Critical Analysis of "Doing Environmental Ethics"

Sinclair discusses how we can improve our moral decision-making in his paper "Have We Got the Cart Before the Horse" (Sinclair, 2009). Sinclair upholds Kohlberg's paradigm of moral reasoning where individuals function at one of six stages in their decision-making process. Each higher stage involves more complex reasoning leading to more and more justice. The implication is that individuals can improve their moral decision-making by moving to the next higher stage .According to Sinclair, "moral discussion and curriculum constitute only one portion of the conditions stimulating moral growth" (Sinclair, 2009, p.11). The other condition is the moral atmosphere that individuals function in. The moral atmosphere provides opportunities for decision-making and influences from the level of justice in the environment. Furthermore, Sinclair asserts that an introduction to the concepts in "Have We Got the Cart Before the Horse" only increases individuals' sensitivity to the presence of moral dilemmas. It may not improve their moral reasoning. With that in mind, I am interested to see what changes, if any, I make in my moral reasoning after reading and exploring ethical theories presented in "Doing Environmental Ethics (Traer, 2009). (Sinclair, 2009)

In "Doing Environmental Ethics" Traer indicates our environmental crisis is largely due to our failure to grant moral consideration to the intrinsic value of nature. To address this, Traer constructs ethical presumptions to act on. The presumptions are based on four types of ethical reasoning and "assert what we understand to be intrinsically right and good" (Traer, 2009, p.15). Examples of each type of ethical reasoning are traced back to environmental laws, philosophical arguments, religious teaching, children's sorties,

human history and his own experience. As "modern culture requires that ethical decisions concerning public policy consider the projections of science and economics" (Traer, 2009, p.xi), Traer predicts the likely consequences of his ethical presumptions as a way of testing his reasoning. Consequences either support or challenge the presumption. (Traer, 2009)

Traer's introduction to philosophical morals starts with a discussion of teleological and deontological ethics. Teleological ethics are ends-based; the rightness of choices is determined by the resulting state. Deontological ethics determines the rightness of an action based on a set of duties or rules. These two forms of ethics are broken down into four forms of ethical reasoning based on duty, right, virtue and relationships. (Traer, 2009)

Traer refers to Immanuel Kant for an introduction to duties-based ethics. Kant's claim is that "our duty is simply to do what is rational" (Traer, 2009, p. 55) Actions are ethical based on the rationality of the good will not the consequences. Central to Kant's claim is the concept of categorical imperative, "an ethical principle is rational if we all, as rational beings, agree that it may be applied without any exceptions" (Traer, 2009, p.56). Therefore an ethical principle cannot be tied to any conditions and could apply to any rational being. As all individuals are rational in Kant's view, the categorical imperative requires we not treat others as a means to an end.

The "Golden Rule" is also frequently referenced in duty ethics, "do unto others as you would have them do unto you". This offers subjectivity, as different people may want to be treated differently. Kant's theory is much more absolute. (Traer, 2009)

One of the strengths of duty ethics is the consistency. Lying, for example, is always wrong. A person following Kant's theory would never lie to another regardless of the situation or consequences. This does pose problems when a lie could protect someone from harm or similar.

Within Kohlberg's paradigm, duties ethics can be at stage 4: Law and Order Orientation, stage 5: Social-Contract, Legalistic Orientation or stage 6: Universal-Ethical-Principle Orientation depending on the duties ascribed to. Morality at stage 4 is rules-based and values consistency. Stage 5 follows the "Golden Rule" and values individual rights. Stage 6, the highest stage involving the most complex reasoning, resembles Kant's theory. Kant's principle of categorical imperative and recognizing the inherent value in others are valued at this stage. (Sinclair, 2009)

The theory of rights ethics upholds that individuals, as reasonable people of free will, have certain natural rights. These rights apply to everyone, everywhere and at all times. At one point philosophers such as John Locke believed that natural rights came from natural law, which originated with God. The natural rights of life, liberty and property were considered valid independent of recognition by the state. Today rights are held up by legal and institutional rules that clarify valid from invalid rights. Rights correlate to an obligation. For example, within Canada we have the right for freedom of speech. The corresponding obligation is on the government to protect that right. (Fagan, 2005) (Traer, 2009)

Ronald Dworkin created the expression "rights at trumps". According to Dworkin, rights should take precedence over other forms of reasoning. In today's society we follow this

belief, at least in theory. Law, treaties and international declarations uphold human rights. Rights for animals and the environment are not as universal. (Fagan, 2005)

Within the Kohlberg paradigm, rights ethics are at stage 5, the Social-Contract, Legalistic Orientation. At this stage individual rights contribute to the determination of right action. Furthermore, the corresponding obligations are valued equally. (Sinclair, 2009)

Virtue ethics focuses on the moral character of the individual instead of the action. Virtuous individuals possess certain virtues, which in turn makes them moral. Their actions are a reflection of that morality. Desirable virtues have varied through history and culture. Traer supports the virtues of integrity, gratitude and frugality. Traer implies that virtue ethics are a form of teleology but others state it is separate from deontology or teleology. Unlike deontology or teleology, virtue ethics do not provide principles for reasoning in moral dilemmas but support developing virtues for their own value. This may then help individuals make moral decisions when dilemmas arise. Virtue ethics are helpful in terms of evaluating the character of others. It also supports the concept of building a good community through sustained engagement. (Hursthouse, 2012) (Traer, 2009)

A current version of virtue ethics can be found in James P Owen's "Cowboy Values". In his book Owen proposes seven core values that are accessible to each of us and allow us to fulfill the code of his boyhood heroes. Each of the values focuses on individual character. However, Owen emphasizes the importance of community engagement to make values sustainable, institute change and provide individual fulfillment. (Owen, 2008)

I have difficulty understanding how virtue ethics relates to Kohlberg's paradigm. I expect it could fit into stage 3: the Interpersonal Concordance Orientation where the focus is on good and nice behaviour. The fit could be highly dependent on the desirable virtue. (Sinclair, 2009)

Traer explores how our relationships with others and nature effects our environmental ethics. The discussion focuses on the ethics of care where moral value is placed on empathy and relationships. "Care" is based on the value of meeting the needs of ourselves and others, including those who are vulnerable. Joan Tronto defines the phases of care to include "caring about, taking care of, care-giving and care-receiving" (Sander-Staudt, v. Joan Tronto). As Traer states, "an ethics of care is an effort to temper justice with compassion" (Traer, 2009, p.90). Therefore, it stands that the ethics of care is valuable reasoning to include in resolution of ethical dilemmas as it has been in animal rights, gay marriage and capital punishment. (Sander-Staudt, 2011) (Traer, 2009)

The ethics of care theory falls into stage 3 of Kohlberg's paradigm due to the focus of interpersonal feelings. The psychologist Carol Gilligan asserts that Kohlberg's paradigm is based on a masculine view of morality where advanced moral reasoning is based on rules, rights and abstract principle. According to Gilligan, Kohlberg's paradigm is biased towards men. Further, a more accurate perspective for woman is toward a progression of increasing degrees of caring based on ethics of care. Support for Gilligan's claim is not universal. (Crain, 1985) (Sinclair, 2009)

Prior to taking Ethical Decision-Making in Public Health (PHLD 605), my understanding of ethics was largely influenced my upbringing, experience and professional obligations. My decision-making was largely based on virtue ethics with some considerations of duty

ethics and was not particularly complex. Exploring the ethical theories presented in "Doing Environmental Ethics" has provided some indication of the moral reasoning I could develop. In recent weeks my biggest change has been noticing the number of moral dilemmas I encounter. This concurs with Sinclair's prediction in terms of increased sensitivity. When decision-making I am trying to slow down so I can identify the reasons for my choice and understand why I consider one choice to be the best. Last week an applicant challenged one of my decisions and I hesitated. I wondered if my reasons were comprehensive or if I was defending my decision due to my ego. I believe moments of doubt and responses to a challenge will help me develop my moral character. (Sinclair, 2009)

Exploring ethics is relevant to anyone working in public health. Public health professionals frequently encounter moral dilemmas when balancing individual liberties with the health of the community. Administering regulations and rules in a field as personal and sensitive as an individual's health can require a delicate approach. Ethics help professionals approach patient's and clients in a manner that is engaging and transparent.

Approaching the topic of our environmental crisis in terms of ethics is important and I would recommend it to everyone. I am purposeful in not singling out a single group for discussing the topic as I believe each of us is responsible for creating our moral community and contributing to a solution. As James P Owen states, "if we want to solve the formidable problems we face, we can't sit back and wait for the government or someone else to do it" (Owen, 2008, "Cowboy More Than Ever"). However, I am hesitant to recommend "Doing Environmental Ethics" to others. Traer does not provide

an adequate introduction to ethical theory. For beginners, such as myself, it necessitates referencing other resources to provide a suitable foundation to understand concepts he proposes. I am concerned readers would loose focus or interest in the process of trying to understand the basics. My other objection is the readability of the text. Quotations are inserted into the text abruptly breaking up the flow of the writing. The approximately one hundred footnotes per chapter do not help either. Finally, discussions are not always succinct or tie together well. In my opinion this diminished my understanding.

"Doing Environmental Ethics" does excel in providing moral reasoning for why we should develop public policy for environmental protection. The combination of diverse ethical theories and testing presumptions against consequences reduces bias. Due to the potential to unite differing perspectives, I would recommend this book to anyone involved in politics or senior levels of public service. Preferably these individuals would already have a background in ethical theory.

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