

A TEACHER'S GUIDE FOR
PRACTICING MORAL REASONING
WITH HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

Living With Each Other



Practical Ethics Playbook by
Jelena Savković



Preface

Ethical decisions are among the most important choices people make every day, and yet moral reasoning receives little direct attention in formal education. In modern, progressive education, the focus often falls on the individual. **Individual academic achievement** becomes the standard by which we measure the success of systems and curricula. However, developing any academic or social skill, falls short if it doesn't address **values**. Education that emphasizes technical knowledge and critical thinking may neglect the most essential application of those skills — using them in the realm of our **moral lives**.

Morality, as the foundation of social life, has been present for as long as civilizations have existed. There is a strong chance that forms of morality were present even long before our rational ancestors. Some animals show behavior that implies existence of some moral norms. Whether we call it a *moral compass, instinct, ethical reasoning, or a cultural imperative*, all societies in the world have developed ideas about what's a **good** and what's a **bad** thing to do. Some moral norms are **universal**, others vary across cultures, and many continue to **change over time**.

Though we might use the terms "morality" and "ethics" interchangeably, strictly speaking, they refer to distinct things. Morality describes the systems of social behavior around the concepts of good and bad, while ethics refers to the philosophical or scientific discipline that deals with morality.

All moralities are constructed around some core social or individual values. These values are the *grounding principles* that guide people's **thinking** and **behavior**. While values are many, some thinkers and researchers have narrowed the core values to the lists of several, such as: fairness, care, respect, loyalty, responsibility, empathy.

The origins of morality can be traced to our **evolutionary history**, the environments in which we live together, and the **development of reason**. They are a combination of biological factors securing individual and group survival, and cultural development.

Moral dilemmas are provocative situations that force us to choose between conflicting actions. Some dilemmas are centuries old, others are entirely new, as changing societies bring new forms of living with each other.

Ethical dilemmas in this activity book are designed to spark curiosity about how we make decisions when living with others, to sharpen critical thinking in the field of ethics, and to invite learners to see morality as an overarching aspect of their lives in society. Scenarios, activities, and real-life engagements in these pages encourage students, teachers, and community members to reflect on the **origins of morality**, the role of both **reason** and **emotion** in decision-making, and the **impact** of individual and collective ethics on the local and global world.

Ultimately, this handbook aims to motivate teachers and learners to see moral reasoning not only as theoretical reflection, but as a guide for practical behavior. The learning experiences it offers should be **transformational**. The guiding idea behind this work can be captured in the words of Anton Chekhov:

“Man will become better when you show him what he is like.”

So, what are the benefits of practicing ethical decision-making?

By inviting values into academic life, students are encouraged to move beyond the self-centered ideals of consumer culture toward deeper meaning in building their **personal identity** and **relationships**.

Discussing moral dilemmas equips them not only with **empathy** and **perspective-taking**, but also with **cognitive discipline** and **integrity**. Ultimately, practicing ethical decision-making develops young people into thoughtful, responsible participants in society — ready to navigate complex challenges with both intellect and conscience. Exploring moral lives revives **wisdom** as a value and an objective in the academic journey.

Engaging students in explicit moral reasoning strengthens their ability to delve more meaningfully into other disciplines. When examining historical events, they enter into the perspectives, choices, and moral climates of different eras. When reflecting on science and technology, they begin to see how innovations affect human well-being, and why moral judgment matters even in technical fields. In social sciences and law, ethical inquiry prepares them to grapple with fairness, justice, and the relationship between values, policies, and legal systems.

Activities in this handbook inspire and support aspects of progressive learning environments, such as *service learning*, *authentic audience* and *character building*. **Moral imagination** in the context of problem solving draws from and stimulates development of critical and creative thinking.

In preparation for career or university focus, students harvest the following benefits of engaging with explicit ethical reasoning:

Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM)

Benefits: Ethical reasoning helps future scientists and engineers reflect on the human impact of their work.

Examples:

- Medical students learn to balance innovation with patient rights.
- Computer scientists consider issues of AI bias, data privacy, and fairness.
- Engineers understand their responsibility for safety, sustainability, and long-term impact.

Outcomes: Students develop awareness that progress is not only technical but also moral.

Medicine and Health Sciences

Benefits: Ethics sharpens their sensitivity to dilemmas in patient care and resource allocation.

Examples:

- Deciding who gets scarce treatments.
- Balancing autonomy with protection (e.g., vaccinations, mental health).

Outcomes: They gain compassion and integrity in patient relationships, and readiness for medical ethics exams and licensing boards.

Humanities (History, Literature, Philosophy)

Benefits: Ethical analysis deepens understanding of human struggles across eras and cultures.

Examples:

- History students study wars, revolutions, and civil rights as moral turning points.
- Literature students interpret characters' ethical dilemmas to explore timeless human questions.

Outcomes: They cultivate empathy, perspective-taking, and critical engagement with cultural narratives.

Social Sciences (Law, Politics, Economics, Sociology)

Benefits: Ethics equips them to examine justice, fairness, and power structures critically.

Examples:

- Law students reflect on whether law and morality always align.
- Political science students weigh liberty, equality, and authority.
- Economists debate wealth distribution and global poverty.

Outcomes: They gain a principled lens for analyzing policies and social structures.

Arts and Creative Fields

Benefits: Ethical reasoning sharpens awareness of representation, cultural appropriation, and artistic responsibility.

Examples:

- Filmmakers and writers consider how their work shapes public opinion and values.
- Artists reflect on freedom of expression vs. respect for communities.

Outcomes: They learn to balance personal creativity with social responsibility.

Business, Management, and Finance

Benefits: Ethics develops awareness of social responsibility, fairness, and sustainability in leadership.

Examples:

- Managers reflect on treatment of employees and environmental impact.
- Finance majors consider fairness in markets and investment choices.

Outcomes: Students become leaders who balance profit with purpose.

Global Studies & International Relations

Benefits: Ethics builds cross-cultural awareness and responsibility in global cooperation.

Examples:

- Students debate humanitarian intervention, refugee rights, or climate justice.

Outcomes: They develop skills in moral negotiation across cultural differences.

Psychology & Education

Benefits: Ethical training grounds them in empathy, fairness, and human dignity.

Examples:

- Psychologists navigate issues of consent, confidentiality, and well-being.
- Educators consider equity, inclusion, and responsibility to future generations

Outcomes: They approach human development holistically, balancing knowledge with care.

Practical Ethics Playbook

A TEACHER'S GUIDE FOR PRACTICING MORALITY WITH HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

The following are the classroom and out-of-the-classroom adaptations of famous ethical dilemmas. Each dilemma contains a short description and, usually, three versions of it, while building on the dramatic element and importance of the choices students make. Each game is played shortly, and then lengthily discussed through discussion questions. These questions can be printed for each student, couple or a group of students in each activity, or they can be projected to the whole class.

There are no right or wrong answers. Players are often invited to defend positions that are opposite of their own ethical stance. The games and questions are **provocative**, often moving away from the moral comfort zone, inviting the whole class to deal with thoughts that might have been a moral taboo before engaging with this Playbook. This creates an even more **challenging** and more **effective** environment for students to engage in discussion **respectfully**. They develop and perfect their **communication** and **debate skills**, **analytical** and **hypothetical thinking**, their **reflection**, and **evaluation of arguments**.