

Resolving Moral Dilemmas Using the Creative Middle Way Approach

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ABSTRACT

Moral dilemmas of all sorts arise in human dealings. Some of these dilemmas is easy to resolve, others are complicated. Some is minor, others are serious. Seeing matters from different viewpoints results in different convictions. Humans have their methods of thought wrestling in an attempt to prove that they are taking the high road. Sources of dilemmas are numerous. They could be professional, legal, business-related, arising from different interpretation of the meaning of an action, or plain stubbornness on someone's part, which results in great resentment by the opposing party. It is not hard for one to be enraged when they face resistance to the way they see things from a certain angle. In the vast majority of moral dilemmas, none of the competing parties can lay claim to absolute rightness while placing total fault with the opposing party. It is almost inconceivable that one party could be totally right while the other being completely wrong. With this comprehension in mind, a window opens for the creative middle way approach to work. This approach requires willingness of all parties to come up with courses of action that satisfy as many moral demands as possible. This is a rational approach that can only succeed if all competing parties can see themselves as winners at the conclusion of the process. This paper will detail the author's experience in teaching the creative middle way approach to the students taking a course entitled ethics, technology and society where an entanglement of complex moral issues required a fresh insight into how to address the concerns of competing parties in a way that is mutually satisfactory to all. Students were given scenarios in which they were assigned different roles and were told that tough decisions had to be made. Those that did not have the spirit of accommodation were uncomfortable but, faced with the prospect of getting entrapped in an even bigger moral dilemma, they ended up seeking a reasonable outcome. Students rated the course very highly and commended its attempt to find realistic and coherent ways toward resolving moral problems.

Tags: Moral dilemma, dispute resolution, creative middle way, rational thinking.

1. Introduction

Faced with situations where tough decisions must be made, individuals sometimes confront moral dilemmas that are not easy to resolve. Such situations can force both ordinary and professional people into corners they never anticipated. A question of ethics in a complex, or even simple, situation requires deep thought and serious analysis of the consequences of any decision made. Issues related to ethics are especially difficult to deal with due to variations in viewpoints. Humans are products of the environment in which they were born and raised. Traditions and norms vary by place and time, and what may

be viewed as acceptable in a given place at a certain time may not be so at a different place or at a different time. Dealing with all these variables is no easy task and finding a perfect solution acceptable to all parties involved in a certain dispute is almost impossible.

The creative middle way is an approach used to find a common ground that, although not totally satisfactory to all conflicting parties, provides everyone involved in a dispute with “something” to, at least, claim victory, albeit partial one.

This paper offers some scenarios where a moral dilemma is encountered and a resolution is sought. Each scenario will be dissected to examine how various potential resolutions could impact the final outcome.

2. Scenario of recently graduated design engineer

The following scenario [1] involves a situation that entails a moral dilemma arising from conflicting values. This scenario was used in the classroom as a case study to initiate a conversation in which students discuss potential solutions to the problem at hand.

Brad is in the second year of his first full-time job after graduating from Engineering Tech. He enjoys design, but is becoming increasingly concerned that his work is not being adequately checked by more experienced engineers. He has been assigned to assist in the design of a number of projects that involve issues of public safety, such as schools and overhead walkways between buildings. He has already spoken to his supervisor, whose engineering competence he respects, and he has been told that more experienced engineers check his work. Later, he discovers to his dismay that his work is often not adequately checked. Instead, his drawings are stamped and passed on to the contractor. Sometimes the smaller projects he designs are under construction within a few weeks after his designs are completed.

At this point, Brad calls one of his former professors at Engineering Tech for advice. “I’m really worried that I’m going to make a mistake that will kill someone,” Brad says. “I try to overdesign, but the projects I’m being assigned to are becoming increasingly difficult. What should I do?” Brad’s professor tells him that he cannot ethically continue on his present course because he is engaging in engineering work that surpasses his qualifications and may endanger the public. What should Brad do?

The dilemma in the above scenario arises from the fact that a recently graduated engineer may not possess sufficient design experience to be involved in design tasks with higher level of difficulty. As a practicing engineer, by virtue of his obligation to public safety, Brad found it difficult to continue to perform design tasks that he was not confident he could do well. On the other hand, Brad wished to prove himself and show his employer that he was doing his best to perform the design tasks he was assigned because he had a legitimate interest in preserving and promoting his own career. Between these two conflicting desires, Brad is caught. As a fresh out of college young engineer, Brad was full of hope for a bright future and thought that an easy way out of his dilemma could be

achieved by talking to his supervisor to ask that his design be reviewed and checked by more experienced engineers. Brad trusted his advisor who told him that his designs were being reviewed and checked by experienced engineers. Brad had faith that his approach in conveying his concern to his advisor would result in a satisfactory solution. The unpleasant fact that Brad discovered later was that his designs were not reviewed or checked, and that they were passed straight to contractors after being stamped by a professional engineer. Although, legally speaking, the engineer that stamped and signed the plans assumed the responsibility related to the accuracy and compliance of the design with applicable codes, Brad could not bear the thought that these were his designs and, due to lack of experience and sophistication, such designs might have some flaws.

Because Brad grew uncomfortable with the lack of action on the part of his supervisor, the next best thing he could think of was to seek the advice of one of his former professors. Although Brad told his professor that he overdesigned whenever he was not sure of the adequacy of his designs, it was his professor's opinion that Brad could not ethically continue along this path which might lead to a disaster.

Faced with multiple conflicting values, Brad had to think unconventionally to find a "creative middle way" that would satisfy as many of these conflicting obligations as possible. In attempting to search for a solution, it is helpful to arrange courses of action in serial order, beginning with the one that would most satisfactorily honor all of Brad's obligations, and continuing to options that would not honor all of the obligations. Here are some possible courses of action [1] and their dissection:

1. Brad could go to his supervisor again and suggest in the most tactful way possible that he is uncomfortable about the fact that his designs are not being properly checked, pointing out that it is not in the firm's interests to produce designs that may be flawed. If the supervisor agrees to provide more adequate supervision, Brad could resolve the problem and keep on the best of terms with his employer. Brad could thus honor his obligation to the safety of the public, to his employer, and to himself and his career. This would be an ideal creative middle way solution. In dissecting this solution one can see that it can only work if the supervisor responds to Brad's request in a positive fashion. In Brad's first attempt to approach the supervisor he was assured that the designs were reviewed and checked by experienced engineers, which was not always the case. In taking this course of action again, Brad is indeed hoping against hope. He probably will hear the same answer again from his supervisor, but the question remains: will Brad's design be really reviewed and checked by experienced engineers. The answer to this question requires time to observe what happens with Brad's future designs. During this wait and see time, Brad has to assume that his supervisor will keep his/her promise and a discovery to the contrary will take Brad back to where his problems started.

2. Brad might talk to others in the organization with whom he has a good working relationship and ask them to help him persuade his supervisor that he (Brad) should be given more supervision. This solution is almost as good, because it would resolve the problem, but it might tarnish the supervisor's reputation with other employees and perhaps with the public. While satisfying Brad's obligation to the public, it might not as

satisfactorily honor the obligation to his employer and himself. In dissecting this solution, it is possible to see that Brad will seek the help of other individuals in the organization to persuade the supervisor to do what Brad could not persuade him to do, e.g., check and review Brad's designs by experienced engineers. The major disadvantage of this solution lies in the fact that it widens the circle of involvement in the problem to include individuals other than Brad and his supervisor. The supervisor may become apprehensive because of Brad's action, because he/she would be projected in not-so-positive light. Other workers in the organization will get to know that the supervisor made an earlier promise to Brad but he/she did not keep. The supervisor might get embarrassed by this action and this might damage his/her relationship with Brad. The outcome of this approach very much depends on how the supervisor would be receptive to the intervention of other people. If the supervisor viewed this intervention as demeaning, this could harden his/her attitude and not much positive could be expected in this case.

3. Brad could find another job and then, after his own employment is secure, reveal the information to the state registration board for engineers or to others who could stop the practice. While protecting his own career and the public, this option does not promote his employer's interests. In dissecting this solution, it is easy to see that Brad would resort to a dramatic solution, e.g., reveal the information to the state registration board of engineers. Although this revelation would relieve Brad from the pressure he is subjected to, it is important to note the timing of this action which comes after Brad secures employment in another job. This solution encompasses some problems. The first is that it may not be proper for Brad to inform the state registration board for engineers without first letting his supervisor know that he would do so. It is understandable that this would involve great risk for Brad's professional career with the organization but it is the right course of action, especially that Brad attempted, to no avail, to get his supervisor to keep his/her promise to check and review Brad's designs. The second problem is that, if Brad informed the state registration board for engineers after he secures employment with another company, he would be viewed as someone who had prioritized his self-interest over interest in public safety. The third issue with this scenario is that, whether Brad informed the state registration board for engineers while on the job or after securing another job, the board almost certainly will ask Brad's supervisor to respond to the allegations made. The board will probably ask Brad to provide documented evidence that he spoke with his supervisor about reviewing and checking his (Brad's) designs and that the supervisor promised to do so, but the promise was not kept. Brad could also find himself in trouble with the board if it is determined that he (Brad) allowed himself to be involved in the reported activities for too long of a time before trying to do something about it.

4. Brad might tell his supervisor that he does not believe he can continue to engage in design work that is beyond his abilities and experience and that he might have to consider changing jobs. This solution involves a confrontation with his employer. This solution might not cause the employer to change his/her bad practices and might harm Brad's career. It might also harm the reputation of the supervisor with his other employees. In dissecting this solution, it is not hard to realize that Brad had reached a point of frustration where he is risking having a confrontation with his supervisor. Although such

a confrontation could lead to a hardened attitude on the part of the supervisor, which could also lead to Brad losing his job, it is probably the only course of action that would make the supervisor think seriously that he/she just could not assign design tasks beyond the capabilities of inexperienced engineers. It is also a course of action that would get the supervisor's attention because if Brad is fired, or even resigned, other employees in the organization would know that it was the lack of action on the part of the supervisor that pushed Brad to the brink, and this could harm the supervisor's reputation. This solution may be too drastic but could also result in an extremely positive outcome. A negative aspect about this course of action is that Brad might find it difficult to land another employment in absence of a favorable recommendation from his former supervisor.

5. Brad could go to the press or his professional society and blow the whistle immediately. This would protect the public, but possibly damage his career prospects and certainly severely damage the supervisor's business. In dissecting this solution one needs to be cognizant of the fact that if Brad went to the press or to his professional society, both entities will seek input from Brad's supervisor about the leveled accusation. For instance, the press will never publish anything related to this story without providing Brad's supervisor with an equal space for a rebuttal. Also, Brad's professional society will seek input from Brad's supervisor before making any determination. A better course of action would be that, before approaching the press or the professional society, Brad should make it clear to his supervisor that he (Brad) had very serious concerns about the unkept promises that the supervisor made to review and check his (Brad's) designs, and because all attempts to remedy this problem had failed, he (Brad) was left with no option but to blow the whistle. This course of action will probably get the supervisor's attention, but it could also put Brad and his supervisor on a collision course.

One can think of other possibilities as well, such as Brad continuing in his job without protest or finding another job without protest. However, if Brad is to protect public safety, his career, and his employer's reputation, a creative middle way solution has to be found and be also acceptable to his employer. A key lesson students learn from such a scenario is thoughtfulness and communication. In cases of disputes or moral dilemmas, one should think of a way for the best possible outcome which preserves the interest of all. It is imperative to weigh all options and know that there will be consequences for any action. It is also extremely important for one to be able to communicate verbally and in writing what one has on his/her mind. In many situations, rational communications using calm and measured language can make the difference between finding a solution and complicating matters.

3. Dissection of creative middle way solutions

A creative middle way by definition requires innovative thinking on the part of those involved in the moral dispute. In the process of developing a solution to a given problem, one must realize that it is almost impossible to get one's way one hundred percent. One must also be aware that the other party involved in the dispute see things differently. So, it is important for one to place himself/herself in the opposing party's place to see why they see things differently, and what could be done to ameliorate the situation. For

instance, in the case of engineer Brad discussed above, it is not difficult to see why Brad was concerned that his lack of experience could compromise the accuracy or the adequacy of his designs. That said, one could also argue that the supervisor wanted to push Brad to take on more difficult assignments, ask experienced engineers in the organization for help in projects with difficult designs, and develop greater ability to deal with complex problems. This is definitely good for Brad to develop his capabilities and become a sophisticated designer. The one thing that the supervisor did and was upsetting to Brad, as it should, was his/her promise to get experienced engineers to review and check the designs without actually doing so. This made Brad lose faith in his supervisor as the problem persisted.

A second issue related to the above scenario is communications. One should always feel that their supervisor is approachable and receptive to their concern. It is clear from the given scenario that Brad's supervisor was approachable but it seems that he was only artificially receptive as he made promises that gave Brad false comfort because he/she did not keep the promise. Another component in communication in this scenario is that the supervisor was not playing the role of motivator where he could have argued that Brad needed to develop his capabilities as a designer, consult with other experienced engineers in the organization, and try to grow professionally. This should have also been Brad's endeavor whether or not his supervisor asked him to do so. Brad apparently wanted to be the best designer that he could be, which is definitely good, but taking on more difficult tasks and seeking the help of experienced colleagues in the organization would have put Brad on a faster track to grow as a sophisticated designer.

The third issue in this scenario is the provisions of the contract that Brad signed with his employer. What was Brad's job description? What do his responsibilities entail? Who could Brad approach in the organization in case of a dispute with his direct supervisor? What was the course of action in case of an unresolved dispute? It is very likely that the answers to all these questions were spelled out clearly in Brad's contract, and this has the effect of making it easier to find a solution that is satisfactory to all.

4. Students Take Away

The course the writer taught involved many scenarios such as the above detailed one. In each and every one of these scenarios students were given the opportunity to debate the merits of every perceived creative middle way solution and to suggest other ones that see viable. To the students' frustration, and probably fascination, the instructor played the devil's advocate to show the students the other viewpoint related to any expressed argument. The students could see for themselves how seemingly small issues could balloon into big problems. They could also see how thoughtfulness, wisdom, and good communications could deflate a volatile situation before it gets out of proportion. The instructor's goal out of this classroom discussion was twofold: get the students to think loud and express their opinions in an environment where no one is disrespected, and to help the students grow professionally as they are asked and encouraged to talk and feel free to express their mind without fear of being judged.

5. Assessment of learning

Assessment of student learning in this course involved several tools as detailed below:

1. Students were required to be prepared to share with the class a current event that entailed a theme related to ethics, technology, and society. In the beginning of each class in this course, three randomly selected students detailed to the class the elements of the story they have prepared. This opened the door for discussion and debate that almost everyone in class participated in. This earned the students points for participation.
2. The instructor prepared various scenarios of ethical and moral complications. These were detailed in class and all students were asked to express their viewpoints as how to resolve the entangled issues. It is interesting to note that expressed viewpoints varied significantly on some issues that, on the surface, seem not to cause much controversy. The instructor assured the class that this was normal and healthy for a society to develop as long as these disagreements are expressed with respect to opposing opinions.
3. Students were also required to write and present a paper on a subject that incorporated ethics, technology, and society of their choice. The wide spectrum and variety of topics selected by students were gratifying. This was an extensive research paper that was also debated by other students after it was presented in the classroom. It was an opportunity for all students to get hands on experience on presenting and making oral argument on topics involving moral conflicts. It is worth noting that some students faced resistance from other students when they detailed what they deemed to be the creative middle way solution, and they vehemently defended their position. Other students yielded when they heard counter arguments and it was fascinating to see how to reach a creative middle way solution for what was deemed to be a creative middle way solution!
4. In addition to all of the above the course included a midterm and a final exam in which real or fictitious scenarios involving moral and ethical dilemmas were given and specific questions were asked as to how to deal with the situation at hand. There was no right or wrong answer to any of the asked questions and students were made aware that they would be graded on the thoughtfulness of their solution and the articulation of their arguments.

6. Conclusions

In the highly technological society in which we live today, a new breed of ethical and moral problems arises. Many of these problems stem from the fact that the situations that involve moral dilemmas are almost new and had no precedent. The rhythm with which our daily lives go is so fast to the point it gives us almost no time to be thoughtful in analyzing all the factors involved in a certain problem. In many circumstances the issues are neither clear cut nor black and white. This when humans need to search for a creative middle way solution. The students in this course were introduced to a new way of thinking, a spirit of understanding and compromise, and a method where a common ground could be found between conflicting parties. Students were made to feel

comfortable with the thought that one can never be right all the time while the opposing party be wrong all the time. Students were made to comprehend that it was absolutely necessary to see, and sometimes even embrace, the opposing viewpoint. It is a recipe for understanding and peace that humans should strive for and endorse.

7. Bibliography

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