Moral Imagination and the Search for Ethical Decision-Making in Management

There is a problem with which ethics and applied ethics have a great deal of difficulty: moral amnesia, an inability to remember past mistakes and to tap that knowledge when new problems arise. The people who make these mistakes and fail to learn from them are often also familiar with values statements and ethics workshops, but are prone to the same missteps regardless. This is because there is a gap between the general (moral rules, principles, rights, and virtues) and a particular situation, across which it is difficult to translate general precepts into particular applications. Moral imagination bridges this gap between theory/principles and practical decision-making.

But what is moral imagination? Building on Immanuel Kant's threefold division of imagination, it consists of:

–Understanding our context and the mental frameworks that we bring to them or they bring to us (mental models, or conceptual schemes, are drawn from our cultures, upbringings, philosophies, etc, that allow us select, focus, frame, organize, and order our experience of the world), and the potential moral dilemmas created by their presence.

–Reconsidering our mental model to take into account new possibilities within the scope of the situation.

–Envisioning and executing possibilities that are not dependant on our current mental models, but that arise out of considering new and fresh schema.

But good moral imagination makes use of several other tools as well, such as narrative. When considering a situation or dilemma, one should consider the greater narrative into which the situation fits: what is the context, the story it tells, and the traditions in which elements of this particular incident are embedded. What are the corporate, institutional, regulatory, legal and social relationships?

Equally helpful is the method of adopting a 'disengaged view from somewhere.' While we cannot remove ourselves from the situation and take a completely objective viewpoint, we can imagine and attempt to take the view of another dispassionate and reasonable person. Such a position is useful in answering questions such as:

–What would a reasonable person judge is the right thing to do in this case?

–Could one defend this decision publicly?

–What kind of precedent does this decision set? Would one want it repeated by others or made into law?

–Is this the least worst option?

Additionally, we should work to keep in mind what Michael Walzer calls moral minimums,' the thin thread of agreement throughout societies about good and bad (although good is often easier to define as not crossing into bad).

The sum of these tools and ideas give use a much better platform from which to make decisions, a process that entails looking at the decision from outside mental models, from the context of narrative, a disengaged view, against moral minimums,

and while it is far from infallible, we may arrive at partial solutions, solutions that serve as the starting place for a new series of decisions always at risk of being challenged.

Full citation:
Werhane, Patricia H. "Moral Imagination and the Search for Ethical Decision Making in Management." *Business Ethics Quarterly* The Ruffin Series: SI #1 (1998): 75-98.