

**HOW TO UNDERSTAND
THE ETHICS QUADRILATERAL**
William Doverspike, Ph.D.
Drdoverspike.com
770-913-0506

Also known as the Methodist Quadrilateral, the Wesleyan Quadrilateral is a methodology for theological reflection credited to the Anglican priest Rev. John Wesley (1703-1791), who was leader of the Methodist movement in the late 18th century. The term is used to describe the principal factors that Wesley believed illuminated the core of the Christian faith. Building on his Anglican theological tradition, Wesley not only focused on Scripture, tradition, and reason, but he added a fourth emphasis—experience. On May 24, 1738, Wesley had a major conversion experience at Aldersgate in London. His conversion experience became a component of how he understood his faith. The experience stimulated a renewed interest in holy living and his trust in personal salvation (i.e., “By grace are you saved through faith”).

Wesley himself never used the phrase *Wesleyan Quadrilateral*. The term was coined by 20th century American Methodist scholar, Rev. Albert C. Outler, Ph.D. (1908-1989). Outler was a Georgia-born American Methodist theologian who is generally considered to be the first United Methodist theologian and one of the most important Wesleyan scholars in the history of the church. He was a key figure in the 20th-century ecumenical movement, and served on the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. He was also an official observer at the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) of the Roman Catholic Church.

Outler is widely credited with being the first to recognize Wesley’s method for theologizing—by using what Outler referred to as the Wesleyan Quadrilateral: Holy Scripture, Church tradition, Reason, and Experience. For Outler (1985), interpretation of Scripture is shaped by our Tradition, our Reasoning, and our Experiences (including our experiences of the Holy Spirit). These perspectives can be viewed as lenses that inform and affect each of the others. ¹ This understanding of Wesleyan theology is prevalent throughout Methodism, particularly in the United Methodist Church (UMC). Using this model, Outler became a key figure in organizing the theological statement put forth by the UMC after its formation in 1968. ²

The Methodist Quadrilateral

For most United Methodists, *Scripture* is considered the primary source and standard for Christian doctrine. *Tradition* is experience and the witness of development and growth of the faith through the past centuries and across cultures and countries. *Reason* allows the individual to use discerning and cogent thought in understanding the Christian faith. *Experience* refers to the individual’s personal understanding of the faith in the light of his or her own life. Taken together, these four elements bring the individual Christian to a mature and fulfilling understanding of the Christian faith and the response of worship and service.

The Wesleyan Quadrilateral

Scripture Holy Bible	Tradition Church History
Reason Discerning Thought	Experience Personal Faith

Figure 1. The Wesleyan Quadrilateral.

The Ecumenical Quadrilateral

The quadrilateral model can also be applied not only to other Christian denominations, but to other religions as well. Within a particular religion, denominations or sects can be characterized by an emphasis on one of the quadrants. There is also a danger of a sect focusing too narrowly on any one of the quadrants to the exclusion of the others.

Scripture Sacred texts Supplementary texts	Tradition Cultural influences Canonical choices Communal preferences Holy days & holidays Religious history Spiritual practices
Reason Deductive thinking Scholarly articles Philosophical methods Scientific evidence Exegetic interpretation Logical analysis	Experience Personal conversion Experiential events Testimonies of others Sayings of the sages Stories of the Saints Eisegetic interpretation

Figure 2. The Ecumenical Quadrilateral.

Cooper’s Theological Circle

An alternative to the Wesleyan Quadrilateral is proposed by Cooper (2018, p. 176), whose motivation is in part because the idea of reason as a source of theology was not adequate.³ For Cooper, “reason is a method of doing theology rather than a source of theological content” (2018, p. 175). Cooper’s Theological Circle consists of two axes. The vertical axis corresponds to the traditional methods of theological reflection (Tradition and Experience). The polar ends of this axis are connected by Scripture in the middle of the circle. On the horizontal axis, the polarity is represented by the rational side (Reason) on one end—“describing the world as it is”—and the imaginative side (Imagination) on the other end—“representing the world as it should be and will be” (Cooper, 2018, p. 177). Again, the polar ends of this horizontal axis are connected by Scripture in the middle of the circle. As Cooper explains, “There is a polarity between the traditional side, which is more historical, communal, and canonical, and the experiential side, which is personal and existential” (2018, pp. 176-177). As with other models, Cooper’s circle may be applicable to ecclesial bodies, denominations, and sects within religions that are grounded in sacred texts. To some degree, a conservative-liberal polarity—or dichotomy as it has become—can be understood with this model. Tradition is often associated with theological orthodoxy and conservatism, whereas liberalism is often associated with reason or experiential subjectivism—both of which may challenge traditional orthodoxy.

In professional ethics, tradition is usually associated more with the political right, power, and regulatory boards, whereas reason or experience is usually associated with the political left (e.g., academic ethics, compassion ethics, and so forth).

The Ethics Quadrilateral

In his graduate courses and professional seminars on ethical, legal, and professional standards for the mental health practitioners, Doverspike (2020) adapted Coleman’s (2013) depiction of the Wesleyan Quadrilateral. Based on Coleman’s diagram, Doverspike uses an “Ethics Quadrilateral” to illustrate a method for understanding professional ethics. When discussing models of ethical decision making (e.g., Doverspike, 2015, pp. 121-128), the ethics quadrilateral can be viewed as one of several examples of a four-step model.

Similar to Outler’s (1985) Wesleyan Quadrilateral, the so-called Ethics Quadrilateral provides a simple model of how one’s interpretation of Ethical Standards is shaped by Statutory Wording (secular scripture), Prevailing Practice (traditions), Deductive Reasoning (reason), and Professional Experience (experience). Each of these lenses informs and affects the others.

<p>Scripture Statutory wording Ethical principles Ethical standards Administrative rules Rules and regulations</p>	<p>Tradition Conventions Best practices Standards of care Prevailing practices Professional traditions</p>
<p>Reason Deductions Consultations Decision models Analytical reasoning System 2 thinking</p>	<p>Experience Feelings Emotions Intuitions Gut impressions System 1 thinking</p>

Figure 3. The Ethics Quadrilateral.

Statutory wording (regulations) shapes how aspirational principles and enforceable standards are interpreted. Standards can also be codified into federal and state laws, rules, and regulations. In a broad sense, statutory wording forms the basis of regulations. ⁴

Prevailing practices (conventions) range from the ethical ceiling of aspirational best practices to the ethical floor of minimal basic compliance. Ethical standards reflect what practitioners should do (i.e., the ideal), whereas prevailing professional practices reflect what practitioners actually do (i.e., the real). ⁵

Reason (deductions) includes judgment, deductive reasoning, formal operational thinking, consequential analysis, and decision-making algorithms.⁶ In Kitchener’s (1984) two-step model of decision making, this perspective is basically the *critical-evaluative level*. Reason is similar to Kahneman’s (2011) System 2 (“slow”) thinking, sometimes called *wizard brain*. Because two heads are better than one, reasoning may include consultations with peers who can provide an alternative perspective. ⁷

Experience (intuitions)⁸ involves emotions, feelings, and gut impressions.⁹ *Intuition* refers to the ability to know something immediately—without the need for conscious reasoning. In Kitchener’s (1984) two-step model, it is the *intuitive level*. It consists of the “shoulds” and “musts” of ethicality. Similar to Kahneman’s (2011) System 1 (“fast”) thinking, it is sometimes called *lizard brain*. As Behnke notes, “The pit of one’s stomach can be as good an indicator of an ethical dilemma as can be one’s frontal lobes” (2009, p. 58). Behnke notes that a valuable decision-making skill is the ability to recognize such feelings and put into words the emotions that may be signaling an ethical dilemma.¹⁰

Putting Ethics Into Practice

When putting ethics into practice, practitioners primarily rely on their personal and professional experience within the context of their understanding of published and peer-reviewed ethical codes of conduct. When faced with ethical dilemmas, most ethically-minded practitioners use some type of systematic decision-making model along with peer consultation. In the adjudication of complaints before ethics committees and state regulatory boards, adjudicators and peer reviewers usually give more weight to codified ethical standards.

External Principles and Internal Virtues

Another way of conceptualizing ethics is to differentiate between *principle ethics* and *virtue ethics*. This distinction is important because the most serious ethical violations are usually related to character deficits in *internal virtues* rather than lack of knowledge of *external principles* (Doverspike, 2015).

Principle ethics deals with knowledge and application of ethical standards, obligations, and methods that focus on solving ethical dilemmas. The essential question is “What shall I do?” or “Is this action ethical or unethical?”

Virtue ethics focuses on cultivation and practice of internal virtues, character traits, and non-obligatory ideals to which a person aspires. The essential question is “Whom shall I be?” or “Am I doing my best?” Virtuous individuals can be identified by five characteristics: positive motivation, vision and discernment, compassion and sensitivity, community awareness, and self-awareness (Meara, Schimdt, & Day, 1996). They strive for humility, generosity, patience, gratitude, kindness, chastity, moderation, and diligence.¹¹

All Models Are Wrong

When discussing conceptual models, it is always helpful to remember the words of the renowned British statistician George P. Box, Ph.D. (1919–2013): “Essentially, all models are wrong, but some are useful.”¹² Quadrilaterals, circles, bins, and lenses are simply alternative perspectives for understanding ethics.

The author makes no claims that his opinions are valid or that his statements expressed herein are free of doctrinal, moral, or theological error. The author welcomes any additions, deletions, or edits that may correct any empirical or factual inaccuracies.

Summary

Regulations (i.e., codified ethics scripture)

- Ethical principles
- Ethical standards
- Administrative rules

Conventions (i.e., professional traditions)

- Best practices
- Standards of care
- Prevailing practices

Deductions (i.e., reasoning)

- Consultations
- Decision models
- Deductive reasoning

Intuitions (i.e., personal experience)

- Feelings
- Emotions
- Gut impressions

Class Diagrams

<p>Regulations</p> <p>Statutory wording Ethical principles Ethical standards Administrative rules Rules and regulations</p>	<p>Conventions</p> <p>Conventions Best practices Standards of care Prevailing practices Professional traditions</p>
<p>Deductions</p> <p>Deductions Consultations Decision models Analytical reasoning System 2 thinking</p>	<p>Intuitions</p> <p>Feelings Emotions Intuitions Gut impressions System 1 thinking</p>

Figure 4. The Ethics Quadrilateral.

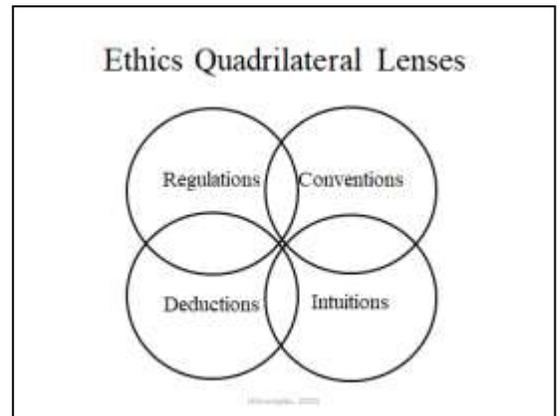


Figure 5. Ethics Quadrilateral Lenses

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 George Edward Pelham Box (1919–2013) earned a doctorate in Mathematics at the University of London in 1953. He was a Fellow of the Royal Society (FRS) and a British statistician who worked in the areas of quality control, time-series analysis, design of experiments, and Bayesian inference. He has been called one of the great statistical minds of the 20th century.
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 Daniel P. (Danny) Coleman holds an MA in Religion from the Earlham School of Religion and describes himself as a Progressive Christian Quaker theologian with Buddhist leanings. On his blog, he states, “I am a contemplative progressive Christian Quaker theologian.” His work touches on contemplative spirituality, process theology, interfaith dialogue, Quakerism, and biblical studies. Daniel and his wife Carla live in Seattle, Washington.
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 Brian Cooper holds a Ph.D. in Christian Ethics from the University of St. Michael’s College in Toronto. He is currently Registrar, Director of Student Development, and Assistant Professor of Theology at MB Seminary (ACTS) in Langley, BC, where he has worked since 2008.
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Notes

1. Daniel Coleman (2013) uses a visual diagram in his classes. Coleman's diagram shows how he views and applies the Wesleyan Quadrilateral, which he describes as a series of lenses through which theological constructs are perceived.
2. With more than 6.2 million members in the United States in 2020, the United Methodist Church was the largest mainline Protestant denomination in the nation. In May 2022, more conservative and traditional members of the UMC formed a new denomination, known as the Global Methodist Church (GMC). The denominational split was the result of a debate that came to a climax in 2019. Among the internal conflicts within the UMC, the most prominent disagreement was around the ordination of LGBTQ clergy and the clergy's ability to perform marriages of same-sex couples. In 2019, there was a special session of the UMC General Conference, in which delegates voted to make policy decisions for the denomination. After the 2019 special session, churches began to leave the denomination. In 2020 and 2021, there were 132 churches that "disaffiliated" from the UMC. The two groups came together to draft a plan that essentially split the denomination and created a new traditionalist denomination—the GMC.
3. Brian Cooper has a Ph.D. (2006) in Christian Ethics from the University of St. Michael's College in Toronto. In 2008, he became an adjunct faculty member at Mennonite Brethren Seminary in Langley, British Columbia. He joined the full-time faculty in 2011. He is currently Registrar, Director of Student Development, and Associate Professor of Theology at MB Biblical Seminary in British Columbia, Canada.
4. As a general rule, enforceable ethical standards fall into one of "the Three Ps" of ethics: (1) *permissive* standards specify actions that are allowed and are often preceded by the word *may*, (2) *prescriptive* standards specify required actions that are often designated by the verb *shall*, and (3) *proscriptive* standards specify prohibited actions that are often designated the phrase *shall not* (Doverspike, 2015, p. 4). A fourth category includes those areas in which ethical standards are *silent*—not addressed by the Three Ps. In those instances for which no single standard exists, some type of derived standard must be extrapolated on the basis of existing standards combined with a decision-making algorithm. As Doverspike notes, "Although ethical standards are printed in black and white when they are published in the pages of an ethics code, it is usually the shades of gray and the spaces between the lines that are encountered in everyday clinical practice" (2015, p. 113). These silent places require skillfully thinking through the shades of gray in a decision-making paradigm.
5. In reality, surveys of prevailing professional practices reflect what practitioners report they do rather than what they actually do. Further, "ethical beliefs are not necessarily indicative of ethical behavior" (Doverspike, 2015, p. 144).
6. This quadrant consists of both *deductive reasoning* and *inductive reasoning*. Inductive reasoning is a method of drawing conclusions by going from the specific to the general. It contrasts with deductive reasoning, in which one goes from general information to specific conclusions. Inductive reasoning is also called inductive logic or "bottom-up reasoning."

7. Peer consultation often involves brainstorming of alternative options and perspectives by using divergent thinking, which is the opposite of convergent problem-solving. *Convergent thinking* (using logic) is also called critical/vertical or analytical/linear reasoning, and it focuses on finding one well-defined solution to a problem. *Divergent thinking* (involving creativity and imagination) is also called creative/horizontal thinking, non-linear thinking, or “brainstorming.” *Lateral thinking* (“thinking outside the box”) involves both convergent and divergent thinking. It consists of solving a problem by using an indirect and creative approach simultaneously, using involving ideas that may not be discernable by using only traditional step-by-step logic.

8. There is a definite relationship between reasoning, good judgment, and experience: “Good judgement comes from experience. Experience comes from bad judgment.” This adage is often misattributed to the author James “Jim” Jay Horning (1942–2013), who was an American computer scientist (Ph.D., Computer Science, 1969, Stanford University, Thesis: *A Study of Grammatical Inference*): Horning said that he often repeated this adage, and he admitted that the original source was Mulla Nasrudin, the great Sufi sage of the 13th century. Most scholars attribute the quote to Nasrudin (born c. 1208), who is the topic of numerous Eastern stories. However, there is an adage that is credibly attributed to Dr. Horning: “Nothing is as simple as we hope it will be.”

9. Chinese philosophers have long considered the gut to be the first brain and root of wisdom. This ancient Chinese wisdom is supported by modern science. The enteric nervous system consists of an estimated 100 million neurons and more than 30 neurotransmitters—including 95% of the body’s serotonin. *Heuristics* are mental shortcuts often considered to be a form

of fast thinking, and to some extent they blur the boundary between purely cognitive reasoning and affective or emotional decision-making. An *affect heuristic* is a shortcut in which current emotion—anxiety, fear, pleasure, surprise—influences decisions and allows us to make decisions and solve problems quickly and efficiently. An *availability heuristic*, also known as availability bias, relies on immediate examples that come to one’s mind when evaluating a specific topic, concept, method or decision. Because shortcuts can lead to impulsive actions, they must be tempered with *festina lente* (Latin, “make haste slowly”). Careful clinicians learn to slow down by using systematic decision making, consultation, and documentation.

10. Stephen Behnke, J.D, Ph.D, M.Div received a J.D. from Yale Law School, Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from the University of Michigan, and M.Div. from the Harvard Divinity School. Since 1996, Behnke has been clinical instructor of ethics in the Department of Psychiatry at the Harvard Medical School. On November 1, 2000, out of a field of 30 qualified candidates, Behnke was selected to be Director of the Office of Ethics of the American Psychological Association (APA). He was APA Director of Ethics from 2000–2015, and oversaw the development of the 2002 revision of the APA Code of Ethics. On July 10, 2015, an APA Press Release announced that APA had fired Behnke following an investigative report (i.e., Hoffman et al., 2015) revealed that he had worked directly with Department of Defense officials in creating a training curriculum for psychologists working with interrogators at Guantanamo and elsewhere. Behnke has never revealed his alleged role in this incident. The irony is his earlier statement: “There’s no one thing that has gotten more psychologists in [ethical] trouble than the desire to be helpful” (as cited in Tjeltveit & Gottlieb, 2012, p. 68).

11. Each of the seven deadly sins—or vices—can be characterologically counterbalanced by a corresponding virtue (Doverspike, 2021). Listed in what has become somewhat of a standard order, pride is always considered the primary capital sin or vice: (1) Pride, (2) Greed, (3) Wrath, (4) Envy, (5) Lust, (6) Gluttony, and (7) Sloth. The seven most commonly cited cardinal virtues are as follows: (1) Humility, (2) Generosity, (3) Patience, (4) Gratitude or Kindness, (5) Chastity, (6) Moderation, and (7) Diligence. As observed by Sir Harold George Nicolson, (1886–1968), “We are all inclined to judge ourselves by our ideals; others, by their acts.” Nicolson was a British biographer, diplomat, politician, historian, novelist, lecturer, journalist, broadcaster, and gardener.

12. The adage is usually attributed to the British statistician George E. P. Box, Ph.D. (1919–2013), who has been called one of the great statistical minds of the 20th century. The actual quote is as follows: “Remember that all models are wrong; the practical question is how wrong do they have to be to not be useful” (Box & Draper, 1987, p. 74).

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