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Circles of Ethics: A Creative Tension Model for Ethical Wholeness

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Abstract

This paper introduces the Circles of Ethics (CoE). These are defined as a series of concentric circles centered in the moral agent. Each circle is occupied by groups perceived by the moral agent as either closer or farther away from herself. The main premise of the paper is that moral agents tend to make instinctive decisions based on their CoE. First, a rationale for the existence and importance of the CoE will be presented. Next, the impact on the CoE of self-interest and in-group bias will be discussed. Finally, implications on ethics education and future research will be addressed.

Circles of Ethics: A Creative Tension Model for Ethical Wholeness

Introduction

My daughter Maggie is 6 years old. As I see her each morning, I am reminded of how I was at her age: A tall and skinny girl with long hair and enough imagination to fill 1,000 unwritten books. Of course, I recognize that Maggie is not me – she is her own independent self, a little woman learning to live her own life. It is inevitable, however, to see Maggie as part of me. I would kill and die for her. Her well-being and mine are closely interconnected.

Maggie was my main inspiration for the “Circles of Ethics” (CoE). These may be defined as a series of concentric circles centered in the moral agent. Each circle is occupied by groups perceived by the moral agent as either closer or farther away from herself. The innermost circles, for instance, include family and close friends. These are then followed by other circles populated by less critical groups such as co-workers, community members, cultural-ethnic counterparts, or compatriots. When a person attempts to solve an ethical dilemma, he may instinctively prioritize the needs of the members of the innermost circles. For instance, people may ignore – consciously or subconsciously – the legitimate rights of residents of far away countries. It is unlikely, however, that they would disregard the needs of their own children. This may be especially true whenever the people involved in the moral dilemma being considered do not share the moral agent’s racial heritage, religion, or certain critical values.

The CoE are the central piece of this paper. First, I will build the case for their importance. Specifically I will contrast the CoE with the Ethic of Justice; the Ethic of Care; and Batson, Klein, Highberger, and Shaw’s (1995) empathy-induced altruism hypothesis. I will also address the role of rational thinking in ethical decision-making. Secondly, I will analyze the

CoE considering compounding effects of self-interest and in-group bias. Finally, I will introduce a model for ethical development based on Peter Senge's (1998) "Creative Tension" model.

Background: The Tension of Care and Justice in Moral Decision-Making

Batson et al. (1995) found considerable evidence that most people value a universal quest for justice and are motivated to uphold it. Indeed, Kohlberg (1984) argued that "a person's sense of justice is what is most distinctively and fundamentally moral" (p. 184). One cannot, Kohlberg said, question the quest for justice and be moral at the same time.

Kohlberg's well-known six-step model of moral development predicted that morally mature individuals are able to value "universal ethical principles" (p. 177) that seek the "equality of human rights and respect for the dignity of human beings as individual persons" (p. 177). At the lower developmental levels, individuals are mostly egocentric, regarding only their own needs and wants. The main motivation at these levels is the satisfaction of the agent's own needs. As individuals progress, however, they start considering the interests of others. Kohlberg proposed that individuals at the last and most advanced level of development follow complex logical reasoning rules in order to make decisions. Such decisions are ultimately based on the needs of society as a whole.

Kohlberg's model has supporters as well as critics. A well-known debate pits proponents of Kohlberg's quest for universal justice against supporters of Gilligan's (1987) Ethic of Care. The Ethic of Care was defined by Starrat (1991) as an ethical reasoning paradigm that prioritizes love and generosity. When people truly care, they love the other for the sake of love, regardless of contractual rights or social responsibilities. Starrat added, "for an ethic of justice to serve its more generous purpose, it must be complemented or fulfilled in an ethic of love" (p. 195).

It could be argued that ethical behavior requires both care and justice. Rather than two independent ethics, Starrat (1991) suggested that these two paradigms complement one another, helping the moral agent reach ethical decisions. Are we, however, equally capable of using both? Are there moments in which one ethic takes precedence over the other?

It is useful, at this point, to introduce research on empathy-induced altruism. Batson et al. (1995) manipulated levels of empathy on subjects and found that when people felt empathy they tended to be less concerned about universal justice values. Instead, research subjects tended to prioritize “the interest of benefiting the person for whom they felt empathy” (p. 1052). In other words, when people *cared*, they tended to follow their *emotional connection* to the person whose case was being discussed. This was true even when the subjects acknowledged that their decision could be considered by some as “unjust.”

It appears, therefore, that even when people *are capable* of a Kohlbergian upper level decision-making style based on the Ethic of Justice, they still may *choose* to ignore it for the sake of empathy. If empathy is absent, the rational and logical Ethic of Justice tends to win. If empathy is present, the Ethic of Care is likely to be the winner.

For instance, let us consider a case based on Batson et al.’s (1995) study. A corporate manager must lay off one of her employees. Both employees have similar qualifications and comparable work records. Employee “A,” however, is the single mother of four young children. Is it “unethical” or “unjust” for the manager to take “A’s” parental status into consideration? The purpose of this paper is not to answer this question or to argue either for the Ethic of Care or for the Ethic of Justice. The case is being made, however, that the Ethic of Care tends to take automatic precedence over the Ethic of Justice if the moral agent feels empathy.

Why does this happen? Here is one possible reason: Moral behavior is often *not* a result of conscious and rational decisions. Instead, ethical decisions are more likely to be intuitive (Epley & Caruso, 2004). It seems that our emotions lead us to a “moral intuition” (p. 181), which tends to guide subsequent reasoning. In other words, instead of carefully weighing our options and reaching a decision, we *first* come up with a decision and *then* conceive a rational justification for the decision already made. This process appears to be inevitable – Epley and Caruso claimed that the only way in which we can avoid it is by intervening *before* people are able to develop a perspective that will bias their judgment.

Here is a summary of the argument so far: Human emotions seem pivotal in ethical decision-making. As people tackle daily moral dilemmas, unconscious feelings are likely to outweigh rational thinking – especially after empathy is aroused. A uniform application of the Ethic of Justice, however, requires more logic and fairness than emotions.

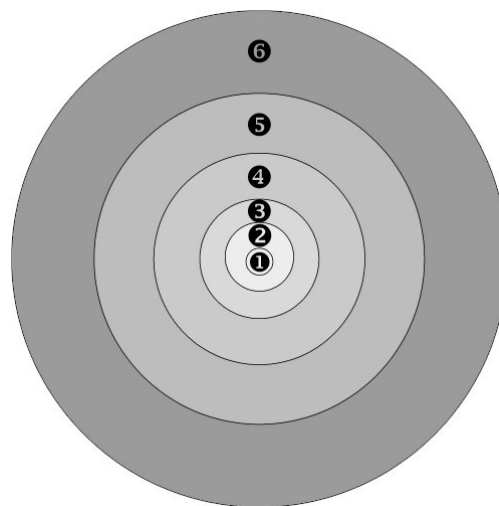
Is this a problem? No, not necessarily. After all, both the Ethic of Care and the Ethic of Justice may lead to a morally justifiable decision. For instance, it is possible to act in a morally righteous way because it is the right thing to do (Ethic of Justice) or because we care for the person (Ethic of Care).

It is possible, however, for Care and Justice to be at odds. For instance, the moral agent may need to decide whether to prioritize the needs of someone whom she deeply loves or those of other society members. *If* we assume that both Care and Justice are valuable and even essential for the proper functioning of human society *then* it is important to investigate what circumstances support each type of moral reasoning. This is where the CoE come in.

Introducing the Circles of Ethics

The Circles of Ethics are a series of circles centered on the moral agent. Each circle includes members of a particular group. The farthest circles are occupied by foreign people from far away lands, unknown, faceless individuals who may not even appear on the evening news. The closest circles include one's children, siblings, spouse, and close friends. Figure 1 is a representation of a particular moral agent's series of CoE.

Figure 1. Circles of Ethics



The numbers indicate various levels of groups that are more or less related to the agent including: **1** moral agent and moral agent's children, **2** spouse, family, and close friends, **3** closest communities, **4** country **5** citizens of countries that are aligned culturally, politically, or racially with moral agent's country, and **6** less visible and/or aligned world communities.

A premise worth exploring is that the Ethic of Care and the Ethic of Justice will more closely align as we approach to the center of our CoE. Then, the synergy reached through the combination of rational moral reasoning and visceral emotional connection will more likely lead

the agent to a morally defensible decision from both Justice and Care perspectives. Following this logic, we may also say that we are less likely to apply the Ethic of Care when we solve dilemmas involving people too far removed from the center of our CoE.

A critic might argue that this does not matter. As long as a moral agent is capable of applying the Ethic of Justice, then his inability to consider a particular moral situation from a perspective of Care is irrelevant. There are two reasons, however, that bring relevance to this issue. First, it is possible for the moral agent to ignore completely the needs of those removed from the CoE center – especially if those needs conflict with the needs of inner circle members. Secondly, the combination of Care and Justice is likely to be particularly powerful. While Justice brings rationality to the decision-making process “empathy induced altruism may provide emotional fire and a push towards seeing the victims’ suffering end” (Batson et al., 1995, p. 1053). The concept of CoE matters, therefore, because people’s *emotional blindness* to the needs of members of farther away circles may, at best, deplete moral decision-making of “emotional fire,” and at worst prevent moral behavior altogether.

Fortunately, it is possible that our series of CoE are fluid rather than static. People may move closer to a moral agent’s innermost circles through a process of empathy manipulation. For example, when we heard about the December 2004 Tsunami catastrophe in Asia, our homes were invaded by images of people from previously unknown lands. We saw their faces and heard their cries of anguish. Arguably, those people moved closer to the center of our CoE. At least for a while, we *cared*. It is likely that the outpouring of sympathy and donations that followed the 2004 Asian Tsunami came from the extraordinary empathy induced by extraordinary events rather than from a collective and sudden sense of universal justice.

Decoding the Circles: Self Deception, Self Interest and In-group Bias

Tenbrunsel and Messick (2004) recently introduced the issue of “ethical self-deception” (p. 223). This psychological process, they explained, helps us remove all moral tinges from a situation. We learn to ignore moral dilemmas when necessary or convenient.

A primary source of self-deception is the fact that each of us sees the world through a personal set of lenses. We have unique perspectives, which can never be completely explained or understood. We are also wired for self-protection. Epley and Caruso (2004) explained that our needs and personal viewpoints flow to our consciousness instantaneously and involuntarily. These authors went on to connect Egocentric Ethics – the view of a dilemma from the standpoint of the moral agent only – to evolutionary self-preservation needs. Our ancestors quickly learned to assess threats to their safety. They learned to *survive*.

Under stress or under threat, therefore, we tend to revert instantaneously to a “default” egocentric mode of operation. Our primal instinct is to care for our own needs *first*. We may learn to ignore this instinct. We may *choose* to ignore it. We can never completely erase it. It seems thus reasonable to place ourselves on the center of our CoE.

What happens, then, with those whom we perceive as closest and most important to us? Could our default tendency for self-protection be then supplanted by the Ethic of Care? Alternatively, could care for those whom we love be seen simply as an extension of Egocentric Ethics?

Perhaps both interpretations are correct. Ethical Egoists might claim that we care for people close to us simply because *their* happiness influences *our* happiness. Ours lives are deeply and inexorably interconnected. For instance, children and parents’ lives are often so

deeply intertwined that the well-being of the child is virtually synchronized with the well-being of the parent.

Indeed, Brink (1993) suggested that we share a “mental life” with those who are close to us. We see them as our extensions – literally, as “other selves” (p. 354). Our welfares are interdependent because we see in our children images of us. Hence, when I see my daughter Maggie, I do not only see a child to whom I owe a primal motherly duty. I do not only see a little person whom I love more than life itself. I also see *me*. As I care for Maggie, I fulfill my duty as a mother (Ethic of Justice), love her (Ethic of Care), and see a younger *me* ready to start anew (Ethical Egoism). All three ethical paradigms lead me to consider Maggie’s needs above my own. Maggie and I make up one central, almost indivisible, piece of my CoE.

Like our children, close family members deeply affect our happiness. They share with us significant values. Similarities in cultural beliefs and interests are compounded by a shared life and common interests. As we move farther in the circle, we may reach community members with whom we work or exchange goods and services. Even though these people may be psychologically farther away from us, they could still be close enough to allow us to “make culture” together. We need one another and mutual need creates mutual bonds.

The CoE concept seems congruent with Blum’s (1993) suggested intermediary space between the personal and impersonal ethics. Blum argued that there is a space that conforms neither to a universal Ethic of Justice nor to a person-centered Ethic of Egoism. This is the space where family kinships, friendships, and close communities find their home. Blum went on to say that acts of compassion towards those whom we love are neither personal/egocentric nor impersonal/justice-based. It is reasonable, Blum claimed, that we care more for friends than for

strangers. A friend whom we perceive in the same impersonal light as we would a stranger is hardly a friend. Caring for those whom we love is a natural part of our humanity.

The farther we move from our inner circles, however, the harder it is to care. Care and empathy, after all, are profoundly interconnected. Empathy is based on an attempt to experience someone's emotional reactions (Batson et al., 1995). As we seek to empathize with people with whom we have no contact, we need to work harder. If complete empathy is an impossible ideal at the best of circumstances, physical and cultural separation may make the task even more challenging. Indeed Brink (1993) offered that people absorb one another's experiences better when they share a "common system of past experiences, beliefs, desires, and values with which to interpret these experiences" (p. 356). The absence of a common ground may breed misunderstanding and fear.

A natural bias towards those with whom we *do* share significant commonalities, conversely, could strengthen our CoE divisions. Indeed, in-group bias, the tendency to favor one's own group, is a powerful human tendency. This tendency can be rapidly observed even when groups are arbitrarily created in laboratory experiments. For instance, if a group is divided into "blue members" and "green members" and given a competitive task to perform, people will quickly start to favor their own group (Dasgupta, 2004). In-group bias appears to be so pervasive that it is seen as "a fundamental social component of almost any kind of group" (Richter & Kruglanski, p. 107).

Since in-group bias appears to be a universal and natural phenomenon, one could argue that it does not lead to ethical problems. After all, if every person favors his or her own group, then *everyone* is protected by *someone*.

A problem with this logic, however, is that not all groups occupy the same position in society. Some groups are dominant, either through sheer numbers or through institutional power mechanisms. Dominance factors change the impact of in-group bias for majority and minority groups members. It might even change its internal dynamics. For instance, Dasgupta (2004) explained that the tendency to favor one's own group is more straightforward for majority group members.

Why does this happen? It seems that two complementary tendencies operate to maintain in-group bias for majority group members: The first is the tendency for ego protection. The second is the tendency to preserve the social status quo. The same is not true, however, for members of minority groups. In their case, ego protection and preservation of the status quo could push them in *opposite* directions. Some argue that it is possible for minority group members to continue legitimizing existing social hierarchies even when they are detrimental to their own groups. Hence, in-group bias serves not only to support self-esteem needs of people but also to support a social system of stratification (Dasgupta, 2004).

A compounding problem is that discrimination against out-group members is, similarly to self-protection, an unconscious and automatic response. Cheigh (2004) proposed that discrimination could occur in a matter of "milliseconds," generating discriminatory "micro-behaviors (p. 209)." In an unequal society, even micro-instances of discrimination are likely to influence negatively the opportunities and experiences of socially disadvantaged groups.

Once again, we are discussing automatic responses rather than controlled and rationally planned ones. People cannot carefully consider the Ethic of Justice in milliseconds. Conversely, it is more likely that in-group bias leads us to an automatic empathy-induced altruism (Batson et al., 1995) *towards our own group members*. After making group-serving decisions, we will then

invoke processes of self-deception to justify them or ignore them. We could genuinely believe that what we are doing is *good* – we are helping someone succeed, and we are doing so because we *care*. Our preference for our own, however, could generate exclusion and discrimination of others.

A Creative Tension Model for Ethical Wholeness

As previously discussed, we all have unique perspectives, seek self-protection, may be deeply interconnected with our own kin, and tend to favor our own groups. All these phenomena are likely to affect the consistent application of both the Ethic of Justice and the Ethic of Care to members of our farther away CoE. This does not necessarily cause an ethical breach. Critics could argue that to care more for those close to us is indeed natural, fair, and perfectly ethical. If we took that stance, we could use the CoE simply to describe which type of ethic people are most likely to evoke when they resolve ethical dilemmas.

Here is an opposing viewpoint: Yes, it is natural to care more deeply for those closest to us. Under many circumstances, we could even be ethically obligated to do so. There could be situations, however, in which such natural preferences deprive other society members of their fair share of social benefits. In those cases, it may be useful to remember that the CoE represent *a tendency*, not a norm. After all, our ability to act *against* our nature is our uniquely human gift.

Perhaps a first step towards combining the Ethic of Care and the Ethic of Justice in situations involving strangers is precisely to know that (a) this connection is powerful, and (b) it is less likely to occur under certain conditions. Awareness may lead the rational person to pause and reconsider her decisions. Indeed Dasgupta (2004) offered that awareness of biases as well as the motivation and the opportunity to control them moderate the path between bias and action.

Batson et al. (1995) offered a second solution. They reminded us that we are able to manipulate empathy by increasing information on the plight of others. Once a moral agent develops empathy, she is more likely to be altruistic. A care-induced generosity seems to kick in automatically. Information may thus “open holes” in our CoE, allowing farther away people to move closer in.

From an ethical education standpoint, it is useful to develop a structured system that will help us improve the connection between Care and Justice. A useful model to start us up is Peter Senge’s (1998) “Creative Tension” principle.

Senge (1998) suggested that we visualize a rubber band placed between a vision of the future and the status quo. Change occurs as the result of the tension generated between the current reality and the future vision. Both an accurate assessment of the reality and the development of a powerful vision are thus necessary for successful change.

From the standpoint of the study of ethics, assessing reality accurately may mean understanding the psychological and social processes that make us who we are. Perhaps we must leave aside naïve notions of total ethical rationality and impartiality and accept that we are indeed biased towards those who are closest to us. The relative position of someone within our CoE *matters*. When people impacted by our decisions are nameless and faceless strangers, ethical behavior will require rational thinking and the strong will to act ethically. Under those conditions, our instincts are unlikely to help us. Our intellect may.

A vision of the future, however, is just as important as an understanding of reality. The fact that we are *more likely* to apply the Ethic of Care when those closer to us are involved does not mean that can *never* apply it outside our immediate circles. A powerful vision of ethical wholeness can pull us towards those whom we ignore. It can move us to listen to the “cries of

the wounded” (Putnam, 1993, p. 87) – the cries of people whom we have hurt or could hurt through biased or myopic decisions. Perhaps this powerful vision can supply the spark that will fuse Care and Justice. It can burst a hole in our CoE and let those who are farthest away come closer. Wounded cries “of pain and indignation” (Putnam, 1993) may be audible at last.

Implications and Topics for Future Research

It should be easy to teach ethics, especially in higher education settings. After all, higher education students are or should be fully capable of learning models of rational thinking. Once students understood various paradigms for ethical decision-making and fully subscribed to their professional code of ethics, ethical behavior should be a logical consequence.

Alas, we know that this is not true. If all that was necessary for ethical decision-making could be included in a book of ethics, we would likely have no Enrons, no business scandals, and no white-collar crimes. Humans are more complicated than that.

There may be, as discussed, two main reasons for our difficulty in “teaching ethics.” First, ethical behaviors may require the “spark” ignited by the Ethic of Care. Because many of our ethical decisions occur fast and unconsciously, we might have little chance to consider the more rational Ethic of Justice. No rational decision-making models will help a person solve an ethical dilemma if she cannot realize that she is even *confronting* one.

Once we recognize the importance of the Ethic of Care, we are confronted with a second problem: It is harder to apply the Ethic of Care to distant members of our CoE. Self-interest and in-group bias conspire to make us impervious to wounded cries occurring too far away from our borders.

As educators, therefore, our first challenge is to raise awareness. Both our students and we must become aware of our natural tendencies. We must acknowledge that in spite of our best

intentions, human ability to consider the needs of others is not absolute. Bias and survival instincts moderate our ability to care.

Our second task is to include the Ethic of Care in our classes and discussions. Empathy for others strengthens arguments for justice. Yes, it is true that people may seek justice without being emotionally involved. It is also likely to be true, however, that our ability to consider justice impartially is moderated by the extent of our care. A stand alone Ethic of Justice may only work if there is no conflict of interest, no impact to those close and dear to us.

Various research ideas emerge from this paper. First, it is important to explore further the concept of CoE. How are our CoE formed? Are CoE different within different cultures and for members of majority and minority groups within a given culture? Since values and priorities are parts of culture, could we say that our CoE is at least partially culturally taught? How do various CoE interact? Do our CoE change through our lives?

Secondly, it would be interesting to test some of the propositions made in this paper. Specifically, it would be valuable to explore and test the idea that the Ethic of Justice and the Ethic of Care are indeed more likely to be fused as we move closer to the center of our CoE.

Thirdly, we might be able to develop a conceptual model that would help us position a given ethical dilemma *within* a circle. Once we consider the relative position of a dilemma within our CoE, we may then be able to select a more effective model for ethical reasoning.

Finally, it might be valuable to test ways with which to “burst holes” in our CoE. How can we bring closer the “cries of the wounded”? One possibility is to include a comprehensive diversity development process in higher education curricula. Indeed, a serious and in-depth diversity course is likely to be as important for ethical development as a more traditional professional ethics course. We all need to become better aware of our biases. Future leaders in

particular must be urged to explore their tendency towards protecting their own turf, as well as the turf of their group members.

A second and perhaps complementary “hole bursting” option is to explore the value of affective activities within ethics education. If ethics and emotions walk hand in hand, then interventions that evoke emotional responses may be useful. Further research is needed to determine (a) how to best evoke emotions, (b) the type of emotion to evoke, (c) whether programs including emotional components are more successful, and (d) whether the positive (if any) impact of adding emotions to ethics education lasts beyond the duration of the course itself.

Conclusion

Ethical development is too important to be solely reserved for “ethics educators.” It is the job of all responsible leaders – including educators within other fields. If ethical development requires the tension and the powerful “pull” of a vision, then visioning is also part of our jobs. I further submit that it is our job to bring closer and make clearer “the cries of the wounded.” We must make full use of the “creative tension” that so freely shows its head in the intrinsic inequalities of our social system.

Of course, critics may argue that this would move us from the realm of educators to the realm of activists. They may urge us to be as impartial as possible. They may claim that our job is to provide students with tools for advanced reasoning. We are teachers, not politicians.

It is true that the job of a leader – and educators *are* leaders by definition – is not only to lead, but also to stimulate the growth of new leaders. In addition, it is clear that our job is neither to reproduce ourselves nor to impose our values on others.

Where ethics are concerned, however, I believe that vision is a vital tool for advanced reasoning. Vision is *the* spark that combines Justice and Care. Our challenge, therefore, is not

only to produce the first spark but also to inspire our students to generate their own. We are both visionaries and teachers of visioning. The visions we share and the visions we inspire may give our students – and our society – a decent shot at achieving ethical wholeness.

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