Empathy and Critical Thinking: The Double Helix in the Moral Compass

Samuel M. Natale, D. Phil.(Oxon.)
Professor of Management
Willumstad School of Business
Adelphi University
Garden City, NY

Anthony F. Libertella, JD, Ph.D.
Professor of Management and Law
Willumstad School of Business
Adelphi University
Garden City, NY

Peter Davis, Ph.D.
Honorary Fellow
University of Leicester School of Business
Leicester, UK

Abstract

Our paper focuses upon the negative consequences arising from the inadequate development of the ability to empathize within the university curriculum relating to applied ethics in business, professional and management studies. We argue this absence in the curriculum may lead later down the career path to the experience of high levels of emotional stress in managers and other professionals which can lead to break-down and withdrawal by individuals. (Patrick Maclagan and Robin Snell, 1992). This study suggested that managers' moral dilemmas arise most in their interpersonal relationships and their findings suggested that where the individual's capacity for empathy is well developed it may not be properly supported by the organization.

Our paper argues there needs to be a greater emphasis on the development of the individual's emotional capacities underpinning their moral compass in the ethics curriculums of our business studies departments. This must be tempered by the individual's capacity for a rational and critical (including most importantly a self- critical) evaluation of the dimensions and consequences of any given ethical dilemma. The context of an underdeveloped capacity to empathize and the pressure to suppress one's own critical reasoning in response to an overriding organizational agenda has led to a general feeling that business ethics is more window dressing than reality. We are convinced that managers need a clearer guidance as to where the not their moral compass can find its' 'ethical north'.

Key Words: Business Schools, Curriculum, Ethics, Emotion, Empathy, Moral Compass, and Truth

Introduction

The Atlantic recently published an important article on the "Broken Moral Compass" (Barnwell, 2016). The article emphasized the growing absence of moral and ethical education as programs become more focused on local and national testing of content over process, with a virtual absence of any reference to necessary decision making and its moral components. Even the simplest moral question about reporting damage done by someone to others, the authors claim, is now interpreted by many as having more to do with "being loyal" to the person rather than any objective ethical or moral norm. (Barnwell, 2016)

At the heart of the problem we agree is an absence of a developed and trained moral compass. The moral compass has been generally understood and defined as a *natural feeling* that makes people *know* what is *right* and *wrong* and how they should *behave* (Moral Compass, n.d) *accessed 10/12/16*). This we feel however is far too vague to be useful as it stands. Where does this 'knowledge' and 'feeling' come from? It cannot be satisfactory to simply put it down to a particular culturally determined transmission of values and principles. Secondly, the values themselves may or may not be that deeply imprinted when they conflict with the individual's perceived self-interest. Thirdly, the acknowledgement of their status as culturally relative not absolute undermines their authority. The moral compass to be of value needs to establish a common truth concerning 'the good' as its ethical north. The good being determined as being attaining to that which is the fulfillment of our common humanity. (Aristotle, 1957.)

Our paper argues for three connected propositions as being critical to ensure our moral compass can truly be effective in the navigation of ethical questions. First we address the issue of how empathy is fundamental to the emotional recognition of our common inherited humanity in others.

'Common inherited humanity' has been criticized by at times as un-provable and even as contradicted by the latest science. We are surprised to read such a criticism as it seems to the authors of this paper axiomatic that humanity has much in common. If not academic disciplines like anthropology, sociology and psychology could not exist, not to mention such areas of management science as marketing. But in the natural sciences too, whilst the genetic finger print points to our unique individuality so the sciences of genetics and biology prove our connectivity to the whole human species and its history. As our paper insists and everyday experience demonstrates these two ideas: the dignity and uniqueness of the individual and the common good are not mutually exclusive categories but two related and foundational elements in the foundational set of a human centered set of ethical rules. Empathy we suggest is a critical intuitive, emotional and biological platform for assessing how our actions are or may impact upon others. By Empathy as distinct from words like 'sympathy' and 'compassion', which Empathy can include, is its crucial role manifest in its ability to see the world as the other sees it.

Secondly, the ability to apply rational or critical thinking is the additional critical component to assist the individual to apply the moral compass objectively and fairly for all stakeholders. We recognize but do not explore in detail in this paper the importance of establishing / re-establishing 'Truth' as a foundational concept for judging ethical issues and for demonstrating one's ability to think critically, i.e. the ability to recognize external realities that conflict with one's own interests or desires and to weigh them objectively against the common good rather than one's own good.

The Conceptual Foundations of the Moral Compass

The moral compass needs to be formed and developed to be oriented to the "good." It is obvious that this is not an easy task. In order for the moral compass to be useful, it must be directed to "true north". This is a process that involves moral education, affective honing and a general sense of the "good and the right." This concern has become more problematic in our highly diverse world where innovations in medical and biological sciences, shifting social attitudes fundamental and globalization together with radical challenges from philosophy that 'truth' does not exist or is unattainable. This is the context for the academic treatment of business ethics and the contemporary formation of the moral compass.

If the compass is not properly formed, it will not point (or orient) in the correct direction. Hence, the analogy of conscience to a compass – it must be properly oriented. If a compass is not pointing to true North (or the markings on the compass indicate that the needle is off-North), it doesn't matter how closely it is being followed – you are still going to go the wrong way. It is within environments that encourage contemplation and self-critical refection as well as communities based on solidarity and common purpose that this formation can potentially be most notably honed in the area of morality and ethics. Clearly the academy remains potentially at least one very important learning community for individual ethical formation.

It is morality that makes people human" says Lennick and Kiel (2005) in *Moral Intelligence*. In their view, the foundation for a moral compass consists of ideologies, morals and philosophies, objectives, and behavior; these factors cooperate together to shape moral intelligence. (Lennick and Kiel, 2005)

As a result, intervention or ethical training needs to critically reflect upon Values, Attitudes, Needs and Expectations (VANE) of individuals and groups as well managing individual goals and wants as manifested in thought, emotion and action.

There are few concepts more important than the moral compass as a mechanism by which individuals can determine what is correct and what is wrong. It has the power to energize correct decisions and to restrain negative actions driven by political or personal gain only. However, it is vulnerable to the charge of being culturally determined and vulnerable to the charge of moral relativism and thus incapable of avoiding the trend toward tribalism rather than global community. We argue that for the moral compass to be effective it must be directed and enhanced by the implementation of critical thinking, the emotional capacity towards empathy, and have a clear evaluative standard that applies to all equally *and is in itself true* both as an ethical analytic starting point and just ends. First we turn to consider empathy.

The Need to Achieve Empathy in Our Relationships

We want to assert that empathy is the key driver of the moral compass as without it critical reasoning alone can all too easily become self-justification. Notwithstanding the evidence that empathy is biologically based and that humans respond physiologically when we note what other people experience (Aronson, 1995) it has received little attention in the Business Ethics curriculum. Not that it has been ignored altogether having already been explicitly applied to the arena of ethical and moral education as early as the 1970s where it was incorporated as part of the proposed minimum elements within a moral and ethical education identified by Wilson (1967) and aspects of this model expanded by Natale (1972).

The force of our concept of self-interest or even survival, psychological distancing and self-referencing that seems supported by the VANE endemic to the dominant corporate culture or self-understanding (identity) can negate our natural ability to empathize. Often hidden within this is a sense of inadequate personal power to effect change as well as overriding fear of the unknown person or group. Organizational actions and behaviors are often driven in response to a capital market whose subject is its own growth and in which humanity is at best an incidental beneficiary and whose role is often seen as purely instrumental for capitals advance.

The study by Maclagan and Snell (1992) who investigated through a series of interviews the moral dilemmas for a group of HRM managers quitting the profession found that the moral dilemmas that caused the most inner conflict arose in interpersonal relationships. (Maclagan and Snell, 1992, Table 1, p158) This finding is not surprising in the light of the importance of our innate skill of empathy. Their research found managers often face moral dilemmas in an organizational climate that is unsympathetic. (p157) Again this is not surprising but it should warn us that if effective business ethics training builds on empathy the likelihood is that many more managers will experience serious inner conflicts. Empathy enables us to understand the others point of *sympathetically*. We see how the other person is feeling by placing ourselves in their shoes.

In reality, critical thinking and empathy are complimentary ways of knowing an external reality that goes beyond our sense of self and self interest and, as such, must be separated out for focus and then integrated into a moral compass. The moral compass cannot function without the interactive corrective of both. In a seminar we asked management students to consider the advantage of empathy as a tool for managers. Their answers (below) were positive concerning the role of empathy in assisting moral or ethical reasoning. The seminar students identified the following uses for the application of empathy by managers.

These components, originally developed by Wilson, were recently discussed by Straughan (2000).

PHIL: is defined as the degree to which one can identify with other people and can, hence, understand that the rights of others enjoy the same status as their own.

EMP: is defined as the ability to understand what others are feeling as well as what one is feeling oneself.

GIG: is defined as the mastery of information and knowledge as the 'what' of the case.

DIK and PHRON: is defined as the ability to formulate a set of rational rules to which one adheres   regarding others

KRAT: is defined as the ability to translate these principles into action and behaviors.

Underlying these responses is an assumption of criteria upon which to give relative weight to the data. To some extent empathy is an emotional not a rational response. Its significance is that it acts as the trigger to a rational and sympathetic understanding of the other and even to our identification with that other person's needs and perspectives which can prompt us to actions aimed at helping the other rather than ourselves.

The idea of empathy is also rooted in the acceptance of the now and the truth of the human experience in the other that we too can experience and understand. We can through empathy share in a present often arising out of the past and use it to build into the future creating positive trust and shared expectations. If the ability to apply empathy requires knowledge (often the type acquired through a liberal education, (Scott, 2014) and skill / insight its application *first requires the desire to try* which suggests a degree of maturation, self confidence which are a part of the individual's character formation. This needs to be nurtured appropriately at various stages in individual development.

Business Schools cater for a wide variety of people with different ages, genders, with a wide range of cultural and racial diversity, experience, and level of academic achievement. This is seen as a barrier to clear communications and presents challenges given the variety of cultural and value sets that one can expect to meet. However this is an additional justification for our insistence that we teach and help develop empathy for students in the business school in order to generate sympathetic understanding of the other in the classroom that will hopefully continue outside the classroom and further down the students career path. Strategies for teaching and learning empathy needs further research, but in our view the *earlier* such educational and training in empathy starts the more internalized its development is likely to become.

The emotional capacity to see the situation from the other actor's place helps us to stand back *from our and their perspective* and employ a critical analysis of the relative ethical issues in an 'objective' manner. We write 'objective' because it begs the obvious question of what is the external measure or moral evaluate calculus upon which our 'objective' evaluation rests? What is the moral truth that gives us the direction (the ethical north-pole) towards an ethical outcome to which our moral compass can now point? Thus before we can explore how critical thinking in response to an understanding informed by empathy can provide the condition *sine qua non* of effective ethical decisions - the double helix of the moral compass - we must for the purposes of this paper assume the importance of truth and its role in moral reasoning. We recognize that this assumption in the current intellectual/philosophical climate cannot be taken for granted without justification but this issue we must leave here for another paper.

Critical Thinking Must Always Inform the Moral Compass

It is axiomatic at this point that critical thinking that is committed to arriving at an objective truth is a condition *sine qua non* for the moral compass to function. It is the condition for the possibility to understand complex situations and move one's behavior and affect into the correct position. Moral decisions are impossible without it. Critical thinking and the study of it has a long and distinguished pedigree. From the beginnings of philosophy there has been a preoccupation with what constitutes a critical thought and how it can be employed and managed. The works of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle bear firm witness to this.

Their approach required a careful analysis not only of the topic under discussion but its context as well as its extensions and implications. Each analytic statement was subject to a careful scrutiny of what was lost in one decision and/or gained in another. Perhaps the most instructive insight is that an analysis of a decision is not necessarily what it appears to be but, rather, requires exploration of preconditions, limits, and anomalous and conclusions that did not follow linearly from assertions and "givens".

Critical thinking arguments continued to develop and, under Dewey and Ennis (in Burbach et al, 2004), the conversation was expanded. According to Dewey, critical thinking involved the suspension of judgment and a healthy skepticism. Ennis suggested that critical thinking is achieved when students are assisted in the engagement of thinking that is reflexive, or, said another way, when students are encouraged to rethink outcomes of their opinions as a way of further exploring the content of their own thought. To perform these critical functions resulted in a fuller understanding of the elements of a decision and an assurance that the best alternatives that meet these external criteria of 'the good' and 'the true' have been selected.

The research took a more practical and political turn in 1983 when a study of critical thinking was connected with educational outcome and *"A Nation at Risk"* argued that critical thinking and, therefore, performance in US education was lower *at every level of education* (Norris, 1985). Keeley et. al. (1982) followed up with studies indicating that although university seniors performed better than freshman, glaring deficiencies remained and went unaddressed. As research into critical thinking expanded, it became more focused on various components of the total process and included evaluation and analysis of the contents of an issue under review to understand its content in the most robust manner. Further work was done on the process of critical thinking with its emphasis on its reflexive nature.

Of course it's important to consider how critical thinking develops in students. Bissell and Lemons (2006) attempted to assess *how* critical thinking developed and manifested itself in a first biology course. The operational definition of "critical thinking" they adapted was based on Bloom's Taxonomy and involved the researchers creating questions that contained both critical thinking components alongside significant course content. Bloom's Taxonomy (1957) developed by Benjamin Bloom aimed at the enhancement of higher forms of cognitive process and involved evaluation and assessment of various concepts along with reflection on procedures and principles in contradistinction to memorization.

He emphasized three domains of learning:
1. Cognitive ability commonly referred to as information/knowledge
2. Affective development which refers to emotional and feeling states which directly impact self and others.
3. Psychomotor usually referred to as physical abilities but can justly be amplified into the skill to get something actualized from theory or point of view. (Bloom,1957).

Bissell and Lemon (2006) also added grading rubrics that were aimed at yielding significant insight into both the content and process involved in critical thinking. Their study recorded that there was an increase in student content when critical thinking was applied to any answer. It also reported improved Meta cognition while manifesting student misunderstanding regarding course content. According to the researchers, this multi-focused analysis yielded a significantly better understanding of student evaluation alongside a mildly cognitive component.

In 2016, Natale conducted a small pilot project where he examined twenty on-line classes held in a graduate business program over several semesters. The two weekly DQs (Discussion Questions) over the varied full semester (ranging in length from 5 to 15 weeks) were examined. The questions were highly focused on either an empathic response or a critical thinking response. In the first 10 courses, all empathic questions were responded to with an empathic analysis while all critical thinking questions were responded to with a critical thinking analytic. The attempt was to see if simple reinforcement of a point of view or feeling would impact the moral compass.

In the second group of ten graduate courses, all empathic questions were responded with opposite points of view. That is to say when a student would answer with an empathic response, a critical thinking component would be added to it. When a student responded with a critical thinking response, the argument was extended to include empathic considerations. The result was that in the courses where analogous responses were used, no significant change occurred in articulated thinking. But in the other sections where their [the students'] comments were extended to include the complimentary concept, articulated thinking became more integrated and involved with issues associated with the moral compass. Clearly one cannot draw hard conclusions form one small pilot study, nevertheless, the results are promising and worthy of further testing.

The terminology describing critical thinking has advanced and become more specific as evident in Petress (2004) description of critical thinking as an approach that examines assumptions, discerns hidden values, evaluates evidence and assesses conclusions. Warnick and Inch (1994) describe the critical thinking process as the unique ability to explore a problem, question or situation; to integrate all of the available information about the issues under review and arrive at a solution or hypothesis to justify one's position. There is in these observations, a greater emphasis on investigation of values, attitudes, needs, assumptions and biases. *However we believe the critical component becomes far less subjective and harder to be 'turned' or 'fine tuned' to eliminate or down - grade unpalatable or inconvenient data (possibly arising from the application of empathy) when referenced to the external measure of the good which we suggest here can be found through reference to our common humanity.*

Developing Student Moral Compass in the Broader Context of Curriculum Reform.

The business schools' curriculums need to be designed so as to: a) bring students to a discussion of truth as a basis if ethical decision making, and, b) to reflect on philosophical positions that would uphold or deny this proposition , and, c) to identify their own community of belief and to question themselves, and their own ethical / moral development against both their community and the others and to reflect on how well they feel *they* fit both these to an external measure of the good rooted in the shared humanity to be found in both communities. A curriculum that directs students towards *both* an external measure of the good and an interior reflection of their own moral development measured against their personal identity as a member of their own community of belief, within the wider human family, needs to include the tools of empathy and critical reasoning to translate general principles into concrete decisions in given cases.

This approach places a significant burden on the faculty member as it is her/his obligation to insure that the process is always a balance and corrective between the use of the critical thinking process and the empathic engagement required to have the moral compass always referencing as appropriate the external measurement of the good against the facts pointing "true north". This is no insignificant challenge as it requires the class to manage not only the concrete data involved in decision-making but also demands infusing the significance of that data with an empathic element informing the external measure of the good. Not only does the moral compass need to be "trained," it also needs to be monitored and corrected as the context varies.

Above all we suggest that moral decision making based on this approach *requires dialogue and feedback from the various actors*. It requires a greater level of involvement and transparency than is often the case today at all levels of organizational decision – making. The four principles rooted in an acceptance of our common humanity are general enough for universal application and flexible enough to allow for a range of ethical outcomes which meet their criteria and also meet effectively the particular circumstances in which the ethical dilemma has emerged.

Such an approach we claim would provide for a revolution in the way business ethics is taught that meets and transcends the impasse and failure found in the current approaches. But we recognize that no revolution in approach to business ethics teaching changes the context of the pressures practicing managers will experience in organizational life. We believe there is a strong possibility, however, that with a more reflective approach and clearer principles as to the measure of the good will help produce greater individual resilience to these pressures and in then to wide spread organizational reform.

So we urge that with these changes in philosophy and methodology the business schools need to present a wider range of models of business organization. Not to eliminate Joint Stock Companies, but simply to ensure a more pluralistic offering which includes private companies, co-operatives, partnerships and sole traders being given equal weight. For a sustained case for this approach see Davis (2006). In addition, there needs to be greater emphasis upon the context in which contemporary business is be conducted. As Warren (2016) points out research into the types of organizations that best weathered the storm of the last recession were found to be those like the John Lewis Partnership (a employee owned business) and family businesses like Day Lewis Pharmacy where 'a mutuality of endeavor' enabled moral decisions concerning a more long term perspective could be undertaken. Another example from the research of Bajo and Roelants (2011) provided four case studies of co-operatives during the recession showing how they developed strategies that continued to protect employment, investment for the future and policies of conservation. Gold, (2004 and 2010) provides further research evidence of the scope for privately owned companies without tradable shares to take the lead in establishing ethical behaviors and objectives in business in her two studies of the *Focolare* movement from its origins in post-war Italy to the global movement it has become today.

Curriculums needs to give additional space to the consequences and costs of business decision-making: social (including exclusion and marginalization); economic (including labor market   conditions and unemployment), environmental (including sustainability, ecological and climate change issues) and political (human rights, concepts of economic democracy, stakeholder theory, and employment rights and trade union rights). This is important because there is little point raising ethical awareness without addressing alternative employment and policy options for business studies students. The curriculum may also need to have components that assist students to evaluate potential employers from the perspective of their ethical records when planning their career paths and application priorities.

Conclusions

Thus we propose the case that empathy and critical reasoning, when measured against an external measure of the good, combine to provide a much more robust basis for business ethics programs. Further, we contend that this approach is more sophisticated than the application of critical reasoning as a simple a process of analysis, or based upon the philosophies of empiricism, pragmatism and the processes of deconstruction advocated by critical theory. Of course, further substantive research using this philosophy and methodology is needed in order to establish ethical and moral standards in organizational life. Human frailty will always remain a key factor in practice; however, in the context of a clear application of the moral compass as we want to see it developed, such frailty arguably will be much harder to disguise or justify. Those who remain skeptical concerning the validity of our reference to a 'common good' should perhaps reflect on the justification of Neo-Classical Economic Theory's proposition of preference to a free market; this model claimed that an optimized human welfare must surely be the common good.

Whether that model delivered or not, the application of common good in business ethics programs is also surely verifiable by the use of empathy and critical reasoning.

References

Anderson, L.W., Krathwohl, D.R., Airasian, P.W., Cruikshank, K.A., Mayer, R.E., Pintrich, P.R., Raths, J., Wittrock, M.C. (2001). *A taxonomy for learning, teaching, and assessing: A revision of bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives*. New York: Pearson, Allyn & Bacon.

Aristotle. *Physics, Volume I: Books 1-4.* Translated by P. H. Wicksteed, F. M. Cornford. Loeb Classical Library 228. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957.

Bajo, C. S., & Roelants, B. (2011). *Capital and the debt trap: Learning from cooperatives in the global crisis*. Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

Barnwell, P. (2016, July 25). Students' broken moral compasses. *The Atlantic*. Retrieved August 1, 2016, from http://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2016/07/students-broken-moral-com passes/492866/

Bissell, A. N. & Lemons, P. P. (2006). A new method for assessing critical thinking in the classroom. *BioScience*, *56*(1). 66-72.

Bloom, B.S. (Ed.). Engelhart, M.D., Furst, E.J., Hill, W.H., Krathwohl, D.R. (1956). *Taxonomy of educational objectives, handbook I: The cognitive domain*. New York: David McKay Co Inc.

Burbach, G. J., Hellweg, R., Haas, C. A., Turco, D. D., Deicke, U., Abramowski, D., . . . Deller, T. (2004). P2-062 Induction of brain-derived neurotrophic factor (BDNF) in plaque-associated glial cells of aged APP23 transgenic mice. Neurobiology of Aging, 25. doi:10.1016/s0197-4580(04)80809-1

Clark, R, & Chopeta, L. (2004). *Graphics for learning: Proven guidelines for planning, designing, and evaluating visuals in training materials*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass/Pfeiffer.

Davis, P. (2006). 'The co-operative, catholic social thought and the good company: The importance of pluralism in the market', Paper presented to the Sixth International Symposium on Catholic Social Thought and Management Education, *The Good Company. Catholic Social Thought and Corporate Social Responsibility in Dialogue*, Pontifica Universita San Tommaso (Angelicum) Roma, Italia) October 5-7, pp1-21. https://www2.le.ac.uk/departments/manage ment/documents/research/research-units/umbo/catholic.pdf

Gold, L. (2004). *The sharing economy: Solidarity networks transforming globalization*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Gold, L. (2010). *New financial horizons: The emergence of an economy of communion*, New City Press, New York.

Keeley, S. M., Browne, M. N., & Kreutzer, J. S. (1982). A comparison of freshmen and seniors on general and specific essay tests of critical thinking. *Research in Higher Education*, 17(2), 139-154. doi:10.1007/bf00973715

Lennick, D., & Kiel, F. (2005). Moral intelligence: Enhancing business performance and leadership success. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Wharton School Pub.

Maclagan, P., and Snell, R. (1992). Some Implications for Management Development of Research into Managers Moral Dilemmas', *British Journal of Management*, Vol. 3, pp 157 -168.

Moral Compass. (n.d.). In *Cambridge english dictionary*. Retrieved October 12, 2016, from http://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/moral-compass

Natale, S. M. (1972). *An experiment in empathy*. Slough: National Foundation for Educational Research.

Norris, S.P. (1985). Synthesis of research on critical thinking. *Educational Leadership*, *43*, 40-45.

Petress, K. (2004). Critical thinking: An extended definition. *Education, 124*(3), 461-466.

Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, (2004) *Compendium of the social doctrine of the church,* Libreria Editrice Vaticana, ISBN 88-209-7716-8

Scott, R. A. (2014). The meaning of liberal education. *On the Horizon*, 22(1), 23-34. doi:10.1108/oth-09-2013-0036.

Shakespeare, S. (2009). *Derrida and Theology*, T&T Clark International, London.

Solmsen, F. (1960). *Aristotle's system of the physical world: A comparison with his predecessors*, Cornel University Press, Ithaca, New York.

Straughan, R. (2000, April 28 – May 3). Revisiting wilson MA. *Journal of Moral Education, 29*(3), 367–370.

Warren, C. (2016). Trust, truth and consequences, in *Work. Because business is about people,*, Autumn, CIPD, Twickenham, pp37 -49.

Warnick, B., & Inch, E. S. (1994). *Critical thinking and communication: The use of reason in argument*. New York: Macmillan Pub.

Wilson, J. B. (1967). *Introduction to moral education*. London: Penguin.