

A Guide to Moral Decision Making

Chris MacDonald, Ph.D.

Revised September 25 2010

This guide is intended only as an aid. It is not a formula, and it does not guarantee good decisions. The order of the steps is not crucial, and may vary from one situation to the next.

A. Recognizing the Moral Dimension

The first step is recognizing the decision as one that has moral importance. Important clues include conflicts between two or more values or ideals.

B. Who Are the Interested Parties? What are their Relationships?

Carefully identify who has a stake in the decision. In this regard, be imaginative and sympathetic. Often there are more parties whose interests should be taken into consideration than is immediately obvious.

Look at the *relationships* between the parties. Look at their relationships with yourself and with each other, and with relevant institutions.

C. What Values are Involved?

Think through the shared values that are at stake in making this decision. Is there a question of *trust*? Is personal *autonomy* a consideration? Is there a question of *fairness*? Is anyone to be *harmed* or *helped*?

D. Weigh the Benefits and the Burdens

Benefits – broadly defined – might include such things as the production of goods (physical, emotional, financial, social, etc.) for various parties, the satisfaction of preferences, and acting in accordance with various relevant values (such as fairness).

Burdens might include causing physical or emotional pain to various parties, imposing financial costs, and ignoring relevant values.

E. Look for Analogous Cases

Can you think of other similar decisions? What course of action was taken? Was it a good decision? How is the present case like that one? How is it different?

F. Discuss with Relevant Others

The merits of discussion should not be underestimated. Time permitting, discuss

your decision with as many persons as have a stake in it. Gather opinions, and ask for the reasons behind those opinions. Remember that your ability to discuss others may be limited by expectations and rules about confidentiality.

G. Does this Decision Accord with Legal and Organizational Rules?

Some decisions are appropriately made based on legal considerations. If one option is illegal, we should at least think very seriously before taking that option. Decisions may also be affected by rules set by organizations of which we are members. For example, most professional organizations have Codes of Ethics which are intended to guide individual decision making. Institutions (hospitals, banks, corporations) may also have policies that limit the options available to us.

Sometimes there are bad laws, or bad rules, and sometimes those should be broken. But *usually* it is ethically important to pay attention to laws & rules.

H. Am I Comfortable with this Decision?

Sometimes your 'gut reaction' will tell you if you've missed something.

Questions to be asked in this regard might include:

- 1) If I carry out this decision, would I be comfortable telling my family about it? My clergyman? My mentors?
- 2) Would I want children to take my behaviour as an example?
- 3) Is this decision one which a wise, informed, virtuous person would make?
- 4) Can I live with this decision?

Please feel free to use, copy, and share this Guide (for private use). If you reprint/publish it, please let me know where.

If you find this Guide helpful, please let me know. If you have comments or criticisms, I would value your input.

How to reach me:

Chris MacDonald
Department of Philosophy,
Saint Mary's University,
Halifax N.S. Canada B3H 3C3

e-mail: chrismac@ethicsweb.ca