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ORIGINAL CONTRIBUTION

Ethical Decision Making and Moral Leadership: A Case for Teaching Classic Literature in Business Schools

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ABSTRACT

Studying literature is often considered incompatible with the aims of management education and business practice. However, as this paper highlights, the teaching and studying of literature in the context of management education is not only relevant but also imperative – something without which a well-rounded development of character and conscience cannot be imagined. By analyzing select literary texts (Sophocles' *Antigone*, Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People* and Conrad's "The Secret Sharer"), this paper seeks to show how the studying of literature may help improve decision making and leadership skills of management students. Moreover, it seeks to demonstrate how literary texts – in their being faithful and realistic representations of life as it is *actually* lived – can be rightfully considered as powerful instructional devices enabling management students, in particular, to cope with the myriad ethical and moral ambiguities of modern business practice.

Keywords: Ethical decision making, Moral leadership, Literature, Management education, Business

1. INTRODUCTION

"Experience keeps a dear school but, a fool will learn in no other."

- Benjamin Franklin

In a rapidly evolving world, management education, in order to be effective, should certainly be not limited to the mere dissemination of relevant knowledge but must ensure a deeper understanding of the strategies taught in the classroom. While formalized management tools based exclusively on scientific rigor are clearly ill-suited for the purpose, one is obliged to look elsewhere. As the title of this paper suggests, the aim of this study is to demonstrate (with the help of suitable examples) how management education offered in business schools can be made more effective through the teaching of classic literature. With experts and educators reiterating the usefulness of fiction (in offering more realistic instances of ethical and moral challenges) over a traditional

prescriptive pedagogy (based on theory and restrictive case studies) since as far back as the 1980s, the teaching of literature in the context of management education is hardly a novel approach.¹

However, such an approach, notwithstanding its usefulness and efficacy, is yet to be widely embraced. To some – in fact, most people – literature and business are so incompatible at heart that "never the twain shall meet." While literature concerns itself with thoughts, ideas and abstractions, business deals with money. The poet or the philosopher is not expected to be a man of the world nor is the astute business person expected to have a refined sensibility or be exceptionally *cultivated*. But curiously enough, a poet may be as well-versed in the ways of the world, if not more, as a financier or a plutocrat. That the meaning of things and

¹ See Clemens & Mayer, 1987; Coles, 1989.

ideas – our understanding of the world we live in; of the people we interact with; of morality, ethics, integrity, loyalty, ambition and freedom – depends to a great extent on our cognizance of both the *vita activa* (public sphere) and the *vita contemplativa* (private sphere) is a fact we often tend to ignore. In fact, our successes (and our failures) are not merely shaped by how well (or how poorly) we conduct ourselves in the public sphere but also manifestly on our ability to think and question our thoughts and actions in private. It is only through a deep contemplation and critical questioning of our thoughts and actions that we can hope to develop our conscience – to distinguish between just and unjust, good and evil, moral and immoral.

Business and management practices often entail high-stake decision making involving ethical and moral challenges. Unfortunately, a traditional business curriculum, founded on the principles of a dominantly prescriptive pedagogy, offers no direct solution to these trying situations. It is, therefore, imperative for any insightful institution to complement the existing business curriculum with suitable perceptive strategies so as to stimulate the moral and emotional growth of students alongside their intellectual development. Concomitantly, the institution that focuses on the overall development of students – not just on their intellectual attainment – is likely to be of the greatest service to the society.

2. LEARNING FROM CLASSIC LITERATURE

It is interesting to note that the ancient Greeks focused on the individual in their quest to seek the best measures for refining their social and political organizations. To put it another way, they emphasized the human element in seeking answers to questions pertaining to the complex relationship between individuals and organizations. While the accumulation of technical skills was considered commendable, an individual's success in the world depended fairly on his ability to strike a balance between his personal needs and that of the society or organization to which he belonged. Likewise, the literature, history and philosophy of the Greeks warned against the dangers that might befall an

individual in case that equilibrium was disturbed. The harmonization of individual and organizational needs and the preservation of *that* harmony were of utmost importance to them. For the Greeks, as evident from Aristotle's *golden mean*, virtue resided somewhere between excess and deficiency. Thus, according to the theory of the *golden mean*, a person could be described as truly courageous only if he demonstrated astute judgment in the face of danger. Such a man would choose his battles wisely, electing to brave the odds worth braving and shunning the others that are not. Rational decision making would place him somewhere between cowardice and recklessness – between the precarious states of excess and deficiency.

Although the theory of the mean does not offer a clear-cut decision procedure, it is certainly worth considering in the process of rational decision making. This is because it helps one to first, identify and then, generalize mean states as virtues or imitable models of ethical behavior. Sophocles' play *Antigone*, for example, deals with the complexities of ethical decision making. Is Antigone's decision to bury her brother Polynices ethical? Polynices went to war against his own brother Eteocles, leading an army against Thebes. When the brothers are killed in combat, Creon, the new ruler of Thebes, declares Polynices a traitor denying him a decent burial. Antigone, Polynices's sister, disobeys the royal edict and is, as a consequence of her audacity, entombed alive by Creon. In *Antigone*, Sophocles outlines the challenges of ethical decision making and the significance of ethical intuitionism in the decision procedure. While Antigone's anguish for the dead Polynices and her sense of familial duty towards him colors her subsequent choices, Creon's need (as the ruler of Thebes) to uphold his power and authority ultimately wins over the possibility of a more compassionate approach. Both Antigone and Creon, in their blind and unquestioning adherence to personal ideologies, underline the dangers inherent in dogmatic absolutism.

When Creon, at the bidding of the blind prophet Tiresias, finally relents, Antigone had already committed suicide and so had Haemon, Creon's son and Antigone's lover. Even Eurydice, the

queen of Thebes and Haemon's mother, in her sorrow, kills herself. While it is inconsequential to speculate if Antigone and Creon were right in their respective choices, it is but obvious that they *could have* chosen more conscientiously and with a greater awareness of the situation. That both Antigone and Creon's commitment to their respective values is a rather damaging exercise in simplification only deepens their tragedy. Sophocles' play is about a "practical crisis" which can only be resolved by "learning a more *elusive kind of wisdom*" (Nussbaum 52; emphasis added). Understandably, one cannot hope to glean such wisdom from a standardized curriculum. On the contrary, problems of choice (such as those that arise in *Antigone*) must be assessed critically and with a flexible responsiveness that combines the quiet vigor of introspection and artful deliberation.

Ethical decision making in contemporary management practice is no less challenging than what it was in ancient Greece. Be it the boardroom or the clubhouse, problems of choice are to be encountered everywhere. Plays such as *Antigone* and *Agamemnon* touch upon some of the universal ethical complexities inherent in the process of decision making. To what extent must an individual sacrifice his own interests for the benefit of the society? What should be an individual's ideal course of action if the demands placed on him by the society/state/organization are, by his own reckoning, unjust? To what extent may an individual overstep the boundaries of normative behavior in order to contain or prevent unethical practices in his organization/society? Questions such as these are becoming increasingly relevant and are certainly worth deliberating over given the complexities of contemporary management practice.

In Henrik Ibsen's 1882-play *An Enemy of the People*, the protagonist Dr. Thomas Stockmann discovers and wants to expose the truth about the town's baths and suffers the consequences of his principled actions. The baths are polluted and pose a grievous threat to public safety. Dr. Stockmann wants to make this information public but the Mayor is opposed to his decision and threatens to ruin his financial and social

standing. Through the righteous doctor's example, Ibsen raises the issue of social responsibility examining, in the process, a particularly difficult moral problem: to what extent might it be considered just to oppose or disregard authority? To put it another way, blind obedience is not a virtue in itself; in fact, to obey (authority) just for the sake of obeying can lead to disastrous consequences. Although Dr. Stockmann adheres to his principles until the very end of the play, his motive – though apparently noble – verges on the irrational (Kahn). By his own admission, Dr. Stockmann is intolerant to leaders and his callousness with regard to his family's welfare is both glaring and unacceptable. His obsession with rational principles is disturbing because it signals his increasing distance from the genuinely humane: "I love this town so much," remarks Dr. Stockmann, "that I'd rather destroy it than see it prosper on a lie [...]. When a place has become riddled with lies, who cares if it's destroyed? I say it should simply be razed to the ground! And all the people living by these lies should be wiped out, like vermin!" (Ibsen 82).

Ibsen's Dr. Stockmann may as well be envisioned as the contemporary whistleblower, conscious of his ethical responsibility to expose evil and acting on the conviction that the truth alone is worth fighting for. The real challenge, however, is not the exposure of evil but the fulfillment of a more personal obligation: to temper cognition and rationality with humane values. Intellectual judgments, in order to be ethical, need not be soulless. *An Enemy of the People* emphasizes the importance of the human element in ethical decision making and warns against the perils of its absence. It addresses questions such as: To what extent and in what situation might the act of superseding authority be considered just and fair? How might one strike a balance between one's personal and impersonal obligations? Moral problems, as Ibsen's play so emphatically underlines, require the asking of the right questions at the right time. It is interesting to note that the *Socratic method*, a mode of instruction developed and popularized by the Athenian philosopher, involved the asking of questions to arrive at the truth. The

importance of the Socratic dialectic derives from its pronounced insistence on critical thinking. In other words, one cannot hope to arrive at ethical decisions without critically appraising every facet of a given moral problem.

The failure to think critically, to introspect and question cherished personal beliefs lie at the heart of Dr. Stockmann's tragedy. So it is with Creon's (and, to a lesser extent, with Antigone's). Decision making and disagreement (*not* consensus) go hand in hand and it is only through the insightful resolution of conflicting opinions that ethical decisions are arrived at. Commenting on the salience of disagreement as opposed to consensus in decision making procedure in modern corporations Peter Drucker writes: "Decisions of the kind the executive has to make are not made well by acclamation. *They are made well only if based on the clash of conflicting views, the dialogue between different points of view, the choice between different judgments*" (380; emphasis added). While it is not easy to consider and evaluate conflicting views objectively, it is equally difficult to let go of cherished assumptions and cognitive biases. In this regard, it is but contextual to iterate the importance of critical thinking and wise counsel. Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (1606), for instance, warns against the dangers of indecision arising from Macbeth's inability to engage critically with moral and ethical issues.

Macbeth is notorious for his vacillations; he gives in to Lady Macbeth's dark, ceaseless persuasions without critically evaluating the consequences of his actions. It is his fragile will rather than Lady Macbeth's evil designs that culminates in his tragic fall. Macbeth, for all his delirious victories, is hopelessly unforeseeing; he fails to see beyond the present moment of action – to "look into the seeds of time". It is, perhaps, unfair to blame Lady Macbeth for his downfall because it is Macbeth, after all, who *chooses* (if one may, at all, use the word to describe his actions) to be manipulated by his dominating wife, his "dearest partner of greatness." But, he fails to make the morally *right* choices; even worse, he *lets* his wife choose in his stead. In matters of choice, Macbeth exhibits a rather disturbing trend as summed up by Jan Kott

(1964): "He has chosen between Macbeth, who is afraid to kill, and Macbeth, who has killed". (83). It is, no doubt, a dangerous and an ultimately defeating choice to make.

Furthermore, Macbeth displays an alarming lack of moral intent – "vaulting ambition" being the only motive behind his execution of the "terrible feat," i.e., the murder of Duncan, his king. Yet, Macbeth's ambition is far from conventional. His single-minded fixation on the moment of action goes a long way in diluting his moral awareness of situations that raise ethical issues (for instance, his killing of Duncan is not simply a violent act of regicide but grievously unethical too, for Duncan – both vulnerable and unsuspecting – was a guest in Macbeth's castle on the fateful night of his murder). In the words of Bernard McElroy (1973), Macbeth "is not driven by a compulsive need to command [...] he scarcely gives a thought to the spoils that will proceed from the act and keeps his attention unwaveringly upon the act itself" (220). Shakespeare's *Macbeth* warns us against the perils of weakened principle and willful (self-) deception reflected in its protagonist's poor choices and anguished vacillations. Even though Macbeth was unable to lead morally and choose ethically, his self-defeating tendencies impart a very valuable lesson on the ethical dimension of leadership and strategic decision making. It is worthwhile to note that *Macbeth's* affective powers derive to a great extent from its universality. The environment in which the drama unfolds with its attendant chaos and equivocations resonates strongly with the contemporary business environment – the crises it portrays being as plausible and probable in the twenty-first century as they were in an earlier time.

Closely tied to the issue of ethical decision making is that of moral leadership. Who, might one ask, can be called a moral leader? How is moral leadership different from leadership in general? Robert Coles describes moral leadership as "intellect calling upon the energies of conscience, with the loyalty of others a signal that such a call has been contagiously successful" (193). What distinguishes moral leadership from leadership in the general sense is

a deeper sense of responsibility coupled with a keener empathic understanding of the context. Given the ubiquity and pervasiveness of moral challenges in the present-day world, it is but imperative for business schools to help students address and engage with questions such as: What is the nature of moral challenge? How should a leader make ethical decisions in right-versus-right challenges? How might a new leader earn and sustain moral legitimacy? As we shall see in the following paragraphs, Joseph Conrad's story "The Secret Sharer" (1910) probes the social function of leadership and the ethical challenges it entails for the new leader.

The exercise of authority, as Conrad's narrative reiterates, subsumes a natural conflict between the public and private lives of those exercising it. Great literature helps us understand the nature of such conflict, together with the attendant stress, and the path(s) leading to its resolution. Conrad's story is about the challenges confronted by the captain of a merchant ship in his struggle to earn technical legitimacy. Being the captain of his ship, his authority as the man in command appears to be a given; however, it is his competence as a leader that is put to test. It is his first command and the captain is painfully aware of the weight of his responsibilities. His decision to hide Leggatt – who is on the run for killing a fellow seaman in the *Sephora* – in his cabin shines a light on the complexities and the risks of intuitive decision making.

While Leggatt claims that the murder was necessary to save his ship, the *Sephora*, in the face of a tumultuous storm, the captain must decide between the just action of handing Leggatt over to the authorities and the more empathic, yet morally ambiguous, response of hiding him in his own cabin. The captain's moral dilemmas and his subsequent decision of hiding Leggatt (as opposed to giving him up) take the reader through the complex process of moral reasoning. While it may be argued that the captain by lying to his crew fails to achieve moral legitimacy, Conrad's story does

acknowledge the *human* element of leadership. It argues in favor of the position that the struggle for legitimacy is, more often than not, routed through an unceasing tension between *right* versus *right* rather than *right* versus *wrong* choices. To put it differently, it is the moral acceptability of choices (of ends and means) alone that, at the end, comes through as the most powerful determinant of legitimacy.

Classic literature, as this essay seeks to show, is a powerful source of learning. In the context of management education, the teaching of classics offers some distinct advantages. Firstly, through its focus on an affective teaching/learning mode, classics encourage a healthy emphasis on values, ideas and the creative designing of optimum solutions for moral and ethical dilemmas. Secondly, literature – being the "imitation of life" – raises important questions and provides useful insights as to the nature and complexities of human thought, behavior and action. Thirdly, literature offers practical lessons on modes of "seeing" by upholding and reiterating the salience of varied and differing perspectives. Finally, and most importantly, the study of literature with its evidently strong emphasis on the *human* element usefully counters the limitations imposed on students and teachers, alike, by highly orthodox and prescriptive curricula.

3. CONCLUSION

Since quality management education should be equally committed to the emotional development of students as to their intellectual attainment, the teaching of literature should be widely adopted by business schools as a useful instructional method alongside the enactment of a more mainstream prescriptive curriculum. This is also to say that success, in business education, depends to a great extent upon the adoption and implementation of a balanced and highly sophisticated curriculum and in making it increasingly accessible to students.

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