

Ethical Dilemma and Critical Analysis

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Making ethical decisions in our postmodern, multicultural, global village can be a tricky proposition. How can we possibly make ethical decisions when faced with moral subjectivism that says everyone is free to decide right and wrong, good and evil for themselves, while not having the ability to speak to anyone else's decisions? Is there a way forward for us as a society to make ethical choices that take into count other belief systems and cultures? This paper will explore a specific moral dilemma and use two frameworks to help guide ethical decisions. This paper will also seek to understand ethical pluralism as a middle ground and way forward for making ethical decisions in the face of relativism and absolutism.

#### **Ethical Dilemma**

On a Thursday morning in late May of 2017 after a Wednesday evening youth group meeting, I received a text message from one of my high school leaders asking to meet with me. When my leader and I met, she informed me that two high school girls had approached her the previous night at youth group and were upset that John (not his real name), who had been away at a military academy was returning home. The two girls laid out a series of events with John, which included unwanted sexual touching, inappropriate text messages, sexual joking all of which which made the girls fearful of his return. My immediate supervisor was on a retreat in the wilderness and was without internet or cell phone. At this point, I wasn't sure what I needed to do. I decided to tell our other pastor, not my supervisor, about the allegations. He suggested that I might need to call the Department of Social Health Services (DSHS) to file a report. At his suggestion, I made a call to DSHS and explained to them the situation and asked if I needed to submit a report. DSHS told me that I needed to file a report, which I did. At this point, I also called my elder –who helps give oversight to my area– to fill him in on the situation and to create

a plan for our next steps, which included meeting with the girls, and all the parents as families. We also planned to tell the session (the ruling body of the church) about the events and our subsequent actions.

While these events may appear to be fairly cut and dry, they were not entirely so. There were several factors which lead this to be a more complicated ethical decision than it might seem on the surface. The following are all factors that contributed to the ethical dilemma. 1) John's family is a powerful, wealthy family who gives a lot of money to the church. 2) John's mom had served as a high school leader up until this year. She is also a personal friend of mine. 3) John is almost universally liked. He is charming, funny, and well known by many in the church and community. 4) The accusers do not belong to the church and are not particularly well known. Both accusers come from a different socio-economic class than John. 5) I needed to account that the girls could be lying about the events and their involvement in them or John could be completely guilty or perhaps somewhere in the middle. 6) The steps of action in this situation were not entirely clear. I could dismiss the girls claims, using my relationship with John and the family to justify myself. This would be the path of least resistance. I could file the report with DSHS and let all parties involved know that I have done so, risking John's family getting angry, pulling their giving, and leaving the church. I could file the report with DSHS and not tell anyone that I had filed the report. I am not required by law to tell the families that a report had I had filed a report. I could meet with just the girls and then with John to discuss the incidents and try to resolve them without getting authorities or parents involved. Finally, I could meet with everyone and be upfront about incidents, including the report to DSHS. While I thought I had a good idea of the appropriate action, I was not 100 percent certain. I tried to approach the situation with a degree of humility that I might be wrong in the actions that I would take. As

Johnson (2011) states, "humility forces leaders to address limitations that might prevent them from taking action" (p. 246).

In the end, I chose to file the report with DSHS. I met with both girls to hear their story. I found their story credible enough to meet with John's parents. I then met with the girls' parents, after they told their parents what had happened. All the parents were upset with me filing a report with DSHS. No one wanted to have their child's name associated with such a report. In the end, John's parents used their power, class position, and wealth to influence the girls to recant their story. John's family has left the church, leaving us with a financial burden from which we have not recovered.

### **The Potter's Box Model of Reasoning**

If I were to encounter the same ethical dilemma today, I could use the Potter's Box Model of Reasoning to help make certain that I was making a moral decision. The Potter's Box Model, developed by Ralph B. Potter is a tool to help frame ethical decisions (Johnson, 2011). The Potter's Box uses four quadrants in a box to help frame a moral choice. The first quadrant is the *situation*. These are the facts of the situation. In the case against John, the facts were two girls accused John of being sexually inappropriate with them. John was off at military academy, and his imminent return caused the girls to come forward. John's parents are wealthy, powerful members who give substantially to our church. John's mom is actively involved in the same program as the two accusers. The second quadrant is *values*. These are the answers to the question why. In John's case, the values we hold in our church and ministry would be truth, safety for our kids, relationships, and grace. The third quadrant in the Potter's Box Model is *principles*. These principles flow out of the values in quadrant two. In John's case, our guiding principle would be to take action that keeps kids safe and allows for restoration. While we hold

the value of relationships, the principle of keeping kids' safe would supersede relationships in this matter. The final quadrant in the Potter's Box is *loyalties*. According to Johnson (2011), "Choosing loyalties is an extremely significant step in the process of making moral decisions" (p. 5). In John's case, the question of loyalty was front and center. Should I be loyal to the John and his family, with whom I have a relationship? Should I be loyal to the victims? Should I be loyal what's best for the institution? I believe in this case, that there is no real choice but to be loyal to the victims until other facts present themselves that might dictate otherwise.

### **Rest's Four Component Model**

James Rest from the University of Minnesota developed a widely used model for moral behavior. The four components of Rest's model are sensitivity, judgment, motivation, character (Johnson 2016). If I were to encounter the John dilemma today, I could use Rest's Four Component model to recognize that what I am facing is a moral dilemma. As Johnson (2016) states, "Moral sensitivity...is the first step in ethical decision making because we can't solve moral problems unless we first know that one exists" (p. 236). I believe that I would need to see the John incident as a moral dilemma and approach it as such. This would lead to the possibility of better decisions. In this case, it would be important to keep the issue as a moral issue, and to give it the intensity required to make it salient enough to respond ethically (Johnson, 2016). The second component of Rest's model is judgment. This is where leaders make a decision based on the identified problem (Johnson, 2016). In John's case, I believe that we could have taken more time in identifying the problem and then proceeding with a decision for action based on utilitarian principles of making sure that the decisions made served the greatest good (Johnson, 2016). The third component of Rest's model is motivation. As (Johnson, 2016) states, "Moral values often conflict with other significant values" (p. 244). In John's case, this is true. The value

of relationship conflicts with the moral decision that needed to be made. I knew that relationship with John's family would suffer and potentially be severed. I don't know that I gave this as much thought as I should have, and if I were to re-encounter this same problem, I would be more cognizant of competing values. I would need to check that those competing values didn't cause me to lay aside the moral decision I needed to make in favor of a competing value (Johnson, 2016). The final component of Rest's model is character. Character is the ability to follow through with a moral plan, even if that plan is difficult and full of potential pitfalls and roadblocks. Character is the strong will of the leader. "Those with a strong will, as well as confidence in themselves and their abilities, are more likely to persist" (Johnson, 2016, p. 246). Character is the one area involving John's case where I was successful. Despite difficulty and struggle with John's family, I never wavered in my resolve to act.

### **Diversity of Moral Beliefs**

When navigating moral dilemmas, one particular issue becomes salient. It is the issue of absolutism, relativism, and the middle ground of pluralism. It is essential to understand that "cultures clash, and when they do, we must decide how to deal with the resulting conflicts, including moral conflicts" (Hinman, 2012, p. 24). Without knowing how others view moral dilemmas, this can be challenging to navigate. I believe that relativism offers little ground for moral and ethical decisions. If everyone is free to decide how to act and no one can judge those actions, then there is little room for positive movement. Absolutism, on the other hand, feels like it has something to say about everything, but only from its perspective. Absolutism is not interested in the idea that others might have something valid to offer the conversation. Pluralism provides a middle ground that relativism and absolutism don't. Pluralism is founded on the principles of understanding, tolerance, standing up against evil, and fallibility. These principles

can help provide a middle ground between relativism and absolutism. Pluralism tries to gain understanding of the other culture or person. Pluralism also tried to be tolerant of those others and cultures who do and see ethical and moral issues differently. Standing up against evil gives a clear understanding of who to side with, regardless of the situation and finally, fallibility keeps on culture or person from believing that they have the stronghold of truth. Fallibility helps us understand that we might be the ones who are wrong ((Hinman, 2012).

### **Conclusion**

Making ethical decisions is not easy. Left to ourselves, humans are not the best at always making moral choices that benefit the greater good. The Potter's Box Model of Reasoning and Rest's Four Component Model provide useful frameworks for making ethical decisions. Both frames are helpful in creating consistent and repeatable moral choices, even when those choices are unclear or difficult. I believe that both frameworks fit into ethical pluralism, which seeks to find a middle ground between relativism and absolutism. This middle ground is particularly crucial in today's world of multiculturalism and the global village.

## References

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