

BOOK REVIEW

A Review of "How Good People Make Tough Choices: Resolving the Dilemmas of Ethical Living"

Rushworth M. Kidder, New York, NY: William Morrow and Company, Inc. (1995)

Review By: Alex Butler, Captain, USAF

In this classic work on moral decision-making, Rushworth Kidder provides a framework for making decisions in situations which seemingly present two ethically “right” choices. Using a plethora of anecdotes, Kidder explains what he proposes as the four paradigms of ethical dilemmas: Truth vs. Loyalty, Individual vs. Community, Short-Term vs. Long-Term, and Justice vs. Mercy. For Kidder these paradigms serve as a litmus test for discerning whether a decision is an ethical dilemma (right vs. right) or a moral temptation (right vs. wrong). In arguing that everyone is faced with ethical dilemmas at some point in their lives, and most people are on a daily basis, Kidder underscores the need for ethical fitness, which he describes as the capacity to recognize the nature of moral challenges and respond with a well-tuned conscious (p. 57). Furthermore, Kidder explains three philosophical principles that most individuals use when discerning between two morally acceptable options, and highlights the value in understanding them as a means to achieving greater self-awareness and moral consistency. Importantly, Kidder explains that this book does not contain a magical set of answers to difficult questions. Instead, it is intended as a vehicle to facilitate the reflective dialog necessary to consistently make ethically sound decisions (p. 76).

Rushworth Kidder is a renowned author and ethicist, best known for this work as well as *Moral Courage: Taking Action When Your Values Are Put to the Test* and other books on ethical thinking. In 1990, Kidder founded the Institute for Global Ethics, which educates, consults, researches, and conducts assessment in the fields of ethical decision making and moral development. Prior to founding the Institute for Global Ethics, Kidder earned his doctorate in English and Comparative Literature from Columbia University and served in multiple appointments,

including professor at Wichita State University and columnist and editor at the *Christian Science Monitor*.

The first part of the book provides an overview of the considerations that Kidder claims are necessary to make ethical decisions in difficult situations. The book briefly introduces the four dilemma paradigms, serving as the litmus test for discerning whether a situation presents an ethical dilemma, in which two morally “right” choices are at odds with one another; or a moral temptation, in which one of the choices being considered is morally unacceptable. Kidder explains that for a situation to qualify as an ethical dilemma, at least one of the following four paradigms must exist: Truth vs. Loyalty, Individual vs. Community, Short-Term vs. Long-Term, Justice vs. Mercy. Conversely, if a difficult decision is void of all four of the aforementioned paradigms, then Kidder believes that one of the potential choices presents a moral temptation; an unethical option which, although appealing, is either amoral or immoral. Amorality, Kidder explains, is often due to an underdeveloped moral compass and the subsequent absence of morally acceptable core values. The amoral individual may not even recognize that his or her actions are wrong. Immorality, on the other hand, is understood as a lack of fidelity to established core values which result in a violation to the precepts of morality (p. 43). Finally, Kidder suggests that the only way to protect oneself from moral temptation is to develop and sustain a healthy level of ethical fitness, which he defines as the capacity to recognize the nature of moral challenges and respond with a well-tuned conscious, a lively perception of the difference between right and wrong, and the ability to make the right choice for action (p. 57).

The second part of the book focuses on Kidder’s belief in the universality of certain values and brings clarity to the nature of the four paradigms. Kidder first distinguishes moral values, defined as those that are intrinsically worthwhile, from other values that do not necessarily fall within the moral realm (i.e.,

political values, economic values, culinary values, etc.), usually captured using a code of ethics. Next, the author cites several theorists as he argues against the notion of ethical subjectivism, insisting that the data points strongly to the universality of several moral precepts. For Kidder, the elements which make up the four paradigms are universally accepted as morally sound, which is precisely what leads to their conflict presenting a moral dilemma. Justice vs. Mercy explains the tension which exists in the choice between objective application of the law and compassion for the plight of others; Short-Term vs. Long-Term highlights how immediate needs and long term goals are often in conflict with one another; Individual vs. Community brings attention to how one’s own needs can run counter to the needs of society at large; Truth vs. Loyalty recognizes that there are circumstances which require a choice in which absolute honesty and commitment to one’s responsibilities cannot co-exist.

The third part of the book provides three principles that Kidder proposes as the most commonly used for resolving ethical dilemmas: ends-based thinking, rule-based thinking, and care-based thinking. Kidder’s explanation of ends-based thinking as concentrating on the greatest good for the greatest number of people echoes the principles that serve as the foundation for utilitarianism. Rule-based thinking is rooted in Immanuel Kant’s concept of the categorical imperative, suggesting that all actions should be based on maxims or precepts which one is prepared to accept as the universal standard. Care-based thinking stems from what is commonly known as the Golden Rule, and as a prerequisite to action it demands that one care enough about the other(s) involved to consider all facets of the situation from their perspective. All three resolution principles are intended to provide a framework for navigating ethical dilemmas. When appropriately applied, Kidder believes they lead to increased mindfulness and guide morally consistent decision-making.

Kidder's book is rich with anecdotal evidence and relies heavily on theory. While the anecdotes help readers paint a mental picture around Kidder's assertions, his audience is still left without any quantitative data in support of his claims. However, despite the lack of quantitative research, Kidder's book is still valuable for anyone seeking to resolve difficult decisions through self-reflection. If there is truth to Socrates' claim that the unexamined life is not worth living, then Kidder's book serves as a wonderful resource for living a more worthwhile life. His principles for resolving ethical dilemmas provide readers with a framework by which they can examine their decision making process and achieve a heightened degree of self-awareness.

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