

The Role of Emotions in Addressing Social and Environmental Issues in Ethical Decision Making

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Abstract : A transition towards a future where the economy serves society so that it evolves within the safe operating space of the planet calls for fundamental changes in the way managers think, feel and act, and make decisions that relate to social and environmental issues. Sustainable decision-making in organizations are often challenging tasks characterized by trade-offs between environmental, social and financial aspects, thus often bringing forth ethical concerns. Although there have been significant developments in incorporating uncertainty into environmental decision-making and measuring constructs and dimensions in ethical behavior in organizations, the majority of sustainable decision-making models are rationalist-based. Moreover, research in psychology indicates that one's readiness to make a decision depends on the individual's state of mind, the feasibility of the implied change, and the compatibility of strategies and tactics of implementation. Although very informative, most of this extant research is limited in the sense that it often directs attention towards the rational instead of the emotional. Hence, little is known about the role of emotions in sustainable decision making, especially in situations where decision-makers evaluate a variety of options and use their feelings as a source of information in tackling the uncertainty. To fill this lacuna, and to embrace the uncertainty and perceived risk involved in decisions that touch upon social and environmental aspects, it is important to add emotion to the evaluation when aiming to reach the one right and good ethical decision outcome. This analysis builds on recent findings in moral psychology that associate feelings and intuitions with ethical decisions and suggests that emotions can sensitize the manager to evaluate the rightness or wrongness of alternatives if ethical concerns are present in sustainable decision making. Capturing such sensitive evaluation as triggered by intuitions, we suggest that rational justification can be complemented by using emotions as a tool to tune in to what feels right in making sustainable decisions. This analysis integrates ethical decision-making theories with recent advancements in emotion theories. It determines the conditions under which emotions play a role in sustainability decisions by contributing to a personal equilibrium in which intuition and rationality are both activated and in accord. It complements the rationalist ethics view according to which nothing fogs the mind in decision making so thoroughly as emotion, and the concept of cheater's high that links unethical behavior with positive affect. This analysis contributes to theory with a novel theoretical model that specifies when and why managers, who are more emotional, are, in fact, more likely to make ethical decisions than those managers who are more rational. It also proposes practical advice on how emotions can convert the manager's preferences into choices that benefit both common good and one's own good throughout the transition towards a more sustainable future.

Keywords : emotion, ethical decision making, intuition, sustainability

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