

Beyond Relativism to Ethical Decision Making

ABSTRACT: This article examines the ethical conundrum of educational decision makers when faced with a plethora of conflicting value-based decisions. It offers an analysis of a well-known fable as the foil to demonstrate the problematic nature of ethical relativism and postmodern ethics in resolving that conundrum, while advocating the use of *five* core commitments that enable reasonable, consistent, and justifiable warrants for ethical choices.

In North American postmodern society, schools are increasingly called to respond to meet the needs and demands of the multiple voices in their communities, not just to listen to those of the powerful and the ordinary classes but to listen and empower those who have been muted by time and circumstances beyond their control. That response is to seek social justice, equity in its various forms, and fundamental fairness for all. Yet, at the same time, educational funding issues are inevitably tied to local, provincial, or state politics, which seem to demand that administrative decision making be based on pragmatism, financial expedience, and the political spin of the day. The issue for educational administrators is how to adjudicate among the various desires of constituents and how to defend that adjudication in the public forum. We assume that all administrators hope to be referred to as having acted ethically in deciding priorities subsequent courses of action, but is there sufficient consensus about constitutes ethical conduct in today's social world?

In the social world, there appears to be no single center of gravity, in ethical sense, with its cluster of commonly held primary, immutable but rather a multipolar ethical compass where the gravitational push and pull

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of the moment depends on a variety of ephemeral political circumstances. For some, this means ethical relativism.¹ Alternatively, some scholars proffer the rejection of both ethical values per se and an analytical template in favor of the postmodern approach. We argue for a better, more substantive, more responsible, more accountable, and more reasonable approach to ethical discernment and decision making than what is offered from versions of naive relativism or certain expressions of postmodernism. We do not offer a solution or a quick-fix alternative but a better way-not an easier way but a courageous, deliberate, and principled way.

This article challenges relativist and postmodern approaches to ethical decision making and is divided into four parts. Part 1 looks at decision making within Aesop's fable "The Miller, His Son, and Their Ass" (*Aesop's Fables*, n.d.), in terms of the failure of relativism as a decision-making orientation. Part 2 describes two types of value relativism and uses the "Miller" analogy, zero-tolerance school policies, and the prohibition of certain books for use in schools to highlight examples of relativism in educational decision making. Part 3 briefly summarizes a postmodern approach to ethical decision making and critiques its applicability in educational administration. Part 4 argues for a foundationalist approach to ethical decision making for school administrators that is in better keeping with the concept of sustained integrity.

PART 1: AESOP'S FABLE AND RELATIVISM

Before referring to the fable, it is important to note the subtle distinctions between nonethical values and ethical values. A typical list of nonethical values includes pleasure, money, health, honor (including fame, glory, and acceptance), power, peace (including contentment), altruism, virtue, wisdom, and God (Kreeft, 1990). Most would likely agree that these values are ethically neutral in the sense that there is nothing inherently ethical or unethical about anyone of them. However, some values are inherently ethical, such as honesty, equity, fairness, and justice. These are different types of values that are not tied to a specific time, goal, purpose, sociopolitical spin, or zeitgeist of the times but that evaluate the nature of the act, both procedurally and consequentially, in terms of good or bad, right or values, it is merely a preferential choice; however, when simple-value relativism becomes ethical-value relativism, she or he encounters the same kind of problem, the lack of a foundational decision-making orientation, experienced by the miller in *Aesop's Fable* (see appendix). The miller and his son began their journey by taking their donkey to a neighboring market in

order to sell him. The trio began their journey with each member walking. During their journey, they met, in sequence, a troop of girls, a group of old men, a company of women and children, a townsman, and a crowd of townsfolk. At each encounter, the miller was offered what the newcomers thought would be the most appropriate riding arrangements. The anxious-to-please miller acquiesced to each of the calls for the proper use of the good animal. Their first meeting prompted the miller to respond to the criticism that "a donkey is to be ridden," by allowing his son to ride while he, the miller, walked alongside. The second interaction had the miller reacting to the suggestion to "express a respect for elders" by establishing himself as the rider and by unsaddling his son.

In the third arrangement, the miller responded to the suggestion that making his son walk along while his father rode was unfair, whereupon both the miller and his son rode the donkey. In the fourth scenario the miller was accused of abusing the donkey with such a heavy load, so they carried the donkey. Thereafter, the donkey finally expressed its disapproval, threw the whole arrangement into disarray, and fell from a bridge into a river. At the end of the fable, the miller's decisions, based on the social persuasions and pressures of the moment, led to the loss of his confidence, his credibility as the leader of the expedition, and, of course, his ass. The story finishes with the miller's roadside conclusion that one simply cannot please everyone, that trying to respond to the many voices containing conflicting value preferences is impossible to manage satisfactorily, and that one cannot succeed in the values domain with any promise of consistency.

The miller's decision-making dilemma is primarily political, but it speaks to hearing and feeling the social pressure of many voices and being unable to take a consistent course of action due to an over willingness to please, one might say to value, them all. The miller had no clear personal (decision-making) values on which to adjudicate among various value claims and thus could not act consistently. Predictably, the miller's value ambiguity, his weak concept of himself and others, and his struggles to mediate a plethora of other peoples' values led to the failure of his mission. Wrong. When a decision maker utilizes relativism to select from ordinary.

The fable provides a metaphor for the diverse and often-contradictory value demands facing educational leaders. This critical incident in the work life of the miller is illustrative of the decision making that educational leaders routinely experience.

The miller had no means of mediating the value conflicts that would ultimately challenge the larger purpose of his journeying. Certainly, he had made the journey to the market before the fateful day, but, as educational administrators can attest, the nature of work can and does change

daily. Within the daily white waters of experiences, without the guidance of fundamental orienting principles underlying his actions, he simply succumbed to the vociferousness of others. In sum, the miller's approach to decision making was to refer to those who had various opinions and to follow each in sequence. He did not have an internal compass showing him the true north of the purpose of his journey and the most effective means to complete it.

The miller is not alone in having difficult decisions to make when a variety of voices are seeking priority. However, when the miller's simple value relativism becomes ethical relativism, meaning that ethical values are just as relative as nonethical values, what ensues is the destruction of the decision maker's personal and public integrity (as explained later in this article). Educational decision makers who face ethical matters are confronted with a cacophony of voices all claiming equal legitimacy and primacy in the ultimate decision. Part 2 of this article looks at two types of value relativism and, using the Miller analogy, the example of zero tolerance school policies and the occasion of the prohibition of certain books for use in schools, to connect and examine ethical-value choices in educational administration.

PART 2: TWO EXPRESSIONS OF VALUE RELATIVISM AND EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATIVE DECISION MAKING

Pluralism and diversity characterize North American society and are appropriately celebrated, but their implications for practical decision making in schools bring a sober response. Ethical-value relativism creates a great deal of confusion in school leaders' ethical decision making. As Stout (1988) says, "Many things might be meant by the claim that morals are relative. . . . These things need to be meticulously disentangled from one another" (p. 15). To this end, we can say that there are at least four types of ethical relativism: cultural, subjective, theoretical, and methodological (P. W. Taylor, 1954).² In this article, we deal with the first two of these prevalent forms.

CULTURAL RELATIVISM

The view that all values are relative to a given society is often referred to as a *cultural* approach to the values domain. Traditionally, cultural relativism describes what a particular group believes and how these beliefs differ from those held by other groups (Gowans, 2004). Empirical findings have

pointed to the fact of value diversity, which has been interpreted as providing support for ethical relativism: What is right in one time or place may be wrong for another. By extension, the claim is that when any two cultures or any two people hold different moral views, both may be morally correct (Gowans, 2004).

A school leader who subscribes to cultural relativism believes that the value knowledge and conscience of people are nurtured by their particular settings and relationships producing a social construction of moral reality. Any attempt, by groups or individuals, to claim universality in ethical commitments is dismissed as being ethnocentric. The practical effect of this attempt is that the only defensible universal value for leaders is that they be tolerant and responsive to various value claimants in schools, because all values are of equal status. The issue is not the priority of the proffered possibilities, which the many voices see as their values, but whether there are ethical values that govern or arbitrate the decision.

The “miller types” respond to this form of relativism wholeheartedly. Unconditional acceptance of all community values (transient or not) encourages people to respect the values held by others, even if these are inherently contradictory. By this account, all values are nonuniversal beliefs, and no differentiation between different kinds of values is considered or indeed possible. Moreover, there is no room for distinguishing value preferences (that which one wants) from ethical values (that which differentiates what is ethically good from that which is ethically bad). A situation ripe for a relativist approach to student behavioral problems with ethical undertones faces a school administrator with the acceptance or rejection of a school’s proposed zero-tolerance policy. Martin (2000; see also Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2005) states,

Zero tolerance is the phrase that describes America’s response to student behavior. . . . [It] means that a school will automatically and severely punish a student for a variety of infractions. . . . [It includes] “threats” in student fiction to giving aspirin to a classmate. . . . [It] has become a one-size-fits-all solution to all the problems that schools confront. (p. 1)

Policy “is public education’s effort to import to education concept of adult mandatory sentencing, [and] it takes no account of we know about child adolescent development” (pp. 4–5); it applies same punishment to a student’s action no matter how egregious that might have been. This is similar to the “three strikes and you’re out” principle in criminal law. The result of such a policy is that the offender may have been involved in two serious crimes of violence and a third crime of merely stealing a pizza; but if the latter falls in the same legal category as the first two (i.e., a felony), the three-strikes rule applies and the offender goes to jail for life.

In the context of educational administration, there are policy and safety reasons for applying a zero-tolerance policy in some cases, such as the possession of firearms.³ In other matters—where there is, despite no immediate danger and no clear and present threat to students, an automatic and severe penalty—zero tolerance is difficult to defend. Relatively minor infractions such as shooting a paper clip with a rubber band, having a manicure kit containing a one-inch knife, or saying to another student, “I’m going to get you if you eat all the potatoes in the school cafeteria,” can result in students’ being suspended for “terroristic threats” (Martin, 2000, p. 2). In such cases, the zero-tolerance policy may result in the suspension or expulsion of a student, even in elementary school, and this is the norm in many schools. If there has recently been a tragic incident associated with a student’s use of liquor, the sociopolitical pressures on school administrators from parents, the police, government agencies, and societal pressure groups can be enormous to implement a zero-tolerance policy. The belief is that students will respond positively to serious punishment, yet there is clear evidence that such is not the case, because it is based on flawed assumptions.⁴ Simple causality does not apply in such cases. Moreover, once such a policy is in effect, students whose first breach of the policy is minor are subject to the same punishment as those whose action was egregious. This may be just, but it is clearly not fair.⁵ Moreover, in the case of a first breach and a student who otherwise has a good chance to change her or his behavior, such an unfair application of a policy’s penalty may result in a behavioral backlash, and it certainly produces “fear and alienation” (Martin, 2000, p. 3) in students.

It takes a strong and ethically centered school administrator, with a clear sense of fairness and the ethic of care (Noddings, 1992), to withstand an interest group’s clarion call for stem measures to prohibit any level of breach of school policies and to impose the same penalty, no matter how serious or innocuous the breach. A relativist decision-making orientation could result in a “miller-like” acceptance of a zero-tolerance policy in reaction to such calls, at the expense of the ethical principle of fairness. Such a decision may be emotionally satisfying to some parents whose children are not punished, but it is inherently unfair to others, especially those who suffer most from zero-tolerance school policies: minorities and the socio-economically disadvantaged (Ontario Human Rights Commission, 2005).

It is not a zero-tolerance policy per se that is relativist but rather the educational administrator’s acceptance and implementation of it for political reasons rather than the ethical nature of that decision. The latter should involve the primary ethical value of care; that is, what is in the best interests of the students (Walker, 1995, 1998)? Without that anchor of ethical

value, political winds may result in any number of relativist decisions in educational administration.

One can appreciate the intention of any philosophy that sets out to simplify the making of decisions. However, when the rationale for ethical decision making is reduced or limited to social opinion or subjective preferences as the best measures of right and wrong, then the school leader's integrity is at risk. The informed school leader knows that principles are not the same as practices, and those principles transcend and ought to trump values derived from practice alone. Acting with personal integrity means that there is an alignment of what one knows with what one believes and what one does. A decision maker who knows of the deleterious and unfair effects of zero-tolerance educational policies yet institutes such policies for political reasons lacks personal integrity, notwithstanding that she or he may appear to be a person of integrity.

SUBJECTIVIST RELATIVISM

Subjectivist ethics centers its morality in the individual's preferences rather than in those of community. This school of ethical thought views moral opinions as only feelings and that there is no such thing as an objective right or wrong (Macdonald, 2005). Therefore, it is the leader's choice and her or his ability to choose that determines the moral status of a given decision that produces action. In this school of thought, when it is said that something is morally good or bad, it means that the individual either approves or disapproves of the particular action—nothing more than this is intended. The subjectivist school administrator interprets ethical statements merely as reports of attitudes or preferences toward particular behavior.

Closely related to subjectivism is emotivism (Ayer, 1952): the view that moral language expresses and arouses emotion. By this account, when a person says that something is morally true or false, she or he is simply venting feelings or trying to impose preferences on others. If a school administrator accepts this school of thought, then she or he is at the mercy of those who claim to hold equally valid emotional preferences but are also able, in effect, to claim decision-making superiority by emotionally asserting their preferences to the administrator. The problems that ensue are quite obvious. According to Etzioni (1996), "People abhor an ethical vacuum, one in which all choices have the same standing and are equally legitimate, when all they face are directions among which they may choose but no compass to guide them" (p. xv). Carter (1996) says that people disdain public figures "who seem unable to be steadfast, who shift ground with the political winds . . . [who are] not engaged in the hard

and deep discernment that makes integrity possible” (p. 30). Later, Carter (1998) says that “integrity helps us to understand what is right and do it, even when there is a cost: if I have no integrity, there is no point in asking me what I stand for” (p. xii). Integrity ought to be developed “as a tool for creating our own moral selves” (p. xii).

An example of this type of ethical decision making in schools is the question of banning certain books from a school’s library based on the religious beliefs of decision makers.⁶ This was the situation in the Supreme Court of Canada case *Chamberlain et al. v. The Board of Trustees of School District No. 36 (Surrey)* (2002). The facts were straightforward. In January 1996, the Surrey School Board passed a resolution stating that teachers could use only books in the “family life component of the career and planning curriculum” (*Chamberlain*, 2002, p. 44) from the approved lists of the Ministry of Education (British Columbia) and the school board. Later that year Mr. Chamberlain, an elementary school teacher, sought permission from his school’s principal to introduce three books as learning resources into the Grade One Family Life curriculum of his school.

The books proffered by Chamberlain depicted gay and lesbian families and were from the Gay and Lesbian Educators of British Columbia. In October 1996, the school principal directed Chamberlain “to use only provincially or district approved learning resources in his classroom” (*Chamberlain*, 2002, p. 44). Given that direction, Chamberlain was advised that he would have to ask the school board for approval to use the books. He made that request and, six months later, on April 10, 1997, the school board adopted a resolution that all administration, teaching and counseling staff [shall] be informed that resources from gay and lesbian groups such as Gay and Lesbian Educators of British Columbia or their related resource lists are not approved for use or redistribution in the Surrey School District. (*Chamberlain* 2002, p. 45)

Chamberlain sought redress by way of judicial review, and the matter was eventually heard by the Supreme Court of Canada. The majority of that court, in finding for Chamberlain, stated, Religion is an integral aspect of people’s lives, and cannot be left at the boardroom door. What secularism does rule out, however, is any attempt to use religious views of one part of the community to exclude from consideration the values of other members of the community (p. 19). In effect, the Surrey School Board members sought to impose on others their personal preference for their religious values without taking into account ethical values.⁷ This unsuccessful and unethical decision-making attempt at value purity for all, based on personal beliefs, is common and noted by Selznick (2002), who states that such people prize purity and coherence over patient concern for diverse

interests, purposes, and values. Ideologues demand simplified alternatives, encourage a divide between “the children of light and the children of darkness,” invite coercion in the name of correct doctrine. All that is alien to the spirit of community, which prefers the untidy concreteness of social existence to the comforts of political correctness (p. 71).

Relativist decision making that is based on the emotions of the decision maker, as in the *Chamberlain* case, can preclude the application of the principle of fairness to minorities and those marginalized in society. The educational decision maker whose decisions are based on an emotional albeit religiously based belief lacks the moral compass necessary for fundamental fairness in ethical decision making within a pluralistic society. As with the miller, who acted on his emotion to please others, the Surrey School Board members acted emotionally without due consideration of basic ethical principles, the ethic of care, and fundamental fairness to those unlike themselves.

PART 3: POSTMODERN ETHICS

Postmodern ethics is paradigmatic ally different from the ethics thus far described in this article. The postmodernist approach, as described in existentialist postmodern thought, is experiential rather than conceptual. Simply put, this approach does not proffer ethical values per se, whether derived from society, a religion, one's personal conceptual viewpoint, or even one's personal experiences. Rather, by definition, humans are morally reflective. People do not apply analysis or thought to breathe or to hear, because those are inherent to existing as a human. Existentially, the same is said of the human as a morally reflective being. Indeed, to superimpose a structure such as an explicit set of ethical values or a particular type of rational analysis on top of what is quintessentially a human function is an aberration and diminution of being human. As Bauman (1993) states, “I am moral *before* I think” (p. 61). He said that it is through the individual's moral intuition that ethical or moral decisions should be made. Why? Because, from the existentialist point of view, the solitary individual is solely responsible for the creation of meaning for herself or himself and is solely responsible for her or his actions and the consequences of those actions.

For the postmodern ethicist, “human reality is messy and ambiguous and so moral decisions, unlike abstract ethical principles, are ambivalent” (Bauman, 1993, p. 32; see also, Mitchell, Sackney, & Walker, 1996; Sackney, Walker, & Mitchell, 1999). This proposition is seen as being self-evident in the postmodern world, where the sense of community and universal

values, including ethical values, has been shattered by the horrors of war; genocide; the concentration camps established under the authoritarian, fascist, and communist regimes in the 20th century; and the alienating effects of crass capitalist expansion throughout the world. One is left with the individual who is by definition a morally reflective being. It is from that understanding that she or he intuits what is ethical or moral in the contextualized moment of decision making. In essence, Bauman believes that the capacity and motivation to be ethical is individualized and quintessentially human.

Unlike Buber's (1970) idea that to act ethically one must eschew the *I-it* relationship in favor of the *I-thou* relationship, postmodern existentialists disdain both approaches in favor of the nonreciprocal: In a moral relationship, I and the Other are not exchangeable, and thus cannot be "added up" to form a plural "we." In a moral relationship, all the "duties" and "rules" that may be conceived are addressed solely to me, bind only me, constitute me and me alone as an "I." When addressed to me, responsibility is moral. It may well lose its moral content completely the moment I try to turn it around to bind the other. (Bauman, 1993, p. 50)

It is the prerational moral intuition of the individual as contained in the individual's conscience that guides the individual to an ethical decision for which she or he is solely responsible. This is reminiscent of Frankl's (1984) idea that human life makes existential demands of the individual; therefore, one cannot hide from making decisions by seeking refuge behind ethical values, or any values, that are provided by others, be they religions, governments, laws, or social majorities.

One wonders if such an existential approach to adjudicating among values, though not ethical in nature, would have helped the miller in his decision making. We suggest not, because each party on the journey had her or his own conscience. It is fine to say that all decisions are of equal ethical value, but how does the decision maker who lives in the public forum adjudicate among them? Moreover, on acceptance of the postmodern existentialist approach, the only justification for an eventual decision can arguably be, at best, that it was coherent with the decision maker's personal conscience. This point has not been lost on others, as Mason (2001) has pointed out in his critique. He said that Bauman (1993) fails to avoid the relativist trap:

First, it is widely accepted that conscience is at least partly culturally influenced, and thus individual morality guided by conscience is still going to reveal to some extent the relativism between cultures; and second, individual conscience-guided moral autonomy without a shared foundational ethics will

multiply the factors generating moral relativism between cultural codes rather than minimize them. Individual conscience-guided moral autonomy laudably increases the potential for moral responsibility, but without a shared foundational ethics, on its own it will perpetrate the nihilism consequent on the “anything goes” attitude of strong relativist positions. (Mason, 2001, pp. 58–59)

Mason (2001) tries to answer the dual concerns of relativism and a nonfoundational ethics in postmodern ethics by saying, “I posit the ethics of integrity as an ethics that seeks an authentic identity in respect and responsibility” (p. 63). In essence, his idea joined Benhabib’s (1992) idea of the contextualized, situated self with C. Taylor’s (1991) ethics of authenticity, which Mason (2001) defines as “to the extent that we respect the dignity of our and each other’s being and to the extent that we take responsibility for the consequences of our actions” (p. 63). We suggest that this argument is recourse to the existentialist notion—but with a twist. It appears that he argues for a foundationalist ethical value: the dignity of the individual. Of course, the problem is not the ethical value but what it means. Does it mean that a practitioner should be truthful, honest, kind? If so, it appears that Mason’s response to postmodern subjectivism is merely to implicitly advocate for a foundationalist position. Alternatively, if such is not the case, how does his position differ from postmodernists who suggest that dignity is fine but that it is up to each individual in her or his conscience to define the contents of the term? In other words, how does one act when one’s dignity is not consistent with another’s dignity, both having differing bases from which their dignities emerge?

The earlier examples of ethical decision making in accepting or rejecting zero tolerance for minor breaches of a school’s code and the banning books from school libraries that display the reality of some families’ lives are not resolved by the postmodern approach to ethical decision making. Why? The postmodern approach is not defensible in the public square, which demands more than simply saying, “I have determined that this is ethical decision because I am the sole arbiter of such decisions, which in so factor not challengeable as reason and logic do not apply to ethical.” The flaw, of course, is that the decision is intended to seriously affect those to whom it is directed, not just the decision maker, and those affected have a reasonable expectation of fairness.

We suggest that, once again, relativism is not escapable within the postmodern sense of ethics, and we further state that, in the words of Mason (2001), “reliance on conscience is . . . inadequate in the public domain that is education” (p. 60). What then might we suggest in order to address the problem of ethical decision making for educational decision makers?

PART 4: A FOUNDATIONALIST APPROACH

Several foundationalist approaches to ethical decision making would have greatly assisted the miller and the school leaders who face calls for the implementation of zero-tolerance policies and the restriction of various lifestyle books in school libraries at the cost of ethical fairness and the ethic of care.⁸ The following five considerations are offered as helpful though not exhaustive descriptions of commitments for ethical decision making with integrity: common ethical principles, relational reciprocity, professional constraints or codes, personal conscience, and professional convictions. When considered as a whole, these five commitments represent a more reasonable, responsible, and balanced set of ethical content (a trinity to which we return at the end of this part) for adjudicating the decisional challenges of school leadership than do the aforementioned versions of relativism.

COMMITMENT TO COMMON ETHICAL PRINCIPLES

What are the common ethical principles that form the basis for the decisions, attitudes, and actions of educational leaders in their various roles? One of the most useful formulations of core ethical principles for educational leaders was developed at the Aspen Summit (Josephson Institute, 1993). These ethical values have been affirmed by dozens of key educational organizations and their executives and constituents in North America. The leaders at the summit proffered that certain “core ethical values . . . form the foundation of a democratic society, in particular, trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, justice and fairness, caring and civic virtue and citizenship. These core ethical values transcend cultural, religious, and socio-economic differences” (Josephson Institute, 1993, p. 1). Ethical leaders are deserving of trust (because of their honesty, integrity, promise and loyalty); they recognize and honor each individual and group of people as having the right to autonomy, self-determination, privacy, and dignity (through their respect for all persons); they are responsible (through their self-restraint, pursuit of excellence, and valuing of accountability); they are fair (through their ensuring that notions of justice, equity, due process, procedural fairness and impartiality/objectivity, and openness and consistency are manifest in their and others’ actions and attitudes); such leaders are also caring (through their concern for the interests of others that transcends mere avoidance of harm to others and through their kind, compassionate, and generous interactions with and on behalf of others); and they acknowledge their civic and professional duty to contribute to

the overall public good (through their community and social consciousness, service, and stewardship).

COMMITMENT TO RELATIONAL RECIPROCITY

Buber (1970) describes the ideal of “relations as reciprocity” (p. 62). From his work, we can observe four basic relationships: it-thou, it-it, I-it, and I-thou. We join with Buber in commending a commitment to reciprocating I-thou relationships as being foundational to a school leader’s approach to ethical decision making. Leadership has so much to do with influence and the chemistry of relationships between and among people. The tendency when discussing ethical decision making is to focus on the nature of the ethical challenge or conflict, the content of ethical thinking, the outcomes desired, and the context within which a decision must be made. These are important factors, but we must not displace from consideration the importance of reflecting on how we see ourselves, the people implicated in educational decisions, and the nature of our relationships.

It is possible to dehumanize our service as leaders to crass servitude to personless causes. We must be committed to the foundational view that people matter. We can decide in submission to political forces, follow paths of least resistance, or acquiesce to the psychologically more comfortable (i.e., compromise to fear, trivialize persons, or dehumanize ourselves) and lose the majesty of our purposeful, relational work in the best interests of children, youth, and communities. In short, the extremes of selfishness and selflessness need to be avoided. We need to come through ethical decision making with respect for ourselves as leaders and as persons intact and, equally, to afford respect and dignity to those persons involved, implicated, or affected by our decisions.

The it-it relationship—where the leader places low value on himself or herself and others—results in disassociation, isolation, depersonalization, discontinuity, and senseless decision making. The it-thou relationship wherein the leader imputes a low value to himself or herself but a high value to the other persons in the relationship results in unhealthy fusion and codependence by the leader such that she or he may be inclined to unthinkingly conform, to make decisions based on likelihood of personal validation.

This selfless and self-denigrating approach steals away personal and professional autonomy with the courage to actually lead. The I-it relationship where in the leader holds to a high value of self and a low value for others results in a leader’s treating others as means, as objects of manipulation, or as instruments for selfish or institutional purposes rather;

than as fellow persons with dignity, volition, and worth. Buber and others (Balswick, King, & Reimer, 2005) commend a commitment to relational reciprocity as exemplified in the I-thou formulation. In other words, when making ethical choices, a leader ought to be committed to experiencing relationships where the goal is described in terms of mutual wins, growth, and appreciation. The extremes of dominance (I-it relations), disassociation (it-it relations), and dependence (it-thou relations) are avoided through a commitment to highly valuing self and the other.

COMMITMENT TO PROFESSIONAL CONSTRAINTS

Most professional educational leader organizations have codes of conduct that constitute commitments to their constituents, assuring the public that members meet the standards of the code. These documents vary in form and substance but generally state that professional members endeavor to be good citizens and hold themselves to high ethical standards. Members are expected to honor democratic ideals and the laws of the land. Social consciousness, commitment to service, and the exercise of civic duties are usually emphasized. The codes generally include reference to a commitment to self-discipline and the pursuit of ethical excellence through diligence and preparedness. Through these codes, members are charged with the responsibility of upholding the honor and dignity of their profession in all their actions and relations with pupils, colleagues, school board members, and the public. Consistency of actions and relations is important to the ethical performance of the member leaders. The concepts of public trust; impartiality in execution of policies, rules, and regulations; respect of persons; professional courtesy in intentions and relations with other organizations; truth telling and nondeceit; obligation to commend there appropriate; guardianship of public education and effective school administration; and care and candor in difficult employee situations are repeatedly found in such school administrators' codes of conduct.

Professional constraints in the form of written and unwritten codes remind school leaders and their constituents that they have accepted the responsibility to keep abreast of current developments in education and contribute to the growing body of specialized knowledge, concepts, and skills. Sustaining leading-edge professional knowledge and competencies are regarded by many codes as ethical responsibilities. Meeting the educational needs of students is an ethical expectation that may include functions such as protecting, providing resources, exercising sensitivity to individual differences, and providing for the equitable distribution of educational goods and opportunities. As indicated, conventional codes of conduct usually prohibit

anything that would interfere with the independent objective judgment of an educational leader, such as commercial ventures that might take away from a leader's full-time concern for her or his school system, conflicts of interest, and the inappropriate use of confidential information.

COMMITMENT TO PERSONAL CONSCIENCE

Administrators' ethical values are developed during three broadly defined phases of life: the preschool period, the preadult period, and the formulative professional period. From an inborn "true-north compass" and out of these moral development phases comes the person's voice of conscience, which some call *intuition*. The voice of personal conscience is a subtle governor of one's behaviors and attitudes. Conscience arbitrates criteria for success; affects expectations (for self and others); and underlies one's drive for self-improvement, life interests, and the desire to achieve goals. The voice of personal conscience compels a school leader to act with particular attitudes and convictions and therefore forms the underlying basis for establishing covenants with others.

COMMITMENT TO PROFESSIONAL CONVICTIONS

Professionals properly distinguish themselves by their conviction-rooted actions based on research-based understandings, reasoned arguments, and well-thought-through experiences. School leaders promote and safeguard the interests of students, parents, support staff, teachers, and other professional and community leaders. They secure conditions that make probable the provision of the best human services possible for all. They possess passionate convictions concerning what constitutes quality learning, teaching, and leadership. With these convictions, educational administrators influence the direction of education and make representations that promote the delivery of the highest-quality education possible. Educational leaders work in diverse local contexts, and their richly arrayed backgrounds contribute varying expressions of professional convictions. Former U.S. President Lyndon B. Johnson is reputed to have said, What convinces is conviction. Believe in the argument you are advancing. If you don't, you are as good as dead. The other people will sense that something isn't there, and no claim of reasoning, no matter how logical or elegant or brilliant, will win your case for you.

Of course, the variety of educational and experiential backgrounds affects each educational leader's development of social, psychological, and educational skills and attitudes. What becomes evident are the varying vocational

experiences, styles, preferences, and personalities, together with different processing mechanisms for perceiving, reasoning about, and evaluating spiritual, intellectual, emotional, volitional, and intuitional data. These differences are obvious in the healthy variety of expressions of professional convictions. Professional convictions adjust in their expression to cultural and individual values constructions but are typically rooted in universal and universalizable warrants and rationale. Leaders exhibit humility by listening to others and refining their convictions, where warranted, and by their courageous articulation of defensible and well-considered professional convictions. This plurality of professional convictions is an asset to professional associations and school organizations because these differing gifts, talents, and passions are valued and allowed to contribute to the refinement and ongoing renewal of shared values within the profession.

APPLYING THE FIVE COMMITMENTS

We argue that the aforementioned five commitments form a matrix from which a foundationalist ethical decision may be made that is more reasonable, responsible, and balanced than a relativist decision-making schema. In the Surrey case, the importance of the matrix displays why all of its parts ought to be considered in making an ethical decision. In Surrey, a commitment of the public institution of education to the common ethical principles of a pluralistic democratic society, such as the inclusion of minorities and the socially disenfranchised, and respect for the dignity of others regardless of their sexual orientation was missing from the Board's decision. Our inquiry to the staff of the LBJ Presidential Museum with respect to this quotation did not confirm that this quote originated with President Johnson, nor have we been able to track the proper attribution. Nonetheless, we think the quote is a good one in the context of this article. The element of reciprocity was also absent because the school board failed to see and deal with the gay families as "thou" rather than "it." The board's commitment to professional constraints was also missing in that, as the Supreme Court of Canada held, a secular school board had no warrant for a religiously based decision that negatively affected a part of its community. But were not the Surrey School Board members entitled to follow their own consciences? Here is where the necessity of looking at the matrix of foundational ethical decision making is manifest.

One element of the matrix is not sufficient warrant on which an institutional decision maker can base an ethical decision. A decision maker in an

institution who looks only at her or his personal conscience for warrant has a myopic view provided by a singular belief system or may be swayed by self-rationalization. One might reasonably expect that in one's private life, decisions based solely on personal conscience are the norm and that little if any harm may result. However, for decision makers within public institutions, where decisions are enforceable by the state and where there is a wide and positive duty to the welfare of others, such as in education, such myopia is unacceptable and is certainly not foundationalist.

The Surry School Board was in error from a foundationalist viewpoint in failing to consider a commitment to professional convictions and the best interests of the children—all of the children and their families as found by the Supreme Court. A foundationalist approach would have demanded consideration of this final commitment. We therefore suggest that the foundationalist approach to ethical decision making is more reasonable than a relativist approach because the resulting ethical decisions are consistent with fundamental commitments, not the shifting sociopolitical zeitgeists of the times. It is more responsible in its articulateness and consistency and is thus more socially and politically defensible than relativism: characteristics so very important in today's world of administrative and legal accountability. It is more balanced than a relativist approach in that it must consider not only the contextual and contingent factors involved, including contrary opinions and beliefs in the decision-making phase, but also whether the consequences, intended and unintended, are in concert with (1) the nature of the decision maker as an individual and as a social being and (2) the foundationalist epistemology, which is the efficacy of reason and logic, as applied to the axiological decision. This is not the case with relativist decision making, because there are no fundamental principles nor is there a dominant epistemology.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The fable of the miller illustrates both value relativism and postmodern ethical decision making, which fail educational decision makers as they attempt to respond to value conflicts. A cognizance of value relativism is essential to the moral acumen of school leaders, and, more important, adhering to a set of ethical commitments is essential if educational leaders are to avoid the miller's plight and sustain their ethical integrity in decision making. Leaders commonly state their desire to be good stewards of their public trust, but the increasing complexity of multiple constituencies and competing values makes this stewardship extremely challenging. Gardner

(1990) states that it is the leader's responsibility to keep "the war of the parts against the whole" in balance by encouraging the regeneration of shared values. He says that "pluralism that reflects no commitments whatsoever to the common good is pluralism gone berserk" (p. 97).

The miller's fundamental problem was rooted in his uncritical embrace of value relativism. Passive or political acquiescence in the face of complex ethical questions and quandaries is unfortunate and inappropriate. There must be a better way. Surely, the response of brushing aside the demands of "value fanatics" is equally inappropriate. Throwing one's hands in the air, shrugging one's shoulders, dismissing the difficult questions as being stupid, and simply agreeing with the ethical agnostics are also unsatisfying responses. The trivialization of ethical commitments through value relativism represses and belittles all value discourse and excludes universally oriented ethical alternatives. The miller's conclusion that "you cannot please everyone" exemplifies a first step toward the well-worn path from value relativism to ethical relativism.

If this passive response to the fact of value plurality is allowed to slide uncritically into the practices of a school leader, then the possibility of ethical integrity is lessened. Such practices come to displace principled behavior and attitudes that are grounded in pragmatic and reasonable ethical commitments. In an environment of unprecedented change, the creation and management of stability, consistency, and equilibrium are as fundamental for educational leaders as are creating and managing change. To provide gyroscopic leadership, a person must work with others to provide a school culture where conscience, codes, convictions, and common ethical principles are integral to the day-to-day activities and relationships of those in the school community. A commitment to the development and use of a trustworthy core of ethical principles is the leadership function, whereas a competent effort to adapt, respond, and meet various needs and interests according to environmental demands is the management function.

As Etzioni (1996) says,

Good societies require people who can balance their religious or secular ethical commitments with respect for autonomy, especially the rights of others; who are willing to engage in moral dialogues rather than promote state enforced morality; and who limit the scope of their shared formulations of the good to core values. (pp. 254-255)

Of course, ethical decision making is easier said than done. None of the alternatives for ethical deliberation and discernment, including those we advocate here, are unproblematic. We acknowledge this point, but we do have a response to the philosophical dilemma implied in choosing founda-

tionalism over relativism. It is true that there is no center point in space; yet, to move with purpose within that realm, one must choose points of reference or move aimlessly with the solar wind.

In Rawls's (1971) terminology, foundationalism establishes "an Archimedean point" from which ethical decision making "is not at the mercy, so to speak, of existing [personal or social] wants and interests" (pp. 230–231). Therefore, we argue that a prudent school leader is better off appropriating the five adjudicating commitments present herein when making ethical decisions. Leaders fail because they lack vision or virtue or both (Bennis, 1991). But applied ethics is related to both vision and virtue. Ethical vision and virtue are expressed by school leaders through their conscious commitments to ethical principles and their courage to act in a manner consistent with them. Plain and simple, people expect school administrators to do right rather than wrong, to promote good rather than evil, and to act justly rather than unjustly. Leaders can operate effectively only from positions of trust, founded in trustworthiness and integrity.

If educational leaders are to sustain their integrity in difficult days, they will need universal or pragmatic Archimedean points of reference on which to ground and justify their actions. This is a call for all school leaders to equip themselves with effective and ethical global positioning systems. Any ethical commitment can be misused, misinterpreted, or manipulated. For this reason, we offer these five commitments as a balanced package for consideration; the finest of ethical filters will apply all five commitments as minimal threshold for ethical decision making. Well-equipped school leaders, those with Global Positioning System receivers, need to exercise a reasonable, consistent, predictable, and generally applicable (universalizable) means for setting their bearings. Such leaders will process (through triangulation) the raw factual and ethical content of their decisions in a fashion that meets the criteria of minimal ethical adjudication (the ethical commitments, reasonably interpreted). In short, they will do so through answering all five of the following questions in the affirmative when discerning their alternative courses of action:

1. Is this decision aligned with a short list of carefully defined and commonly held ethical principles—that is, honesty, caring, promise keeping, and so forth?
2. Is this decision one that expresses my own positive self-regard (high view of my own integrity and the importance of sustaining it) and my deep commitment to the dignity that I know ought to be unconditionally afforded other human beings (whoever they are and independent of what side of the issue they are on)?

3. Is this decision in line with how my most respected colleagues and I have come to see our professional purposes, stewardship of public trust, and fiduciary responsibilities to each group of constituents whom we seek to serve (perhaps succinctly expressed in the promises of a code of conduct)?
4. Is this decision attuned to an honest, unfettered, and clear sense of right and wrong, good and bad, virtuous and vicious, proper and improper? In other words, does my conscience agree with the prospective decision, and do I have an internal green light to proceed?
5. Is this decision consistent with the professional convictions that I have forged over the years and have come to believe, with all my heart, to be important, perhaps nonnegotiable?

Our claim is that, as school leaders go beyond ethical relativism to navigate the complexities of their daily and special instances of ethical decision making, they will sleep better, discern better, and more cogently justify their professional and organizational determinations when they can demonstrate the alignment of their decisions to all five of the commitments advocated by this article.

Last, we suggest that the miller, as a foundationalist decision maker, would have successfully completed his mission. Onto logically, as a human being, he would have realized that his own independence and freedom bring with them a personal responsibility for decision making notwithstanding communal relations. Epistemologically, he would have used reason to synthesize the various possibilities of action and, through analysis, seen the inherent contradictions in the various requests of the communities through which he traveled and the dysfunction of unnecessary change. Finally, he would have concluded that relativism is dysfunctional, and based on principle and reason, he would have safely arrived at the market having saved his ass.

APPENDIX: THE MILLER, HIS SON, AND THEIR ASS

A Miller and his son were driving their Ass to a neighboring fair to sell him. They had not gone far when they met with a troop of women collected round a well, talking and laughing. "Look there," cried one of them, "did you ever see such fellows, to be trudging along the road on foot when they might ride?" The old man, hearing this, quickly made his son mount the Ass and continued to walk along merrily by his side. Presently they came up to a group of old men in earnest debate. "There," said one of them, "it proves what I was a-saying. What respect is shown to old age in these days? Do

you see that idle lad riding while his old father has to walk? Get down, you young scapegrace, and let the old man rest his weary limbs." Upon this the old man made his son dismount and got up himself. In this manner they had not proceeded far when they met a company of women and children: "Why, you lazy old fellow," cried several tongues at once, "how can you ride upon the beast, while that poor little lad there can hardly keep pace by the side of you?" The good-natured Miller immediately took up his son behind him. They had now almost reached the town. "Pray, honest friend," said a citizen, "is that Ass your own?" "Yes," replied the old man. "O, one would not have thought so," said the other, "by the way you load him. Why, you two fellows are better able to carry the poor beast than he you." "Anything to please you," said the old man, "we can but try." So, alighting with his son, they tied the legs of the Ass together and with the help of a pole endeavored to carry him on their shoulders over a bridge near the entrance to the town. This entertaining sight brought the people in crowds to laugh at it, till the Ass, not liking the noise nor the strange handling that he was subject to, broke the cords that bound him and, tumbling off the pole, fell into the river. Upon this, the old man, vexed and ashamed, made the best of his way home again, convinced that by endeavoring to please everybody he had pleased nobody, and lost his Ass in the bargain.

NOTES

1. See an excellent article on the concept of relativism by Swoyer (2003) in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, available at <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/relativism/#2.5>.
2. P. W. Taylor (1954) labeled this relativist category *sociocultural relativism*; however, for the purposes of this article, that category has been designated as simply *cultural relativism*.
3. At the other end of the spectrum from those adamantly opposed to zero tolerance are those who seek to expand such policies to include most lesser offenses and rules violations.
4. There are several excellent texts that describe the fallacy of the "rational actor" theory and the importance of impulsivity as a factor in actions deemed deviant by authorities (see Presdee, 2000; see also Burke, 2003). Judy Davidson, author of *Comprehensive Crisis Management for School: An Inservice Guide for All School Personnel*, believes that administrative policy can play a significant role in prevention. She argues that "zero tolerance of weapons on campus also should be supported by a zero tolerance policy regarding bullies and harassment, including emotional, physical, and sexual." Bill Modzeleski, director of the U.S. Department of Education's Safe and Drug-Free Schools program, believes that zero-tolerance policies are needed to maintain order among thousands of children: "I don't want my kid in school being threatened . . . being harassed . . . being bullied" (see

the Commonwealth Educational Policy Institute website at http://www.cepi.vcu.edu/policy_issues/school/school_safety.html).

5. Applying a punishment equally to all involved in an incident may be just but failing to give due consideration in the penalty phase to the degree of culpability and the particular circumstances of each individual offender is not consonant with the ethical principle of fairness; that is, when a “weapon” is deemed to be any sharp instrument capable of inflicting bodily harm, a nail file is not fairly equated with a sharpened hunting knife when dispensing a penalty for possession of a “weapon” (see Dworkin, 1986).

6. A full analysis of the *Chamberlain* case is available in Donlevy (2004).

7. It might be argued that Chamberlain sought to impose his values on the provincial curriculum; however, the issue in this article is the ethical reasoning of the educational decision maker rather than a supplicant. It is a question of the administrative decision maker’s acting on personal religious values in the public sphere within a secular institution that is at stake in the Surrey case and one’s claiming that such views trump all other values—particularly democratic value pluralism.

8. A good description of the foundationalist epistemic position as distinguished from other moral epistemological theories as described by Tremel (2005) may be found at “Moral Epistemology,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, at <http://www.iep.utm.edu/mor-epis.htm#H1>.

9. Our inquiry to the staff of the LID Presidential Museum with respect to this quotation did not conform that this quote originated with President Johnson, nor have we been able to track the proper attribution. Nonetheless, we think the quote is a good one in the context of this article.

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