ETHICAL DECISION MAKING: A PERSONALITY TYPE

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A 16 year old girl, bleeding profusely, is taken to emergency. After being examined, she refuses the suggested medical treatment because her religion does not allow the use of blood products. You are asked to join the girl, her parents, and several health care professionals to try to resolve the situation. What is your first response to this ethical dilemma?

**Introduction**

Health care providers have always faced ethical dilemmas in caring for the sick and dying. Among factors contributing to complex ethical challenges are medical technologies, patient rights, professional autonomy and institutional policies. When addressing ethical dilemmas there are times when all of us stumble, despite our best efforts. Certain insights from the psychological theory known as Personality Type can help us better understand the actual process of ethical decision-making and also provide insights into those aspects of the experience that we find difficult.

**The Process of Ethical Decision Making**

When grappling with ethical dilemmas, ethicists refer to the outcome of their deliberations as resolutions more than solutions. Problems have solutions. Ethical dilemmas, at best, lead to resolutions. Most ethicists hold that the scientific method used in human problem solving is not identical to the method used in ethical decision making. However, the two processes do have some important commonalities. Both are multi-stage, organized and reasoned methods of collecting, weighing and evaluating evidence so that sound conclusions will emerge. As Drane has noted, health care professionals have no alternative to using a structured methodology when trying to resolve ethical dilemmas. The process involves more than simple choice or judgement.

"Ethics is a refinement of moral decision-making. Strategy and method play such key roles that ethics can be compared to science." Therefore, while ethical decision-making is not problem-solving only, it is no less a type of problem solving. The scientific method used in problem-solving and decision-making involves four basic activities, preceded by a statement of the problem and followed by action. These steps are: gathering relevant data, exploring possible solutions, analyzing suggested solutions and then evaluating their impact. Some authors have proposed that ethicists should use such multi-phase problem-solving methods, saying that this would promote a more sophisticated process of ethical discernment.

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Consciously or not, most of us tend to approach ethical challenges out of methods such as the deontological, the teleological or the relational. These methods are rooted in certain ethical principles, such as autonomy, beneficence and justice, which for many of us are faith-based. However, when it comes to the hands-on process of ethical reasoning, we could profit from intentionally using the four distinct, inter-related steps mentioned earlier. When using this process, most of us will find it easier to focus on some things and neglect others. For example, we may favor phase two (generating possible solutions). We may also find that, among the remaining three steps, one in particular causes us the most concern. Unconsciously, we give it less time and less attention. We'd be happy if we could assign it elsewhere, or skip it. It is in reflecting on such issues that Personality Type could be helpful.

**The Theory of Personality Type**

Countless Canadians have been introduced to Dr. Carl Jung's personality theory, as described by the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (M.B.T.I.) The theory is an attempt to explain some important psychological differences among people. It has had a powerful positive impact on such health care issues as leadership styles, team dynamics and preferred spiritualities. Type theory deals with four pairs of mental activities we use regularly. The first pair concerns our preferred way of using personal energy: we take either an external or an internal focus (extroversion or introversion). The second pair has to do with our way of perceiving reality: each of us takes either a micro or a macro approach to perception (sensing or intuiting). The third pair of mental activities deals with how we prefer to process what we've perceived: we take either an objective or subjective approach (thinking or feeling). The final pair deals with our desire for more or less structure in our lives (judging or perceiving).

When we complete a questionnaire such as the M.B.I.T. we decide which mental function, from each of the four pairs of opposite functions, is more natural to us. We end up with one of 16 possible four-letter combinations, which is designated our Personality Type. For example, one of the sixteen types is the ESFJ. A person with this type tends to focus energy externally on persons, places and things (E), perceives reality via specific, concrete facts (S), takes a subjective perspective in drawing conclusions (F) and favours structure/closure over flexibility/ambiguity (J). When trying to
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resolve an ethical dilemma an ESFJ prefers to talk things out with others (E), takes time to gather accurate and specific facts (S), is concerned about the impact an ethical conclusion may have on people (F), and wants to bring closure to the discussion (J). In relationships between ethical decision-making and Personality Type, tremendous theoretical and practical insights are possible. There are strengths and weaknesses in the approaches to ethics taken by each of the 16 types.

Type Dynamics
One important aspect of type theory is called Type Dynamics, and is relevant to ethical decision-making. The gist of Type Dynamics is that the 16 different personality types rank the two perceiving functions (sensing and intuiting) and the two judging functions (thinking and feeling) into four different priorities. The terms used to refer to these ranked functions are: the dominant (favorite, best developed), the auxiliary (second favorite), the tertiary (third favorite) and the inferior (least developed). For example, an ESFJ gives first priority to the subjective perspective in drawing conclusions (F), second priority to perceiving via specific, concrete facts (S), third priority to using one's intuition (N) and the lowest priority to drawing conclusions based on objective, logical analysis (T). Knowing our personality preferences, especially how our type prioritizes the four inner functions (S/N and T/F), can help us reflect on how we handle ethical decision-making. As Isabel Briggs-Myers notes, "According to type theory, the best decisions use both kinds of perception (S and N) in order to gather all useful information and both kinds of judgment (T and F) to ensure that all factors have been weighed." Because we prefer one particular kind of perception and one kind of judgment, we usually focus on our preferred ways and lose the positive contributions of our non-preferred way.

Ethical Decision Making and Personality Type
Ethical discernment typically involves processing four distinct activities:
1) gathering relevant data; 2) exploring possible responses; 3) weighing the pros and cons of each possibility; 4) evaluating the impact of each one, especially on people. According to type theory, the four inner priorities (sensing, intuiting, thinking and feeling), which are in a different order for different types, parallel the four phases of the process of ethical decision-making. There are definite correlations between each of the four phases of ethical discernment and the four inner functions: between sensing and data-gathering; between intuiting and hypothesizing; between thinking and objective evaluation; and between feeling and weighing the people impact.

However, for none of the 16 types do we have an exact fit. For example, for the ESFJ the ranking of the inner functions is: feeling, sensing, intuiting and thinking. For this type the best-developed inner function (feeling) comes last in the normal order of the four steps in ethical decision-making. The ESFJ will tend to focus unduly on the people impact of an ethical decision, to the detriment of the three preceding steps.

Type theory suggests that each of the 16 types is innately good at one of the first two stages of ethical discernment, either at gathering data or at generating possibilities.

If, for example, one's dominant (best developed) function is sensing (gathering data) one is off to a good start in undertaking ethical discernment. This is the case with four of the 16 types (ISTJ, ISFJ, ESTP, ESFP). However, for these same four types the second stage of ethical discernment - generating possibilities (intuiting) - is the weakest. This means that these four types start out well in ethical discernment but tend to stumble in phase two. They can easily get stuck in the information they have gathered, and fail to see a way out. What such types can do to improve their approach to ethical discernment is to intentionally go to their intuiting function once sufficient data has been gathered, even...
though that is not their natural inclination.

The four types for whom the intuiting and not the sensing function is dominant (INTJ, INFP, ENTP, and ENFP), find that a different situation presents itself. They tend to be hasty in the initial data gathering phase and easily focus on unimportant details. Since they prefer generating possibilities to gathering information, the hypotheses they produce tend to be poorly grounded. For four of the 16 types (ISTP, INTP, ESTJ, and ENTJ) the dominant is thinking and the inferior is feeling. For these types, there is a tendency to come up with results that are logical, but unrealistic. They tend to ignore the impact a decision can have on people's lives. For the remaining four types (ISFP, INFP, ESFJ, ENFJ) the dominant is feeling and the inferior is thinking. These types often fail to grasp the consequences of the various possibilities, and focus primarily on the needs of the people in the immediate situation. Their opinions can be swayed by the views of trusted people.

**Conclusion**

The process of ethical decision-making can be more effective if the insights of Personality Type theory are used. For most of us, this could be done retrospectively i.e. reviewing several ethical decisions we've recently made. Placing the four basic phases of the process of ethical discernment alongside how our particular Type ranks the four inner functions, should provide immediate insights. Unless we are intentional, we will tend to emphasize our favorite function and neglect the use of our least-preferred function. We need to use both ways of perceiving (sensing and intuiting) and both kinds of judging (thinking and feeling), regardless of our particular Personality Type. The outcome is best if we utilize the four functions in this order: sensing (to gather facts), intuiting (to generate hypotheses), thinking (to critique the hypotheses) and feeling (to assess the impact). The dynamic theory of Personality Type loses its vitality if conceptualized too mechanically. The same can be said of the process of ethical decision-making. Practical ethics is art as well as science.

**References**


9. L. V. Berens, 1999, op.cit
