

Case #1: Everyday Actions and Personal Harm Liability: When Do They Become Ethical Issues?

Introduction

Modern society increasingly struggles with personal and organizational accountability. Over the past fifty years, we have witnessed a gradual shift away from assuming responsibility for the consequences of our actions. Ethics have often become situational—adjusted to fit individual preferences, corporate convenience, or institutional pressures.

This raises important questions: How flexible should ethics be in everyday life? Where is the line between personal freedom, social responsibility, and harm to others? Laws exist to guide behavior, but they vary across states, are often inconsistently enforced, and sometimes allow for wide interpretation.

The following three scenarios present ordinary, routine activities. Each illustrates how seemingly small choices can carry both ethical and legal implications.

Scenario 1: Speed Limits

Speed limits are set by local, state, and federal authorities to promote safety and efficient traffic flow. Despite this, most drivers exceed posted limits daily. For example, consider a road with a maximum speed limit of 45 mph:

- Is driving at 46 mph unethical, even though it is a technical violation of the law?
- If not, at what point does exceeding the limit become unethical—49 mph, 52 mph, 57 mph?
- How do factors such as weather, traffic density, or school zones affect the ethical calculation?
- More broadly, how do law and ethics differ? Is it possible to engage in an illegal act and still be ethical - or a legal act and still be unethical?

Scenario 2: Handicap Parking

A person with a disability obtains a disability parking permit. One evening, the driver's able-bodied spouse drops them at the door of a restaurant, then uses the permit to park in a nearby handicap space rather than a regular space 100 feet away. On other occasions, the spouse uses the permit to park in handicap spaces while running quick errands, even when the disabled person is not involved.

Legally, the spouse has not violated the law. Ethically, the issue is more complicated:

- Is it ethical for a non-handicapped person to use handicap parking, even when transporting a disabled person?
- Does intent (convenience vs. necessity) affect the ethical evaluation?
- Do legal and ethical standards always align? If not, how should individuals make a decision?
- Are “small” ethical choices like this insignificant—or do they form the foundation of societal morality?

Scenario 3: Texting While Driving

The rise of smartphones has revolutionized the way we communicate. Texting is now the norm across all age groups. Yet, texting while driving has become a dangerous—and sometimes deadly—habit. Nearly every state has passed laws prohibiting it, but enforcement and compliance vary.

- Is texting while driving inherently unethical, regardless of its legality?
- Should it be universally illegal at the national level?
- What about other distractions—such as eating, applying makeup, or adjusting in-car entertainment systems? Are these ethically comparable to texting?

Closing Reflections:

“Sound moral and ethical behavior cannot be established or created in a day...a semester...or a year. They must be institutionalized within our character over time...they must become a way of life.” — General Charles Krulak