Making Ethical Decisions, Resolving Ethical Dilemmas

Gini Graham Scott

Executive Book Summary by Max Poelzer

About the Author

Gini Scott Graham is an author, consultant, and public speaker who specializes in law, sociology, professional development, and workplace relationships.

Overview

"What we consider wrong, bad, or unsuitable behavior may be perfectly acceptable from someone else's perspective." p. 36

Since the 1960s and 1970s, Western society has experienced a breakdown of personal morality and shared ethical codes creating an ambiguous ethical climate in which each individual draws on different values, perspectives, and judgments to inform their decision making processes. This breakdown of common ethical reasoning has led to confusion and misunderstandings in personal and professional settings; therefore, there is a need for a standard of social values to regain our moral grounding. This is the claim the author puts forward in her book, which is comprised of interviews of several individuals regarding important decisions that they have made at different points in their life either in their relationships with friends, family, lovers, colleagues, superiors, subordinates, or clients. These surveys reveal that there are several approaches that individuals may choose when making choices including, following religious codes, listening to intuition, adhering to professional ethics, accepting groups norms, or making practical decisions based on logical rationalizations. The approach(es) that each individual chooses to follow may differ depending on the context of each situation, such as the nature of the relationship between the person and other parties involved, the importance or stakes for the individual, and whether the decision is a professional or personal one. Nevertheless, the author notes that the approach that an individual follows typically aligns with their moral outlook, whether it is egoistic or altruistic, and ideological foundation, whether the person is liberal or conservative. Given the wide range of sources for ethical decision making, it is difficult to know what is the right choice and what is the wrong choice since each individual will have a different ethical perspective. Thus, the author seeks to create a map of ethical decision making, which describes the values and personal traits that lead to certain decisions being taken, in order to develop mutual understanding and to reduce conflict.

Part I: Introduction

Scott contends that, at this moment in human history more than at any other point, it is necessary to reflect on the ethical values and principles that inform our decisions so that it may be possible to develop a personal guide for how to negotiate dilemmas and resolve internal and interpersonal conflicts. Failure to reflect on our own principles, she argues, could cause us to become ethically disoriented since there are so many competing sources of values in our society, including media, popular culture, and other people, which may advocate for unethical behaviours and attitudes, including excessive greed and selfishness. Scott argues that situation is a recent phenomenon that has emerged since the 1980s due to the decline of community values and religion, as well as, the rise of industrialization, capitalism, and consumerism. As a result, standard ethical codes that had previously been established and followed either by a geographic community or a faith community have been replaced by personal ethics.

Thus, Scott seeks to identify what principles and approaches individuals use to inform their ethical decision making practices. Through a combination of a literature review of other ethical theorists and original qualitative research, she identifies eight approaches:

1. Looking to moral principles (institutional codes)

2. Applying moral strategies (utilitarian)

3. Evaluating the situation (situational)

4. Following one's intuition (gut level)

5. Following the pleasure or power principle (personal gain)

6. Seeking the greater good (altruism)

7. Innovating (new rules)

8. Rational analysis (benefits and costs)

"Make sure everything is done ethically. Within reason, of course."

Ethical Choices Map

	Style of Choosing		Orientation	
	Rational	Intuitive	Other	Self
Philosophy of Values — Pragmatist				
Moralist				
Attitude to Rules — Follower				
Innovator				

The author constructs the "Ethical Choices Map" as an instrument that one can use to assess their own decision making style in a given situation or the style of another person. She notes that traditional individuals, whose ethical rules are deeply ingrained because of a personal history that may include an upbringing strongly influenced by religion or other institutions, are likely to occupy the inner corners, being followers, moralists, intuitive, and other-oriented. Individuals who do not have the same strong adherence to traditional ethical codes are more likely to occupy the outer corners, being innovative in breaking/making rules, thinking through situations rationally, taking a pragmatic approach to each situation, and being self-oriented.

Despite the fact that, in the first section of the book, Scott bemoans the absence of a strong ethical code within our society, which would align with the traditional approach, she explains that the purpose of the map is not to judge whether an individual is more or less ethical due to the way that their decisions would be characterized according to the categories of the map. Rather, it is a tool that can be used to determine how one is apt to behave in different situations and identify a possible relationship between their choices and their personal characteristics or background.

Part II: How People Resolve Ethical Dilemmas and Make Choices

Much of the book is comprised of interviews that the author has conducted with subjects who were asked about various instances when they had faced a difficult ethical dilemma. They recounted the process that they went through in order to reach a decision on how to act and what choice to make in a given situation. Their answers revealed that each of the four dimensions of the map should be thought of as continuums. For example, in regards to the philosophy of values, people could either be moralist, moralist-pragmatist, pragmatist-moralist, or simply pragmatist based on their decision in a specific situation.

Among her subjects, Scott discovered that three of the dimensions, "Style of Choosing," "Orientation," and "Philosophy of Values," can be directly related, if not attributed, to the characteristics and backgrounds of each individual. Females were more likely to be intuitive and other-oriented while the reverse was true for male subjects. Whether an individual was a pragmatist or a moralist corresponded with a subject's secularity or religiosity, respectively. Scott notes that there was no strong connection between background and an individual's attitude to the rules.

Nature of the Author's Survey Sample

The author interviewed a small group of 28 individuals evenly split between genders. Apart from gender representation, the group did not reflect American society as a whole. Most of the participants were highly educated, under the age of 50, Caucasian, and were employed either as professionals or in creative fields. At several points throughout the book, Scott makes large generalizations about certain segments of the population based on the responses she received from the small sample. For example, she writes, "When one is in a lower-income financial status, one must be more self-oriented to survive" (p. 85). In her attempt to draw connections between personal traits and decision making orientations, Scott, at times, makes general claims that are supported through the answers her subjects provide but might not hold up if scaled to a larger group.

Part III: Applying the Ethical Choices Model in One's Life

Where a person situates him or herself within the map will often vary depending on how much the individual values certain traits in general and in particular contexts. For example, an individual may consider innovation in their approach to rules, but perhaps in certain circumstances, such as in legal situations, this same individual may place higher value on following the rules of an institution. Scott discovered that, among her subjects, there was a general tendency towards intuitive decision making for personal choices, whereas, pragmatism and rationalism where used when the dilemmas were professional in nature. Not only do the values that shape our decisions shift depending on the situational context, they also change throughout a person's life.

Determining one's personal decision making approach is an ever evolving process. There are various reasons for this evolution, including our exposure to different sources of ethics, our changing priorities, shifting responsibilities, and gaining life experience. In our youth, we may be focused primarily on our own personal and professional development as we go through school or attempt to begin our careers. They might be more likely to take a more pragmatic approach and make decisions that maximize their personal gains. At this point in our life, we have not gained many life experiences, so our values are likely to come from a limited number of sources, such as our parents or religious faith. Adults are likely to be established in their career and have started a family. Thus, they will likely have a more other-oriented outlook in their personal life and their workplace. However, Scott contends that this shifts back to self-interested decision making later in life when adults are reaching the end of their careers and their children have grown up.

"…when I've tried to point out something wrong, which is hurting a lot of people…I've found that officials and managers often don't want to hear that – but if I think it's important enough, I'll press on, and I think that comes to a great extent from my parents." - Ari, p. 163

A common trait of most of the interview subjects is that they attributed receiving their core values from their parents. The basic principles that parents provide to their children are come down to the difference between right and wrong. These include:

- Be honest, don't lie, cheat or steal
- Be responsible and self-reliant
- Have a strong social conscience

Regardless of the age of the interview subjects, their life experiences, or orientation on the ethical choices map, or whether their relationship with their parents was negative or non-existent, many individuals remarked that this early influence impacted their values and behaviours throughout their life in both personal and professional settings.

Part IV: Resolving Ethical Dilemmas in Different Situations

People make important decisions everyday and may not take into account ethical considerations or even acknowledge that personal ethics may play a role in certain dilemmas. However, Scott argues that we should reflect on our values in order to make the decision that is best for us, which does not necessarily mean the choice that will provide us with the greatest personal gain but the decision with which we can live most contentedly.
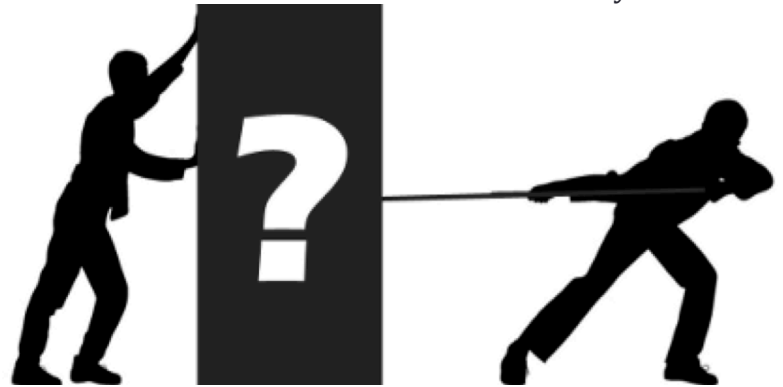
Dilemmas are rarely characterized by choices between right and wrong. Rather, there are often multiple push and pull factors that can influence the direction one chooses when making a decision. Influences may be internal conflicts over deciding whether one should do what is in one's own self-interest or do something that would allow one to serve others. Other people may also figure into our decision making process, since the advice of parents or workplace superiors might weigh on our choices heavily but may not always align with our own personal values. Finally, financial considerations can also serve as an obstacle to choosing the most ethical path or a motivation for selecting a less ethical choice. Ethical decision making is often complex; not only is the ethical choice not always clear, the presence of competing interests further complicates our efforts to resolve conflicts or make the best decision.

Thus, the ethical choices map offers individuals with a tool to help provide clarity in the decision making process. By using this tool, it is possible to identify our own personal ethics and compare or contrast these values with the values associated with each possible decision. The choice and its ethical characteristics or consequences, which most closely aligns with our ethics, will likely be the choice that we will be most happy to live with.

Different Situations and Ethical Dilemmas

The ethical choices map can be used in almost any situation in which an important decision must be taken. Scott provides anecdotes from her interview subjects about ethical dilemmas relating to family, work dating, organizations, and public. Perhaps most significantly, the author provides a brief description of how we can use the ethical choices map when we find ourselves dealing with individuals whom we perceive to be unethical. Using the map can allow us to understand what is the most effective way to deal with difficult individuals. There is no ideal option, however, selecting a response that corresponds to our ethics can minimize conflict and unease.

Critique

Although Gini Graham Scott introduces her book by criticizing the current ethical climate as plagued by ambiguity due to the breakdown of institutionalized common codes of ethics and even identifies the need for standard ethical principles that guide the morals of a society, she ultimately appears to recognize that such an ideal is likely not possible. Towards the end of her book, Scott recognizes that the interview subjects who have taken part in the construction of this book represent a small portion of the global population. Despite religious backgrounds that included Judaism, Christianity, Catholicism, Atheism, and New Age faiths, most of the individuals were culturally American and Caucasian. She further notes that if surveys had been conducted with individuals from more diverse backgrounds, her results may have differed significantly and the categories within the ethical choices map may not have been adequate.

The main contribution that this book makes to the field of ethical theory is the ethical choices map that Scott advances as a way to facilitate ethical decision making and the resolution of conflicts. The personal anecdotes of her interview subjects, which comprise the majority of the book, are intended to demonstrate the applicability of the ethical choices map. Thanks to the very general nature of the continuums included in the map, it is both simple to understand this tool and easy to situate any story at some point within the map. Thus, most of the stories add little to the understanding of the tool and tend to be more redundant than insightful.

Relevance for the Public Service

The public service, like many professional sectors, has its own established code of ethics that guides employees in their professional conduct and in decision making processes. Public servants are called to fulfill the agenda of the government, respect the democratic process, and serve Canadian citizens with respect and equity. At the same time, public servants are expected to approach decisions using logic and pragmatism, considering both the feasibility of pursuing a course of action, considering the means to achieve the goal, and think about the possible consequences of the activity. On the ethical choices map, public servants will fall somewhere between "follower," "pragmatist," "rational," and "other" oriented, with variations depending on how much value each individual gives to each element.

Discussion Questions

1. Is it essential for an organization to have a standard professional code of ethics?
2. Is it always possible or necessary to take a rational approach to ethical decision making? Is it appropriate to use intuitive skills in a professional setting?
3. The author offers the ethical choices map as a tool to understand other people's choices. Do you think it is possible to identify the values that inform the choices of others? Would this practice reduce conflict or not?
4. When making decisions in a professional setting, what balance should we strike between personal ethics and the values of our organization?

Scott, Gini Graham. *Making Ethical Choices, Resolving Ethical Dilemmas*. St. Paul, Minnesota: Paragon House, 1998.