Ethical maturity: Compasses for life and work decisions–Part I

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The ability to discern the right, the better, or the good action is part of our everyday lives—daily decisions are based on our ability to 'suss out' the best decision to be made in often complex situations. There are no compasses to guide us in the right ethical direction. The numerous codes of ethics and ethical frameworks used throughout the helping professions do not ensure automatic ethical behaviour on the part of members—while we often know what we should and shouldn't do in certain situations, we don't always do what we should. Even when we behave ethically, there are times when we are unable to articulate why we did what we did, or provide a coherent explanation of the decision-making processes that resulted in our action. Even when we can explain what we did and connect it to guidelines and principles, there are no guarantees that we will feel sure we did the right thing—we are not always at peace with the moral decision/s we have made. In this article, MICHAEL CARROLL provides a *Five Step Model of Ethical Maturity* to ensure we are on the right moral track to an 'ethics of excellence'.

There are numerous codes of ethics and ethical[1] frameworks used throughout the helping professions. In fact, a sign of advancement and 'coming of age' for a profession is the development of a code of ethics that supports and guides practitioners to do what is good, and to avoid what is harmful in their work.

These codes and frameworks usually contain principles that guide members to make ethical decisions, and provide clear, unambiguous directives on what should or should not be done in certain circumstances. However, being paid up members of a profession and subscribing to their code of ethics does not ensure automatic ethical behaviour—while we often know what we should and shouldn't do in certain situations, we don't always do what we should.

Even when we behave ethically, at times we are not able to articulate why we did what we did, or provide a coherent explanation of the decision-making processes that resulted in our action. We cannot always justify, defend or explain our actions.

Even when we can explain what we did and connect it to guidelines and principles, there are no guarantees that we will feel sure we did the right thing—we are not always at peace with the moral decision/s we made. Hindsight, after-action reviews and occasional rumination, can keep our previous ethical decisions alive for us. While this may result in obsessive replay of our decisions, there is value in the use of retrospective insight to learn from ethical decisions already made.

Ethical maturity

Five procedures are needed if we are to look beyond decision making in ethics to *ethical maturity*:

1. fostering ethical sensitivity and watchfulness—the development of 'ethical antennae' that alert us to the presence of ethical issues/dilemmas;
2. the capacity to make an ethical decision that is aligned to our ethical principles and values;
3. implementation of the ethical decision/s made;
4. putting into words, and being able to justify to stakeholders the reasons why the ethical decisions were made and implemented;
5. having some closure on the event even when other possible or 'better' decisions could have been made—learning from what has happened and living with the consequences of decisions made is crucial to ongoing well-being.

Ethical maturity involves: *the reflective, rational and emotional capacity to decide actions are right and wrong, or good and better; the resilience and courage to implement those decisions; being accountable for ethical decisions made*

Footnote: 1. While a distinction is often made between the terms *'moral'* and *'ethical'*, these terms are used as if similar throughout these two articles. The term 'ethical' is used to describe what is right or wrong, good or bad, and good or better.

(publicly or privately); and the ability to learn from, and live with, the experience.

While we will return to this definition later, the point to be made early on is that ethical maturity is not a 'done deal', or a definitive end-point in a journey, but is an ever-unfolding process. It is not a destination to be arrived at, but is continual lifelong learning.

A Five-Step model of Ethical Maturity that includes the five elements above will be presented. I have applied this model in counselling, in life and executive coaching, in organisational development, and in supervision. It may have a wider use in other areas where individuals, couples, teams and organisations face issues of right and wrong, good and bad, and good and better, e.g., human resources, business ethics and even life decisions. The subtitle of this article, *Compasses for life and work decisions,* refers to how the ability to discern the right, the better, or the good action is part of our everyday lives—daily decisions are based on our ability to 'suss out' the best decision to be made in often complex situations. Often we do not have compasses to guide us in the right ethical direction. Not only do we live complicated lives, but we must make complicated and complex decisions almost on a daily basis—such decisions require us to have some guidelines to ensure we are on the right moral track.

The model presented in this two-part article will focus on the second stage of the model—*ethical discernment resulting in ethical decision making.* (This model was presented in a two-day 2010 training in Melbourne and includes insights and thoughts from the 165 participants. I would like to thank them for a great two days that have developed my own thinking and fine-tuned the Five-Step model.)

Ethics at 'arm's length'

Ethics is one of those areas, a bit like research, where most of us know we should be interested, feel a bit guilty about not being more interested, and still keep it at arm's length. Passmore, Allan and Mortimer (in press) recount experiences similar to my own: *'over the past few years one of us has presented several conference papers on the topic (of ethics), while at the same event running* workshops on other topics including mindfulness… *While the ethics event struggled to draw a dozen participants, the session on mindfulness was so popular it was difficult for the presenter to get in the room'* (p. 1).

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> *Ethics and ethical thinking can remain somewhat vague in our personal and professional backgrounds until something happens to force us to reflect on it—and often that reflection comes a bit too late.*

us to reflect on it—and often that reflection comes a bit too late. I have accompanied a number of individuals through ethical complaints and while, thankfully for the practitioners, none of the complaints have been upheld, it has made us more ethically aware and more alert to when ethical problems might lurk close to the surface.

There is good reason for this 'arm's length' approach to ethical training. First, most of us don't think of ourselves as being unethical or acting unethically—so why waste a lot of time delving into theory, research, literature and frameworks that may not be needed, especially when there are other more pressing practical needs on our workfront agendas? It almost always comes as a surprise to individuals when there is any hint—never mind the severity of a formal complaint—that their decisions or actions might be unethical.

Second, ethics, ethical decision making and ethical dilemmas are all areas of great uncertainty. It is rare that there are clear answers about what to do or not to do, and we can come away from ethical training more
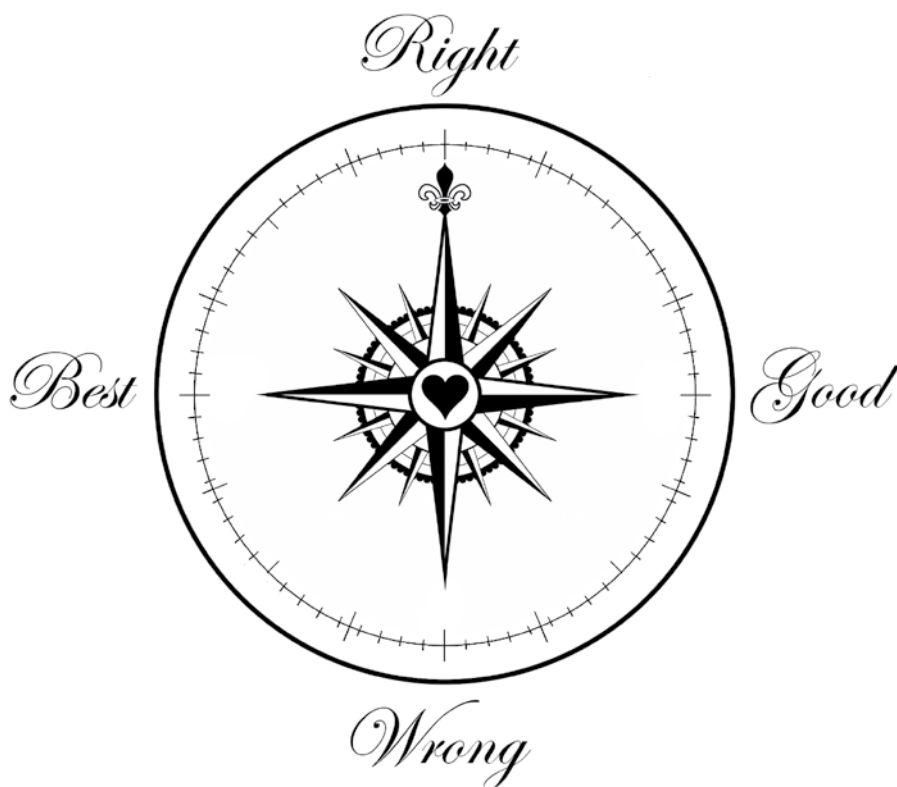

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confused than enlightened. Except for a few universals—do not have sex with your clients, have professional liability insurance to cover your work, keep appropriate client notes—there are few hard-and-fast behaviour rules that tell us dogmatically what the right course of action is, or how we should behave.

Ethics falls within that area of life that King and Kitchener (1994) call *'ill-defined problems'* and Kegan and Lahey (2009) see as the difference between *'technical'* versus *'adaptive'* challenges and problems. Ill-defined problems do not have a single or a simple answer. Well-defined problems do, e.g., there is one right way to change a light bulb. How to manage my money usually has a similar right answer. Ill-defined problems however, require capabilities other than knowledge or skills to resolve them. There are no givens. An example might be the questions, 'What mindset do I need to change to tackle my depression?', or 'When might I share information with a third party that breaks my confidentiality agreement with a client?'.

For Kegan and Lahey (2009), *'technical problems'* are ones that are resolved or solved by developing new skills such as flying a plane, performing brain surgery, managing your finances. You don't have to change yourself to resolve these problems, you don't require any specific self-awareness. *'Adaptive problems'*, however, need more than simply new skills to resolve them. They require that the person changes to meet the challenge—in other words that the person adapts rather than simply learns new skills. Many see ethical dilemmas as the first of these approaches—there are answers out there if only I can find them, or if I can develop some rational or logical skills to resolve the issue.

To view ethical problems or solve ethical dilemmas through the lens of an *adaptive approach* demands other resources that raise the questions, 'Do I need to think differently about this?', or 'What new mindset do I need to develop in order to think ethically?' Perhaps what is required is not so much an 'either/or' approach (certain or uncertain, technical or adaptive), but more a 'both/and' position. Sometimes there are clear answers and sometimes

we have to change and adapt to meet the situation. How do we identify the demands of different contexts and problems to resolve this as either a *'technical'* or an *'adaptive'* problem?

Most of our codes, guidelines and frameworks provide principles to support us, but the interpretation and application of those principles are very much left up to ourselves. For instance, many codes include an ethical requirement that practitioners keep up to date, invest in their own ongoing training and continue their professional development. Some specify time to meet this requirement, e.g., 30 hours. Others leave it open to interpretation. Would reading one article a year suffice? Hardly. A one-day training course? If you interpret the ruling in a minimalist way then you will look at what you can get away with as fulfilling the basic requirement. On the other hand, if you take an excellence perspective then no doubt you will read journals, go to training programmes, ensure you go to supervision and attempt to keep up with contemporary research. Again, with such uncertainty and generality around, why waste time until we need to make decisions?

Ethical complexity

Let us take a not unusual case scenario to help unlock some of the complications and uncertainty involved in an actual helping relationship—in this case, a counselling arrangement. Ousep is working with a suicidal client, Roland, who phones and leaves a succinct message on Ousep's answer-machine, *"That's it. I can't take any more. I am definitely going to end it tonight"*. Ousep has been landed with an ethical dilemma. He is conscientious, cares deeply about his client, has great loyalty to the organisation that employs him to see its clients (one of whom has just phoned), and wants to act to

the highest professional standards. What does he do? He has worked with Roland for two years now and this type of phone call is not new. Roland phones every few months and says something similar. Perhaps by hearing Ousep's voice, this is a way of reassuring himself that there is someone who wants him to live and, with this tiny morsel of hope, he will struggle on until they meet again on Friday.

Or did Ousep hear a slightly different note and tone in Roland's voice? Perhaps it's not the same kind of phone call as they have had before. The last few sessions have been deeply distressing and have hit new depths of despair and hopelessness for them

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both. Is this a breakthrough or a breakdown?

Ousep struggles with two possible outcomes. In the first he decides to call the Ambulance Emergency Service and have Roland admitted to a psychiatric ward where the staff already know him and will take Ousep seriously. What to do or not to do? Ousep stares into the bleak decision-making process that looks like it has a no-win ending. He thinks of his second option: he does nothing and takes the chance that Roland will gain enough from the phone call to keep him going. But another image enters his consciousness. He imagines an early-morning phone call from Roland's only daughter who visits him on her way to work each day, to say she has found him dead.

Using his scenario-planning method, Ousep plays a *'what if'* game. What if he implements his first decision? Ousep imagines the results. He marshalled the emergency forces to go straight to Roland's house, break down the door when he doesn't answer, section him and bundle him into a psychiatric ward where he spends three weeks before being released.

"Of course I wasn't going to commit suicide", he tells Ousep angrily, *"how dare you betray me!"*. He is not sure he can trust Ousep again and a once strong, trusting relationship has been ruptured. Scenario Two ends no better. Ousep imagines himself doing nothing and spends a sleepless night wondering what the morning will bring and its series of possible beratings if Roland's daughter actually finds him dead. He imagines the question she will ask: *"When you knew how suicidal Roland was, why didn't you call for help?"*. He visualises the Inquest, the look of betrayal from Roland's daughter, the tense and emotional meeting with his own manager who reminds him of the organisation's policy around suicidal clients, and finally, living with himself knowing he could have done something to avoid Roland's death.

Ousep's decision-making processes can work towards some kind of ethical conclusion in several ways. He can play it safe: both for himself and for his client, *and* for his organisation: get the paramedics and emergency mental health team in and they can make the final decision. He has done what he should have done. Roland also might learn that he can only 'call wolf' so often without being challenged.

Ousep can back up this decision with a quick read of his ethical code that says without any ambiguity that where a client is a danger to himself, then he (the counsellor) can break confidentiality, and take whatever steps are needed to safeguard the client. Making this decision keeps him safe as counsellor also—were there an ethical complaint against him it would be unlikely that he would be found guilty. He had done his duty well.

On the other hand, he could decide to base his ethical decision on his relationship with Roland and let his knowledge, understanding, and intuition speak to him. In this instance, it says, do nothing. Yes, he has heard Roland and has once again been touched deeply by the despair he hears. He connects, stays with Roland. He knows the risk he is taking. But he knows Roland too. His third stance is to put Roland at the centre of his decision. He doesn't want to ignore his responsibilities to look after himself personally and professionally, nor does

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he want to overlook his obligations to his organisation or the public at large, but he wants to put Roland solidly and clearly at the centre of his decision. What is the best thing to do for Roland? On what basis does he decide? His duty, safety and the law? His relationship with Roland? Or on what is best for Roland?

Possible bases for ethical decision making

There are six bases on which Ousep can make his ethical decision:

1. The authority of someone else

Ousep can adhere to the ethical code to which he subscribes—what his profession tells him, what his supervisor advises him, what he remembers an old tutor saying, what the Bible/Koran/his faith tradition decrees that … (fill in the injunction or the prescription according to the authority quoted).

2. Reason, rationalising and working through the dilemma logically

This involves looking at the pros and cons for each possible decision and weighing up the best thing to do when there are a number of viable options. Steare (2006) takes this approach: *'We will feel a range*

of emotions when confronted with an ethical dilemma: anger, fear, frustration, stress, concern, guilt and anguish. Any such emotion should be articulated, acknowledged and then set to one side as we begin our deliberation. Ethicability recognises the power of emotions, but also reminds us that deciding what's right is a rational and reasonable process between two emotional stages. At the outset we acknowledge our perhaps negative emotions and set them aside' (p. 91). Reason, logic, clear thinking, problem solving all help us come to a decision using our intelligence.

3. Emotionally

Ousep can stay with his emotions, listen to them carefully, sift through them and decide to trust them as a vital form of communication. He feels concerned and anxious, and yet another strong feeling of containing Roland won't go away. Fine (2007) makes this point, *'Our emotions play an important, if furtive, role on our moral condemnations and approbations'* (p. 54). Lehrer (2009) spells it out, *'When you are confronted with an ethical dilemma, the unconscious automatically generates an emotional reaction. (This is what psychopaths cannot do). Within a few milliseconds, the brain has made up its mind; you know what is right and*

what is wrong. These moral instincts aren't rational—they've never heard of Kant…It's only at this point—after the emotions have already made up the moral decision—that those rational circuits in the prefrontal cortex are activated' (p. 167).

4. Intuitively

Ousep can gather up the wisdom of the years, and monitor his intuitive thoughts and feelings. As an experienced and professional counsellor who has had to make a number of risky decisions over the years, what does his sense of what is happening say to him? What hunches, insights and intuitive decisions emerge? Perhaps Ousep should listen to Gigerenzer (2007), *'Stop thinking when you are skilled … reason can conflict with what we call intuition … good intuitions go beyond the information given'* (p. 103).

5. Scientifically

Ousep can set it up as an experiment, an action-inquiry, gathering evidence for and against. Close to the rational and reasonable approach, the scientific method treats an ethical dilemma as if it were a research project. How do we go about working towards a decision or conclusion using the best in research methods?

6. Common sense

What would most people do in this situation? What is the common sense approach to making a decision in the 'here and now' with this particular issue? Many practitioners, when asked, see common sense as their preferred option in making an ethical choice.

It is obvious that each of the six bases on which ethical decisions are made have strengths and weaknesses, e.g., the authority approach accesses the wisdom of the ages, the experiences of others and takes a lot of responsibility away from the individual for whom it is easy to get lost in the complexities and details of the ethical dilemma.

On the other hand, the weakness of this method is that it can keep individuals dependent on authority, it can be a very unreflective stance, and it often doesn't take contextual or situational elements into consideration. Most of us would try not to make our

final ethical decision using just one of the above approaches and would encourage Ousep to take all into consideration before finalising what to do—what is best for Roland, how can the relationship between Roland and Ousep guide him towards an ethical-based decision and how does duty, codes, the law all help in that final decision? What do my feelings tell me? Is my intuition pointing me in a direction I can trust? How can I reasonably work it through and what can others (authorities, codes, guidelines, my values, etc) contribute to my final choice of action?

In this short, but not uncommon, scenario, some of the complexities involved in making an ethical decision have been articulated. Ethical codes and how they might guide us to ethical conclusions have been touched on; the various stakeholders involved in this one ethical decision (Roland, his daughter, Ousep, Ousep's organisation, doctors, emergency teams, psychiatric wards, Ousep's profession and ethical complaints) have been mentioned.

Ousep has struggled to anticipate further outcomes on the decision he will make in the present, as well as the fallouts from different decisions in the future; the ambiguity of living with decisions when we will never know for sure what was the right/certain thing to do has been felt; the two different decisions that Ousep might make have been outlined and some possible foundations that might lead him to make one decision rather than the other have been traced.

The second reason we stay somewhat clear from delving into ethical dilemmas, i.e., that there are very few definite answers, has been mentioned above. A third reason is its sheer complexity. The case brought by Ousep shows some of the difficulties involved. However, the surface has been touched only lightly. Other potentially complex demands facing Ousep have not been aired, e.g., the legal aspects of his decision making and what legal responsibilities he might have in this case.

A very, very brief history of ethics

Ousep is left holding the phone debating whether he uses it or not. He is still wondering how he will

make the decision that may have life and death consequences. Not only is ethical decision making complex, but the whole field of which ethics is a part is a minefield of complexity. There are professions dedicated to ethics: moral philosophy and moral theology. Many of the greatest minds of history starting with Aristotle and his famous Nicomachean Ethics have tried to make sense of ethical and moral decisions. Thomas Aquinas, Kant, Descartes, Hume are but a few of the historical figures who have given us theories on how morals and ethics work. In our modern era others have taken up the challenge and researchers like Kohlberg (1981) and Rest (1986) have spent their entire academic lives looking at various stages of moral reasoning. Modern approaches to ethics deal with ethics of trust, ethics of care, relational ethics, feminist approaches to ethics, ecological ethics, and communicative ethics amongst others. Space does not allow a summary of all of these theories here, however, it is important to get a sense of the historical components that make up thinking on ethical and moral development.

Hugman (2005) describes four traditions that combine to make up the historical journey of moral understanding. These traditions are not discrete, in that one followed the next which then disappeared, rather, they interweave throughout history with one tradition at times having an ascendency. Figure 1 presents these four.

Tradition 1: the 'philosophy' era of ethics

This era is characterised by largely individual approaches where good character, virtue, trust and integrity are the features of the moral person. The Greek philosophers (Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates) were all exponents of this approach. Socrates famously accosted people in the streets of Athens and challenged them: 'do you take care of yourself?'. That is to say, are you thinking about what is truly of importance in life, and do you live your life accordingly? (W. Prall, personal communication, 2011). This tradition in ethical history comprises the era of a personal sense of honour and

the character of the person involved. There were no codes of ethics as such; rather an individual ethics combined at times with adherence to a common agreement (e.g., the Hippocratic Oath). This individual ethics was enforced by European Medieval culture: honour, chivalry, character, good name and reputation. We see it emerge in contemporary ethics in terms such as 'ethics of trust', 'ethics of care', 'relational ethics' and integrity as a foundation for ethical decision making. Its strength was to place responsibility on the individual and its weakness was the lack of any external controls or guidelines for the individual.

Tradition 2: the 'religion' era of ethics

This era was notable in its search for universal truths to guide people in making ethical decisions. It was espoused and lead by religion, in particular, Christianity. Its aim was to promote universal understandings of ethics, making ethics more of an objective rather than a subjective decision. Again, it emerges in modern ethics in seeking to define and describe the foundations of ethics and while it has moved away from universals

such as the ten commandments, it has still held onto its universal claims, e.g., the Ethical Frameworks of the *British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy* (BACP, 2007) and the *Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia* (PACFA, 2011) list a number of universal characteristics of the ethical person; respecting human rights and dignity, ensuring integrity

of relationships, increasing personal effectiveness, etc. The strength of this era was to provide clear objective truths to support the making of ethical decisions; its weakness was to take responsibility away from the individual who could end up practicing the minimum level of responsibility (what is the minimum I need to do in order to fulfil my responsibilities?).

Tradition 3: the 'rational' era of ethics

This era represents the role of reason and rationality in ethics and

locates reason as the method, and possibly the only method for making ethical decisions. This approach is clearer in the thought of someone like Kant, but its modern equivalent is undoubtedly Kohlberg (1981) whose research focused on the stages of moral reasoning. The strength of this approach is its ability to work out logically and rationally how and

It seems the bulk of ethical complaints arise from senior people in a profession.

why we make ethical decisions. Its weakness is that we may not practice what we have reasonably worked out. There is not a necessary follow-on implementation for a rational and clear ethical conclusion. It is based on the assumption that the best decisions are the ones that use reason to reach conclusions about what should or should not be done.

Tradition 4: the 'diversity' era of ethics

This tradition is the era of diversity and integration. This component in ethical and moral maturity consists in combining and integrating a number of approaches: situation ethics, relational ethics, ethics of care, emotional and communicative ethics, and ecological ethics. It looks at the contextual issues involved in ethics (situation ethics) with the particular demands of specific relationships. This approach also posits a 'moral intelligence', i.e., that we are born with a moral faculty that is fine-tuned by our context. Just as we have an innate facility to speak and then to particularise this in the environment and relationships that support us to speak a particular language, so too we are born with an innate ability to know what is right and wrong which is, in turn, activated by the contexts in which we grow up.

These traditions in ethical development all place the focus of ethical decision making in somewhat different areas: the individual makes the decision based on his or her moral character; we look to universal truths that guide, influence and sometimes dictate what we should do; we reason

Figure 1: Four Traditions in Ethical History (Hugman, 2005).

our way to what is right and good; or, we build our ethical decisions on relationships, fidelity, trust and our involvement in the world.

What is ethical maturity?

I want to introduce the five step model of Ethical Maturity by focusing first on what is meant by *'maturity'* and then offering a definition or description of it. In the past I have presented a model of ethical decision making that, on reflection, seems rather narrow and based too much on the rational approach to ethical decision making (Carroll, 1996). I want to take that model a step further and ask what ethical maturity might look like.

While not wanting to get involved in an intellectual debate and discussion of what maturity means, it is important for us to have some sense of the term and the activity involved if we are going to use it as a central tenet of ethical decision making. First of all, we are talking about human maturity. Many pack animals have clear codes of conduct and behaviour (what for them is right and wrong). These codes have been documented in animals such as horses (Don, 1997), wolves, dogs, etc. However, these codes of behaviour have not been chosen but are instinctual to other animals and are not open to choice depending on the demands of the situation, i.e. they are not mature decisions as such.

Neuroscience reminds us that we have three brains, or three parts to our brain—the reptilian brain, the mammalian or limbic brain, and the human, executive or Frontal Cortex brain. Each of these brains contributes to our moral sense and adds to our human ethical decision making. Humans, unlike other animals who have one or two of these brains, possess all three, and it seems that if we are to talk about human maturity in ethical navigation then we should include all three in that process.

The term maturity itself involves a movement, from immaturity to maturity. We all grow up. Infants make decisions differently from adolescents who in turn make decisions differently from adults. There is a process involved in moving to mature stances. Many theorists and researchers have outlined developmental theories

tracing the stages that individuals and groups go through on their journey towards different types of maturity, e.g., Erikson and his developmental stages, Kohlberg (1981), Gilligan (1982) and Rest (1986) and the stages of moral development, Perry (1970) and King and Kitchener (1994) on epistemological development. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986) have researched the stages women go through on their journeys of learning. Laske (2006) has connected coaching to developmental theory. There are even developmental models of supervision that trace the stages supervisors and supervisees go through as they move towards wisdom. While there has been criticism about the application of these theories in an overly rigid and linear fashion, they are helpful in making sense of development, growth, learning and maturity. Maturity is the end result of a process of development and can entail such terms as wisdom, reflection, thoughtfulness and consideration. There is movement from 'surface' to 'depth' learning (Moon, 2004; Jarvis, 2006; Brookfield, 2005). These theories are made up of more than simply the physical progression from one stage to another. Children become teenagers who become adults who face old age—all physical changes. There are psychological, emotional and rational developments that often accompany these physical stages. We can become mature in some areas of life, e.g., physical and/or rational, and still remain arrested or immature in other areas of life and living, e.g., emotional.

Maturity, as mentioned above, is not seen here as a fixed point in a developmental process by which we can now be seen to have reached a maturity destination. Some equate maturity with seniority and/or experience. E. Shaw (personal communication, March, 2011) suggests that *'some people stay more elaborate in their immaturity, with their advanced language masking their lack of evolution on a personal level'*. Ethical maturity in some areas of ethical decision making can exist alongside ethical immaturity (being ethically juvenile) in other areas. It seems the bulk of ethical complaints arise from senior people in a profession

(Quadrio, 1994, 1996, 2004; Koocher & Keith-Spiegel, 2008). Recently, I had an example of a very senior practitioner—who had written eloquently about boundaries and parameters in counselling himself—crossing an ethical boundary with a female client, and justifying what seemed to be a clear 'blind spot' in his ethical development. Ethical maturity is truly a never-ending task with practitioners in all fields of the helping professions needing to continue to develop ethical sensitivity.

From these developmental models, I have selected one that helps underpin the theory behind ethical maturity, the work of Baxter Magolda.

Baxter Magolda (1992) has gathered a number of other learning approaches into four domains of knowing, based on a continuum of beliefs that lead towards mature learning:

Domain 1: Absolute knowing

Knowledge is seen as certain. What I need to know is out there somewhere and I need to find the expert, book or code that tells me the 'truth'.

What would an ethical stance from this perspective look like?

Domain 2: Transitional knowing

In this domain doubt begins to emerge that there can be such certainty about everything. The learner reaches the stage that there is certainty but also some uncertainty.

What would an ethical stance from this perspective look like?

Domain 3: Independent knowing

This domain contains an awareness that knowledge is uncertain. Learners now take a position that everyone has a right to his or her opinion.

What would an ethical stance from this perspective look like?

Domain 4: Contextual knowing

In this domain knowledge has to be worked towards taking into consideration contexts, people, and relationships.

What would an ethical stance from this perspective look like?

Moon (2008) suggests that maturity here, and in other developmental theories, is based on several movements:

- from an absolutist (we are certain) to a relativist stance (it's not a given);
- from authority as the final arbiter to the individual taking responsibility;
- from single to multiple perspectives;
- from static to moving truth;
- from total objectivity to a consideration of environment and motivation;
- from rational alone to rational *and* emotional (thinking with feeling);
- from description of facts to widening narratives;
- from zero reflection to in-depth critical reflection;
- from simplicity to complexity;
- from no questions to asking questions;
- from subjective only (being stuck in our own view) to the ability to stand back from and be somewhat objective;
- from a blank sheet to an awareness of the impact of prior experience;
- from reflection to critical self-reflection (reviewing one's own reflective processes (p. 116–117).

These movements do not exclude each other. There may be some areas where I believe in absolute knowing and others where I have a contextual awareness of differences. However, it seems to me almost impossible to have ethical maturity if there is no awareness of ethical relativity—of how *knowing* is constructed and co-constructed. This does not mean that individuals who subscribe to a totally absolutist form of knowing are not moral or ethical. In fact, it is quite mature to have values that are absolute and non-negotiable. However, to have ethical maturity I would argue that you need to be able to adopt a relativist stance when needed—fundamentalists, in my book, are not ethically mature.

Five components of ethical maturity

From the above we can begin to describe what 'ethical maturity' means. I offer the following definition:

Ethical maturity involves having the reflective, rational and emotional capacity to decide actions are right and wrong or good and better, having the resilience and courage to implement those decisions, being

accountable for ethical decisions made (publicly or privately), and being able to learn from and live with the experience.

This needs a bit of unpacking. The first four features of a person who is capable of making ethical decisions of a mature nature are being able to:

1. reflect

This feature involves the ability to examine and look in some depth at various aspects of the issue (see Carroll, 2009, 2010). Zero reflection is a slippery slope to possible unethical stances. Reflection is included because it is the mature, the adult, and the thoughtful position to take on ethics. We will see in Part II how it becomes an essential feature of mature ethical decision making. Reflection brings mindfulness, attention and deliberation to the process of ethical decision making.

2. rationalise or reason

This is the second feature or characteristic of ethical maturity. The ability to work logically and again thoughtfully towards conclusions and decisions. To think critically and examine in detail using rational approaches is a key feature of being human and one of our best gifts. It is this feature that makes us different from other animals who act according to codes of conduct built into their lives. Rationality is our ability to reason, to reflect, to imagine and to consider in depth why we should choose one course of action over another.

3. be in touch with our feelings and emotions about what is happening

While the history of ethical and moral understanding often gives little sway to emotions in making ethical decisions, our awareness of the role of emotions in decision making in general has increased over the years and insights from neuroscience have

helped us place emotion more centrally in the making of ethical decisions, e.g., *'Psychopaths shed light on the crucial subset of decision making that's referred to as morality. Psychopaths have no emotional brains—a broken amygdala. When you are confronted with a moral dilemma the brain and the unconscious automatically generate an emotional response (this is what psychopaths cannot do). The madman (as Chesterton remarked) is not the man who has lost his reason. The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason. After the emotions have made their decision the rational circuits in the cortex are activated. People come up with persuasive reasons to justify their moral intuition'* (Lehrer, 2009, 165).

4. note the difference between intention and action

Fine (2007) captures this beautifully in her work on the brain. *'Our appraisals of others also fail to take the same generous account of good intentions that we allow ourselves…they (volunteers in a research project) generously judged*

> *…it seems to me almost impossible to have ethical maturity if there is no awareness of ethical relativity—of how knowing is constructed and co-constructed.*

themselves by what they wanted to do, rather than by what they actually did… we give others less credit for their good intentions than we give ourselves for ours. The masterful hypocrisy of the immoral brain demands a certain grudging respect. It lazily applies nothing but the most superficial and disapproving analysis of others' misdemeanours, while bending over backwards to reassure that you can do no wrong' (p. 65).

It seems to me that all four areas (the ability to reflect, the capacity to involve our logical and rational capability, being in touch with what our emotions and feelings are telling us, and to note the difference between intention and action) combine in the realm of ethics to create some form of ethical maturity. All four seem necessary to me to enable decision

making at its most excellent point. It may not be necessary to use all four in all decisions we make, but access to them is essential if we are to show ethical maturity. A focus on one to the detriment of the others can result in missing key ethical points:

- concentrate on reason alone and you can end up out of relationship and unreflective;
- concentrate on emotion alone and you can be driven by impulsivity;
- concentrate on reflection alone and you can end up navel gazing.

These four play major parts in mature ethical decision making but often come to the fore at different times in the ethical decision-making process. Figure 2 outlines the five steps that together comprise ethical maturing. While somewhat sequential, they are not linear.

A more detailed consideration of each of these steps highlights the need for a combination of knowledge, skills and support to be able to implement them. What follows is an outline of the five steps and suggestions for ways in which we can build up and/ or implement each step. An exercise is also suggested at the end of each step to help examine where each of us is in respect to that element.

Ethical maturity (elements in mature ethical decision making)

1. Fostering ethical sensitivity and thoughtfulness (moral education)

- building a moral compass through making ethical decisions;
- alert and vigilant to ethical issues;
- supervision, reflection, training to fine-tune ethical sensitivity;
- self-awareness: exploring my values, power issues, what hooks me;
- knowing the difference between intention and action;
- alert to the pressures and stresses of work that might make me more vulnerable to unethical behaviour;
- managing and working with difference, uncertainty, risk and inequality;
- being aware of what responsibility means and what faithfulness to relationship is about;
- committed to excellence and high standards (with the welfare of the client as central).

Exercise: Articulate your own moral code (DNA). What is the implicit (or explicit) real moral base from which you work? *'Where from within you do your moral decisions come?'* (Scharmer, 2007). This is not about your moral ideals or espoused theory of morality but what actually motivates you to act morally and ethically?

2. Ethical discernment and decision making (moral judgement):

- knowledge of ethical theories, principles, codes, rules and applications;
- systemic approach: holding together the needs of individuals, community, society and professions;
- being able to integrate emotion, intuition, reason and decision making;
- aware of our own ethical stance (foundational beliefs);
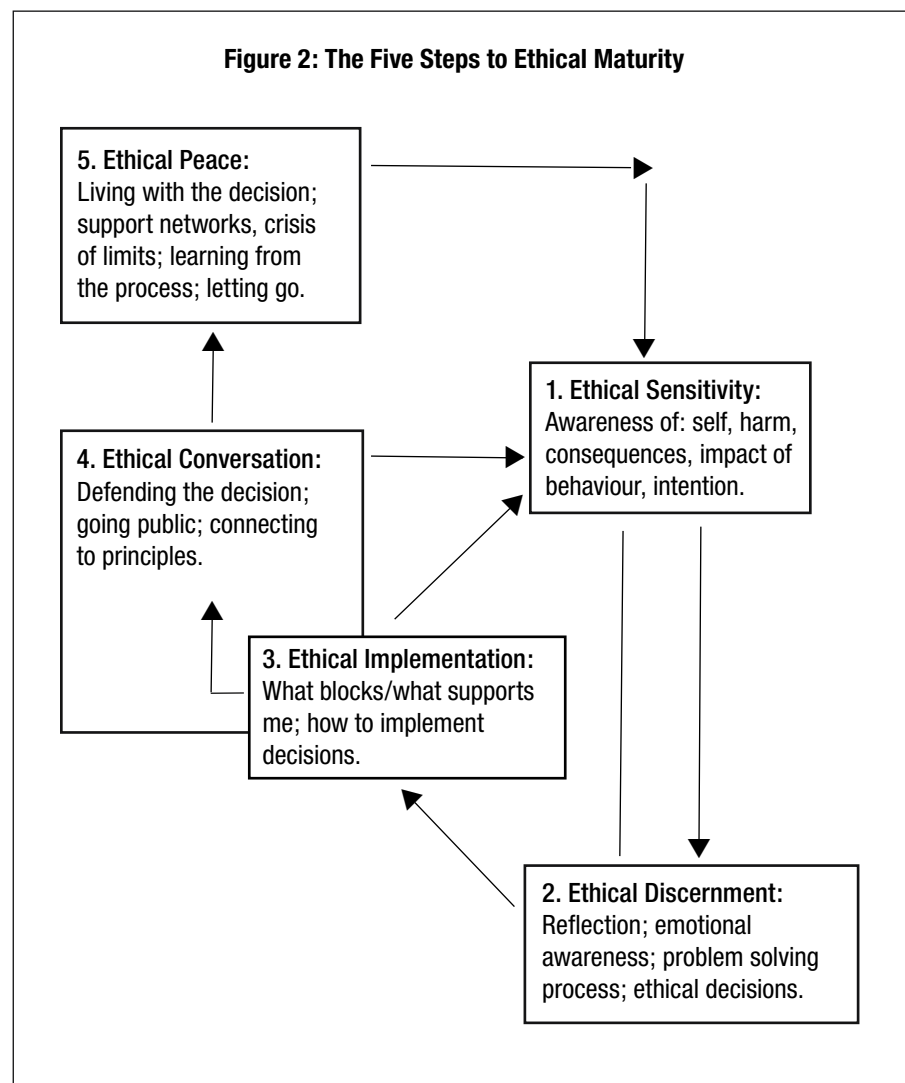- alert to the assumptions we bring

to ethical discernment;
- knowing ourselves—our vulnerabilities, biases;
- a clear problem solving model for ethical decisions;
- being able to reflect deeply (reflection, self-reflection and critical self-reflection);
- having dialogues and discussions with others (especially with those who might take a different ethical viewpoint);
- using supervision.

Exercise: How do you actually make ethical decisions?

3. Ethical implementation (ethical capability and moral duty):

- What steps do I need to take to implement my ethical decision?
- What people are involved and who needs to be told?
- What restraints are there on me not to implement this ethical decision (politics, protection of

Figure 2: The Five Steps to Ethical Maturity

5. Ethical Peace: Living with the decision; support networks, crisis of limits; learning from the process; letting go.

4. Ethical Conversation: Defending the decision; going public; connecting to principles.

1. Ethical Sensitivity: Awareness of: self, harm, consequences, impact of behaviour, intention.

3. Ethical Implementation: What blocks/what supports me; how to implement decisions.

2. Ethical Discernment: Reflection; emotional awareness; problem solving process; ethical decisions.

someone of some organisation, rationalisation, my image etc)? How might I argue myself out of implementing it?
- What support is needed by me (of others) to implement this decision?
- What risks am I taking in implementing my ethical decision?
- What other ethical issues arise as a result of implementing this decision?
- What 'competing commitment' might militate against my implementing this decision to which I am committed? (Kegan & Lahey, 2009)

Exercise: What helps and hinders you in implementing ethical decisions you make?

4. Ethical accountability (moral defence)

- If my decision were to receive heavy media coverage, would I blush in shame or beam with pride?
- Could I explain my ethical decision clearly and honourably to those I love (my children, my closest friends, my partner?)
- Would my personal integrity remain intact if my decision became known? And if not, am I willing to compromise it for the sake of doing the expedient thing, or merely pleasing others?
- Could I defend my decision before my professional organisation's ethics committee?
- Would I be happy and supportive if my colleagues, friends or family members were to make the same decision if they were in my shoes?

Exercise: How do you defend the ethical decisions you make? Privately? Publicly?

5. Ethical sustainability and peace (living with the ambiguities of ethical decision making):

- How can I deal with the anxiety around the final decision?
- How can I let go of the situation and the dilemma?
- Can I accept the limitations involved in the whole experience? (e.g., not having all the facts, living with hindsight)
- What have I learned from the experience?

- What would I do differently the next time I had a similar ethical dilemma or problem?
- What personal and professional support do I need to live with the consequences of this decision?
- What help is available to me if I find myself ruminating or thinking obsessively about the decision I made?

Exercise: How do you take care of yourself when you have made an ethical decision? Especially one that contains a risk?

Building the components/ steps of moral maturity

In the 2010 Melbourne two-day training programme participants considered the five steps in small groups and proposed suggestions to help or support individuals or groups in each step of ethical maturity. Appendix 1 provides a summary of their suggestions with additions from other sources.

Conclusion

The first part of this two-part article presents a theory of ethical maturity comprising five steps (not necessarily stages). The emphasis is on the term 'maturity' and how practitioners in the helping professions can move from an 'ethics of duty', which is often about what I should or ought to do to an 'ethics of excellence'—how can I be faithful to the highest standards of relational care? The movement is towards a grown-up ethics where individuals take responsibility for their actions and behaviours and incorporate in-depth reflection, mindfulness, diversity, compassion and courage into their decision making. It also begins to look at how mature people make decisions. This will be the focus of Part II to be published in the next issue of this journal.

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Step 1: Fostering ethical sensitivity

To build a moral compass and foster ethical sensitivity we need:

- awareness of our own values (religious; role models from family, work, home)—not just espoused values (the values we say we believe in) but our values-in-action, the real values to which we subscribe (Sartre once said, 'I know my values by my actions').
- awareness of why we do what we do—our motivation. Knowing our own hidden agendas can help us to notice when we are tempted to be less than ethically mature (e.g., 'I love the power this gives me'; 'I am flattered that I am needed', etc);
- knowledge of how we tend to use power ('power over', 'power with') to gain insight into when we might feel the need to rescue, give answers, or be authoritative;
- a capacity to care for self—physically, emotionally, mentally and spirituality—creates the energy to notice, think and feel clearly about ethical problems and dilemmas as they present;
- to embrace our fears and hypocrisies in order to recognise and accept some of our limitations;
- a capacity to reflect deeply and honestly to identify when our own needs predominate;
- empathy which allows us to see other perspectives;
- to 'relate with' rather than 'relate to', which allows us to see individuals with differences rather than as objects or commodities.

Step 2: Discerning ethical decisions

To make mature ethical decisions requires us to:

- be open to, stand back from, and keep bigger pictures in view—to think individually, relationally and systemically;
- use others as resources, e.g., supervision, consultancy, codes of ethics, etc;
- slow down the pace, reflect and keep tabs on what is happening to us and others;
- be aware of how we make decisions and our strengths and limitations in this process;
- access feelings, hunches and intuitions to see if clear and definitive answers present;
- trust intuition at times;
- notice any external pressures seeking to influence our decision making.

Step 3: Implementing ethical decisions

To implement decisions we need to:

- know there can be a gap between deciding what to do and implementation of the decision;

- notice obstacles—fear, lack of time, collusion, competing values, fear of repercussions, ambiguity;
- consider what might stop or block movement from decision to action;
- avoid procrastination;
- be aware of competing commitments and fears that might stop us acting.

Step 4: Justifying and defending the decision made

To help and support us at this stage we can:

- keep a journal and/or reflective notes of our thoughts, ideas and actions, and document what is happening;
- be honest and not defensive—notice where there are risks, lack of clarity, differences in viewpoints;
- allow conflict and disagreement—hold our own space;
- imagine providing rationales for decisions that allow us to clarify why we did what we did;
- move from a defensive position to one of openness, curiosity and honesty. This demands great courage when we are concerned we have not made, or were influenced to make, a decision that was not the best one.

Step 5: Ethical peace and sustainability

To live with our decisions we need to:

- accept lingering doubts and tolerate uncertainty, while considering other possible scenarios and endings;
- continue to learn from what happened—even if it means reviewing the case in the light of new experiences or information;
- be compassionate and self-accepting—know we are dealing with issues that often have no right answer;
- use strategies that assist us to avoid rumination and obsessive reflection, e.g., meditation, exercise, pets;
- accept we have limited control over the contexts in which things happen;
- find ways to articulate our thoughts and feelings, e.g., writing and journaling;
- have forums where we can speak about the issues and get support;
- use hindsight gained from our mistakes and poor decisions to let go of perfectionism;
- recognise if any apologies are needed;
- accept that we might make a different decision were we asked to make the decision again;
- let go and, at times, forgive.

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