

## *The Ethics of Interpersonal Relationships*

Robert W. Firestone and Joyce Catlett, 2009, Karnac Books  
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Ethical behavior is a tricky thing to define: usually we think of it as doing what is “right.” My profession of psychology has both a well-defined, specific ethics code, as well as aspirational principles for behavior—your basic “Do No Harm” playbook. Yet even with this code and these guidelines, many psychologists often fail to act ethically toward their patients. And on an even broader scale, we all treat people whose selves and closest interpersonal relationships have been damaged by affairs, abuse, neglect, and violence: in short, unethical behavior. Firestone—a respected psychologist himself—and Catlett set out to explain why behaving ethically is such a struggle, on many levels: between individuals, in families, in communities, in businesses, and between nations and religious groups.

On reading the introduction, one is struck by the impossible scope of the task. It seems at first as if the authors are overly ambitious, setting out to solve all the problems of the world (the destructive behavior of humans toward each other and the planet) with their explanation and corrective prescriptions. With this skepticism in mind, the reader may continue on to the first few chapters, which outline the basis for the book: the authors’ own experiences in a lifelong

group of friends, which evolved through constant group self-examination and insight into an apparently highly functioning, nurturing collective of members. The theme of optimism emerges here, with the authors sometimes veering into truisms: “people’s problems in relating to one another and unethical behaviors in interpersonal relationships can be understood and transformed through dedication and understanding.” Thankfully, however, the authors don’t rest here. As the chapters progress, more and more connections are made between individual traits necessary for ethical living and community and global benefit. These themes are illustrated both by personal observation of the “friendship circle” and—appeasing those sticklers among us who prefer it—by sound psychological research.

It is in the middle few chapters of the book where the authors really hit their stride and are the most persuasive about their arguments. Here they delve into several sticky psychological themes and successfully demonstrate the impact of these on ethical behavior large and small. In the chapter titled “Mastering Anger,” they show that aggression, for instance, is a response to frustration and shame, rather than an innate human propensity. In perhaps the most elegant theme in the book, the authors illuminate how intergenerational transmission of maladaptive beliefs and behaviors perpetuates a cycle of unethical patterns of relating.

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Again calling on well-established psychological theory, a case is made that anxiety about aloneness, death, and the finite nature of existence is often the nursery for the development of unethical behavior, whether through the fantasy bond (between children and parents, spouses, individuals and groups) and its false promise of immortality, or other means.

The final chapters of the book deal with the ethics of leadership and power. They hold the conclusions one expects, but with the added bonus of a thoughtful analysis about responsibility of followers as well as leaders, of the consequences of surplus dependency as well as surplus power. The final chapter on an “Ethical Society” also holds an unexpected but appreciated surprise: an emphasis on the importance

of a society’s views on how to die well, which impact, of course, what it means to live well.

In the end, Firestone and Catlett have written a valuable and well-researched, solid contribution to the field of ethics. Despite misgivings about the somewhat self-congratulatory tone regarding the friendship circle’s achievements, I found myself admiring the organization and thorough nature of the book. Also, it added to my conceptualization of the lives of more than a few of my own patients. It is a book in which one cannot help but recognize glimpses of family, friends, and self. If nothing else, the authors have provided an illuminating mirror, with optimism and hope for correcting that which ails us as individuals and society as a whole.