

A Question of Ethics

Ethical Decisions — Does Gender Matter?

Sometimes, there is no “wrong” answer, especially when we are faced with moral dilemmas. Ethical dilemmas give us options. When making a moral decision, there can be multiple outcomes from the choices we make. What makes one decision morally superior over another? It very much depends on the moral framework in which that decision is fashioned. Of course, to make moral decisions, we all draw on our experience, our education, our character. An ethical decision relies on the moral reasoning of the individual, or group of individuals, making that decision. What moral reasoning guides your decision making?

Immanuel Kant was an 18th-century German philosopher, and is regarded as one of the most influential thinkers of modern Europe. If you favor the universality of Kant, then you seek to find an answer to a moral dilemma by finding a moral rule that applies. It is a “one size fits all” rule that must be applied with impartiality. It is the striving toward equity and justice that drives this perspective of moral reasoning. From Kant’s viewpoint, there are certain universal proscriptions which should never be violated. For example, it is never acceptable to kill or to steal. It is a framework that is rigid, yet it is fair to the community because it treats no individual differently from another.

Similarly, **Lawrence Kohlberg**, in 1958, developed a hierarchy of moral reasoning, a pathway to achieving what he judged to be superior moral thought. Kohlberg was an American psychologist who was a professor at the University of Chicago and Harvard University. Famous for research in moral education, reasoning and development, he proposed stages of moral development. Kohlberg, too, believed that as moral reasoning matured and an individual progressed



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through stages of moral development, the height of moral reasoning would allow an individual to assess ethical dilemmas with equality, fairness and impartiality.

In her landmark work, *In a Different Voice* (1982), **Carol Gilligan**, a colleague of Kohlberg while they were at Harvard, took issue with the kind of moral reasoning that lost sight of the individual. Gilligan believed that moral decisions based on justice and fairness were incomplete because that moral framework ignored the individual. Her theory of care-based moral reasoning countered Kohlberg’s hierarchy of moral reasoning by insisting that relationships mattered. Moral decision making could not, according to Gilligan, be made in a vacuum. The effects of decisions were felt by individuals. She could not ascribe to universal rules that were to the detriment of individuals or individual relationships.

Justice-Based Moral Reasoning

Kohlberg theorized that there are three reasoning patterns for ethical issues, each of which must be attained before an individual can move to the next, and presumably more worthy, level of reasoning. These are the Preconventional Level, the Conventional Level and the Postconventional Level. These levels assess the individual’s understanding of moral issues.

At the first level, individuals make judgments according to how it affects them. Individuals are not capable,

at this stage, of abstract reasoning, and cannot understand the impact their reasoning may have upon an organization. They are “me” oriented. At the Conventional Level, individuals begin to understand the benefit of institutional rules, and that such rules impart a stability and sense of order to the group. The frame of reference has moved from “me” to “we.” Yet the individual’s sense of right and wrong focuses on the particular group to which the individual belongs. At the Postconventional Level, which is Kohlberg’s notion of the ultimate stage of moral development, the frame of reference shifts to a more universal mindset. The rights of all individuals are respected, and every individual has the right to make his or her own moral decisions.

Jonathan Glover is a British philosopher, currently teaching ethics at King’s College of the University of London. In his book *Humanity: A Moral History of The 20th Century* (1999), Glover concedes that humanity is motivated to act morally by self-interest. Striving toward efficiency by promoting equality and justice and impartiality supports self-interest. Yet, he believes that moral action is not solely self-serving or impartial. Individuals must make connections with others.

Glover sees self-interest as a restraint against immoral actions. Self-interest, when applied rationally, will promote “reciprocal altruism.” Glover acknowledges that not all good deeds are repaid but that one’s performance

of good deeds makes more likely a return on one's investment of generosity. He expresses his hope that humanity is capable of much more than calculating self interest, and that there are human responses that act as natural restraints to immoral behavior. Glover believes that we have a tendency to respond to others with respect and sympathy, "caring about the miseries and happiness of others, and perhaps feeling a degree of identification with them."

James Rachels was an American philosopher and professor at the University of Alabama at Birmingham who concentrated his work on ethics. His work *Elements of Moral Philosophy* (2002) insisted on impartiality, yet conceded that earlier convictions might need to be revised. "There are competing moral theories which ascribe to the concepts of relatedness and partiality and do not necessarily view impartiality as a requirement in moral decision-making." Gilligan put forward a moral theory that considers relationships as primary in moral development and reasoning.

Care-Based Moral Reasoning

Gilligan took issue with Kohlberg's model of moral development and reasoning as male-oriented. She theorized that women make moral decisions in different, but no less valid, ways. In her study, as detailed in the book *In a Different Voice*, Gilligan found that women made moral judgments based less on justice and rights, and more on care and compassion. Kohlberg theorized that the games children play provide them with an opportunity for role-playing in the resolution of disputes.

Gilligan writes: "Consequently, the moral lessons inherent in girls' play appear to be fewer than in boys'. Traditional girls' games like jump rope and hopscotch are turn-taking games, where competition is indirect since one person's success does not

necessarily signify another's failure. Consequently, disputes requiring adjudication are less likely to occur. In fact, most of the girls . . . interviewed claimed that when a quarrel broke out, they ended the game. Rather than elaborating a system of rules for resolving disputes, girls subordinated the continuation of the game to the continuation of relationships."

Gilligan makes the distinction between rights-based reasoning and care-based reasoning. "The morality of rights differs from the morality of responsibility in its emphasis on separation rather than connection, in its consideration of the individual rather than the relationship as primary." Gilligan writes that women will come to appreciate justice-based reasoning through the logic of relationships, realizing that a self-critical and self-sacrificing morality must be tempered by the need of all people for care and equality.

Women's Ways of Knowing (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, Tarule, 1986) affirmed the different socialization processes for men and women. However, the book stops short of concluding that men and women are, by their very natures, either rights-based or care-based reasoners. "Separate and connected knowing are not gender-specific. The two models may be gender-related: It is possible that more women than men tip toward connected knowing and more men than women toward separate knowing."

Balancing Perspectives

In **Leslie Dawson's** article, "Women and men, morality and ethics — sexual differences in moral reasoning," which appeared in the July–August 1995 issue of *Business Horizons*, she explores the issue of whether there is a gender difference in ethical decision making. She asks, if men and women differ in their moral reasoning and judgments, what are the implications for ethical

conduct in the workplace? If different ethical values are brought to work roles, those differences will shape work-related decisions. Dawson writes, "The more we understand the difference in moral reasoning that characterizes the sexes, the better we can appreciate women's impact on ethical decision making in organizations."

As a counterpoint, many social psychologists disagree with the empirical claim that men and women differ significantly in their approach to moral reasoning and decision making. Studies have found that men and women use both justice and care dimensions in their moral reasoning. It is this blending of moral reasoning perspectives that will allow organizations to make better informed decisions and to craft ethical business decisions with a consideration for what is fair and what is compassionate.

"The most important human endeavor is the striving for morality in our actions. Our inner balance and even our very existence depend on it. Only morality in our actions can give beauty and dignity to life."

— Albert Einstein

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