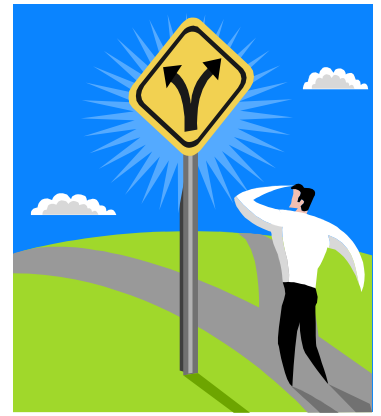


Finding the Right Path

By: Marisa A. Colston, PhD, ATC

Professionalism and ethics in athletic training (sports medicine) have received considerable attention in the literature over the past decade. Previously, ethics conversations have largely centered on cases that received extensive media coverage, such as those that involved Hank Gathers and Kory Stringer, two high-profile athletes who died playing their sport. High-profile ethical cases are often associated with complicated and messy lawsuits. Although ethics and the law represent separate domains, they often go hand in hand. Changes in the athletic training profession, such as education reform and a growth in the literature on related topics, are starting to fill this void in a much-needed manner.



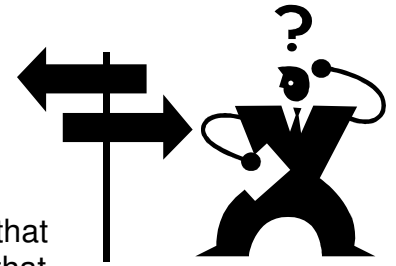
Simply discussing ethics as they relate to the profession, and to life in general, is often pointless without an understanding of *how* to address sensitive issues. The discussion can lead to heated and fruitless debates. There seems to be an inverse relationship between emotions and intellect. For instance, can you recall an intelligent statement you made when you were angry or upset? This is hard for most of us to do. *People with a hot temper do foolish things; wiser people remain calm (Proverbs 14: 17).*

Prior to entering such conversations, it is important to have an understanding of how you think. In other words, “think about how you think”, which is formally defined as metacognition. Such insights will lead to the recognition of various intellectual barriers to ethical thinking. One barrier may be a view that all value judgments are undemocratic. A moral relativistic point of view affirms that whatever one *‘feels* is right, is by that very fact right’. Assuming that the majority view represents the best view, or viewing morality only as a religious matter without any secular applications, are also obstacles to clear ethical thinking. Unless we can overcome these barriers, all efforts at ethical analysis are unlikely to be effective and meaningful. V. R. Ruggiero (2004) masterfully addressed this necessity when he stated that, *“The moral imperative of our time is to break the bonds of indecision, move beyond fad and foolishness, and address the dilemmas of modern living sensitively and sensibly, with regard for their complexity.”*

There is a tendency to judge issues on the basis of preconceptions and bias rather than careful analysis. ‘Hot button’ issues may create a flood of impressions and reactions that rush in on your thoughts. The force of the flood is irrelevant. Having your judgment swept away by it is relevant to reasoning. The following rules of engagement can help to counter this flood and the other barriers to ethical thinking:

- Be aware of your first impressions,
- Be certain you have all relevant facts,
- Consider various opinions on the issue and the arguments that support them,
- Keep your thinking flexible,
- Express your judgment precisely and explain the reasoning that underlies it,
- Leave egotism and personal agendas at the door,
- Listen actively, and
- Judge ideas responsibly.

Ethics is defined as the branch of philosophy that seeks to determine how human action may be judged 'right or wrong', 'good or evil'. A distinction must be made between ethics and law, religion and professional etiquette. There is significant overlap and they heavily influence each other, but they are separate. Furthermore, there is some evidence to support that ethics originated from religion, which complicates distinctions. The bottom line is that there must be a common ground for ethics. Religious doctrines cannot be that common ground, because all participants (Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, etc.) must affirm the basis for ethical judgment. Therefore, theology alone does not provide that common ground...but it sure is important! As C.S. Lewis notably points out, when one takes the time to truly study these religions, one will find that there are far more commonalities than differences.



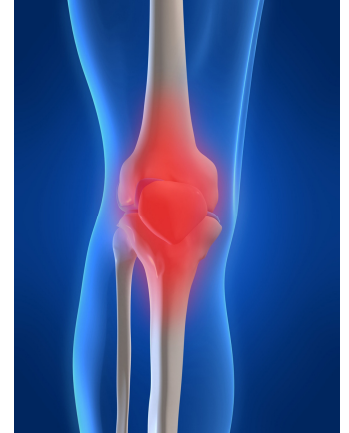
Clive Staples Lewis (1898-1963) was truly one of the most brilliant ethical thinkers of our time. Born into a Christian family, he professed atheism at the age of 15. His intellectual journey led him to Christianity by age 33. He related this realization as "kicking and screaming" into Christianity. The more he tried to discredit Christian doctrines through science, logic, and rationalization, the less he was actually able to do so. This led to what was eventually titled the 'Lewis Trilemma' where he addressed the claim that Jesus was God. Lewis posed three possibilities: 1) Jesus really was God; 2) Jesus was deliberately lying, or 3) Jesus was not God but thought himself to be. The second argument is completely contrary to the scripture and historical documents describing the nature and demeanor of Jesus, so Lewis argued that this was not a feasible option. The third option suggests that Jesus was delusional or insane which is inconsistent with everything that is known about Him. This in turn leaves only one viable option: Jesus really was God.

Lewis in his *Morality Argument*, argued for the existence of God based on observations about morality in the world. This is founded on moral law, a "rule about right and wrong" commonly known to all human beings. He presented that moral law is like the laws of nature in that it was not created by humans. To understand Christianity, one must understand the moral law, for it is the underlying structure of the universe and is "hard as nails". He wrote that we must grasp the dismay which comes from our failure to keep the moral law to understand the coming of Christ and his work. Lewis put forth that the death and resurrection of Christ as the only way in which our inadequate human attempts to redeem humanity's sins could be made adequate in God's eyes. Jesus "became a man" in Christ to make full atonement possible.

Opposite thinking to this argument would be moral relativism which suggests that there are no absolute rights and wrongs and all moral decisions are personal and subjective. Moral relativists support the belief that whatever one claims is morally acceptable is morally acceptable and that it is taboo to judge/criticize others' moral decisions. A night of television or even 30 minutes of the news would lead us to believe that this moral position is predominate. Could this philosophy be *responsible for the decline in civility and cheapening of human life?*

To answer that question, we first have to answer why we have ethics. We have laws. So as long as we follow the laws, do we really need ethics? We absolutely do. Ethics guide the legal system. Before an action/behavior can be considered unlawful, there first needs to be a value judgment on whether the behavior is right or wrong. History has clearly taught us that one set of laws is not enough. In other words, we continue to need ethics to refine and perfect our legal system. Ethics is a guide for living honorably. For Christians, the ultimate guide for living honorably is the Bible, which cleverly has been described as the "Basic Instructions Before Leaving Earth".

There are numerous ethical principles; however, the following could be considered to be some of the most relevant to athletic training: the principles of nonmaleficence, beneficence, utility, and autonomy. The principle of nonmaleficence means to “Act in ways that do not cause needless harm or injury to others.” In other words, do not expose athletes/patients to unnecessary risk. Avoid harmful techniques/practices and terminate the procedure if harm becomes evident.



The principle of beneficence is to “Act in ways that promote the welfare of others.” The clinician-athlete relationship is at the core of this principle. Do we always place the welfare of the athlete above competing outside pressures? Is the athlete our number one priority? The principle of utility guides the whole agenda. Utility means to “Act in ways that bring about the greatest benefit and the least harm.” Which diagnostic tests have the greatest value and are evidence-based? Which ACL protocol has the best outcome? Which exercises have greater risks than benefits?

Finally, the principle of autonomy relates to the idea that “Rational individuals should be permitted to be self-determining.” This revolves around informed consent and its core components: disclosure, comprehension, voluntariness, and competence. Despite the fact that we may know what is best for a particular injury or condition, based on our education and experience, we never truly know or understand what is best for an individual without that person’s input. Always involve your patient in the decision making process. This is an essential component of evidence-based practice, but more importantly, it is necessary for upholding the “Golden Rule”; a fundamental aspect of Christian behavior.

The virtues of Christian behavior support the ethical principles just described. When one acts with *prudence*, he or she is exercising sound judgment. To act with *justice* is to allow moral rightness to guide behavior. *Temperance* is the practice of moderation, and *fortitude* means to act with moral courage. These virtues can be exemplified by character qualities associated with salvation, such as hope, faith and charity. All of these characteristics guide ethical behavior, but also guide professional behavior.

Professionalism and professional etiquette are different from ethics, but often coincide. Reeves (1991) describes a profession as “*A body of individuals committed to ensuring that they regulate themselves and behave ethically, committed to imparting their knowledge and skills and promoting research, and committed to excluding those who don’t meet the standards.*” As members of a health care profession, athletic trainers must wear two hats and embrace the responsibility of being both a “healer” and a “professional”. The healer is under no obligation to serve on committees or engage in other research or administrative activities, but the professional must.

The literature supports that professions must be “moral” or devoted to public good. Therefore professionalism is an ideal to be pursued. Trust from the public is to be gained and protected. Each member must follow accepted principles and codes of ethics of the profession. Actions must be judged as ‘right or wrong’ as part of professional behavior based on these codes. This means that decisions made should be beneficial for most members within the profession and that is how actions will be judged. Many members may be crossing ethical (and legal) boundaries if they are not familiar with, or even aware, that a code exists.

A question I frequently ask myself and pose to students is "How do we become what we need to be?" Part of the answer to this question can be found in a quote by Max DePree when he states that "We cannot become what we need to be by remaining what we are". The path to get there surrounds us, but if we do not open our eyes, our ears and our hearts, while simultaneously quieting the bombardment of opposing thoughts and temptations, we will not find the right path. Here are some hints as to where to begin:

- *Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it." (Isaiah 30:21)*
- *No testing has overtaken you that is not common to everyone. God is faithful, and he will not let you be tested beyond your strength, but with the testing he will also provide the way out so that you may be able to endure it. (1 Corinthians 10:13)*
- *For God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power, of love and of self-discipline. (2 Timothy 1:7)*

A higher moral standard does exist. Jesus is the ultimate teacher and the Bible is our guide. We must be taught and teach others how to be a healer and a professional. Professional status is not a right, but a gift given to us that we must vow to uphold through Christian and professional behavior. These qualities are not inherent; they must be taught and modeled. We were given free will and have as much of an ability to choose right behavior as we do wrong behavior. Integrating the virtues of Christian behavior into all aspects of our lives will make us a better professional, a better person. To do so requires faith, discipline, work and perseverance. What is the reward? *He who believes has everlasting life.* (John 6:47)



Dr. Marisa Colston is the Director of the Graduate Athletic Training Education Program (ATEP) at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. In addition to her administrative role, she teaches graduate gross anatomy, legal, ethical and psychological aspects of athletic training, and various clinical practicum courses. Her primary research areas are core function and lumbar spine injury prevention, ethics, and professional gatekeeping. Marisa lives in Hixson, TN., with her husband Jon, their son Alexander, Sydney (dog), and Rajah (cat).



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