Ethical Comportment in Organizations: A Synthesis of The Feminist Ethic of Care and the Buddhist Ethic of Compassion

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Abstract. This article describes a mode of ethical behavior in organizations called ethical comportment that is the enactment of the principles of elements common to the feminist ethic of care and the Buddhist ethic of compassion. The paper outlines the main tenets of care and The Eightfold Path of Buddhism, a mode of practicing compassion, demonstrating the similarities in values and practices that embody what the author considers to be ethical comportment in organizations.

Keywords: ethics, feminist ethics, ethics of care, Buddhist ethics, compassion

1. Introduction

Ethical behavior in organizations is traditionally considered to be a matter of making decisions that involve right or wrong, or good or bad, and then acting on those decisions. This paper discusses a concept of ethical behavior, ethical comportment, that includes and goes beyond decision-making and action. Ethical comportment is ethical behavior that includes one’s intentions, efforts, feelings, and thoughts, and occurs within individuals, between individuals, and within organizations. Further, we suggest that ethical comportment may come directly from the heart, soul, or spirit as well as mind, and does not exclusively involve rational, linear, or intellectual processes.

The field of business ethics has a number of decision-making models with criteria to determine what is the most ethical action in any given situation. Ethical decision-making and reasoning is assumed to involve cognitive processes of rationality, thinking, and logic. In this paper we set aside the underlying assumption that ethical behavior is a result of cognitive, rational processes, and propose a mode of ethical behavior we called ethical comportment that is grounded in the heart, soul, spirit, and mind of being human and connected with others.

While the focus of this paper is the foundations of ethical comportment in organizations, to best understand it we first need to contrast it with un-
ethical conduct in organizations. Broadly defined, unethical conduct includes any intentional or unintentional actions, thoughts, or efforts, large or small, that harm others. This includes sexual harassment, exploitation of workers in unsafe work environments, suppression and exclusion of voice and participation in decision-making of any organizational members, inequitable access to opportunities, harmful gossip, discrimination based on race, sex, age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, religion, political beliefs, class or caste, and nationality, use of fear and coercion, theft of any kind, dishonest speech, the manufacture of potentially harmful products, and giving or receiving a bribe. In essence, unethical behavior is behavior that harms others. While it is most often associated with specific actions that are outside of the rules, policies, regulations, and norms of the organization and the larger legal parameters of the surrounding society, for present purposes unethical behavior can be as simple as harboring hatred towards another person. In the Buddhist context, to have unkind thoughts towards another is to fill oneself with unkindness and dislike that is harmful both to the person holding the unkind thoughts as well as the target of this unkindness. Also, because so much communication is nonverbal, unkind feelings may be communicated even through silence. In *The Dhammapada* (Maitreya, 1995), a central part of the teachings of the Buddha, the relevance of one’s thoughts is highlighted:

> Mind is the forerunner of all actions.  
> All deeds are led by mind, created by mind.  
> If one speaks or acts with a corrupt mind, suffering follows,  
> As the wheel follows the hoof of an ox pulling a cart.

Both the feminist ethic of care and the Buddhist ethic of compassion are grounded in a set of values and behaviors that at the individual, interpersonal, and organizational level comprise what we consider to be ethical comportment. We begin with a discussion of the feminist ethic of care, in theoretical and practical terms, and then proceed to define and discuss the Buddhist ethic of compassion, with its practical steps for enactment in everyday life. Finally from these two traditions we develop the concept of ethical comportment, a broader definition of ethical behavior that includes all of one’s thoughts, actions, decisions, and feelings as practiced in the context, for present purposes, of organizational life. Finally we discuss implications of this model for practice and research.

The contemporary feminist ethic of care has evolved from relatively recent developmental psychology and moral development (Gilligan, 1982; Gilligan and Attanucci, 1988; Jack and Jack, 1989; Miller, 1976; Noddings, 1984; Tronto, 1993). The Buddhist ethic of compassion was first contemplated in 500 B.C., when Buddhism began in India. We discuss the similarities between