



Why Keep an Ethics Log?

By Darnell Lattal

We owe it to ourselves to record our struggles and efforts to do the right thing. The decisions we make, especially the difficult ones, are an important part of who we are. As we weather the “storm of life,” some of us are too easy on ourselves, some are too hard. Who we are requires truth. An ethics log can help in the search for truth.

We owe it to ourselves to record our struggles and efforts to do the right thing. The decisions we make, especially the difficult ones, are an important part of who we are.

- Darnell Lattal

Living ethically means finding a balance. Self, family, friends, job, communities, the world at large – all have claims on our time and resources. An ethics log can help us to achieve the right balance by putting our ethical decision down on paper where they will not be forgotten. We can remind ourselves of what we have done and what we still need to do.

Living an ethical life does not mean being a saint. A great many people do a pretty good job in the normal course of working each day, looking after families, helping friends, supporting charities, being responsible citizens. An ethics log can

make it easier for us to support and reward ourselves in our efforts to do the right thing.

We have included two empty pages for each week in the year, but dates are not filled in. That is left to you. For some weeks you may want to write on more than two pages, for some

weeks less. Sometimes, you may want to take a vacation from record keeping!

We should do what we can to improve the world, but we should also strive along the way simply to make ourselves happy.

– Darnell Lattal

WHAT IS ETHICS ALL ABOUT?

Some philosophers say: Living an ethical life means doing as much good as one can. This is the philosophy of utilitarianism, made famous by the writings of Jeremy Bentham and John Stewart Mill in the nineteenth century. According to Bentham and Mill, everything we do should help to “bring about the greatest good for the greatest number of people.” In both our jobs and our personal lives we should strive to make the world a better place. Corpora-



tions should exist to provide worthwhile goods and services at competitive prices. The professions should all be broadly focused on bettering society. Government service should be exactly that – genuine service to the larger community.

Yet, if we fix our eyes always on doing the greatest good for the greatest number, we may forget about ourselves. We may get lost in the shuffle. The basic insight of utilitarianism is sound, but it is incomplete because one’s own self-esteem and self-fulfillment are just as important. The “ethics of self-fulfillment,” first formulated by the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, provides a needed balance to utilitarianism.

We should do what we can to improve the world, but we should also strive along the way simply to make ourselves happy. In other words, we should not sacrifice our own happiness for the sake of other people, but equally, we should not sacrifice the happiness of other people for the sake of our own ambitions. We should use our education, experience, and talents both to help others and to make our own lives as complete as possible. There are exceptions, however.

Sometimes, some people are called upon to sacrifice themselves to save others: On the battlefield in wartime, or from a burning building perhaps, or in the midst of a tornado or earthquake. In emergencies, the normal rules of ethics do not apply. In fact, if there is a single rule in ethics, it is that no single rule exists. Sacrifice is certainly not a part of day-to-day ethics –and thank goodness for that!



Why do the great moral writers like Mill and Aristotle inspire us? Part of the answer is that they are single-minded, which is a characteristic of genius. The inspiration of genius is almost always focused in a single direction. For the everyday world, however, single-mindedness can lead us astray; instead, we must search for a balance among the inspirations, and we must search for realistic interpretations of the inspirations.

What does the “greatest good for the greatest number” mean? There is no single answer that any person – or any society – has a right to insist upon. What does “self-fulfillment” mean? Again, no single answer is carved in stone. Therefore, we must respect everyone’s freedom to pursue different interpretations.

ARE THERE GUIDELINES FOR ACHIEVING AN ETHICAL BALANCE BETWEEN SELF AND OTHERS?

We suggest that you attempt to follow the “50/50 Rule.” In your life, do as much good for others as you do for yourself. Do as much good for yourself as you do for others. Over the course of a lifetime, try to achieve a more or less equal balance. An approximation is all that is called for, needless to say. “Doing good” is not easy to measure!

Although people do not usually tell themselves that they are seeking a 50/50 balance in their lives, many do understand in a general way what is meant. Parents are a good example. In their efforts to balance their own needs against their children’s needs, most parents know that they should not sacrifice themselves for their children (except in unusual circumstances), nor should they expect their children

to sacrifice themselves for the parents. Likewise, teachers know that they must balance the demands of students against their own lives apart from teaching. There is always more that a teacher can do to help his or her students, but at some point this must stop, and the same general point holds true for every worthwhile job and career. We must all balance the demands of our jobs against our own needs and interests of the job.

Following the 50/50 Rule is not easy to do—even with the help of an ethics log! One reason is that “helping others” means many different things. There are many different ways for us to be concerned about others—many ways to focus our energies. Many inspirations. The utilitarian goal—striving to bring about the greatest good for the greatest number – is only one of them. Another is to focus, not on society as a whole, but on people who are in the greatest need.



One of the most inspiring statements of the latter ideal is the injunction to “love thy neighbor as thyself.” Who is thy neighbor? The answer is, someone in need. It may be someone close to you or it may be someone on the other side of the globe. All major religious traditions place a special emphasis on helping people in need. The world contains all too many people in desperate need.

The world contains all too many people in desperate need.

Another of the great ethical ideas is individual rights. The Declaration of Independence contains what is perhaps the most inspiring statement of basic rights—to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The concept of rights is special in that it is totally inclusive. In other words, everyone has the same basic rights – women and men, old and young, black and white, people of all nations, races, and religions. Our friends have rights, but so do our adversaries and opponents. Law-abiding citizens have rights, but so do criminals. Well-adjusted people have rights, but so do those with emotional and mental problems. The rich have rights, but so do the poor. People who follow conventional lifestyles have rights, but so do people who live unconventionally.

Thus, we have four inspiring ethical concepts: Bettering society as a whole. Fulfilling ourselves. Helping those in need. Protecting the rights of each and every individual. Living an ethical life means factoring all four of these inspiring ideas into the equation.

The common theme among all four of the inspirations is the preciousness of human lives. Philosophers express this point of view by saying that every human life

has intrinsic worth – value in itself and to itself. Religious writers say that everyone is precious in God’s eyes. Answering ethical questions is like putting together a large picture puzzle. If any of the pieces are left out, the preciousness of someone’s life is likely to be overlooked – ourselves, the people we serve through our jobs, future generations, individuals in need, the man or woman who lives next door or on the opposite side of the globe.

DAILY REMINDERS

1. **Respect autonomy.** Autonomy is everyone’s right to be left alone and to be their own person. Henry David Thoreau said: “If I knew for a certainty that a man was coming to my house with the conscious design of doing me good, I should run for my life.” Much too often, people with good intentions seek to impose their values and their view of the world on those they wish to help. We must all work hard to avoid falling into that trap.
2. **Put honesty and integrity ahead of monetary success.** If you do this, then you will probably increase your chances for monetary success in the long run! People will perceive that you are a person who can be trusted through thick and thin. There is no greater asset in life than that.
3. **Take pride in what you do.** Other rewards for a job well done are much less certain. The job may be that of a parent, a friend, a volunteer, an employee, a manager, a member of a profession. Amidst the ups and downs of the economy and the good and bad news that we all receive each day, pride in a job well done is often the only constant.



4. **Be positive, not negative.** Whenever possible, reward others, do not punish them. Catch your child doing something good today and reward him or her for it. Catch someone with whom you work doing something good, and compliment or support that person.
5. **Don’t forget that an ethical life is a balanced life** between the value in the moment and the value over time, and that you, and you alone, are responsible for achieving the balance in your life.

• • • • •

*These few pages are not intended to tell the whole story of ethics, needless to say, but merely to provide some guidelines and reminders. We discuss the ideas found here at greater length in *A Good Day’s Work: Sustaining Ethical Behavior and Business Success* (Lattal & Clark, 2007).*

[About the Author]

DARNELL LATTAL, PH.D.



For more than 30 years, Darnell has been dedicated to supporting clients in areas such as strategy implementation, behavioral systems redesign, and leadership development.

Her expertise lies in coaching individuals and organizations towards effective behavior change and is currently working to help advance the mission of The Aubrey Daniels Institute. Darnell's greatest joy is in furthering the incredible power for bringing out the best that behavior analysis provides to others, including to her seven grandchildren.

[About ADI]

Regardless of your industry or expertise, one thing re-mains constant: People power your business. Since 1978 Aubrey Daniels International (ADI) has been dedicated to accelerating the business and safety performance of companies worldwide by using positive, practical approaches grounded in the science of behavior and engineered to ensure long-term sustainability. ADI provides clients with the tools and methodologies to help move people toward positive, results-driven accomplishments. Our clients accelerate strategy execution while fostering employee engagement and positive accountability at all levels of their organization.

CONNECT WITH US

aubreydaniels.com/stay-connected

web: aubreydaniels.com

blog: aubreydanielsblog.com

twitter: twitter.com/aubreydaniels

