

Beyond the Right Answer: The REASON Framework for Teaching Ethical Deliberation in General Education

Stephanie Pudiquet

Abstract

Ethics courses often introduce moral theories and then ask students to apply a fixed sequence to dilemmas. A sequence can make reasoning visible, but it may also encourage the mistaken belief that ethical judgment is an algorithm that converts facts and principles into one uncontested answer. This conceptual-pedagogical article analyzes a college Ethics worktext as an instructional source and develops the Reconstruct-Enumerate-Articulate-Search-Own-Notice (REASON) framework for ethical deliberation in general education. The framework retains the worktext's emphasis on facts, issues, principles, alternatives, consequences, and decisions while adding stakeholder mapping, role responsibility, uncertainty, safeguards, implementation, and post-decision review. REASON asks learners to reconstruct the situation and distinguish evidence from assumption; enumerate affected parties, claims, relationships, and authority; articulate values and test the case through consequences, duties and rights, justice, virtue, care, and the common good; search for alternatives that reduce avoidable harm and preserve legitimate claims; own a publicly defensible decision and implementation plan; and notice outcomes, objections, and reasons for revision. Two analytical tools accompany the framework: a comparison of ethical lenses and an assessment map that connects each stage with an observable student product and a characteristic reasoning error. The article argues that case-based ethics should assess the quality of deliberation rather than agreement with an instructor's preferred conclusion. Strong work identifies morally relevant facts, represents perspectives fairly, applies more than one lens without merely listing theories, responds to counterarguments, respects legal and professional constraints without equating legality with morality, and specifies who should act, when, and under what safeguards. The contribution is an instructional design framework rather than an empirical claim about learning gains. It offers a transparent way to connect moral theory, cultural context, professional roles, moral courage, and accountable action across multidisciplinary college programs.

Keywords: ethical reasoning; moral deliberation; case-based learning; general education; moral decision-making; ethics pedagogy

Introduction

Ethical reasoning is not demonstrated by naming a theory after a decision has already been made. It requires a learner to notice that a situation has moral significance, determine what is known and uncertain, identify who may be affected, explain which values and obligations matter, compare feasible alternatives, and accept responsibility for an action that can be justified to others. These activities are related but not identical. A student may understand utilitarianism and still overlook a vulnerable stakeholder; another may recognize unfairness but lack the resolve or authority to respond.

General education is an appropriate site for this work because ethical problems cross professional boundaries. The Commission on Higher Education frames the Philippine general education curriculum around holistic understanding and intellectual and civic competencies (Commission on Higher Education, 2013). The Ethics course therefore serves students who may later work in education, business, engineering, health, government, technology, or community organizations. Its task is not to provide profession-specific answers to every future conflict. It is to cultivate transferable habits of disciplined, impartial, context-sensitive, and accountable judgment.

The source worktext covers the nature of ethics, moral dilemmas, freedom, values, love and interhuman relations, culture, moral development, human acts, feelings, reason and impartiality, moral courage, virtue ethics, natural law, Kantian ethics, utilitarianism, justice, taxation, and youth ethics (Ethics, 2023). Its central procedural lesson presents seven steps: gather facts, determine ethical issues, identify principles, list alternatives, compare alternatives with principles, weigh consequences, and decide. This sequence provides a valuable scaffold, especially for learners who otherwise respond to cases with intuition alone.

Yet a scaffold can become a checklist. Students may copy facts without testing their reliability, list stakeholders without representing their claims, name moral theories without using them, or announce a choice without an implementation plan. The final step may also imply closure when real decisions require consultation, documentation, monitoring, appeal, or revision. The central argument of this article is that ethical decision-making should be taught as deliberation: structured enough to be examined, but recursive enough to accommodate uncertainty, disagreement, role constraints, and learning from consequences.

Purpose of the Article

This article has three objectives: (a) to distinguish a procedural checklist from defensible ethical deliberation; (b) to develop the REASON framework as a reusable method for multidisciplinary ethics cases; and (c) to propose assessment evidence focused on reasoning quality, implementation, and accountability. The guiding question is: How can general education students analyze moral dilemmas methodically without treating ethical theories as labels or decision models as algorithms?

Conceptual-Pedagogical Approach

Instructional Source and Analytical Unit

The article uses conceptual synthesis and instructional design analysis. The Ethics worktext supplies the curriculum architecture, moral cases, and seven-step reasoning sequence. Moral philosophy clarifies the distinct work performed by consequences, duties, rights, justice, virtue, care, and the common good. Moral psychology contributes distinctions among moral sensitivity, judgment, motivation, and implementation. Scholarship on case teaching, reflective judgment, moral imagination, discussion, and formative assessment is used to translate these ideas into observable classroom practices. No student sample, intervention, or learning-effect estimate is reported.

The unit of analysis is a deliberation record: a traceable account of how a learner moves from a morally significant situation to an action and subsequent review. The record may be a written case analysis, structured oral defense, group memorandum,

role-play debrief, or decision log. What matters is that claims, evidence, alternatives, reasons, objections, and responsibilities are visible enough to receive critique and revision.

Ethical Deliberation Is More Than Moral Judgment

Rest and colleagues' four-component account distinguishes moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation, and moral character or implementation (Rest et al., 1999). The distinction explains why selecting the most defensible option is only part of ethical conduct. A decision maker must first perceive the ethical features of a situation, give moral considerations sufficient priority, and possess the skills and persistence to act. Ethics instruction that assesses only the stated answer may therefore miss both earlier failures of perception and later failures of action.

Ethical intensity also varies across situations. Jones (1991) argues that features such as magnitude of consequences, probability, temporal immediacy, proximity, and concentration of effect can influence ethical decision-making. These features should not mechanically determine what is right, but they help students understand why some issues demand rapid escalation, broader consultation, or stronger safeguards. A classroom framework must therefore attend to both principle and the moral texture of the case.

The Architecture of a Defensible Ethical Analysis

Facts, Assumptions, and Uncertainty

Every case contains information selected by an author, narrator, institution, or witness. Students should classify statements as verified facts, reported claims, reasonable inferences, disputed interpretations, and unknowns. They should also ask who controls missing information and whether delay is possible. 'Gather the facts' becomes intellectually meaningful only when evidence quality and uncertainty are explicit. In practice, the most ethical immediate action may be to seek information, preserve records, consult an authorized person, or protect someone while inquiry continues.

Stakeholders, Claims, and Roles

A stakeholder list is not a headcount. It should specify how each party may be affected, which claims deserve consideration, what vulnerabilities or power differences exist, and who has authority to act. Roles generate legitimate obligations but can also narrow attention. Winston (1995) notes that ethics cases often expose tension between internal role standards and broader moral duties. Students should therefore distinguish what a role permits, what an institution requires, and what morality may demand beyond minimum compliance.

Multiple Ethical Lenses

Moral theories illuminate different features of a case. Consequential reasoning examines benefits, harms, probabilities, and distribution. Duty-based reasoning asks what obligations and constraints apply even when violation promises a desirable outcome. Rights protect legitimate claims against being traded away too quickly. Justice tests consistency, fairness, and the position of the least advantaged. Virtue ethics asks what dispositions and practical wisdom responsible action expresses. Care ethics foregrounds relationships, dependence, responsiveness, and context. Common-

good reasoning considers the institutions and shared conditions that enable people to flourish.

The purpose of using several lenses is not to count votes among theories. Nor should students assume that disagreement proves all answers equally acceptable. A lens is useful when it identifies a morally relevant consideration, disciplines a claim, exposes a trade-off, or suggests an alternative. The final justification should explain convergence and conflict: which considerations support the same option, which resist it, and why some reasons carry greater weight in the particular circumstances.

Table 1

Ethical lenses as questions, evidence, and safeguards

Lens	Diagnostic question	Evidence to examine	Characteristic safeguard
Consequences	Who is likely to benefit or be harmed, how much, and with what probability?	Short- and long-term effects; distribution; reversibility; uncertainty	Do not hide severe harm inside an aggregate benefit
Duties and rights	What must or must not be done, and which claims set limits on action?	Promises; consent; confidentiality; professional codes; human rights	Test whether an exception could be publicly justified
Justice and fairness	Are benefits, burdens, opportunities, and procedures distributed fairly?	Comparable cases; bias; power; due process; effect on vulnerable parties	Apply reasons consistently and allow voice or appeal
Virtue	What would practical wisdom, integrity, honesty, courage, and compassion require?	Motives; habits; role models; institutional pressures; character of the act	Avoid confusing confidence or loyalty with virtue
Care and relationships	What dependencies, histories, and responsibilities are morally significant?	Trust; vulnerability; relational obligations; likely experience of affected persons	Care must not become favoritism or silence another's agency
Common good	What shared practices and institutions must be protected or improved?	Public trust; social cooperation; access; sustainability; institutional precedent	Do not sacrifice identifiable persons to vague public claims

The REASON Framework

REASON organizes ethical deliberation into six recursive stages: Reconstruct the situation; Enumerate stakeholders and claims; Articulate values and ethical lenses; Search alternatives and safeguards; Own and justify a decision; and Notice outcomes and revise. The framework consolidates the worktext's seven-step model while making uncertainty, perspective, implementation, and review more explicit. A later stage may reveal a missing fact or stakeholder, so movement backward is evidence of responsiveness rather than procedural failure.

Reconstruct the Situation

The learner prepares a neutral account of the decision context, timeline, available evidence, uncertainty, urgency, legal or institutional constraints, and the decision maker's actual authority. The account should avoid loading the description with a conclusion. Questions include: What happened? What is alleged? What must be verified? What will occur if no action is taken? Which facts may be obtained without increasing harm?

Enumerate Stakeholders and Claims

The learner maps persons, groups, institutions, future parties, and shared resources affected by the decision. For each, the learner states the interest or claim, vulnerability, power, relationship, and opportunity for voice. Impartiality does not mean pretending

that every claim has equal moral force. It means refusing to exclude a claim merely because the person is unpopular, distant, dependent, or unable to speak.

Articulate Values and Ethical Lenses

The learner identifies the values in conflict and applies at least two relevant lenses in sufficient depth to change or test the analysis. Theories should be stated accurately and connected to case evidence. For example, a rights claim must specify the right holder, content, corresponding duty, and possible limit. A consequence claim should specify who experiences the effect, its probability, and whether it can be reversed.

Search Alternatives and Safeguards

The learner generates options beyond the dramatic binary commonly built into dilemmas. Alternatives may include consultation, staged action, temporary protection, disclosure through proper channels, recusal, documentation, negotiation, appeal, or redesign of the institutional process. Moral imagination is the ability to reframe a conflict and envision actions that respect more legitimate claims than the obvious options (Werhane, 1999). Safeguards state how foreseeable misuse, error, retaliation, or unequal burden will be reduced.

Own and Justify the Decision

The learner selects an action, identifies who should perform it, establishes timing and authority, and offers reasons that could be examined by affected parties. A defensible justification acknowledges the strongest objection and explains the residual moral cost. Ethical maturity is not demonstrated by claiming that the chosen option has no downside. It is demonstrated by explaining why the remaining burden is justified, minimized, and not concealed.

Notice Outcomes and Revise

The learner states what should be documented, monitored, communicated, or reviewed after action. Notice includes whether expected benefits and harms occurred, whether safeguards worked, whether new evidence changes the judgment, and whether an appeal or institutional reform is necessary. This stage connects ethical reasoning to accountability and prevents a decision from disappearing once the classroom answer is submitted.

Table 2

REASON stages, assessable products, and reasoning errors

Stage	Student product	Feedback question	Reasoning error
Reconstruct	Neutral case brief with facts, claims, unknowns, urgency, and authority	Which statement is assumed rather than verified?	Treating the narrator's framing as complete
Enumerate	Stakeholder-and-claim map	Whose voice, vulnerability, or responsibility is missing?	Counting stakeholders without explaining claims
Articulate	Comparison of relevant values and ethical lenses	How does this lens alter the judgment?	Naming theories without applying them
Search	Feasible options with safeguards and consultation paths	Can avoidable harm be reduced without abandoning the duty?	Accepting a false binary
Own	Decision, counterargument, residual cost, actor, timing, and justification	Would the reason remain defensible if roles were reversed?	Conclusion without implementation or objection
Notice	Monitoring, documentation, communication, review, and revision plan	What evidence would require reconsideration?	Treating decision as final and consequence-free

Designing Case-Based Ethical Learning

Choose Cases With Real Conflict and Sufficient Context

A useful case places a decision within relationships, institutions, constraints, and uncertainty. Winston (1995) argues that serious conflict and detailed context make students attend to both reasoning and the environment of action. Cases should therefore provide enough information for analysis but preserve contestable questions. They should not depend on sensational harm merely to create engagement. Everyday conflicts involving disclosure, fairness, consent, professional responsibility, resource allocation, conflicts of interest, or institutional loyalty can reveal the same reasoning demands.

Case selection also requires care. Instructors should avoid presenting disability, poverty, culture, religion, or illness only as devices for dramatic choice. Groups represented in a case should not be reduced to stereotypes, and students should not be compelled to disclose personal trauma or beliefs. A fictional case can be authentic in structure when roles, consequences, institutions, and evidence are credible.

Separate Analysis From Performance

Small-group discussion, role-play, and debate can reveal perspectives, but fluency and confidence are not the same as ethical competence. A persuasive speaker may omit evidence; a hesitant student may produce the strongest written analysis. Assessment should therefore combine participation with a deliberation record that shows individual reasoning. Barry and Yadav (2007) note the value of case-based instruction for ethical understanding, while also calling for rigorous evaluation of instructional methods.

Use Discussion to Test, Not Merely Display, Positions

A discussion should require students to paraphrase an opposing view fairly, identify the evidence that would change their position, and respond to a principled objection. The instructor's role is to press for clarity, relevance, consistency, and consequences rather than announce a preferred answer too early. Brookfield and Preskill (2005) describe discussion as a disciplined way of learning through diverse views. In ethics, this discipline includes protecting minority positions while challenging reasons that rely on prejudice, misinformation, or unequal consideration.

Integrate Culture Without Collapsing Into Relativism

Cultural context shapes moral language, relationships, expectations, and the practical meaning of actions. Respectful analysis asks how community practices are understood by participants and how power operates within them. It does not infer that every established practice is justified or that outsiders have privileged moral insight. Students can compare cultural interpretations while still testing harm, consent, fairness, rights, care, and the common good. This approach combines humility with critical responsibility.

Connect Judgment to Moral Courage

The worktext appropriately treats moral courage as distinct from knowing what ought to be done. Students should identify implementation barriers such as fear of retaliation, loyalty, financial dependence, hierarchy, time pressure, or diffusion of responsibility. An action plan may include allies, documentation, confidential advice,

formal channels, protection from retaliation, or escalation. Courage is not recklessness; it is responsible persistence under morally relevant risk.

Assessment for Ethical Reasoning

The American Association of Colleges and Universities' Ethical Reasoning VALUE Rubric emphasizes self-awareness, recognition of ethical issues, understanding of perspectives, application of concepts, and evaluation of positions. REASON adds explicit evidence for alternatives, implementation, and review. A concise analytic rubric can score six dimensions: situation reconstruction, stakeholder representation, ethical analysis, alternative generation, justification and action, and accountability.

At an emerging level, a response repeats the case and states a preference. At a developing level, it identifies an issue and one relevant principle but treats assumptions as facts or offers a narrow option set. A proficient response distinguishes uncertainty, represents legitimate claims, applies multiple lenses, considers a serious objection, and specifies action. An extending response reframes the problem, proposes safeguards, identifies residual injustice or harm, and states what evidence would justify revision. The rubric evaluates the intellectual tools for ethical choice, not whether the student agrees with the instructor.

Formative feedback should target the reasoning process. Black and Wiliam (1998) define formative assessment by the use of evidence to improve teaching and learning; Hattie and Timperley (2007) distinguish feedback about goals, current performance, and next steps. Comments such as 'Whose claim is absent?', 'Which fact supports this prediction?', or 'Who has authority to implement this option?' are more useful than 'Think deeper.' Students should revise at least one analysis after feedback so ethical reasoning is practiced as improvable work.

Discussion

Structured Deliberation Without Algorithmic Certainty

REASON does not produce moral truth by formula. Its function is to make omissions, assumptions, trade-offs, and responsibilities contestable. A structured process can improve the quality of disagreement even when students reach different conclusions. Two analyses may both be defensible if each accurately represents the case, takes affected parties seriously, applies relevant principles consistently, and accepts residual costs. Other conclusions may be indefensible because they depend on false facts, discriminatory premises, incoherent exceptions, or disregard for severe avoidable harm.

The framework also prevents theory from floating above practice. Consequences require estimates and distributions; duties require actors and role boundaries; rights require corresponding obligations; justice requires comparison and procedure; virtue requires motives and habits; care requires relationships and voice; the common good requires institutions and shared conditions. Action and review then test whether the reasons survive contact with the world.

Implications for General Education

A common deliberation language can support ethics across disciplines without replacing professional codes or specialized knowledge. Engineering students may

analyze safety and disclosure; business students may examine conflicts of interest; teachers may address fairness and confidentiality; health students may consider consent and care; technology students may confront privacy and accountability. The cases differ, but the habits of reconstructing, representing, testing, imagining, justifying, and reviewing remain transferable.

The framework can also improve curriculum alignment. Course outcomes should distinguish knowledge of theories from performance in cases and action planning. Activities should produce assessable deliberation records. Rubrics should reward counterargument, safeguards, and revision. When these elements align, ethical reasoning becomes more than a final essay question or participation grade.

Research Agenda

The REASON framework can be examined through design-based research, rubric validation, think-aloud studies, and comparative case instruction. Researchers could investigate which stages students omit, whether stakeholder mapping changes alternative generation, how cultural framing affects issue recognition, and whether post-decision review improves transfer to new cases. Studies should report the cases, prompts, teacher interventions, scoring procedures, and examples of student reasoning rather than relying only on self-reported confidence.

Further inquiry may compare individual and group deliberation, written and oral defenses, discipline-specific and multidisciplinary cases, and face-to-face and online formats. It should also examine whether students can distinguish legitimate pluralism from relativism and whether implementation planning predicts responsible action beyond the classroom. The framework is offered as a testable pedagogical proposition whose value depends on transparent evidence.

Conclusion

Ethics education should help students do more than recall theories or select an answer from a dilemma. It should teach them to reconstruct situations carefully, represent affected parties fairly, articulate competing values, search beyond false binaries, justify an action under scrutiny, and remain accountable for what follows. The REASON framework organizes these responsibilities into six recursive stages: Reconstruct, Enumerate, Articulate, Search, Own, and Notice.

Applied to multidisciplinary general education, REASON preserves the practical strength of the source worktext's seven-step model while adding uncertainty, role authority, cultural context, safeguards, implementation, and revision. Its central educational claim is modest but consequential: instructors need not impose one conclusion to demand rigorous ethical work. They can assess whether reasons are informed, inclusive, coherent, responsive to objection, feasible in action, and open to accountable review.

References

- American Association of Colleges and Universities. (n.d.). Ethical reasoning VALUE rubric. <https://www.aacu.org/value/rubrics/value-rubrics-ethical-reasoning>
- Aristotle. (2009). *The Nicomachean ethics* (D. Ross, Trans.; L. Brown, Ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Barry, B. E., & Yadav, A. (2007). The case method: Using case-based instruction to increase ethical understanding in engineering courses. *Purdue e-Pubs*. <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/enegs/1/>
- Beauchamp, T. L., & Childress, J. F. (2019). *Principles of biomedical ethics* (8th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Black, P., & Wiliam, D. (1998). Assessment and classroom learning. *Assessment in Education: Principles, Policy & Practice*, 5(1), 7-74. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0969595980050102>
- Brookfield, S. D., & Preskill, S. (2005). Discussion as a way of teaching: Tools and techniques for democratic classrooms (2nd ed.). Jossey-Bass.
- Commission on Higher Education. (2013). CMO No. 20, series of 2013: General education curriculum - Holistic understandings, intellectual and civic competencies. <https://legacy.ched.gov.ph/2013-ched-memorandum-orders/>
- Dewey, J. (1933). How we think: A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process. D. C. Heath.
- Ethics [Instructional worktext]. (2023).
- Hattie, J., & Timperley, H. (2007). The power of feedback. *Review of Educational Research*, 77(1), 81-112. <https://doi.org/10.3102/003465430298487>
- Hess, D. E., & McAvoy, P. (2015). *The political classroom: Evidence and ethics in democratic education*. Routledge.
- Jones, T. M. (1991). Ethical decision making by individuals in organizations: An issue-contingent model. *Academy of Management Review*, 16(2), 366-395. <https://doi.org/10.2307/258867>
- Kant, I. (2012). *Groundwork of the metaphysics of morals* (M. Gregor & J. Timmermann, Trans. & Eds., rev. ed.). Cambridge University Press.
- King, P. M., & Kitchener, K. S. (1994). *Developing reflective judgment: Understanding and promoting intellectual growth and critical thinking in adolescents and adults*. Jossey-Bass.
- Kohlberg, L. (1984). *Essays on moral development: Vol. 2. The psychology of moral development*. Harper & Row.
- Nussbaum, M. C. (1997). *Cultivating humanity: A classical defense of reform in liberal education*. Harvard University Press.
- Rachels, J., & Rachels, S. (2019). *The elements of moral philosophy* (9th ed.). McGraw-Hill Education.
- Rawls, J. (1999). *A theory of justice* (rev. ed.). Harvard University Press.
- Rest, J. R., Narvaez, D., Bebeau, M. J., & Thoma, S. J. (1999). Postconventional moral thinking: A neo-Kohlbergian approach. Lawrence Erlbaum Associates. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781410603913>
- Werhane, P. H. (1999). *Moral imagination and management decision-making*. Oxford University Press.
- Winston, K. I. (1995). *Teaching ethics by the case method*. Kennedy School of Government Case Program, Harvard University.