


COMMENTARY

Resolving ethical dilemmas is a matter of developing our practical wisdom

Georgi P. Yankov 

Development Dimensions International (DDI)

Corresponding author. Email: Georgi.Yankov@ddiworld.com

“Neither by nature, then, nor contrary to nature do the virtues arise in us; rather we are adapted by nature to receive them, and are made perfect by habit.”

(Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, II.1, 1103a20–25)

Drawing on Martin Hoffman’s empathy-based information-processing model, Lefkowitz (2021) suggests five paradigmatic forms of ethical dilemma. These forms are content-free and independent of the contexts within which ethical dilemmas occur. Lefkowitz reports that fewer than one third (30.9%) of the dilemmatic situations that were provided by the surveyed respondents were resolved positively, and about the same number were resolved negatively (31.7%). Given the mostly applied composition of the surveyed sample (54.9% of all respondents), it is evident that industrial-organizational (I-O) psychology practitioners urgently need training in resolving ethical dilemmas at work.

Lefkowitz (2021) conceptually delineated the ethical dilemmas that I-O psychologists face but did not address how to resolve them. For example, how are I-O psychologists to connect the three metadimensions (justice, welfare, and virtue), the ethical principles of the APA, and the unique contexts of each ethical dilemma they find themselves in? Lefkowitz calls this missing connection a “conceptual deficiency.” He suggests that the five paradigmatic forms can help us successfully connect the abstract normative principles and the idiosyncratic ethical dilemmas of everyday professional practice. Lefkowitz goes on to explore the formal dimension of ethical dilemmas with its motivational, cognitive, emotional, evaluative, prescriptive, and stressor elements but, again, does not explain how we are to operationalize and use the elements to resolve the pressing ethical dilemmas in our practice.

In this commentary I would like to extend Lefkowitz’s (2021) analysis with a discussion about resolving ethical dilemmas. Specifically, I strive to emphasize the roles of practical wisdom and professional education as prerequisites for successfully resolving ethical dilemmas. I also turn to the classics and moral philosophy where the topic of ethical dilemmas naturally resides.

Alasdair MacIntyre, one of the most influential moral philosophers of the 20th century, once commented that if two volumes were published, the first containing the entire preceding philosophical literature concerning ethical dilemmas from Plato to W. D. Ross and the second devoted to publications on ethical dilemmas in the last 30 years, the second volume would be by far the

larger (MacIntyre, 1990, p. 367). Humbly heeding MacIntyre's warning, I will approach ethical dilemmas from the vantage point of virtue ethics¹ and its most renowned contributor: Aristotle.

In virtue ethics, ethical dilemmas are decided by the moral agent's² practical wisdom (called *phronesis* by Aristotle) only as effectively and positively as the moral agent has grown in excellence or virtue (*arête*). Specifically, Aristotle defines practical wisdom as concerning human things about which we deliberate (Aristotle 350 B.C.E./2009, 1141b8–11) and further clarifies that this deliberation has to be not just how to serve our own interests well but how to act and live well *in general* (Aristotle 350 B.C.E./2009, 1140a25–28). Virtue ethics are deeply humanistic because they assume that we all have some average amount of each of the human virtues³ and that we almost never can attain what Philippa Foot (1978) calls “perfect virtue.” Thus, virtue ethics takes us as we *are*—imperfect moral agents torn apart between several equally right things to do.

Clarifying the concept of virtue is key to understanding our moral imperfection. In virtue ethics, each virtue is like a personality disposition to feel in a certain way and to be motivated to do certain things. Let us give a practical example from our profession. An I-O psychologist with high degree of honesty would feel bad not telling the truth and will be motivated to report a manager who asks for the disclosure of personal information from an engagement survey.

Thinking of virtues as dispositions that are beneficial and nice to have, however, is misleading. In ethical dilemmas, or, better, in high-stakes ethical decision making, a moral agent who has high degree of practical wisdom will always do what a moral agent having a nice disposition (e.g., the personality factor of agreeableness) may or may not do. It is nice to be honest, but if that is our sole criterion for acting virtuously, then we resemble good children who never lie *except when* they might get a treat they really, really love. Being of nice temperament does not guarantee that the moral agent will do the right thing. On the contrary, a moral agent who possesses high degree of practical wisdom should strive to never lie and should recognize the temptations and implications of lying in all possible situations.

In this respect, we, not as I-O psychologists, but as psychologists in general, should be particularly good in appraising situations involving human motivations. We should excel at recognizing how the consequences of our actions in a particular situation would affect a particular individual. For example, imagine a consultant has been hired to coach the narcissistic director of a certain company. The latter might soon be buying a lot of coaching services from the consultant's employing organization. A consultant possessing high degree of practical wisdom should not try to cover up the narcissism if the director requests interpretation of their personality assessment results. However, not lying, in this case also requires strongly considering the way to report the results—in the interest of successfully coaching and helping the director. At this point the ethical dilemma is resolved. Even if the director is displeased and does not pursue the intended business with the consultant's organization, the consultant has already done the practically wise thing in this situation.

¹I have selected virtue ethics as a viable theoretical framework on ethical dilemmas because the other influential moral theories do not allow for the existence of genuine ethical dilemmas. First, deontological rationalist theories of morality (e.g., Immanuel Kant, Thomas Aquinas) uphold only a few moral principles. From the latter, applying an indefinite number of additional logical premises, specific requirements for contextualized, day-to-day moral decisions can be deduced (Donagan, 1996). Second, command theories of morality (e.g., divine command as in monotheistic religions or communitarian ideologies such as Marxism) also do not allow for moral dilemmas because the source of moral principles (God or the community) cannot be questioned. In command theories, the moral agent accepts the commands of God or the will of the community. Third, utilitarian theories (e.g., Henry Sidgwick, R. M. Hare) do not allow for ethical dilemmas because these theories presuppose the existence of the “greatest happiness” principle, which organizes our intuition-derived moral rules. When an ethical dilemma arises, the moral agent resolves it by selecting the action that would produce as much happiness as possible for as many people as possible.

²*Moral agent* in philosophical language denotes an individual who is able to tell right from wrong and is responsible for their actions.

³The cardinal virtues are courage, temperance, wisdom, and justice, whereas the secondary are honesty, benevolence, sincerity, wittiness, and so on.

Startling as it may seem, Aristotle, 2,343 years ago, gave us the most systematic analysis of practical wisdom. For him practical wisdom is actually a virtue too, and it belongs to the intellectual side of the soul where true knowledge resides. Practical wisdom is not like cleverness, which seeks to take the right steps to *any* end, because wisdom targets only *good* purposes (Foot, 1978). Instead, practical wisdom is the work of the conscious and motivated human will, a will that perseveres in what is the right thing to do. Now, if to develop the virtues of character one needs to develop the virtue of practical reason, what does this process look like? How does this all relate to discussion of helping I-O psychologists resolve practical ethical dilemmas?

I believe that the answer lies in I-O psychologists acquiring and perfecting the habit of using their practical wisdom to resolve ethical dilemmas. What this acquisition of habit can realistically look like? As a scientific society with high expectations and standards for our professional education, an easy and straightforward way to habituate future I-O psychologists is, perhaps, the introduction of professional ethics courses in the curricula of our I-O graduate programs (master's and doctorate). Such courses are taught for accountants, architects, ministers, medical doctors, lawyers, and many more professions. Professional ethics courses apply moral philosophy to the specific ethical situations that professionals in each field face. The goal is to help professionals think holistically and train them good decision making for the difficult, ethically laden situations they would face in practice.

In our field such courses can be taught by I-O psychologists with solid grounding in the humanities. Exposing future professionals to the forms of ethical dilemmas and as many specific cases within each form would help them to develop the habit of being virtuous. This is extremely important because, for Aristotle, we become virtuous by repeating virtuous actions (*The Nicomachean ethics*, 1103b14–22; 1103b31–32)—that is, by practicing being virtuous. Just like learning a language or a craft proverbially requires 10,000 hours of exercise, one needs to form the habit of using their practical reason and perfect it bit by bit over a long period. The goal is to reach an ethical state of character, to fully develop our character, to constantly habituate ourselves to acting in the right way in every possible set of professional circumstances.

For example, to successfully resist temptation, which is one of Lefkowitz's (2021) five forms, I-O psychologists need to practice abstaining and removing self-serving motives regardless of whether they are researchers, HR managers, consultants, or professors. Every time temptation may come in different forms, with respect to different people, and with different odds for success if one succumbs. However, a practically wise I-O psychologist will have to persevere in their will and find the way not to succumb to the temptation. In this sense, to form the habit of using one's practical wisdom is to be constantly habituating and accustoming one's character. This process can be likened to dynamic equilibrium—the constant habituation both produces virtuous acts and makes it possible to be virtuous in varied circumstances (Lockwood, 2013).

Of course, developing all virtues of character maximally is impossible, but training ourselves and doing the virtuous behaviors is what effectively makes us virtuous. In this sense, we, the I-O psychologists, will certainly make mistakes and fail to resolve Lefkowitz's (2021) five forms of ethical dilemmas right out of graduate school. Some of us might be better at resolving role conflicts, and others might be better at resisting coercion. That is why I call our field to consider exposing graduate students to as many different circumstances of the kinds of ethical dilemmas as possible. The current business, technological, societal, and political realities should alert us to the possibility of being confronted with ethical dilemmas more and more often in the future. Are we ready to resolve them at a rate greater than 30.9%?

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Cite this article: Yankov, GP. (2021). Resolving ethical dilemmas is a matter of developing our practical wisdom. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology* **14**, 331–334. <https://doi.org/10.1017/iop.2021.74>