Ethical Decision-making: How Twenty Years of Philosophy Changed my Life

JC van der Merwe

This article focuses on the process of ethical decision-making. I will begin with some reflections on my personal and academic life thus far to illustrate how I became interested in ethical decision-making and to discuss the influence that thinkers, such as Danie Strauss, had on my thinking. In the second part of the article I will explain my own approach to ethics, which will be followed by some remarks regarding specific philosophical tools that can be applied to ethical and moral issues.

1. Introduction

Contributing to a festschrift for Danie Strauss is an honor and at the same time, a daunting task. Given his extraordinary philosophical knowledge and skill I am reluctant to enter into a dialogue with him on topics such as an alternative formulation of the first main law of thermo-dynamics or the philosophical orientations intrinsic to the natural sciences, not to mention anything relating to Dooyeweerd or computers. However, the philosophy of Danie Strauss still has a significant influence on my own thinking and although the topic that I am going to discuss is not generally associated with his academic work, I hope it will highlight some of these influences.

My interest in ethical decision-making began with a simple (!) question: Why do I think about things the way I do? In principle this could be attributed to the influences of Danie Strauss, Kobus Smit and Johann Visagie on my early thinking. Once I realized that this question was triggered in many instances by specifically ethical issues, other questions followed: How does one go about making an ethical decision? Is it possible to identify and analyze a specific process involved in ethical decision-making? Is there more to ethical decision-making than merely having an opinion or, is it simply a case of trusting your gut feeling?

Even though I have been formally engaged with these questions for the last five years, clear cut answers have up to now eluded me. (To some this might

sound like an excuse for still working on my Ph.D.) However, this does not imply that the project thus far has been devoid of meaning. To the contrary, the journey has become enriched with more in-depth questions and has been filled with significant insights, some of which I will elaborate upon in this essay. I will begin with some reflections on my life thus far to illustrate how I became interested in ethical decision-making, after which some of the philosophical tools that might shed some light on the latter process will be identified.

2. Thirty eight years: reflecting on the different phases and faces

Ethical decision-making was not something that I consciously reflected upon during the first eighteen years of my life. One of the reasons for this being the fact that most of the ethical decisions concerning my life were made on my behalf. I was born in the late 1960's in South Africa and brought up in a traditional Afrikaner home. My parents were conservative Afrikaners, both politically (supporters of the National Party) and religiously (members of the Dutch Reformed Church). They told me in no uncertain terms what was right and what was wrong, good and bad, acceptable and unacceptable. The same happened at school where I just needed to follow the rules, which were clearly spelled out.

With regard to the moral issues in society, the Dutch Reformed Church and the National Party government (which had an inseparable relationship) made the decisions for the society I lived in. It was only later that I realized that legislation does not necessarily make people or societies moral, and how damaging the use of misplaced religious guilt can be. However, the result of all of this was that I hardly ever had to struggle with ethical decision-making – all I had to do was follow the rules, abide by the laws and accept the authority with which it was given without questioning it. During these years this did not really bother me, and I had a good childhood (although a psychologist or two have tried to disprove my assumption during a couple of compulsory sessions as a theology student). In a sense this was a wonderful secure way of living one's first few years on this planet. I later realized that my parents, the school and the state treated ethical decisions primarily as religious issues, due to the tremendous influence and power the Dutch Reformed Church had at that time. So, at the age of 18, I knew all about what was regarded as right and wrong, good and bad, but little about *why* it was so.

After school I went to the University of the Free State to study theology. Rather surprisingly at the time, it was philosophy and not theology that changed my way of thinking regarding ethical issues. The influence theology had on my skills regarding ethical decision-making was limited,

to say the least. My first encounter with philosophy was in 1987, when Danie Strauss entered the classroom, picked up a chair, and started enthusiastically to describe the 15 modes of being of the chair which he followed up with the story of Achilles and the tortoise. I was mesmerized and decided to major in philosophy rather than psychology, alongside theology. However, for most part of my pre-graduate studies I struggled to see the relevance of philosophy for my ambition to become a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church. The main reason for this might have been the lack of interest and subsequent effort I put into my pre-graduate studies, especially during the first two years.

Nevertheless, my curiosity continued to linger in the field of ethics. In the philosophy department the focus was on applied ethics at that time. Medical, political and environmental ethics were presented with a strong religious undertone, emphasizing right and wrong along the lines of a Christian/Humanistic division. This resonated well with my frame of reference, since the religious character of ethical issues enjoyed emphasis. After Kobus Smit explained to my parents that philosophy is not a purely atheistic enterprise, I enrolled for a Honors degree in philosophy. During this time I became interested in the field of political ethics and that remained so until after I finished my Master's degree on the topic of affirmative action in 1992.

The influence that the philosophers under whom I studied have had on my thinking became apparent to me only in later years. However, it is an impossible task to try to describe this influence in a manner that does justice to their individual philosophical knowledge and skills. Given the above, I can summarize it as follows. The philosopher that had the least influence on my thinking on pre-graduate level was Johann Visagie. The main reason for this being the fact that he mastered the art of making himself most of the time, appear quite absent (even when he was present). Ironically, today he is the philosopher who has the most influence on my own thinking. He continues to demonstrate the importance of the ability to relativize religion and culture when necessary, and to strive towards maintaining a balanced (ideological critical) view. The person that had the most direct influence on my thinking as a student was Kobus Smit who introduced me to Greek philosophy and established the important role of an ethical life attitude. The value of sound argumentation and systematic thinking was powerfully demonstrated by Danie Strauss. He never taught a course in logic in those days, but the rational, logical arguments that characterize all of his discourses (including the jokes he tells) had an enduring influence on my philosophical development. Although he

identified with, and promoted the Dooyeweerdian tradition, he rarely ever 'played the religious card' but always focused on the rational content of Dooyeweerd's philosophy.

I ended up occupying the privileged position of academic assistant in the Philosophy Department for five consecutive years – where I learned even more from my teachers. The philosophy department had a unique culture and atmosphere that continue to be envied by some. Academic assistants were treated more like fellow colleagues than mere students, which was something not to be taken for granted – a fact I only realized after socializing with fellow assistants in the faculty. Danie Strauss, at that time the head of the department, had much to do with this. He allowed his colleagues absolute academic freedom and never interfered with the content of the courses they taught or research projects they were involved in. Danie Strauss, Kobus Smit and Johann Visagie (also known by some as 'the philosophical trinity') were a formidable philosophical team, diverse in personality and philosophical interests, but united in their quest for a systematic way of philosophizing. Most importantly, they cultivated a respect for philosophy as a discipline in all their students, while always emphasizing the fact that they too were still students of philosophy.

Two experiences of great consequence during my student years reinforced my keen interest in ethical decision-making. The first incident occurred in my third year when Kobus Smit prescribed Lourens Du Plessis' book *Tien Perspektiewe. Gesprekke oor die toekoms* (*Ten Perspectives. Conversations about the future*). It was the late 1980's in South Africa, and the author addressed some of the challenges facing the Afrikaner people. It is difficult for me to give a rational explanation for why exactly this book has had such a significant influence on me. Maybe, it was just the culmination of a process that was subconsciously developing in my thinking. At the time, I did not know how to interpret this experience and I felt somewhat lost. Up until then my opinions (especially regarding politics and religion) conformed to the traditional views associated with a typical Afrikaner middle-class citizen. For the first time, without knowing, I applied Socratic self-examination to my own thinking. Some would say this was the beginning of the end for me, but in my opinion *Ten Perspectives* perpetuated a process of critical self-examination that has become a way of life. This kind of critical attitude did not go down well during the occasional visit to my parents, as well as with some theology professors. Since I was not an activist by nature, the only real outlet for my socio-political views came in the form of an Afrikaans newspaper, *Die Vrye Weekblad*. It became a pastoral haven and led to a Friday afternoon

ritual on which I cannot elaborate for ethical reasons.

The second experience was a public debate that took place on campus in the early 1990's. The topic was abortion and the main participants were Prof Kader Asmal and myself. Kader Asmal gave an impressive account of the reasons why he was in favor of abortion on demand. However, it was not well received by the audience, which consisted of mainly white, Afrikaans speaking Christian students. I, on the other hand, presented the traditional Christian view on abortion, and although well reasoned, the backbone of the argument was still religiously qualified. Afterwards, Kader Asmal invited me for a drink in private and asked if I could give any compelling reasons why abortion is wrong, other than those depending on a specific religious view. At this point I realized that I needed to rethink the role of religion in public debate. And for a second time, I found myself at cross roads, especially since I was nearing the end of my theology studies. Being engaged with my Master's degree at that time, this experience coincided with a process of personal transformation. Since I rarely ever socialized with people other than white, Afrikaner Christians, I realized that I lacked the skills, knowledge and moral sensitivity to understand people with different cultural and religious backgrounds. The highlight of my Master's study was therefore not so much the written script, but the interviews I held with people (organized by Kobus Smit) ranging from Piet Koornhof (whom I still respect, despite the later adverse publicity), the American Buddy Norman, and various ANC provincial leaders. To my surprise, this endeavor actually caught the eye of the national intelligence service of the apartheid regime.

After I eventually became a full-time minister in the church I was confronted with ethical decision-making of another nature. I felt inadequate to advise people who struggled with real life and death issues, especially since this was in many instances directly linked to the question of the meaningfulness of their lives. The fact that ethical decision-making was not primarily a religious issue was confirmed for me. However, another role player came to the fore which I had not until then taken into consideration: guilt feelings.

Having to make ethical decisions is irrevocably part of being human and plays a significant role in a person's quest for a meaningful life. But when such decision-making is not made attentively, it can in many instances be the source of guilt feelings. (I am not analyzing guilt feelings from a psychological perspective and will therefore use the term in the commonsensical manner that refers to the everyday vocabulary of ordinary people.) When discussing the essence of a meaningful life, many

people will name guilt feelings as one of the most common obstacles that stand in the way of such a realization. The emphasis here is on unnecessary, sometimes self-inflicted, guilt feelings. The reason for this is the fact that people want to make the right decisions. By 'right' is usually meant a decision that leaves them with a feeling that their integrity is still in place, that the decision they made will not cause harm to any other person (or themselves), and that this decision will contribute to the meaningfulness of their lives. This insight has had a direct influence on the way I have been teaching ethics in later years.

On the personal front, I became more critical of the dogma and moral viewpoints of the Dutch Reformed Church. I began to question the value of the Christian religion as I had been practicing it. This would eventually evolve into a critical evaluation of organized religion in general, which culminated in my current state of being 'religiously unmusical' (an expression I borrow from Max Weber via Richard Rorty).

In 1999 I returned to the Department of Philosophy at the University of the Free State, this time as a lecturer. Much had changed from the time that I was a first year student. Apartheid was gone and so were two members of the 'philosophical trinity'. In the former I rejoiced, the latter filled me with sadness as it was the end of a very special era in the history of the philosophy department. Since Johann Visagie was the only one left he had no choice but to accept the post of head of the Department of Philosophy – something he had managed to evade successfully for many years. (The Philosophy Department is the only department I know of, where nobody *wants* to be head of the department.) A year or two later the University of the Free State introduced the module system, which meant that we had to reorganize the semester courses into new units. Johann Visagie took the bold step of suggesting that we seize this opportunity to critically analyze and revisit the content of the courses as well as the philosophy of the department as a whole.

This was something that needed to be done, since the nature of society had changed, a fact that was reflected in the student body itself. We had students from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. For example, where the majority of third year students were white Afrikaner male theology students in the 1980s, the majority of third years are now white female students studying diverse subjects and attending the English classes. The approach of the department shifted towards introducing students to different philosophical tools that they can apply in their lives, instead of promoting a specific philosophical tradition or specific philosophers. The implication of this is that we treat the philosophical

insights of people such as Dooyeweerd, Habermas, Derrida, Chomsky, Nussbaum, Oruka and Rorty, with equal enthusiasm and criticism.

The challenge I was faced with, was to decide on an approach to the teaching of ethics which would honor the legacy of my philosophy teachers, while incorporating the insights I had gained since then, in an authentic manner. Continuing the tradition of academic freedom amongst colleagues, Johann Visagie encouraged me to do just that. The four perspectives that shaped my approach to the teaching of ethics can be summarized as follows.

Firstly, my personal interest in ethics was not in the field of applied ethics as such, but more in the process that entailed ethical decision-making in general. I am of the opinion that if people know more about the process involved in ethical decision-making, they can apply that to different fields such as political, medical, business or environmental ethics. It is not as if each of these fields has a specific 'decision-making model' that only applies to that specific field. The only thing that separates them is the fact that the specific facts and circumstances that need to be taken into consideration, differ. Having said that, the contributions made to society through the teaching and application of applied ethics are invaluable – especially when considering the impact of techno-scientifical research on the lifeworld.

Secondly, applied ethics in general tends to focus on the big moral issues and not necessarily on the ethical issues that ordinary people encounter on a daily basis. I was specifically interested in the process involved when individuals make ethical decisions regarding their private lives. This has received little, if any attention in philosophy as an academic discipline. I became interested in a relatively new field in philosophy, namely philosophical consultation, and was intrigued by the fact that this too was not regarded as academic philosophy. (To be fair, this is a view often propagated by philosophical consultants themselves.) However, my interest in the Hellenistic schools of philosophy allowed for such a combination to be a natural one. I subsequently started to contemplate the possibility of academic courses in ethics, where some modules focus on a more technical analysis of the process involved in ethical decision-making, while others explore the therapeutic value of philosophy and address existential issues such as happiness, frustration, desires and death.

Thirdly, it was the response I got from students in the classes (not only in ethics modules) when asked to substantiate their specific views on issues, which affirmed the fact that the question as to *how* one goes about making decisions, rarely ever enters the debate. They mostly focus on *what* the

decision is going to be. This becomes even more apparent in situations where role play is used and students need to give advice on ethical decision-making. Some will not get involved at all and assert with a relativistic shake of the head and a politically correct "who am I to decide for you?". At the most they will advise the person to go and "see" a professional for help - in most cases either a religious/spiritual leader or a psychologist. (By doing so unknowingly affirming the so-called 'medicalization' of society.) Others are quite eager to give their opinion and when there is some consensus they feel that the issue is resolved – without contemplating the possibility that this does not necessarily imply that the decision is an ethical one. Naturally, when the opinion of the adviser differs from the advice seeker, a problem occurs. What usually happens in such a situation is that the one tries to convince the other that his/her own opinion is right and the other's is wrong. This usually ends up as a futile exercise in which each party is left with their specific opinion still intact, accompanied by the (in)famous phrase: Let's agree to disagree.

Finally, I took notice of the enormous public interest in popular psychology the last few years. A critical analysis of the content of publications and television programs produced by people such as Oprah and Dr Phil are testimony to the fact that ethical decision-making is one of the 'big issues' that people are struggling with. And whereas ethical issues were once seen as primarily religious issues, they are nowadays viewed as having to be dealt with in the field of psychology. This affirmed the relevance of philosophical consultation, to me and the necessity to incorporate it into the curriculum.

3. Applying philosophical tools to ethics

The analysis of the process involved in ethical decision-making forms the foundation of my approach to the teaching of ethics. Students have the right to have their own opinions, which might (and often does) differ from my own. As I repeatedly tell them, my primary concern is not with what your opinion is, but why you have that specific opinion. I encourage students to analyze their opinions so that they will have a better understanding of what was going through their minds when they made a specific decision. A critical examination of the reasoning behind a specific point of view, might also lead to the identification of cognitive dissonance and ultimately a change of opinion – something I encourage as well. My role as a philosophy teacher is therefore not to promote a specific stance on moral issues in an authoritarian way, but rather to empower students to make informed decisions themselves. Applying the different philosophical

tools developed within the department is one way of accomplishing this.

There is no hierarchy amongst the tools, and it is up to the individual to decide which of the tools are most applicable to a specific situation. The tools should thus not be seen as a model, consisting of different steps that need to be followed in a specific order. Although each of these tools has unique characteristics, there is a coherence between them. (For example, reasoning skills play a part in all of them, not only in argumentation theory). One of the consequences of this approach is that it bridges the gap that exists between ethics and the rest of the sub-disciplines within philosophy. The tools should therefore not be seen as intrinsically 'ethical' in nature, but as philosophical tools that can be applied to ethical and moral issues. What follows are brief introductory remarks to some of these philosophical tools.

3.1 Worldview-interpretation

One of the reasons why opinions regarding ethical issues differ, is that people have different views of the world. In order to have a better understanding of a specific ethical situation and be able to make a calculated assessment of the decision to be taken, it is important to be able to recognize and understand the worldview(s) that might be relevant. Worldview-interpretation, in a technical sense, is the process involved in getting to know and interpret one's own view of reality as well as those of other people.

Worldview is commonly used to depict a religious orientation towards the world (e.g. Christian worldview, Islamic worldview); as a synonym for culture (Western worldview, African worldview, Eastern worldview, etc); or to refer to a specific socio-economical or political paradigm or ideology (Marxist worldview, Capitalistic worldview, and so on). However, these are all very broad and general descriptions and cannot accommodate the individual personalization of a worldview. In other words, its usefulness is limited since it fails to explain why it is possible for two people who share the same worldview to have different opinions regarding ethical issues such as same sex marriages or capital punishment.

In order to explain one's view of the world one needs to be more specific regarding the influences on one's life, and therefore I distinguish between worldviews on a macro level (WORLDVIEW) and on a micro level (Picture of Reality). (This distinction runs parallel to a similar macro-micro distinction in another tool, ideology theory). Differentiating between a person's WORLDVIEW and his/her Picture of Reality could

explain why members of the same family might share the same worldviews, but they might interpret the shared culture or religion differently, which will result in them having different Pictures of Reality. In most instances a person's view of life is influenced by more than one WORLDVIEW that can be accommodated within a Picture of Reality.

3.2 Argumentation theory

In ethical decision-making, argumentation skills play an important role. Unfortunately when it comes to debating an ethical issue, people tend to prefer to argue against each other, rather than to think with one another. The question is not whether you made the right or wrong decision, but whether the decision you made was an ethical one. There seems to be the perception that in an ethical debate there always must be a winner, in the sense that one opinion must be proven superior to others. This often lead to fallacious argumentation, where poorly constructed and motivated points of view are represented as being superior through the use of emotional appeal and arguments directed against the person. (Argumentation theory overlaps to some extend with communication theory – another tool. This latter theory has received its most systematic elaboration in the work of Jürgen Habermas).

Some people have a natural ability when it comes to sound reasoning, but in general many people lack good argumentation skills – which is evident when one look at the quality of the public debates on moral issues. Plato already emphasized the importance of sound argumentation when ethics is discussed and would have been in favor of incorporating the teaching of basic reasoning skills into the school curriculum (for example the structure of an argument, how to reason about cause and effect, how to recognize fallacies, and so on).

3.3 The distinction: morality and ethics

It is important to distinguish between decisions that have only implications for an individual's personal life, and those that have an impact on society. (Compare the macro-micro distinction referred to above). A distinction between private morality and public morality is sometimes used to depict this. I prefer the distinction Habermas makes between ethics and morality, where ethics concern those decisions an individual makes regarding her personal life, and morality applies to the big moral issues present in the public sphere. For example, a person might be in favor of active euthanasia as an ethical issue, but might argue that the society he/she lives in would not be able to deal with it in a morally

competent way. What is in my best interest and what is in the best interest of society do not always concur.

For many people supporting a traditional religious belief system, this distinction will of course be problematic. They will argue that active euthanasia is wrong in the eyes of God and consequently this should be true for individuals and for society. Deciding otherwise would be a sign of hypocrisy. But when dealing with moral issues in a society that is characterized by cultural diversity as well as religious diversity, the ability to relativize your personal religious view regarding moral issues is clearly a necessity.

3.4 Rational interaction for moral sensitivity

For too long have we strived towards consensus at all cost and neglected the importance of ethical/moral sensitivity, which is something different. Rossouw and Van Vuuren make this point with the Rational Interaction for Moral Sensitivity (RIMS) approach they developed. This approach is a modification of the 'ideal speech situation' offered by Habermas, and the aim is to achieve moral sensitivity and not necessarily always moral consensus. I use this philosophical tool in combination with Martha Nussbaum's idea of the three qualities of a good citizen, namely Socratic self-examination, world citizenship and narrative imagination. The purpose of this is to create a society in which people do not only tolerate diversity, but create the freedom in which such diversity can be lived out in a meaningful way. The differentiation Habermas suggests with regard to the role of religion in the public sphere supports this idea. In terms of religious freedom, he distinguishes between a positive liberty to practice one's own religion en the negative liberty to remain spared of the religious practices of others.

3.5 Metaphor analysis

The application of metaphor analysis (as developed by George Lakoff) made me realize that the state, church as well as my parents addressed ethical decision-making by implementing the so-called "strict father" rather than "nurturing parent" metaphor. However, this should not be seen as a "good" versus "bad" comparison. Rather, ignoring the negative in the one while negating the positive in the other, will lead to a one sided approach with ideological proportions. My folks were "ordinary" citizens and they themselves were brought up with the strict father model. Nevertheless, my parents, the church and the state succeeded in their effort to install what may be called an ethical life-attitude in me. It will not do to

suggest that authority (parents, church and state) is a bad thing in itself (something that Chomsky sometimes comes close to). To the contrary, I think that family life in particular is of utmost importance for creating a society that has a moral conscience. But the strict father metaphor can be applied in such a manner that it meshes with ideological discourses – illustrating the close links between the tools of metaphor theory and ideology theory.

3.6 Ethical paradigms

Another factor that comes into play is ethical paradigms. Usually this works like an ideology – it is a set way in which one argues ethically. This happens mostly on a subconscious level, which emphasizes the need for critical self reflection in this regard. And yet again, your specific worldview will influence the type of ethical paradigm or theory that you relate to and apply in your personal ethical decision-making process. Depending on an individual's Picture of Reality, she might for example be more inclined to follow a deontological theory than a virtue ethics. While the old apartheid regime followed a Kantian-type approach, the present regime is more inclined towards a utilitarian approach.

The fact of the matter is that no one ethical theory has been proven to be the ultimate one. Each one of the different approaches, whether following Aristotle or Kant, Mill or Fletcher, or whatever; each of these theories has some positive and some negative aspects. The same goes for the "Divine Command" model. It entails some universal truths but is at the same time exclusive. Also, it depends on the interpretation that people give regarding 'what God tells us to do'. Since such opinions differ this leaves us with the same dilemma as the one discussed under worldview-interpretation.

3.7 An ethical attitude towards life

Being rational in making an ethical decision is very important, but when analyzing the nature of an ethical decision, one needs to recognize that there is an emotional side to it as well. This aspect involved in ethical decision-making is most of the time overlooked. We have all struggled at some time with the question of whether to listen to your "heart" or to your "mind"?

Kobus Smit introduced the idea of an ethical life-attitude to me. He describes this attitude as consisting of respect for life, personhood, societal structures and God - all of which should be characterized by compassion, care and commitment. Smit applied this tool in the field of medical ethics

and I made the following modifications so that it could be applied in a wider context and by people from different religious backgrounds: respect for life should be seen in the widest possible sense, including all forms of life. I also replaced "respect for God" with the more democratic respect for a religious/spiritual power.

Intuition plays an important role in ethical decision-making. I am critical of the view that when it comes to ethical decisions, intuition is all we have. But I think the more we live an ethical attitude, the more we can trust our intuition. In terms of practicality and reality, sometimes we have to make a decision on the spot, and while cultivating an ethical attitude towards life, we need to have recourse to an intuitive understanding.

4. Conclusion

It is important to address the process involved in ethical decision-making in such a way that ordinary people feel empowered, instead of helpless with regard to ethical decision-making. Although it is true that ethical decision-making is at times a difficult and complicated process, it would be a mistake (and unethical) to depict it as so complicated that it can only be done successfully by professionals or with the help of professionals.

Making ethical decisions is a personal matter and nobody can claim responsibility for making a decision on behalf of another person. People are different, and the ways in which they go about making ethical decisions are different. There is no ultimate model to follow, there are no easy steps, but we need to be critical, and address the issue instead of opting for either an authoritarian approach or a total relativistic one.

The bottom line is: there is more to ethical decision-making than merely having an opinion. And although ethical decisions will rarely be easy or straightforward, we need to at least attempt to make them with conscious awareness, supported by sound reasoning and backed by an ethical life attitude.

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