

ETHICS



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ETHICS

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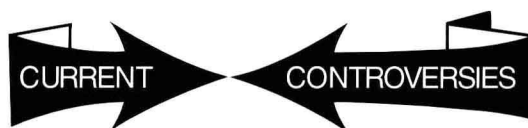
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ETHICS

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Foreword

By definition, controversies are “discussions of questions in which opposing opinions clash” (Webster’s Twentieth Century Dictionary Unabridged). Few would deny that controversies are a pervasive part of the human condition and exist on virtually every level of human enterprise. Controversies transpire between individuals and among groups, within nations and between nations. Controversies supply the grist necessary for progress by providing challenges and challengers to the status quo. They also create atmospheres where strife and warfare can flourish. A world without controversies would be a peaceful world; but it also would be, by and large, static and prosaic.

The Series’ Purpose

The purpose of the Current Controversies series is to explore many of the social, political, and economic controversies dominating the national and international scenes today. Titles selected for inclusion in the series are highly focused and specific. For example, from the larger category of criminal justice, Current Controversies deals with specific topics such as police brutality, gun control, white collar crime, and others. The debates in Current Controversies also are presented in a useful, timeless fashion. Articles and book excerpts included in each title are selected if they contribute valuable, long-range ideas to the overall debate. And wherever possible, current information is enhanced with historical documents and other relevant materials. Thus, while individual titles are current in focus, every effort is made to ensure that they will not become quickly outdated. Books in the Current Controversies series will remain important resources for librarians, teachers, and students for many years.

In addition to keeping the titles focused and specific, great care is taken in the editorial format of each book in the series. Book introductions and chapter prefaces are offered to provide background material for readers. Chapters are organized around several key questions that are answered with diverse opinions representing all points on the political spectrum. Materials in each chapter include opinions in which authors clearly disagree as well as alternative opinions in which authors may agree on a broader issue but disagree on the possible solutions. In this way, the content of each volume in Current Controversies mirrors the mosaic of opinions encountered in society. Readers will quickly realize that there are many viable answers to these complex issues. By questioning each au-

thor's conclusions, students and casual readers can begin to develop the critical thinking skills so important to evaluating opinionated material.

Current Controversies is also ideal for controlled research. Each anthology in the series is composed of primary sources taken from a wide gamut of informational categories including periodicals, newspapers, books, United States and foreign government documents, and the publications of private and public organizations. Readers will find factual support for reports, debates, and research papers covering all areas of important issues. In addition, an annotated table of contents, an index, a book and periodical bibliography, and a list of organizations to contact are included in each book to expedite further research.

Perhaps more than ever before in history, people are confronted with diverse and contradictory information. During the Persian Gulf War, for example, the public was not only treated to minute-to-minute coverage of the war, it was also inundated with critiques of the coverage and countless analyses of the factors motivating U.S. involvement. Being able to sort through the plethora of opinions accompanying today's major issues, and to draw one's own conclusions, can be a complicated and frustrating struggle. It is the editors' hope that *Current Controversies* will help readers with this struggle.

“Like most people, Americans are sometimes generous and compassionate, sometimes dishonest and untrustworthy.”

Introduction

Many statistics indicate that Americans are less ethical today than in previous decades. In the book *The Day America Told the Truth*, 64 percent of the 5,000 Americans interviewed agreed with the statement “I will lie when it suits me—as long as it doesn’t cause any real damage.” Seventy-four percent agreed that “I will steal from those who won’t really miss it.”

These statistics are alarming. But while Americans may not be very ethical (according to their own accounts), are they in fact *less* ethical than in previous decades? Gary Edwards of the Ethics Resource Center, a think tank that promotes and researches ethics, believes that they are. He writes:

In some inchoate way we sense that things really *are* different now, that the balance [between good and evil] is lost and may not be restored. Our institutions decay and the moral memory of wisdom wanes, leaving us with the growing anxiety that if things are not worse now than they have been, they soon shall be.

There is a particular concern about the lack of ethics in young people, many of whom seem nonchalant about cheating, stealing, and other unethical behaviors. In a 1989 Girl Scouts of America study of students in grades 4 to 12, 65 percent of high school students reported they would cheat on an important exam, and 36 percent said they would lie to protect a friend. Almost half said they rely on “their own personal experience” as the basis for deciding what is true. The majority said they had no external moral code, either religious or secular, to guide them.

A CBS News report reveals much about how the ethical dilemmas of America’s youth have changed in forty years. In the 1940s, according to the report, the top seven transgressions of schoolchildren were talking out of turn, chewing gum, making noise, running in halls, cutting in line, disobeying the dress code, and littering. By the 1980s the list had changed to include drug abuse, alcohol abuse, pregnancy, suicide, rape, robbery, and assault.

Why such a dramatic change? Edwards believes it is the decline of the institutions that once taught ethical values:

In the 1940s and for generations before, we relied on family, religion, and

schools together to impart essential civic and moral values across generations. [Since then] we have witnessed the gradual erosion of the family, the secularization of our society, and the evacuation of values from public school instruction. The moral development of our children has suffered greatly.

Ethicist Michael Josephson agrees that families, schools, and other institutions are failing to teach children about ethics and about the negative consequences of unethical behavior. But after completing a two-year study on the ethics of high school and college students, Josephson concluded that a cynical and selfish attitude that pervades society also contributes to a lack of ethics among young people. As Josephson writes:

The lax ethics, self-indulgence, and rationalizations expressed by today's youth reflect and magnify similar characteristics in society. . . . "Look-out-for-#1" rhetoric and an unrelenting parade of bad examples engender cynicism and foster selfish attitudes that drive dishonest and irresponsible conduct. . . . Youth of today rarely hear invocations to morality and service. Instead, they hear "Greed is good," and other slogans that degrade traditional ethical values such as altruism, honor, and duty beyond self.

Josephson believes this cynicism and selfishness drive young people to think that unethical conduct is necessary to succeed in life. In his study, 75 percent said they think that "most people will cheat or lie when it is necessary to get what they want." A significant percentage agreed that "it is not unethical to do whatever you have to do to succeed if you don't seriously hurt other people."

Josephson's findings and those of other ethicists are cause for concern. But concern about the behavior and ethics of the young and of all of society is not new. Throughout human history social critics have lamented the lack of ethics in society. A prophet in the eighth century B.C. wrote that "the times are evil." Hundreds of years later Jesus Christ labeled his society "a wicked generation." As Edwards states, "Meanness, deceit, and avarice have been with us forever."

But if vices have always existed, so have virtues such as courage, love, and compassion. Josephson himself found that, in addition to his study's negative findings, many young people show "a high degree of caring and a willingness to help others." Of the respondents, nearly 90 percent said "being kind and caring" was very important. In a speech on America's ethical values, Jeffrey H. Coors, president of ACX Technologies, points to the generosity of Americans as evidence of their ethical nature:

We are the most giving nation on earth. There is no tradition of benevolence that can compare in Asia, Latin America, Africa, or even Europe. Nowhere in the world is there a United Way or a Cancer Society like ours. No other nation supports missionaries to the same extent, and none can compare with America in support for private, independent education. . . . Americans donate about \$100 billion to charity each year, mostly in the form of individual contributions. Remarkably, poor Americans give a higher percentage of their incomes than do their more affluent neighbors.

Introduction

Ethics: Current Controversies explores the ethics and lack of ethics in American society in the following chapters: What Motivates People to Behave Ethically? Is There a Lack of Professional Ethics in America? Is American Business Ethical? Do Ethical Business Practices Benefit Society? Are Modern Biomedical Practices Ethical? What Measures Would Promote Ethical Behavior? The contributors debate whether Americans are less ethical than in previous decades and discuss the role ethics plays in the many aspects of people's lives.