

# The Sensing of Ethics

## *Our Inner Knowledge of Good and Evil*

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*The Hindu culture discovered many thousands of years ago that if you got a relatively good body, you had a reasonable, mild man. So the way a reasonably good body behaved became for them the touchstone for morality. When morals are built from the body's behavior you get moral structure and behavior which respects the rights and privileges of other individuals.*

Ida Rolf (1978, 71)

### Introduction and Definition

It was June 1971, in a rented house on the cliffs above the ocean north of Big Sur, California. I was in my first ('auditing') half of my training with Ida Rolf. About to follow the other students out for lunch break, I noticed that Ida was talking with a young man who had shown up to request that she admit him to her training. They had talked only five or ten minutes when I heard her say, "I will not admit you to my training. You are an angry young man, and I will not turn an angry person loose on people's bodies." With a noticeable tone of irritation, he asked, "What makes you think I'm angry?" Quietly and simply, she said, "I can see." With that, the interview ended.

Notice that he framed the issue in terms of *thinking*, while she responded in terms of *seeing*. They spoke in two fundamentally different languages, one based in physical reality and one not so based. Here is a lesson on what I propose is a most important quality of ethics: fundamentally ethics is physical rather than mental knowledge, sensory rather than intellectual or psychological. It is most clearly experienced in our bodies, as are the principles of Rolfer® Structural Integration (SI). Our professional Code of Ethics is, more accurately, a set of rules for good behavior, based on the deeper truths that I am calling ethics.

### Definition

We think in the language in which we speak, so we think more clearly when we are clear about the grammar of that language and the precise meanings of its words. Let's see what Webster's dictionary (the 1979 big book) says about the precise meaning of the word 'ethics': "ethics – the system or code of morals of a particular philosopher, religion, group, profession, etc." Morals! It's about morals. The dictionary further says: "morals – principles and practice in regard to right, wrong, and duty; ethics; general conduct or behavior, especially in sexual matters." So morals are about right and wrong. For the adjective, it says: "moral – 1. relating to, dealing with, or capable of making the distinction between, right and wrong. 2. relating to, serving to teach, or in accordance with, the principles of right and wrong. 3. good or right in conduct or character; often, specifically, virtuous in sexual conduct; opposed to *immoral*."

We see, then, that ethics and morals involve being "capable of making the distinction between right and wrong" in one's conduct or behavior. How we do that will be the main focus of this paper, which will explore it in various directions, in depth. Our experience of what is written on paper, as in the professional Code of Ethics of the Rolf Institute®, may be different from our experience of those ethics written in our bodies.

### The Most Unethical People

We can learn much from studying criminals: the most unethical of people. Stanton Samenow, PhD (born 1941) is a clinical psychologist who studied criminals who were locked up in St. Elizabeth's Hospital, an immense federal psychiatric facility in Washington, DC. His first conclusion was that these criminals were not mentally ill

but were men who had used their criminal skills to manipulate their way there, to avoid the less pleasant prisons. His classic book *Inside the Criminal Mind* (1984) has contributed greatly to today's established methods of offender treatment and is well worth anyone's reading. In chapter 13, "To Change a Criminal," he describes a slow and arduous process of communicating patterns of ethical thinking from someone who has them to someone who does not – which we'll see has a parallel in the transfer we do with a Rolfering client.

Samenow (1984, 177) quotes an inmate as saying, "If rape were made legal, I'd do something else," barely touching on his profound observation, the full import of which he did not understand. He enlarged on this in a workshop I attended, when he said that it was typical of the criminal inmates that they preferred lying to telling the truth (even when it gained them nothing), stealing to honest work (even when it paid less), adultery to having sex with their wives, etc. To me, this was an exciting observation, as it gives us a way of accounting for rapists, etc. In my understanding, when people are so closed off, so disconnected from their bodies, so unable to feel everyday feelings, they are so empty they can hardly stand their inward nothingness. But *aha!* There is one feeling that can always break through the disconnectedness: the gut sense of *doing something wrong*. Never mind how yucky it feels – it can be pretty exciting. Most of us can recall, perhaps from childhood when we stole something from a store, that feeling – and most of us found it too yucky to want to feel it again. Dr. Samenow told us that these men became bored and depressed when there was no 'action' – conning, stealing, raping, or scheming to do so. Although he was a psychologist who excelled at observing the workings of a criminal mentality, he could not connect with my observation that, under all that, is those criminals' lack of physical sensing of the ethical knowledge that lives within everyone's body.

Let me share the report of my Rolfering work a decade and a half ago, with a child I'll call

“Joe” and his mother: When they came in together to see me in the out-of-state office where I was working, I was struck by the unsocial manner of this eleven-year-old boy, who gazed sullenly at the floor and responded to all my questions with “I don’t know.” His mother told me that, when unobserved, he sometimes snuck out of the house and vandalized the neighbors’ homes (seriously, like cutting their wires) and sexually molested and probably tortured other children. The question flashed in my mind, “If he’s like this at eleven, what will he be like when he’s eighteen – if he’s still alive?”

I said to him, calmly and firmly from the center of my being, “Joe, people who are connected to their bodies don’t do things like that. You need to get your body back.” He looked straight at me and said, “How do I get my body back?” “It’s called Rolfing” [SI]. “I’ll show you.” And I did three of the Ten Series of sessions on him that week. Those sessions were technically ordinary, but after each one I felt beaten up, as if I had had a wrestle with the devil. It was not clear until later what had been accomplished, when after a month, I called to inquire about “Joe.” The receptionist said, “Oh, he doesn’t do those things any more. He always used to sit in the waiting room staring at the floor, wouldn’t look at anyone, and there was a black cloud around him. Now he smiles at people and I can see white light around him!”

Within the year, I finished all ten of his Rolfing sessions, and several of his mother’s. It was a pleasure to watch “Joe” and his mother on the waiting-room floor peacefully playing together, like two happy children. She did not finish her sessions; I believe she could not handle the energetic change of completing her series because of the damage done by her having lived in an intergenerational satanic ritual abuse family. After several years, I received the report that “Joe” was locked up in juvenile detention for his involvement with a group of youth stealing cars. I was sad to hear this, but considered it far better than where he had been when I first met him.

One further observation on the criminal body. In the early 1970s my wife Bonnie, working as a psychiatric nurse, had as a patient in her locked ward a cold-blooded killer whose latest victim was a mom-and-pop shopkeeper who had traded fire with him during an armed robbery. The old man’s .22 caliber pistol was no match for the

robber’s single 45mm bullet. This prisoner, under police guard in the hospital, did pushups to keep in shape for his next escape attempt in spite of his several chest wounds (much too painful for a normal person to do). When Bonnie tended the drainage tubes in his chest, she was astonished at the lifeless stony hardness of his whole body; he was literally a hardened criminal.

## Ethics Is In Your Body

Because it has been challenged in court innumerable times, from every conceivable perspective, and survived, the polygraph (so-called ‘lie detector’) is an important source of information regarding the nature of the ethical function in human beings. When I was born in 1930, the polygraph instrument and its current manner of use were taking shape in the hands of Leonarde Keeler, a psychologist and friend of my parents. I clearly recall the day in the mid-1930s when I was taken to the Chicago Police Crime Lab to become the first child ever tested on it, as Dr. Keeler wanted to know whether it worked on children as it did on adults. It did. Using the challenge still in use today, I was told to select a card, remember it, return it to the deck, and by no means reveal to my mother which card it was. When she asked me, one card at a time, “Is this your card?,” I was to say “No” in every case, being careful not to give it away by facial expression, etc. I was sure I could fool her, but the machine went wild with my bodily reaction to lying: sweating, holding my breath, increased blood pressure.

This body-based approach to detecting lies is not novel in the recorded history of people of various cultures. An example from ancient India depended on the same autonomic nervous system response, but focused on the drying up of saliva that accompanies sweating. They had all of the accused chew dry rice and then spit it out. “While this was a simple task for the honest, those who were deceiving had difficulty in accomplishing it and were then judged to be guilty and punished accordingly. This practice recognized that fear slows the digestive processes, including salivation” (Abrams 1977, 11).

My reason for including these bits of lie-detection history is that they demonstrate that, for everyone, there’s a basic bodily-function element to our ethical sense of right and wrong. Even severe sociopaths can be validly tested by these bodily methods. My thesis is that what appears

to us as their lack of conscience is, more accurately, their *lack of sensing, noticing, or consciously connecting with that knowledge of good and evil that lives deep within everyone’s physical body.*

A sense of ethics simply comes with being grounded in one’s senses. It is opposite from delusions, which come from lacking such a ground.

I’m going to go out on a limb and suggest that the Rolfing process contributes to a person’s sense of ethics. My view is that a basic Ten Series of Rolfing SI connects the client with his own inner blueprint of perfection, which includes not only our creator’s design for how we are to live with gravity, but also for how we are to live with each other – our sense of ethics.

## Learning, Healing, and the Language of Agency

My remarkable mentor, James Warrick ([www.takeflightcoaching.org](http://www.takeflightcoaching.org)), used to say, “Reality is a person.” In my belief, truth (especially ethical truth) comes to us not just through our senses, but through our senses *from a person.* I see our built-in ethical sense as coming from the one who created (or built) us – God. But a sense of ethics is also transmitted to us, ideally, through our parents, who – from the child’s perspective – are like gods. ‘Mother love’ is not taught in a college class, yet it is something we all recognize – its presence or the lack thereof. Individuals who were severely abused as children sometimes spend their lives in kind service to others, exceptionally devoted to providing to their own children and others what their parents did not.

## Sex Offenders

Two decades ago, I pursued a rare opportunity, gaining permission from the local Probation and Parole office to offer a weekly class to some seriously unethical men, a story I wrote up as “Internal Correlates of Relapse Prevention: Some Principles of Ida Rolf’s Work Used in Healing of Convicted Sex Offenders” (Humiston 2004). I used verbal instructions based on my Rolfing skills to reach into their bodies and reconnect them with their innate sense of ethics. As in regular Rolfing SI, I communicated something I had in my body to the bodies of men who did not have it. In over two years of that work, I saw perhaps twenty men, but only those six who *chose* to continue with me for a year or more were ‘healed’.

Let me now point out a significant parallel between Rolfing SI and that work I did with sex offenders – something that is basic to the nature of ethics: it is those who choose to finish the work that receive the full results. Those sex offenders, it is true, had been ordered by a judge to obtain treatment in the community from a professional who was approved by Probation and Parole. And seeing me cost less than seeing any of the others. Yet only about a third of the men who started with me chose to continue for the year or more that it took to fully restore their personal ethical sense. For the others, the energy that the work opened up was too much for them. And, as we know, there are Rolfing clients who swear they want the whole Ten Series but never come back after the first few sessions; in my view, some should be recognized as clients who should not finish Rolfing work, as they are not ready for the full opening of their energies.

## *The Most Basic Written Source I Could Find*

In 1986 I was asked to prepare a code of ethics for another professional group. Although its board did not choose to adopt my proposed code, my experience in preparing it was personally very meaningful. At first I studied existing codes of professional organizations like the American Medical Association, but found their official statements to be the philosophies of academic men, a mass of confusion that did not satisfy my hunger for real, simple, clear truth; I wanted to spit them out. On a Sunday afternoon I walked from our New York apartment to sit on a bench in Riverside Park, with blank paper on a clipboard, to ponder what might be a more basic source of ethical principles. When I reviewed the familiar Ten Commandments (which I had memorized), I found that they felt right and translated them. Some were easy and some were hard, but when I was done my body was filled with energy like electricity that lasted for almost a week. Although no one else said they noticed it, for a couple of days I had the distinct feeling that my face was shining with a bright light from the truth of that work.

Here is how that ancient source translated into a proposed modern code of ethics:

I. As in any dignified profession, the welfare and needs of the client must be foremost and above all other considerations in the practice of the Method. This is the purpose

for which the Method was created and all other purposes must remain secondary to it.

- II. A practitioner must be straightforward in clearly informing a client as to fees and conditions of the work, expected duration and results, etc. To be misleading, or even unclear, in this area may be grounds for a complaint.
- III. The Method should never be misrepresented as something that it is not. Practitioners should clearly inform clients as to when they are doing (this method's) work and when something else is being done.
- IV. Practitioners should set aside sufficient time and money to continue the pursuit of their own progression and growth. It is dishonest to represent that one can assist a client's growth when one is not doing so oneself.
- V. The name of (the founder) and his Method should be honored and its integrity protected so that the public may respect it as standing for professional excellence and ethical practitioners.
- VI. First, do no harm. A practitioner is to keep silent regarding a client's confidential information, and is to refrain from any actions that could be foreseen to be to a client's physical, mental, financial, or other detriment.
- VII. Sexual involvement of any kind with a client is unethical, either during the professional relationship or after it is terminated. Because focus on anything sexual always diverts energy and attention from other areas, it necessarily destroys the balance that is essential to the Method. To pretend otherwise is dishonest and exploitative, and it is the duty of every practitioner to scrupulously maintain a non-sexual focus of attention with clients.
- VIII. It is unethical to accept payment for any services that are not necessary, appropriate, or clearly in the client's best interests.
- IX. Practitioners must be honest in all their dealings, professionally and otherwise. Immorality, dishonesty, or unethical behavior in any aspect of one's life casts doubt on one's ethics as a practitioner.

- X. It is unethical to disparage other practitioners, professions, or methods. The Method stands on its own merits, and each practitioner should do likewise.

## *The Language of Agency*

Ethics seen as rules of *required* behavior may be hard to promulgate, in the sense that they are seen as demands upon us for self-denial. Ethics seen as rules of *chosen* behavior, which are guides for our self-fulfillment, are, however, generally harder to promote, for a little-understood reason: they are based on different mental grammars, or mental languages. The distinctive words "I don't want" reflect what we are born with, the default language. It is the source of everyone's first impulse to avoid pain and seek comfort, and supports living at a low level of intensity (and ethics). Using it requires no special skill and burdens one with no particular responsibility. In a sense, the default language is required; it comes with being born, with living; you can't get away from it.

Those things that mean living at a higher level of intensity – receiving greater light and knowledge, experiencing interpersonal intimacy and love, achieving things that are difficult, and truly living ethically – require the language of 'agency' to accomplish. They require, and are the result of, desiring, choosing, seeking and asking – which is what I am referring to as the *language of agency*. As a Rolfer, I know that I do my best work when I consciously move into deep longing within my own body for the desired changes in my client's body. I'm sure that the language of asking is acquired by infants and children when their parents (and others nearby) are likewise wishing and desiring good things for those children. This is high intensity and doesn't happen by default, but only from being sought and chosen.

In *For Freedom Destined*, Franz Winkler finds that these issues are central to the themes of Wagner's *Ring* cycle and *Parsifal* music dramas. For the desires of the gods of Germanic myth to be fulfilled, humans must take some difficult ethical actions *by their own choice*, not compelled by the gods. Seeing that such choosing requires a high level of conscious awareness (lost when the hero Siegfried is drugged), "Wagner rediscovers here the long-lost key to a deeper understanding of evil. Evil in its darkest form does not depend on wicked deeds, nor even on bad intentions. For

actions and aims can be corrected, atoned for, or at least repented. But when man permits his awareness to grow dim, when he takes a step backward on his path of moral evolution, he commits a sin against the meaning of existence, the sin against the Holy Ghost. Such failures bring suffering to the world, suffering far greater than any caused by intentional evil" (Winkler 1974, 68). Again drawing a parallel to Rolfing SI, I believe that the crucial awareness here is more in the body, where our sense of right and wrong lives, than in the mind.

## Conclusion

Ethics is a part of the larger issue of how any human being can best make room for self and other at the same time. This is dealt with voluminously in the writings of existential philosophers and psychologists, which is beyond the scope of this article. It is dealt with concisely as the second commandment: "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself" (Matthew 22:39), which to me means that we, ourselves and others, all count equally.

*Karl Humiston was for twelve years (2004-2016) the Chairman of the Rolf Institute's Ethics and Business Practices Committee. He is still actively practicing Rolfing SI in San Diego, California.*

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