



Be Good: How to Navigate the Ethics of Everything

Randy Cohen

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The *New York Times Magazine's* original "Ethicist" Randy Cohen helps readers locate their own internal ethical compasses as he delivers answers to life's most challenging dilemmas—timeless and contemporary alike. Organized thematically in an easy-to-navigate Q&A format, and featuring line illustrations throughout, this amusing and engaging book challenges readers to think about how they would (or should) respond when faced with everyday moral challenges, from sex and love to religion, technology, and much more. Sure to ignite brain cells and spark healthy debate, *Be Good* is a book to refer to again and again.

Be Good: How to Navigate the Ethics of Everything Details

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Jill Blevins says

I used to listen to his podcast and enjoy laughing at the expense of others or at least think, “What would I do in a situation like that?” Reading letter after letter just got irritating and I’m not sure if it’s because the author starts to sound like a know-it-all who is never wrong, even if he is or if it’s because, well, no I think it has to do with the author alone. Just to mansplaining for me.

Margaret says

I was a fan of Randy Cohen's "The Ethicist" columns that ran in the Sunday New York Times Magazine for 12 years. I only discovered it about 4 years ago and quickly became addicted. His column was the first thing I read when I opened up the Times on Sunday mornings. Cohen's responses to every day ethical dilemmas were always thoughtful and respectful of the person who posed the question; but it was the humor he interjected that really made the column so enjoyable for me.

This book organizes selected columns by themes (work, neighbors, technology, love, etc) and are prefaced by his views on the topic followed by a selection of columns that retain his original response. In several cases he provides updates either to reflect new insight he has had since writing the response or the fall-out that resulted from his answer.

His recognition that his responses could evoke strong reaction (not always positive) and the need to respond with grace and respect was as useful as his insights into ethical dilemmas. This book is worth keeping on your bookshelf (electronic or physical) and going back to periodically as a reminder that leading an ethical life takes a fair amount of self reflection and a willingness to take the high road even when we would rather not.

Jeff Kelleher says

Silly and trivial.

This is a compilation, with added commentary, of the author's "The Ethicist" columns in the New York Times Magazine. It is an exercise in the utmost banality.

An ethics treatise will tackle the tough issues, right? Like abortion, mercy killing, homosexual marriage, collateral damage to civilians. Nope. This one ducks all of those. Instead we get the following:

- Is it ethical for a vegetarian/animal rights proponent to swim with the dolphins?
- Is it ethical for a vegetarian cat lover to buy meat-based cat food?
- Should the family of a little league batter pay for a car window smashed by a foul ball?
- Is it ethical for an opponent of the Iraq War to invest in oil futures?

- It is ethical to send a college-student intern for coffee?
- Is it immoral to sing the N-word in Stephen Foster's songs?
- Should a woman resign from her Curves fitness center membership because the owner opposes abortion?

With religious-like certitude, the author insists on casting his mundane public policy views as matters of high morality. So we get four pages of high-dudgeon argument on why cars are immoral. A former comedy writer, he seems to have no sense of humor about this.

Give us a break. We have better things to do.

Amy says

I would call this ethics "light". I enjoy Cohen's writing style, but the book tackles pretty mundane ethical questions. I heard him speak on NPR and found him fascinating, so my expectations for the book were pretty high. It would be a great bathroom book.

Paula says

When I was in college, I wanted to take a course in Ethics, and was surprised to find that my University (USC) didn't offer one. It's always been a subject of interest to me, so when I saw this book on display at my library I grabbed it. I had never heard of the column "The Ethicist", not being a New Yorker/East Coaster, but applying ethics to everyday situations sounded like an interesting idea. "Dear Abby" with an ethical slant. It actually reminded me of Isabel Dalhousie's "Journal of Applied Ethics."

Anyway, it was an interesting book, written with humor, and though I didn't always agree, I found most of the author's arguments for his decisions made sense. With one exception. One writer, a computer technician, had found pornographic images on his boss's computer, and some of it appeared to include images of children. He wondered if he should call the police, but was worried for his job. Cohen's advice was to do nothing, because, although we must always protect children, if it came out that this man had child pornography on his computer, it might ruin his life. He could lose his standing in the community. He might have to go to jail, and jail terms for those who look at illegal pornography are so draconian. Besides, men who look at child pornography rarely act on those impulses. Better to just pretend this never happened. Say what?!?! It sounded like something written by officials of the Boy Scouts or the Catholic Church - way more concerned about how to protect the adult perpetrator at the expense of the child victim. Cohen of course took a lot of flak for this particular column, and reprinted some of those angry responses in the book. But he maintains that his "sources" (who remained unnamed - are they members of the Man/Boy Love organization or what?) assured him that men who look at child porn usually only "look", they don't act. Following that logic, men who look at heterosexual porn, or homosexual porn, or whatever, also only "look." I don't buy it. Perhaps, as Cohen argues in the book, someone else had downloaded those materials onto the boss's computer, perhaps there's an innocent, or at least logical and legal explanation. If so, when the police were notified, the boss would have an opportunity to explain - he wouldn't necessarily go to jail. If I was that technician, I couldn't live with myself if I just did nothing. It was decidedly NOT ethical to do nothing.

Jaylia3 says

Like many people must, I get some kind of pleasure that I don't completely understand from reading advice columns, and the New York Times Magazine's The Ethicist has long been one of my favorites. Answers are opinionated but based on reason usually balanced by common sense, so they are not so much dictates as starting points for further thought or lively discussions around the breakfast table. Randy Cohen was the original Ethicist and he held that job for 12 years, but I never knew his background which includes writing for late night TV, an interesting prerequisite. Here he opines on numerous issues, including some of my favorite conundrums--questions of animal rights, the proper response to athletes using performance enhancing drugs, and how to balance respect for other cultures with support of human rights tenets that those cultures don't abide by.

In some of the more interesting sections he writes about some of the general principles behind ethics itself. People are not crudely divided into honest and dishonest, he says, different circumstances elicit different behaviors in all, meaning among other things that we should not test people by tempting them to stray. Examining smaller issues of ethics is a way to learn something about a culture by looking at its unguarded moments and as individuals we should avoid even nominal ethical lapses because they can have a coarsening effect on our awareness and judgments.

This is not the kind of book you'd want to read straight through, but since it's full of short queries and responses it's perfect when time is limited or when the reader is likely to be interrupted. I read an advanced review copy of this book.

Lisa says

Half-through I began to wonder: Will it be ethical of me to count this book as read if i skip the unnecessary introductions to each chapter?

Alan says

I am not a philosopher. I have no PhD. I have no credentials to validate my moral reasoning.
—p.314

Randy Cohen, who wrote the New York Times column "The Ethicist" for twelve years, waited until very late in his book to make this admission explicit. My wife, who *does* have a doctorate in social ethics, says politely that Cohen often pulls his opinions "out of his bum." Which may be true, but Cohen's still a careful and logical thinker and—what's more—a competent articulator of those thoughts. His amateur opinions on (it says here) "how to navigate the ethics of everything" are always lively, humorous and forcefully expressed—and, honestly, I agree with him just about all of the time. Not always—what would be the fun of that?—but almost. And it would be hypocritical for me to deride the efforts of articulate amateurs in a public forum, wouldn't it?

This book collects hundreds of Cohen's "The Ethicist" columns, under broad categories like Family, Civic

Life, Sports, the Arts, School and Religion. Each such chapter starts with an essay on the subject at hand, and then dives into a series of individual readers' questions, each followed by Cohen's thoughtful answer and, often, some of the fallout from that answer. Occasionally, Cohen even recants his original opinion in the face of cogent argument.

Cohen also says that he grew to understand, over the course of the twelve-year run of his column, that the phrase "a soft answer turneth away wrath" is not just an ethical approach; it's also eminently effective... something it took me awhile to learn, but which I try to practice as well—I've seen it work. His even-tempered responses to even the silliest reader queries are exemplary for their tone, even if one ignores the advice being provided.

I found *Be Good* very difficult to put down, although the question-and-answer format did become a little difficult to take in large doses; I think I enjoyed Cohen's advice a little more when it was presented to me on a weekly basis. Either way, though, it's consistently fun to read Cohen's work... and it's possible that in the process of deciding whether to agree with him, a little clarification may have come into my own amateur system of ethics as well.

Nathan Leslie says

Cohen is insightful and makes fine distinctions on ethical issues (Ethicist--nice gig if you can get it). This is the kind of book where you can jump around and read various entries that might seem appealing. This is an intellectual's *Dear Abby* and Cohen's perceptions will stick with you, and even might make you a better person in the long run. Best of all, these are the kinds of sticky situations which we all find ourselves in on a regular basis. Cohen gives us food for thought and then some.

John says

I was very disappointed in this book. I expected a few insights on difficult questions, but got almost nothing of that sort. In fact, the number of interesting perspectives was smaller than the number of peculiar positions. For example, Cohen considers allowing drivers to talk on hands-free phones but not handheld phones is "breathtaking cynicism or dazzling ignorance" because the problem with cell phone use is "cognitive, not mechanical." Thus, talking on a hands-free phone while driving is "unethical." My question to Cohen is whether talking to a passenger while driving is also unethical, for the same reason.

My other complaint is with the book's presentation, not its behavioral recommendations. The author used to be a writer for the David Letterman show, and the book is filled with jokey asides that I found gratuitous, sophomoric and distracting. The humor also put me off because it obviously aimed at a demographic primed to laugh at snarky comments about Republicans: the discussion of unattributed ghostwriting is exemplified by a George W. Bush speech and a Sarah Palin book; a discussion of hypocrisy by "the former governor of a large Northeastern state"; the example of ignorance is Bush's pronunciation "nucular." You don't have to be a Bush fan (I'm not) to get the feeling that only liberal elites are expected to be ethical or intelligent enough to read Cohen's book.

Having hoped to find an engrossing and challenging read, I finished *Be Good* merely convinced that I would not read another piece by the author.

JDK1962 says

Very entertaining and surprisingly funny...not surprising when you realize that the author has four Emmys earned writing for David Letterman. I think my only complaint is that there is no academic depth (for example, one would expect a very different book if one with the same title were written by, say, Peter Singer). The book stays pretty much at the level of trying to think through issues with some common sense, and checking the reasoning by substitution. That being said, I think the world would be a much better place if its population would routinely apply this high a level of reasoning to actions and policies in the public sphere.

The book is derived from short columns written for a New York Times column as opinion/entertainment, and even without the aforementioned depth, I found it highly enjoyable.

Nina says

I had never read *The Ethicist*, but I found myself agreeing with most of Cohen's responses. Simply from an entertainment perspective, every question and answer combo wasn't super exciting (which is why I'm not rating this higher), but his writing and sense of humor are both quite good.

A quote I love that really has nothing to do with the jist of the book, but spoke to me personally (and is indicative of some of the insights/witticisms one comes across while reading it):

"Much that is worthwhile is notably inefficient. It takes hours and hours to listen to all the Mozart concertos; it takes years to raise a child."

David says

collection of ethics advice columns from NYT magazine. I don't see that paper regularly and hadn't heard of this guy, so all new to me. Quite funny [apparently he used to write for Letterman]. Deals with mundane issues for the most part, and by his own admission he's not a professional philosopher or rabbi or what have you, just a regular thoughtful guy giving his take on the various dilemmas people face.

I mostly agreed with him (e.g., school board member is not obligated to send her kids to public schools -- living in DC I've been exposed to that issue forever -- Jimmy Carter good, Clinton and Obama bad for sending daughters to Sidwell Friends, etc. etc.), but understandably not always. For instance, I don't agree that looking at a salary list for your company (that you came across inadvertently) is ok ("admirable" in his terms, b/c transparency is good and keeping salaries private is just to protect the Boss Man). but he always gives a good account of the basis for his conclusions, considers alternatives, etc.

A particularly interesting feature of the book, applied to maybe half of the Q & A's, is his "update" in which he discusses either what the original writer did about the situation and with what consequence, and/or discusses the feedback he got on his response.

If books were Facebook, I'd give many "like"s to his point (p. 196) that it can be gratifying to turn a nasty interaction with a critic into a civil one just by setting a gracious tone yourself. He cites Proverbs for "a soft

answer turneth away wrath". Doesn't always work of course -- I'm still waiting for a response from the guy who emailed me to cancel his subscription to an internet psychotherapy panel I was on circa 2000 -- he wrote "take me off your f...ing list!", and I replied "thank you for your constructive, closely reasoned feedback" but got no further dialogue going. Maybe he thought I was sarcastic -- always hard to tell tone from email.

In any case, fun, quick read about interesting, concrete ethical issues.

Linnie Greene says

A solidly interesting, easily digestible book. It's divided into topical sections ("community," "technology," etc.) and comprised of short Q&A's focused on ethics & morality. My favorites were the ones where I couldn't predict Randy Cohen's response, of which there were several -- he's careful to separate ethics from morality, legality, and tradition, which makes for interesting answers every so often. This isn't simplified, thankfully, because one's beliefs & guiding principles shouldn't be, I reckon. Three stars because it's really intelligent and thoughtful, although there were a few brief portions where I found my eyes wandering to the next section. This doesn't need to be read chronologically or in one sitting, which is great for anyone who's busy or looking for a change in their typical format. Still, this couldn't top Cheryl Strayed's fantastic "Dear Sugar" for me.

Jackson Matthews says

This book is good to make a person laugh out loud, ponder some possibilities, promotes civility. I liked to think on the idea that one can sin alone but have to be amongst people to be unethical. What would be the exceptions to that? Or is it a fast rule?
