

# Book review of Michael Carroll and Elisabeth Shaw's 'Ethical maturity in the helping professions: Making difficult life and work decisions'

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What does it mean to be human? What guides our actions and informs our decision-making? And how do we manage and deal with the consequences, good or bad? How do we deal with decisions when we come face-to-face with the moral dilemmas we handle as individuals, as family members, members of communities or specific cultural groups, and as practitioners in the helping profession? Or as intriguingly, what are the ethical anchors, principles, beliefs and assumptions that make up our moral intelligence that influence our decision making in life and at work? Especially decisions that have a direct impact on our moral standing and the wellbeing of others in our lives, in our communities and in society at large.

Is it possible to make ethical decisions that show a maturity that encompasses compassion, wisdom and empathy, and once that decision is made and acted upon, do we reflect back on the process as well as the outcome? Is it possible to have a moral compass that guides us in all situations when a decision is needed to move forward, particularly when communities are so diverse and cultural influences so strong in shaping our behaviors, thoughts and actions? Is it possible to have a "truth to act" particularly with the current pace of change in cultural norms, intercultural influences and challenges to the intellectual traditions of patriarchy, colonisation and monoculture?

And what motivates unethical behaviors, e.g. people, groups, clans, tribes and societies that inflict harm, destruction, violence and anomie upon one other? In essence what is the ontological position underpinning our decision-making processes? What is the essence of the "why we exist" and for "what purpose"? What is the meaning of "being" and what is the right way to reflect this "beingness"? Is it possible to act ethically across cultures, and across intellectual, religious and political influences? Of course the answers to these questions have concerned many philosophers from early time but we continue to seek new meaning from our "beingness" and new ways to review our actions as we move through life.

So what is the current thinking about ethics and professional behavior and how can we be assured that we can achieve ethical actions if that is what we choose to do? These are some of the issues and challenges professionals face in today's rapidly changing social, political and cultural context. Indeed these are the challenges Michael Carroll and Elisabeth Shaw tackle in this ambition book *"Ethical Maturity in the Helping Professions:*

*Making difficult life and work decisions.* These people who are eminent and well qualified in counseling, coaching and professional supervision address these concerns and, as they do so, they begin to lay the foundations of a framework for an ethical maturity – a maturity that takes practitioners into deep learning about how to respond to the very real, and often ambiguous, challenges of professional life.

It is taken for granted that professionals need codes of ethics and agencies and organizations need to set up codes of practice for staff and clients. We assume that acting ethically is central to 'best' professional practice. Codes of ethics not only guide good work but protect clients and practitioners from harm and when, faced with moral crossroads, offer a guide to move forward. In thinking about the individual in the helping profession it would be hard to find a counselor or practitioner who, at some stage in their career, hasn't felt overwhelmed about some decisions needing to be made and felt the associated fear of the impact of such a decision (if poorly made), especially when there are several complex issues at stake. If morality entails an ethical being acting for good, seeking happiness and wellbeing, and doing no harm then we need to know how this can be achieved. If we assume that morality is the bedrock upon which everything in peoples' lives is constructed then it follows that we need to explore what that bedrock is and, then learn how to build a life from its foundations.

If the premise is that to teach ethics one needs to unravel what is ethical and then live to those standards then we need to know what is ethical (good) and what is unethical (bad) and how transgression happens and its consequence. If the question is how we find a way to live a life of ethical consciousness and maturity then this impressive book provides much insightful information that will help you find some answers to these questions and tools for making ethical decisions as the need arises in your life. So how do the authors go about providing this valuable information to the reader?

First they provide a very brief history of ethics by prominent thinkers from Socrates to Aristotle to Kant to Singer. These ideas are supplemented by the more recent growth in neuroscience and the importance of the brain's development in moral behaviours. The way the brain has matured over time, and how coded impulses translate into thoughts and actions that are both conscious and unconscious, is particularly interesting especially against the current debates about relativity and social constructionism. Having set the bedrock the authors then go on to address in turn the six components posited as the basis for developing ethical maturity for use in professional work. This is done by moving through six separate, but interrelated, sections drawing extensively on current literature and research and peppered with examples from the authors' personal and professional experiences. These chapters (7-19) are where the more micro details emerge for use in professional decision-making.

The first premise is concerned with creating ethical sensitivity and mindfulness, i.e. to live ethically one needs to unravel what is ethical and then live to those standards. One must also know how transgression happens either by denial, omission, ignorance, neglect or conscious planning. The second component addresses what is ethical decision making and how can one build up a moral character. The third section talks about implementing

ethical decisions and addressing the pitfalls. The fourth section is concerned with accountability, both personally and professionally, and the fifth concerns living with decisions made and then obtaining peace with ourselves. This peace is achieved if we are kind, forgiving and compassionate to ourselves, and learn how to manage shame if we are unsettled about the outcome. The final stage is concerned with learning from experiences and integrating this learning into our life ahead. The chapter on integrating new learning into building a strong moral character – a moral maturity – is particularly relevant if an examined life is what you are aiming for. The book finishes with ideas about training, implementing ethical behaviours in organizations, and in conducting research.

If you, as a practitioner or thoughtful citizen, are interested in developing a moral character, a character that wants to work towards making the world a better place, to reduce human suffering, to avoid doing intentional harm to yourself and to others, to take personal responsibility for your actions and to be able to explain why you did what you did, then this well researched and compiled book is for you. If you are interested in exploring your moral compass and developing a moral maturity in your work and in your life then again this book will provide thoughtful and insightful information and leave plenty of room for reflection and moral growth. The age-old questions of “where is your moral compass”? and “where do you stand ethically in your work and in your life”? not only concerned philosophers of the past, but should also concern reflective practitioners in the present. It was Socrates who said that the unexamined life is not worth living and Aristotle who argued that the discussion about what is a good life is not for the inexperienced. If this rings true for you, then living morally with ethical maturity might be the biggest challenge humans’ face, irrespective of our social, cultural and political positioning. This book gives plenty of valuable knowledge, skills and examples of how to meet these challenges. Enjoy this book for the resources and the richness it brings.

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