The Potter Box

The Potter Box is a model of moral reasoning designed by Dr. Ralph Potter of the Center for Population Studies at Harvard University. It is not just a series of quadrants; it is a set of logical steps to be taken by a conscientious person working his or her way through an ethical dilemma. It provides a rational, systematic approach that allows the person to do four things:

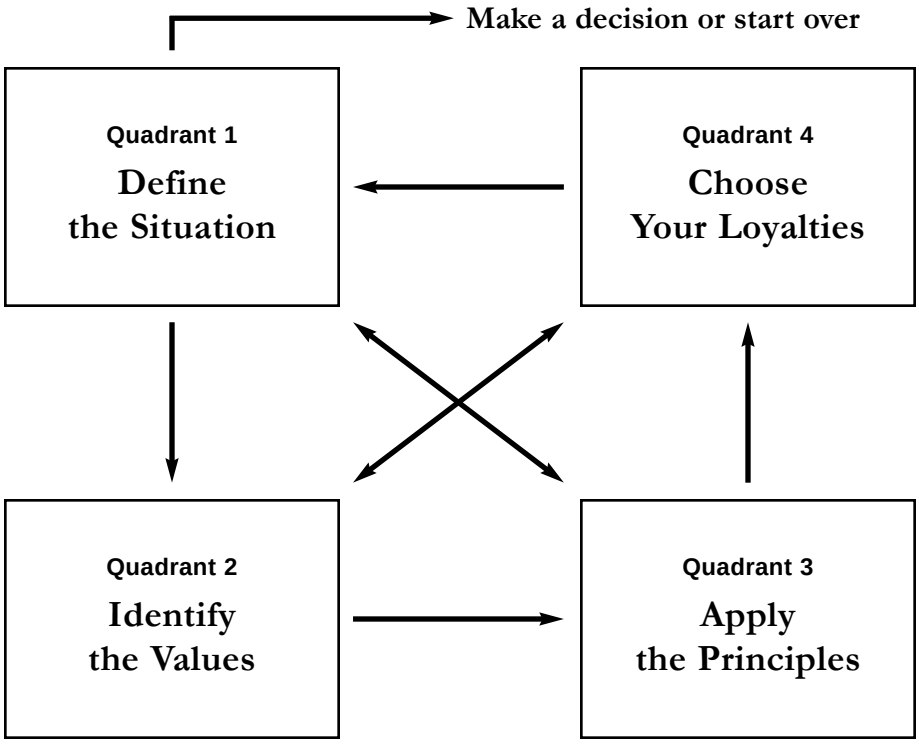
- Define the ethical situation or dilemma objectively and in detail.
- Identify values that relate to the situation.
- Inject moral philosophy as justification for a decision.
- Choose to whom one is loyal.

To use the Potter Box, begin in Quadrant 1 by defining the situation. Then proceed through all remaining quadrants. The arrows indicate that you may return to any previous quadrant — and should at least consider doing so — to apply insights gained through reflection in subsequent quadrants.

Through research with subjects who used the Potter Box, Dr. Potter learned that reasonable, open-minded, intellectually honest people often ended up with different ethical solutions to similar problems, based on their own individual input in each or all four quadrants of the Potter Box. He also found that the reasoning process and the moral justifications people give for their decisions are often just as important as the decisions themselves, if not more so.

The goal of the Potter Box is not to force a specific choice; it is to help individuals understand and ethically justify their decisions.

In this class, you will be required to use the Potter Box as the method of development for your ethics essays. After you identify a situation that qualifies as a moral dilemma, you should run that stituation through the Potter Box. At the end of your essay, you are required to take a position and let me know how you would resolve the dilemma, based on your moral reasoning.



To help you prepare for your first ethics essay, let us now work our way through the Potter Box, one quadrant at a time:

Quadrant 1 — Define the ethical situation or dilemma.

Look at the situation in detail and from points of view that differ from your own. Remember that a complete definition of the situation will include recognition and identification of competing virtues. (In the absence of competing virtues, there is no dilemma.) Also, recognize that additional insights may cause you to adjust your views in other quadrants of the Potter Box. You may have to return to a previous quadrant and go through the cycle again. For example, the societal decision of whether abortion is right or wrong (at some point in gestation) hinges on the definition of when life begins — and that definition becomes a determining factor in examination of the question in the other three quadrants.

Quadrant 2 — Identify values or beliefs that define what you stand for.

Values are helpful in rationalizing or defending behavior. They are standards of choice through which people or groups seek meaning, satisfaction and growth. We seek consistency in our values. Some values are instrumental or desirable modes of conduct (being helpful, responsible, ambitious, honest, independent, loving, etc.), while others are terminal ends that we seek (self-respect, happiness, security, a sense of accomplishment, inner harmony, an exciting life, equality, a comfortable life, true friendship, a world at peace, freedom, wisdom, social recognition, etc.).

Quadrant 3 — Identify and apply appropriate moral principles pertinent to the situation.

Avoid giving inconsistent, ad hoc or dogmatic advice; instead, use moral philosophy. Give general, consistent advice drawn from the wisdom of the ages that can be applied to similar situations. Ethical principles, as laid down by philosophers, should help you to illuminate the issues. Some moral principles that might be applied in this quadrant include Aristotle's Golden Mean, Immanuel Kant's categorical imperatives, John Stuart Mill's utilitarian ethic, John Rawls' egalitarian veil of ignorance, W.D. Ross's notion of prima facie duties, and the Judeo-Christian ethic of doing unto others as you have them do unto you. Some of these principles, in application, may seem contradictory at first glance, but that is probably because of individual differences in definitions, values and loyalties. Still, people who seek to do the morally correct thing tend to follow one or more principles of moral philosophy.

Quadrant 4 — Identify and choose your loyalties.

To whom are you ultimately loyal? And to whom do you owe allegiance at intermediate steps? Who benefits from your decision? Who gets hurt? You may have competing loyalties to yourself, your family, your friends, you boss, your company or firm, your professional colleagues, your clients, customers or audiences, and society at large. At one stage of the decision-making process, you may come to believe that one loyalty has supremacy over all others; but at another stage, you may change your mind.

When you reach Quadrant 4, you should return to Quadrant 1. Then make a decision or start all over. Don't be discouraged if you find you have to start over or if you jump from one quadrant to the next or back and forth. That is to be expected. It means you're *thinking,* which is an important aim of this class — to get you to think about ethics.

Later in the semester, we will discuss Lawrence Kohlberg's theory of moral development, and you will see then that legalistic thinking — what the law allows us to do — tends to occur at lower stages of moral development. However, moral philosophy — especially autonomous use of moral principles and rules — occurs at higher stages of moral development.