instances (see Sternberg, 2000). They do not want to think too deeply about the situations, because it is too painful to contemplate what really may be happening.

2. Define the event as having an ethical dimension

Given that one acknowledges that there is a situation to which to pay attention, one still needs to define the situation as having an ethical dimension. Given that perpetrators will go out of their way to define the situation otherwise—as a nonevent, a civil war, an internal conflict that is no one else's business, or a deep love for children—one must actually redefine the situation to realize that an ethical component is involved. Redefinition of problem situations is one of the keys to creativity (Sternberg, 2000, 2003). Again, a creative component is central to ethical reasoning. One cannot accept the perpetrator's definition of the situation but rather has to redefine it—the essence of creativity.

In the case of the Nazi genocide, the campaign against Jews was defined as a justified campaign against an internal enemy bent upon subversion of the state (Sternberg & Sternberg, 2008). It was of course not defined as genocide by the perpetrators. To this day, the Turkish government defines the Armenian genocide as a conflict for which both sides must share the blame (Sternberg & Sternberg, 2008). In Rwanda, the government defined the genocide as a fight against invading aggressors who came from outside the country and did not belong there in the first place. And Jerry Sandusky characterized his behavior toward children as showing care for them, not unacceptable lust. Redefining a situation requires creative effort, and most people simply do not decide for creativity (Sternberg & Lubart, 1995).

3. Decide that the ethical dimension is significant

If one observes a driver going one mile per hour over the speed limit on a highway, one is unlikely to become perturbed about the unethical behavior of the driver, especially if the driver is oneself. Genocide is a far cry from driving one mile per hour over the speed limit. And yet, if one is being told by cynical, dishonest leaders that the events that are transpiring are the unfortunate kinds of events that happen in all countries—didn't America have its own Civil War?—then it may not occur to people that the event is much more serious than its perpetrators are alleging it to be. Again, if people are told that events have no significant ethical dimension—that they are routine events—then it takes an additional creative step on an individual's part to imagine otherwise: They have to think about how and why what they have been told is false. For example, if I tell you that the campaign against Tutsis in Rwanda was not a genocide but rather a Civil War, you have to do the extra step either of drawing upon your existing knowledge or acquiring new knowledge to ascertain that my statement is not true. When Jerry Sandusky showered with young children, he tried to convey to others that it simply was of no consequence; in fact, the showering was only a symptom of a much greater problem of child abuse.

4. Take personal responsibility for generating an ethical solution to the problem

People may allow leaders to commit wretched acts, including genocide, because they figure it is the leaders' responsibility to determine the ethical dimensions of their actions. Isn't that why they are leaders in the first place? Or people may assume that the leaders, especially if they are religious leaders, are in a uniquely good position to determine what is ethical. If a religious leader encourages someone to become a suicide bomber or to commit genocide, that "someone" may feel that being

such a bomber must be ethical. Why else would a religious leader have suggested it? When Jerry Sandusky at Penn State misbehaved, no one who knew about it wanted to be the one to take responsibility to do something about the misbehavior.

Taking personal responsibility means redefining a situation as involving oneself in some way, not just others. Since it is so much easier to view an ethical dilemma as someone else's problem, many people do not make the creative step.

5. Figure out what abstract ethical rule(s) might apply to the problem

In this step, we have to think about various ethical rules we may have in our minds, and examine which one best seems to apply to the given situation. This part is analytical. However, when there is not an exact fit, we must creatively mold what we know to the current situation. Most of us have learned, in one way or another, ethical rules that we are supposed to apply to our lives. For example, we are supposed to be honest. But who among us can say he or she has not lied at some time, perhaps with the excuse that we were protecting someone else's feelings? By doing so, we insulate ourselves from the effects of our behavior. Perhaps, we can argue, the principle that we should not hurt someone else's feelings takes precedence over not lying. Of course, as the lies grow larger, we can continue to use the same excuse.

When leaders encourage genocide, they clearly violate one of the Ten Commandments, namely, "Thou shalt not murder." This is why the killings, to the extent they are known, are posed by cynical leaders as "justifiable executions" rather than as murders. The individual must analyze the situation carefully to realize whether the term "murder" applies. In the Sandusky case, those involved got bogged down in the question of what the rule is for notifying the police. No one did so until much too late. This step is primarily analytical rather than creative.

6. Decide how these abstract ethical rules actually apply to the problem so as to suggest a concrete solution

This kind of translation is, I believe, nontrivial. In our work on practical intelligence, some of which was summarized in Sternberg et al. (2000), we found that there is, at best, a modest correlation between the more academic and abstract aspects of intelligence and its more practical and concrete aspects. Both aspects, though, predicted behavior in everyday life. People may have skills that shine brightly in a classroom, but that they are unable to translate into real-world consequential behavior. This step, as applied to recognizing that murder is afoot in a genocide, is primarily analytical. In the Sandusky case, the president of the university and some of his colleagues misapplied the rules of ethics: They argued they were being humane by not destroying his life. Unfortunately, their inaction resulted in the lives of many children being destroyed.

7. Prepare for possible repercussions of having acted in what one considers an ethical manner

When Harry Markopolos (see Markopolos, 2011) pointed out to regulators that Bernard Madoff's investment returns had to be fraudulent, no one wanted to listen. It was Markopolos who was branded as a problem, not Madoff. In general, when people blow the whistle, they need to be prepared for their bona fides to be questioned, not necessarily those of the person on whom they blew the whistle (as Marianne Gingrich discovered, when she was branded a liar by her former husband, upon her revelation that her ex-husband wanted an open marriage when she discovered that he was having an affair, later resulting in divorce).

People think creatively when they imagine the possible repercussions of acting ethically—will they lose their friends, will they lose their job, will they lose their reputation? During the Enron scandal in 2002, whistleblower Sherron Watkins lost all three. Relatedly, when reports first came in of Nazi genocide, there was a general reaction of disbelief—how could such atrocities possibly be happening? Whistleblowers need to imagine all the things that can go wrong, but they also need to imagine what could go right and how they can maximize the chances of things going right. Such imagination requires creative thinking.

In the Jerry Sandusky case, administrators were afraid that making the case public would bring down the reputation of Penn State. They were right. What they failed to realize is that not reporting the behavior publicly would do far greater harm to the university's reputation.

8. Act

In ethical reasoning as in creativity, there may be a large gap between thought and action. Both often involve defying the crowd and hence even people who believe a certain course of action to be correct may not follow through on it.

Sometimes, the problem is not that other people seem oblivious to the ethical implications of the situation, but that they actively encourage you to behave in ways you define as unethical. In the Rwandan genocides, Hutus were encouraged to hate Tutsis and to kill them, even if they were within their own family (see discussion in Sternberg & Sternberg, 2008). Those who were not willing to participate in the massacres risked becoming victims themselves (Gourevitch, 1998). The same applied in Hitler's Germany. Those who tried to save Jews from concentration camps themselves risked going to such camps (Totten, Parsons, & Charny, 2004). It is easier to follow the crowd than to act creatively or, in many instances, ethically. This is why corruption is so common throughout the world. Even when people know of it, they often re-elect corrupt leaders, allowing the corruption to persist.

Teaching for Ethical Reasoning

We need to teach for ethical reasoning (Sternberg, 2010b). In recent years, we have seen the end of Bear Stearns, Lehman Brothers, Merrill Lynch, and numerous other financial enterprises. Few people reached the depths of Bernard Madoff, the epitome of unethical behavior on Wall Street, who sits in a prison cell. The irony is that firms like Bear Stearns and Lehman Brothers hired only those they considered to be the best and the brightest. They recruited from the very top colleges and universities in the nation. It appears that whatever qualities one needs to be accepted by these institutions and to be graduated from them with distinction are not the qualities that would have led to success in the firms. In large part, university success reflects a student's ability to absorb a knowledge base and to reason analytically with it. Success in business and in life require creative and ethical reasoning, none of which are at a premium in university life or in the standardized tests now used to admit students to universities. In a nutshell, we are selecting for and developing qualities that, while important, are woefully incomplete when it comes to success in the world.

The proposed model applies not only to analyzing others but to evaluating one's own ethical reasoning. When confronted with a situation having a potential ethical dimension, students can learn literally to go through the steps of the model and ask how they apply to a given situation.

Effective teaching of ethical reasoning involves presenting case studies, but it is important that students as well generate their own case studies from their own experience, and then apply the steps of the model to their own problems. They need to be actively involved in seeing how the steps of the model apply to their own individual problems. Most importantly, they need to think creatively as they use the model of ethical reasoning in thinking about ways of defining and redefining ethical dilemmas that enable them to get through the various steps.

As an example, suppose you think you see your roommate copy text without attribution from a document on the Internet into a paper he is writing. First you have to pay attention to the situation rather than simply ignore it. Second you have to define it as an ethical situation. Some students today would view it as something that they themselves do and that is not at all bothersome. Third you have to decide it is important enough to pay attention to. Maybe you see an ethical aspect to the situation, but do not see it as a big deal. Fourth you have to decide it is personally relevant. Perhaps you believe instead it is none of your business. Fifth you have to decide what ethical principle applies. Is this an example of plagiarism? Sixth you have to determine how to apply the principle to the situation. Is copying from the Internet relevant to plagiarism? How much text has to be copied before it is plagiarism? Seventh you have to decide whether to say anything, thereby risking the wrath of your roommate and perhaps losing a friend. Eighth you have to decide to act rather than just leave the situation alone.

As a university administrator, I, like other administrators, have discovered that students' ethical skills often are not up to the level of their ability-test scores. Colleges run the full gamut of unethical behavior on the part of students: drunken rampages; cheating on tests; lying about reasons for papers turned in late; attacks by students on other students; and, questionable behavior on the athletic field. Faculty members, of course, are not immune either: Few academic administrators probably leave their jobs without having had to deal with at least some cases of academic or other misconduct on the part of faculty. In hearing excuses students invent for work not done, I often have wished that students and faculty alike would apply their creativity to ethical rather than unethical uses.

In speaking of the challenges of leadership, and particularly of leaders who become foolish, I have spoken of the risk of ethical disengagement (Sternberg, 2008). Ethical disengagement (based on Bandura, 1999) is the dissociation of oneself from ethical values. One may believe that ethical values should apply to the actions of others, but one becomes disengaged from them as they apply to oneself. One may believe that one is above or beyond ethics, or simply not see its relevance to one's own life. Unless one seeks creatively to redefine the way one sees oneself, one sees oneself as ethical when in fact one has entered into a period of downward ethical drift (Sternberg, in 2012).

Schools should teach ethical reasoning; they should not necessarily teach ethics. There is a difference. Ethics is a set of principles for what constitutes right and wrong behavior. These principles are generally taught in the home or through religious training in a special school or through learning in the course of one's life. It would be challenging to teach ethics in a secular school, because different religious and other groups have somewhat different ideas about what is right and wrong. There are, however, core values that are common to almost all these religions and ethical systems that schools do teach and reinforce, for example, reciprocity (the golden rule), honesty, sincerity, and compassion in the face of human suffering.

Ethical reasoning is how to think about issues of right or wrong. Processes of reasoning can be taught, and the school is an appropriate place to teach these processes. The way to teach these processes is by teaching students the model, and having them apply it to case studies. The reason is that, although parents and religious schools may teach ethics, they do not always teach ethical reasoning, or at least, do so with great success. They may see their job as teaching right and wrong, but not how to reason with ethical principles. Moreover, they may not do as good a job of it as we would hope.

Is there any evidence that ethical reasoning can be taught with success? There have been successful endeavors with students of various ages. Paul (Paul & Elder, 2005), of the Foundation for Critical Thinking, has shown how principles of critical thinking can be applied specifically to ethical reasoning in young people. On the present view, for the instruction to be fully successful, teachers also would have to teach for creative thinking. DeHaan and his colleagues at Emory University have shown that it is possible to teach ethical reasoning successfully to high school students (DeHaan & Narayan, 2007). Myser (1995) of the University of Newcastle has shown ways specifically of teaching ethics to medical students. Weber (1993) of Marquette University found that teaching ethical awareness and reasoning to business-school students can improve from courses aimed at these topics, although the improvements are often short-term. Poneman ("First Center to Study Accounting Ethics Opens," 2010) and Jordan (2007) both found that as leaders ascend the hierarchy in their businesses, their tendency to define situations in ethical terms actually seems to decrease.

Ultimately, the greatest protection against ethical failure is wisdom, which I define as using one's knowledge and skills to help achieve a common good, over the long as well as the short term, through the infusion of positive ethical values. In this way, one recognizes that, in the end, people benefit most when they act for the common good. Wisdom is the ultimate lifeboat (Sternberg, 2005; Sternberg, Jarvin, & Grigorenko, 2009; Sternberg & Jordan, 2005; Sternberg, Reznitskaya, & Jarvin, 2007).

Conclusion

Deciding how to confront ethical challenges is one of the biggest challenges we will face in our lives (Sternberg, 2011a, 2011b). But when citizens fail and when leaders fail, it is not usually because they are not smart or knowledgeable enough. It rather is because they lack the creativity and ethical reasoning they need to get their businesses and their lives back on track.

Creativity does not require ethical reasoning. But ethical reasoning typically involves creativity. If we do not encourage our children to think creatively, we will not transmit to them the skills to think ethically. If we teach them only to think creatively and not to act ethically, we have no reason to believe that they will use their creativity in an ethical manner. History, indeed, often suggests otherwise.

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About the Author

Dr. Robert J. Sternberg is provost and senior vice president of Oklahoma State University. He previously was dean of arts and sciences at Tufts University and before that was a professor of psychology, education and management at Yale University as well as director of the Center for the Psychology of Abilities, Competencies and Expertise there. He starts as president of the University of Wyoming July 1. Sternberg currently is president of the Federation of Associations in Behavioral and Brain Sciences.

e-Mail: robert.sternberg@gmail.com