

SURVIVAL PAPER

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Survival Ethics

By Jim Jones

The "big one" has hit and the entire system has shut down. There is no water, power or gas service and no place to get food. You are doing okay because you stocked up on food and water years ago and your family is reasonably warm and well fed. After about a week, your neighbor comes knocking on your door asking for food and water. This is the same guy who chose to buy a big screen TV and a luxury car instead of emergency supplies. He is the one who called you a "survival nut" a few months ago but he has two small children. You do not know how long the emergency will last and how long your food and water will be needed to keep your own family alive. What is the "right thing" to do?

You are moving with your family to escape from a riot zone. You hear cries for help from a doorway you pass. Do you stop and help or keep going?

You and your family are on a makeshift raft in a flood. A panic stricken person is desperately trying to board the raft, but his efforts and his weight threatens to overturn and sink your small raft. Do you do the "right thing" based on normal codes of conduct and help him even though the outcome and your duty to your family are compromised? Do you do the "best thing" and fight him off to assure the survival of your family? Do you do the "acceptable" thing in the eyes of your family and society by helping or the logical thing to the most people? If you let him drown are you a monster? If you save him you may be a hero, but if you only succeed in drowning your whole family you are a fool. These are the classic "ethical dilemmas" that face the survivor. In real disaster the dead are dead, the desperate are the desperate, but the survivor has choices. Those choices are going to be gut wrenching moral and ethical decisions that have no easy or absolutely correct answers. A good grasp of ethics may be aid the survivor.

The subject of ethics is a major issue in business and in medicine today but nowhere is it more important than in a survival situation. If "survival of the fittest" means survival of the meanest and most ruthless, then what really survives?

Each person has his or her own ideas about what is right or wrong. We make what we consider to be "moral" decisions. Morals are what we feel about right and wrong. Ethics, on the other hand, are guides we use to examine situations

and guide our actions. Our families, communities, religions and society program our ideas of right and wrong from an early age. These expected behaviors stick with use. Laws establish standard of behavior and “morality” but “morality” is not necessarily ethical. Slavery was once considered morally permissible but is now recognized as unethical. During World War Two the Japanese considered surrender immoral but suicide was a duty to the Emperor. Mobsters have moral codes that make them “good fellows” to each other and to whom murder can be “doing the right thing”.

The concept of ethics came from the ancient Greek philosophers such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. The Greeks focused on the concept of personal virtue. Virtue was viewed as an internal value. The individual was expected to be the best they could be and right and wrong were defined by how the acts represented the actor. British philosophers such as Mill and Bentham brought forth the “utilitarian” concept of ethics. In this concept, it is the results that justify the action. This is the “end justifies the mean” philosophy. The “deontological” philosophy advocated by Immanuel Kant is based on the idea of doing your duty. It would support an action for its own sake, regardless of the consequences. It is about the means rather than the end. So we have right and wrong based on who you are, what the results will be, or what your duty is. It gets complicated when your *duty* is to do something that will result in a bad *end*, or when the *means* needed to serve a good *end* will have little personal *virtue*. Always telling the truth may be a good moral code, but it may be ethically questionable when it could result in real physical psychological harm. Killing another human being may be morally wrong but ethically defensible based on the situation.

Survival ethics comes down to life and death. Your life and death and that of others you come into contact with. Do you save life, risk life or take life? A primary question that everyone must answer is; how do you define your life? Are you *what* you are physically or *who* you are morally and spiritually? Are you about how you look and what you have or are you about what you believe in and stand fore? While your body is mortal your values and ideas are immortal. So, does your survival action justify your continued physical survival or does your survival alone justify your action? Is what’s best and safest for you also best and safest for what you stand for?

In survival, laws are not an issue. You are left with your own moral code and ethical concepts to make life and death decisions. You must ask yourself:

- What is the right thing to do based on my values?
- What is the best thing to do for me?
- What is the best thing to do for others?
- What represents my values and ideas?
- What is my duty?

- Would I want others to do this *to* me or *for* me?
- How will others that I care about judge my actions?

Yes, the answers to each question may be conflicting! What *can* you do? What *should* you do? What do you *want* to do? In the heat of a survival situation there will be no time to engage in a philosophical discussion. Most true survival situations are about risking your life or risking or taking the life of others. You must have an idea of where you draw the lines. In a situation where you may need to choose to risk or even sacrifice your own life, when would you do it?

- Never. Even if it would protect those I care for or values I stand for.
- Only if absolutely necessary to protect the lives of others I care about.
- To defend the life of others being attacked or abused
- Only if necessary to defend my values and ideas
- Only if necessary to remain free
- To defend my property
- To maintain my pride and honor
- Rather than live an unpleasant life.

If you know when you would be willing to put your own life on the line, have you established when you would take a life or put the life of others at risk?

- Never. Not even to defend my life and that of those I care for
- Only in the immediate defense of my life and those I care for
- To defend the life of others being attacked or abused
- To defend my personal freedoms and rights
- To defend my values and ideas
- In order to remove potential threats to my life and freedom
- To defend my property and lifestyle

- When insulted or disrespected.

For the purposes of the above questions, taking or risking life is not just about shooting or being shot at. Risking your life could be the act of sharing your food, entering a danger zone to rescue someone or stopping to help instead of keeping moving. Taking life could be just failing to aid others or withhold food or water needed by others to survive.

We may look at our moral code as a compass that directs us towards the right action, but ethics is the map that guides our rout. Ethical choices must be free of fear, anger, hate, pride, and other negative emotions. Flexibility and adaptability are key concepts in survival psychology. Ridged moral codes that are valuable assets during “normal” times may conflict with survival imperatives in emergency conditions. The lines between right and wrong can become blurry in the heat of survival and conflict. What can you live with and what would you die for. The true survivor must know themselves and have a firm ethical foundation upon which to base life and death decisions. How and why we survive is as important as *that* we survive.