



# Character-Infused Ethical Decision Making

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## Abstract

Despite a growing body of research by management scholars to understand and explain failures in ethical decision making (EDM), misconduct prevails. Scholars have identified character, founded in virtue ethics, as an important perspective that can help to address the gap in organizational misconduct. While character has been offered as a valid perspective in EDM, current theorizing on how it applies to EDM has not been well developed. We thus integrate character, founded in virtue ethics, into Rest's (1986) EDM model to reveal how shifting attention to the nature of the moral agent provides critical insights into decision making more broadly and EDM specifically. Virtue ethics provides a perspective on EDM that acknowledges and anticipates uncertainties, considers its contextual constraints, and contemplates the development of the moral agent. We thus answer the call by many scholars to integrate character in EDM in order to advance the understanding of the field and suggest propositions for how to move forward. We conclude with implications of a character-infused approach to EDM for future research.

**Keywords** Ethical decision making · Judgment · Virtue ethics · Character

Misconduct can arise in many forms. In 2016, 11.5 million files were leaked, linking 140 politicians including top officials, heads of state, and ministers in 50 countries in the biggest fraud and money laundering scheme in history, known as the Panama Papers; in 2017, more than 1000 athletes were linked in an operation to manipulate or conceal positive drug tests resulting in the IOC banning all Russian athletes from the 2019 Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang; and in 2019, Operations Varsity Blues was the largest investigation of its kind to connect 53 individuals involved in college admissions fraud at American ivy league universities. While these examples highlight how ethical misconduct can be traced back to systems that justify and support its existence and pervasiveness, each one of these examples is reinforced by individuals making a seemingly simple choice. Perhaps it is choosing to withhold some income during tax reporting

and justifying that one has already paid their fair share of taxes; feeling tired and needing a little boost in training just to get over a minor training plateau; or hiring an admission specialist to handle college admissions and therefore passing on accountability. While there are many explanations for misconduct, including mainstream paradigms that assert the ethical shortcomings of context and/or bad people as underpinnings of misconduct (Kaptein, 2011; Kish-Gephart et al., 2010; Sims & Brinkmann, 2003; Treviño et al., 1998), we suggest that when bad decisions have been made, where ordinary reasoning should have prevailed, poor individual judgment (i.e., practical wisdom/phronesis) founded in character, is implicated.

While character has been implicated in ethical decision making (EDM) (e.g., Arjoon, 2010; Bright et al., 2014; Crossan et al., 2013; Nonaka et al., 2014; Sosik et al., 2019; Weaver, 2006), current theorizing on how character applies to the EDM process has not been well developed. Virtue ethics is one of three main branches of normative ethical philosophy that emphasizes the process of personal character development (Whetstone, 2001). It focuses on the character of the moral agent rather than the act itself in order to understand EDM. This paper thus integrates character, into Rest's (1986) EDM model to reveal how shifting attention to the nature of the moral

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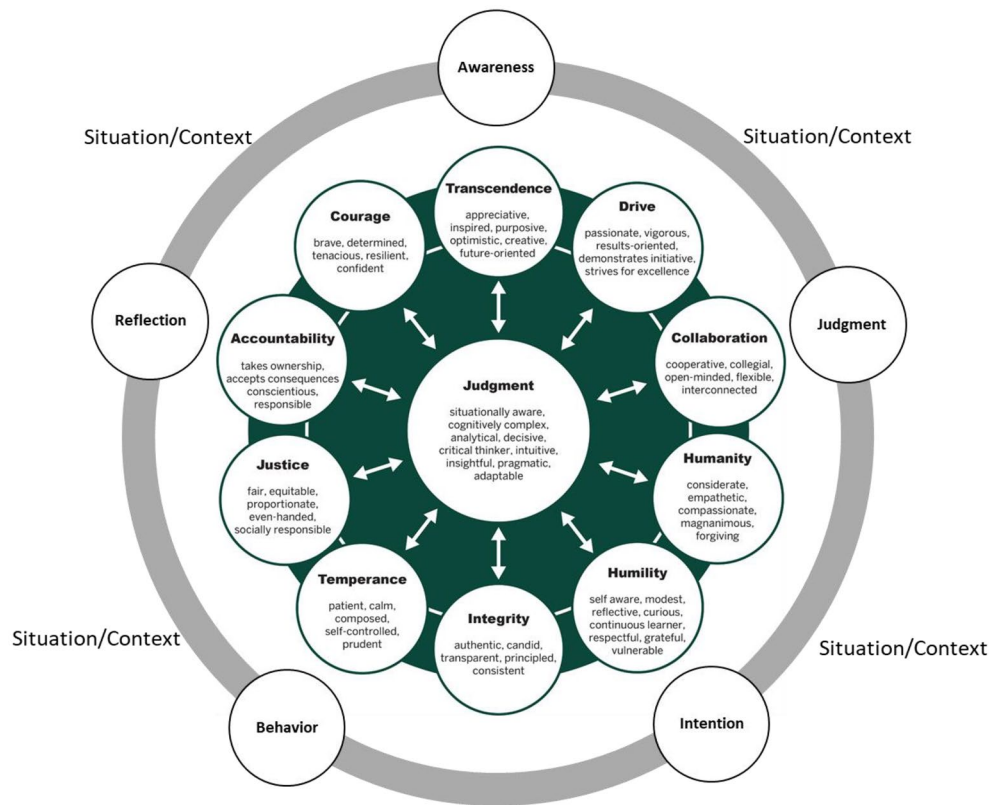
agent unearths implications for both EDM research and practice. Specifically, rather than focusing on how moral behavior may have broken down at any one EDM component, attention shifts to how the quality of decision making may have been different if the moral agent had strength of character. Would strength of courage (a person with an unrelenting determination, confidence, and perseverance in confronting difficult situations), supported by other dimensions of character (e.g., justice), result in a different quality of moral awareness, judgment, intention, behavior, and reflection than a person whose courage has never been properly exercised? Would a person with strength of character have a different way of weighing fairness? Be able to follow through on their promises in tough times? We contend that Rest may have envisioned that strengthening the moral decision stages would have resulted in better ethical choices but he did not articulate the character underpinnings that account for differences in the quality of the moral decision-making process. In other words, he describes the process of a moral decision but does not consider how the quality of that process changes depending on *who* is at the center of that process.

Consequently, our aim is to demonstrate how character, founded in virtue ethics, can be infused into Rest's (1986) EDM model—seen as the “gold standard” (Hannah et al., 2011)—to better explain what individuals are (not) attending to, why certain intentions are (not) formed, how ethical problems are contemplated, and why certain actions are (not) chosen by focusing on *who* is at the center of the EDM process. We use the term *infuse* to describe the interconnected nature of character with the EDM process. Rest's model of EDM describes what occurs during the process of moral deliberation but does little to explain what is required of the moral agent to engage within the stages. For example, moral awareness is required to understand the moral nature of a problem, but what should one be aware of, to whom and to what should the awareness apply, and when does moral intention follow awareness? Furthermore, how would strength of courage, humanity, or justice, for example, change the nature and quality of awareness as opposed to weaknesses in these virtues? These types of questions require an orientation and exploration into both normative (virtue ethics) and descriptive (Rest's EDM) theories, which is uncommon, but not unique (for an example, see Sadler-Smith, 2012). Further, we believe, as do other authors (e.g., Mantere & Ketokivi, 2013), that to make substantive contribution to understanding decision making, specifically as it pertains to sound reasoning, requires an iterative process, cycling between normative and descriptive ethics (Fischhoff, 2010). Virtue ethics emphasizes the process of personal character development (Whetstone, 2001). It focuses on the character of the moral agent rather than the act itself to determine ethics.

Towards this goal, we examine the nature of character as it applies to each of Rest's four EDM stages and to an additional stage of reflection proposed by Crossan et al. (2013). While Crossan et al. (2013) introduced the idea of a virtue-based orientation (VBO), suggesting that EDM can be enhanced through the virtuous mean and its buffering role in demanding contexts, they were only able to frame the larger constructs. They envisioned their framework as a means to guide further research and their research agenda explicitly addressed that “there is an additional opportunity to examine the relationship between values, virtues and the components of EDM as described by Rest (1986)” (p. 578). We seek to address this aim by examining how character-infused judgment underpins each EDM process. Furthermore, we extend the VBO framework by addressing the entwinement of the moral agent with context and describe how virtuous or non-virtuous actions affect individual character development. We, therefore, boldly assert that understanding and developing individual character in EDM can counterbalance the cultural and contextual forces that often undermine individual character, and thus provide an antidote to the prevailing unethical culture practices.

Accordingly, the contribution to EDM theory is threefold. First, in spite of the potential for theoretical and practical implications, there is a near complete lack of scholarly consideration for character in the EDM which has been overshadowed by consequential (cost–benefit analysis, incentive systems) and deontological (rules) considerations (Ferrero & Sison, 2014). (For a review of EDM see Craft, 2013; Ford & Richardson, 2013; Hunt & Vitell, 1986; Loe et al., 2000; O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2005.) (See Reynolds and Ceranic (2007) for a prototypical study of this point). We do, however, recognize key scholars who have written about virtue-based judgment; for example, Nonaka et al., 2014; Sadler-Smith, 2012; Shotter & Tsoukas, 2014; Thiele, 2006. Our contribution is to anchor judgment more broadly in character, and to articulate the theoretical connection between character and Rest's EDM process.

Second, we discuss how character-infused EDM allows for a practical and descriptive focus to EDM. We therefore advance this perspective by strengthening and deepening the virtue ethics perspective relative to other perspectives because virtue ethics provides the groundwork to be able to define EDM within the confines of time, location, agents, and activity; as such, it is an ethics that is contextual (Van Staveren, 2007). Thus, the alignment of character with the EDM process allows for insight into the contextual nature of EDM as the ability to exercise a virtue depends on both the character disposition of the moral agent and the context in which the agent operates. Specifically, the courageous act of the moral agent contributes to the ethical context but the courageous act also depends on, and is constructed in part, by the context which may constrain or enable being



**Fig. 1** Character and EDM. The figure is a combination of Rest's (1984) EDM model and Crossan et al.'s (2017) character model

courageous (Dionysiou & Tsoukas, 2013). Because, the moral agents' action is neither independent nor dependent on the social structure but rather it is positioned within a social space (Hartman, 2013; MacIntyre, 1984; Sadler-Smith, 2012). The individual and the context are mutually reinforcing as they are intimately connected (Giddens, 1984). Virtue ethics, therefore, provides a unique perspective to EDM because it considers the process of EDM as one that is both the object and the subject of contextual constraints.

Third, virtue ethics considers character-infused decision making as something that the moral agent can develop and strengthen through virtuous experience (Aristotle, 1999). While, the moral agent may be operating in a context that constrains moral agency, it is the underlying dispositions of character that will determine whether (non-) virtuous action is exercised (e.g., voicing against authority versus acquiescing to corruption) (Weiskopf & Tobias-Miersch, 2016) and how it is exercised given the situational constraints. This action strengthens or weakens the character of the moral agent (a point we continually reinforce throughout) and in turn will fortify the EDM process. We elaborate on the specifics of how development of character occurs through the process of reflection in the last stage of EDM. Thus, we answer the call by management scholars (Crossan et al., 2013; Treviño et al., 2006; Whetstone, 2001) to integrate

virtue ethics in EDM to advance the understanding of the field.

We commence with a conceptual overview proposing that accounts of EDM need to embrace the complexity and ambiguity associated with the broader domain of judgment and decision making (JDM). We introduce virtue ethics using a character model by Crossan et al. (2017) and Rest's model as depicted in Fig. 1. The thrust of our theorizing is infusing a character-infused perspective into Rest's four stages of EDM (plus a reflection stage proposed by Crossan et al., 2013), revealing how recasting Rest's processes with a character lens fundamentally shapes EDM. We conclude with implications for research and practice of a character-infused approach to EDM.

## Conceptual and Theoretical Overview

### The Nature of EDM

Ethical problems can be characterized by their situational complexity, unprecedented nature, and lack of one correct solution (Camillus, 2008; Heifetz, 1994), thus requiring deliberation and adjudication (Putnam & Conant, 1990), which are processes that greatly benefit from a virtue-based

lens. A deontological perspective might ask questions about the legality of an issue, a consequential perspective may weigh the cost and benefits of speaking up when a moral line has been crossed (e.g., whistleblowing and the cost of losing one's job), a virtue-based perspective, however, asks questions, such as how moral courage, integrity, or justice might be exercised in this instance. Practically speaking, an individual may understand the situation and be able to solve the problem, but does the individual have the moral courage to carry out the action and the accountability to handle the consequences?

Seeking to unravel the nature of ethical problems can be challenging particularly because they can often appear as deceptively simplistic issues. In particular, the decisions and actions (or lack thereof) by an individual at a moment in time may not appear to have ethical consequences, but those consequences may come to light either through the collective action or inaction, or through time. An example of this is the creative financial engineering of Enron executives that awarded former chief financial officer (CFO) Andy Fastow with, on the one hand, the prestigious title "CFO of the Year" and, on the other, a prison card (Elkind, 2013). Fastow's account of what happened at Enron illustrates the point that lawyers, accountants, and the board signed off on the actions being taken with little awareness of the ethical implications, focusing instead on whether the actions were compliant with accounting principles and laws.

Further, actual outcomes may have clear ethical implications, may have implications that are debatable from an ethical perspective, or may have consequences that an individual might consider better or worse but have no clear ethical implications. Shotter and Tsoukas (2014) argued that character-infused judgment shows up even in "mundane cases of organizational life such as when supplies managers having to decide how to handle a particular supplier, not involving ethical matters at first glance turn out to implicate notions of goodness by the desire for personal and professional excellence." (p. 381). Understanding the boundaries of a problem requires judgment, not simply to supply a one-shot answer but to contemplate broader implications (Shotter & Tsoukas, 2014). Thus, we contend that theories seeking to explain EDM need to account for the nature and quality of decisions associated with the broader domain of JDM.

Good judgment requires an analysis of content to supplement laws, principles, and axioms (Gigerenzer, 1991, 1996). Unfortunately, the JDM literature has tended to embed the consequentialist perspective in explaining JDM with less regard for other perspectives (Mellers et al., 1998). The virtue ethics perspective we describe can be extended to JDM; however, we focus on expanding the boundaries of traditional EDM approaches to account for more complex types of decision making for which the ethical dimensions are not necessarily salient at a point in time or by an individual. This

in turn will create a natural bridge to JDM. We return to this when we discuss the nature of "awareness" in Rest's model. Table 1 provides the definitions of each of the 11 dimensions of character while Table 2 gives an overview of the possible connections between the dimensions of character (shown in Fig. 1) the components of EDM, and the components of JDM. It is not our intention to unpack all of these connections, but rather use them as examples to illustrate our theorizing.

## Virtue Ethics and Character

Virtue ethics also asserts that the act cannot be stated apart from the reasoning, the particulars of the agent, and the prevailing circumstance (Koehn et al., 1995). In other words, an appropriate assessment of an action also requires consideration of the agent who is committing the act, their intentions and reasons for the action, and the context surrounding the agent. We define character using the Crossan et al. (2017) definition of character as an amalgam of virtues, personality traits, and values, which enable moral and personal excellence (see Fig. 1). We use this model of character because its theoretical foundation was based on an engaged scholarship approach that included the participation of both management scholars and business practitioners to create a model that is academically rigorous and practically relevant. Virtues, as described, are considered universal human characteristics that have been accepted as the makeup of good character (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and refer to situationally appropriate behaviors that are emblematic of a person of good character. Only a few of the behaviors underpinning the virtues have a personality trait base, such as conscientiousness and openness, which are relatively stable dispositional variables (Bono & Judge, 2004). In contrast, most of the behaviors are learned and therefore can be developed.

Virtue ethics does not deny that people are born with all sorts of natural tendencies (e.g., friendly or irritable) but that an individual's innate qualities can be encouraged and developed or discouraged and thwarted by external forces (e.g., parents, role models, culture). Therefore, natural tendencies are shaped and developed through a long and gradual process of education and habituation. The development of individual virtues is thus in essence one that is unfolding, as the individual journeys through self-knowing and the good is obtained by wrestling with virtues in practice. The good is thus not a fully stable human quality but is one in the making; subject to the ongoing development of character that hold a virtuous life together and thus held together by a degree of narrative unity (MacIntyre, 1981) in the life of an individual. That is, a purposeful 'quest for the good' (MacIntyre, 1981, p. 204). Virtue ethics therefore is an interplay between disposition and development; to act virtuously is to act from inclinations that are formed from the practice and

**Table 1** Definitions for dimensions of leader character

Dimension	Definition
Judgment	Makes sound decisions in a timely manner based on relevant information and critical analysis of facts. Appreciates the broader context when reaching decisions. Shows flexibility when confronted with new information or situations. Has an implicit sense of the best way to proceed. Sees into the heart of challenging issues. Reasons effectively in uncertain or ambiguous situations
Courage	Does the right thing even though it may be unpopular, actively discouraged, and/or result in a negative outcome for him/her. Shows an unrelenting determination, confidence, and perseverance in confronting difficult situations. Rebounds quickly from setbacks
Drive	Strives for excellence. Has a strong desire to succeed. Tackles problems with a sense of urgency. Approaches challenges with energy and passion
Collaboration	Values and actively supports development and maintenance of positive relationships among people. Encourages open dialogue and does not react defensively when challenged. Is able to connect with others at a fundamental level, in a way that fosters the productive sharing of ideas. Recognizes that what happens to someone, somewhere, can affect all
Integrity	Holds oneself to a high moral standard and behaves consistently with ethical standards, even in difficult situations. Is seen by others as behaving in a way that is consistent with their personal values and beliefs. Behaves consistently with organizational policies and practices
Temperance	Conducts oneself in a calm, composed manner. Maintains the ability to think clearly and responds reasonably in tense situations. Completes work and solves problems in a thoughtful, careful manner. Resists excesses and stays grounded
Accountability	Willingly accepts responsibility for decisions and actions. Is willing to step up and take ownership of challenging issues. Reliably delivers on expectations. Can be counted on in tough situations
Justice	Strives to ensure that individuals are treated fairly and that consequences (positive or negative) are commensurate with contributions. Remains objective and keeps personal biases to a minimum when making decisions. Provides others with the opportunity to voice their opinions on processes and procedures. Provides timely, specific, and candid explanations for decisions. Seeks to redress wrongdoings inside and outside the organization
Humility	Lets accomplishments speak for themselves. Acknowledges limitations. Understands the importance of thoughtful examination of one's own opinions and ideas. Embraces opportunities for personal growth and development. Does not consider oneself to be more important or special than others. Is respectful of others. Understands and appreciates others' strengths and contributions
Humanity	Demonstrates genuine concern and care for others. Appreciates and identifies with others' values, feelings, and beliefs. Has a capacity to forgive and not hold grudges. Understands that people are fallible and offers opportunities for individuals to learn from their mistakes
Transcendence	Draws inspiration from excellence or appreciation of beauty in such areas as sports, music, arts, and design. Sees possibility where others do not. Has an expansive view of things both in terms of taking into account the long term and broad factors. Demonstrates a sense of purpose in life

Adapted from "Toward a framework of leader character" by Crossan et al. (2017). *Journal of Management Studies*, 7. Copyright 2016 John Wiley & Sons Ltd and Society for the Advancement of Management Studies. Adapted with permission

cultivation of virtues (Weaver, 2006). EDM therefore is the activity within which development occurs, or fails to occur.

The virtues depicted in Fig. 1 represent desirable mean states (Aristotle referred to this as the virtuous mean) between vices of deficiency and vices of excess. For example, courage is a virtue between recklessness (vice of excess) and cowardice (vice of deficiency). Mean state does not translate into average or moderate level, but rather recognizes that the virtuous form of courage, must be supported by the other dimensions of character such as temperance, with its behaviors of patience, calm, composed, self-control, and prudence, when required by the situation.

Judgment,<sup>1</sup> akin to Aristotle's practical wisdom, has associated behaviors that are recognizable from many decision-making models, such as being analytical, a critical thinker, and decisive, but also involves other behaviors that have been less well presented, such as being situationally aware and intuitive. Judgment involves a high degree of situational awareness to direct the other character dimensions in situationally appropriate ways toward achieving an intended good (Arjoon, 2010; MacIntyre, 2007; Sison & Fontrodona, 2013). In decision making, judgment requires a recognition of the qualities in a situation that will move

<sup>1</sup> Judgment means "practical wisdom or phronesis" and is distinct from Rest's stage of moral judgment. Hereinafter in this paper we refer to judgment to mean practical wisdom and the judgment component of Crossan et al.'s (2018) character model, while moral judgment refers to the second stage of Rest's model of EDM.

**Table 2** Dimensions of Character, EDM processes, and JDM

Character dimensions		EDM			JDM	
	Awareness	Judgment	Intent	Behavior	Reflection	
Drive	Greater energy to engage in moral issues	Desire to make the right/moral decision	Motivation to do the right thing	Being persistent in carrying out the action. Executing the intention with excellence	Continual engagement in the reflection process to learn and develop excellence in character	Greater degree of taking charge and recognizing that a decision needs to be made
Transcendence	Seeing situational factors as connected to the promotion of certain values	Reflecting on our goals and its link to character in deciding what is the right choice	Commitment to making a virtuous choice	Sacrificing lower values (e.g., self-interest) for virtuous ones	Asking: who will I become if I choose X vs Y, who am I becoming if I continue to make decisions in this way?	Being in service to the common good through living a virtuous life. Instead of asking what is the right answer, asking Who am I, Who am I becoming in my decision making
Collaboration	Seeing the interconnectedness on the self (and one's decisions) with others	Greater connection to other's impact and an open-mindedness about possible decision paths	Seeking the help of others when the choice will be difficult to follow through	Engaging others when implementing the decision	Seeking feedback from others	Recognizing various frameworks (including others perspective) that can be applied to decision making
Humanity	Greater sensitivity to harm	Accounting for the positions of other parties involved	Choosing to be in service of others	Consideration of others when carrying out the behavior (e.g., being kind when telling a hard truth)	Forgiving oneself for mistakes, forgiving others for mistakes	Recognizing how decisions might affect others
Humility	Recognizing that perhaps one may be deficient in certain ethical issues	Reflecting and continuously developing one's character to reason	Recognizing one's weaknesses that may prohibit following through with intentions	Setting up the situation to decrease potential failures in action due to personal weaknesses (e.g., verbal commitment to others)	Critical examination of limiting beliefs, thoughts, and behaviors that may have led to unethical actions. Gaining perspectives of others to determine if the decision made was good	Recognizing weaknesses/gaps in knowledge about an issue
Temperance	Giving appropriate time and consideration to important issues	Giving appropriate time and consideration the deliberation process	Decreasing barriers (e.g., self-regulatory controls) that may prevent intentions from becoming actions	Controlling one's emotional state when responding in accordance with intention	Motivation to revisit and deeply examine the decision-making process. Patience to reflect in action as the process is occurring	Greater ability to self-regulate emotions, cognitions, and behaviors
Integrity	Sensitivity to environmental factors that are incongruent to character	Consistently applying good judgment across all contexts and situations	Ensuring that the right choice becomes the intended choice	Ensuring that actions match values	Determining inconsistencies in the other stages of decision making (e.g., behavior did not follow intent)	Ensures character is consistently applied

Table 2 (continued)

Character dimensions		EDM			JDM	
	Awareness	Judgment	Intent	Behavior	Reflection	
Justice	Greater sensitivity to ethical issues such as fairness	Greater sensitivity to appropriate ethical issues such as fairness	Choosing to service moral values over self-interest	Rewarding and punishing fair and unfair behavior, respectively	Asking: was I fair to all parties involved?	Making fair and balanced decisions
Accountability	Accepting and recognizing oneself as a moral agent	Takes ownership of the decision and engages in the deliberation process. Responsible interpretation and application of rules and norms in deciding	Seeks to take accountability for the final decision	Taking accountability for the decision	Asking: Did I do everything that I could to make the best decision?	Greater personal agency; higher internal locus of control
Courage	Choosing to be a moral agent	Choosing to deliberate in the decision and facing one's own possible limitations and deficiencies. Accepting the outcome of the judgment process	Standing by the conclusion of the decision	Going through with one's intentions regardless of personal cost and situational pressures	Deeply examining the self and acknowledging one's faults in decision making	Seeking the help of others
Judgment	Choosing and continuing to engage in the issue, insight into the situational variables and the components of an issue that are important in decision making	Determining ways to appropriately apply laws, rules, principles, benefits, consequences, values, and goals, to the situational context	Recognizing the situational barriers that may create difficulties in follow through	Carrying out the intended decision within the boundaries of social norms and knowing when to break norms in situationally appropriate ways	Determining how to reflect, what to reflect, when to reflect and when to stop reflecting	Situational awareness and cognitive complexity to determine the appropriate line of action. Support from appropriate virtues to inform the decision making

the moral agent toward appropriate action (Rest, 1984; Rest & Narvez, 1994).

### Virtues, Character, and Context

A virtue ethics perspective in EDM provides important insights that can complement and address key issues that a deontological or a consequential perspective cannot (Uhlmann et al., 2015). Virtue ethics is concerned with the particulars of the agent (motives, intentions, habits, relations) within context (circumstances, relationships, community, time) in order to evaluate human action (Ferrero & Sison, 2014). For virtue ethics, the role of judgment (or practical wisdom) which is central to the entire decision-making process, continually evolves as life is experienced. Judgment, which operates within context to produce actions that are situationally appropriate, cannot be untwined from either the character of the agent, nor the situational nature in which the process occurs (Sandberg & Tsoukas, 2011). We acknowledge the interwoven nature of context and the agent, recognizing that an amalgam of contextual features or social architecture of a socio-political system works to constrain or enable the moral agent which can either fortify or diminish the agent's power within the context or social structure (Latour, 1986). Thus, we seek to articulate the entwined property of the moral agent and the context in which the agent operates.

Even in socially reinforcing or socially weakening ethical situations, agency remains. While we make this bold assertion, we also emphasize that in focusing on character, we do not mean to equate character with heroism to which the individual can overcome any situational force that is presented. Rather, strengthening and developing character means to strive for excellence. One action in isolation cannot define the character of the moral agent (Sreenivasan 2002). Character development is a journey that is deliberate and is qualified by the collective wholeness of the person. For example, the moral agent may have been silent when witnessing an incident of bullying, but upon reflection may come to insights on how to regain agency and exercise integrity should something similar arise. Giddens (1984) refers to agency as events in which the moral agent has the capability to act differently. But, in the face of social-political norms, disproportionate power distributions, and contextualized ideals defined by time and space, the ability to recognize, judge, intend, and act differently is underpinned by the agent's strength of character. Alongside this entwinement of context and agent, there is also an intimate connection between the agent and the action/activity of the agent and who the agent becomes as a result of the action (action includes any emotional, physiological, verbal, and behavior by the agent which can occur at any moral stage). The action brought about by the moral agent has unique properties such that it

has historical roots brought about by socio-political forces, and the norms/scripts of the period (Engeström, 2000) but the action also has recursive properties such that it feeds back into the system to either reinforce or potentially disturb the connections among the actor, context, and future action (either by repetition, reinforcement of the behavior, slippery slope effect, or act as a disturbance that changes the process entirely). The action can become a permanent structure in the makeup of the character of the individual. We thus contend that the moral agent is "*becoming while doing*." From this perspective, the actions taken by the moral agent becomes an important aspect of the agent's character development (either strengthening or weakening character) which is critical to virtue ethics (Bright et al., 2014)—something that is absent from the other branches of ethics.

Judgment is concerned with the moral agent's decision making to act in ways that are situationally appropriate given the actors, context, and social norms of the situation. It enables the individual to reconcile both the context and individual tendencies toward a particular course of action. But, arriving at a judgment within the particulars of a circumstances—and what might enhance or downgrade quality of judgment—has not been well explored. While the analytical intelligence has been extensively studied and is well suited for familiar and contextually isolated issues, practical intelligence, associated with good judgment, is required for highly contextualized situations and often occurs in the normal course of daily life (Sternberg, 2000). In viewing the model as shown in Fig. 1, judgment is situated centrally and plays the role of a controller to determine the appropriate dimension of character to express within the boundaries of a context (Crossan et al. 2017). However, judgment can be impaired if the required dimension of character is not appropriately developed when needed for the situation. We discuss impaired judgment as it relates to undeveloped character dimensions more extensively in the following sections.

### Rest's EDM Model

Rest (1986) developed a four-component EDM model in which the moral agent must (1) recognize the moral issue (awareness); (2) make a moral judgment (judgment); (3) resolve to place moral concerns ahead of other concerns (intention); and (4) act on the moral concerns (behavior). Each component is distinct such that success in one component does not imply success in another component (Jones, 1991). However, failure in one component will likely lead to failure in other components. For example, giving priority to moral values over economic values (judgment) may lead to failure in moral action. While other EDM models have been proposed (Dubinsky & Loken, 1989; Ferrell & Gresham, 1985; Hunt & Vitell, 1986; Treviño, 1986), Rest's EDM model still remains central to EDM (Craft, 2013).



**Table 3** Example propositions of character-infused EDM

Stage	Proposition
Awareness	Character determines the level of capacity for awareness such that greater character strength will lead to a greater awareness of the elements of judgment in general and the embedded ethical aspects that may emerge Situational complexity and the individual capacity for awareness are positively related such that as situational complexity increases, the greater is the need for a higher capacity for awareness to produce better judgment, but when situational complexity is low, judgment is less dependent on the capacity for awareness
Judgment	Judgment based on virtues will be more universally accepted as an ethical judgment (across time and cultures) than judgment based on personal values Individuals with highly developed character will engage in and form deeper deliberations when making decisions than will individuals with underdeveloped character
Intention	Character will moderate one's ability to prioritize moral values above other values more often in forming intentions to act Character will strengthen one's moral commitment and moral resolve such that judgment will lead to intentions to act ethically
Behavior	Character strength will moderate an individual's intention to behave in an ethical way such that intentions will more likely lead to behavior when character strength is high than when it is low Unethical behaviors will weaken character while ethical choices will strengthen character
Reflection	Reflection will moderate the development of character toward greater ethical decision making through strengthening and deepening one's character Reflection-in- and -on-action will serve to strengthen the agent against strong situational pressures to act unethically

## Character-Infused EDM

We present a character-infused EDM approach to offer a more comprehensive and integrated account of Rest's (1986) four-stage (plus one) model, starting with awareness and followed by moral judgment, intention, behavior, and reflection. We do not intend to convey that EDM starts with awareness. Rather, it is a reasonable starting place to unpack the links between character and Rest's model. To begin, we offer the following proposition: character enters into and influences each component of Rest's model, such that any particular stage will be compromised by weak character or strengthened by strong character. As we move through the stages, we suggest examples of propositions to serve as a roadmap for future research (see Table 3) by illustrating the ways in which character can be infused into Rest's model of EDM.

### Awareness

When confronted with a problem, there are times an individual recognizes the moral nature of the situation and other times, views the problem from an amoral perspective. When the moral agent recognizes the problem as having moral qualities, the agent enters into Rest's (1986) first stage of EDM: moral awareness. Moral awareness involves the interpretation of the situation with regard to what actions are possible, what parties would be affected by each possible course of action, and how the interested parties regard the effects of such action. Previous research examining moral awareness has found that even small shifts in context can distort or inhibit individual moral sensitivities and

subsequently produce undesirable consequences (Butterfield et al., 2000). However, prior research in moral awareness is limited in terms of how individuals can buffer against the (often unassuming) assault of contextual forces. We thus offer a character lens of moral awareness that enables the behaviors Rest imagined by equipping the individual with the character to navigate the situational forces that impede ethical awareness. While Rest contends that behaving ethically requires ethical awareness, he does not anticipate that it takes strength of character to do so. A character approach to awareness goes beyond recognizing that the individual is a moral agent (Jones, 1991), but rather recognizes there will be differences in who the moral agent is with respect to strength of character.

Strong situational variables such as the culture and climate of a group can create a context that emphasizes certain values over ethical values, which fade into the background (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004). For example, adopting a business language as an interpretive filter will enhance concerns for organizational performance and a reliance on professional norms and standards as a guide for decision making (Butterfield et al., 2000). There is a rich vocabulary in business to illustrate this phenomenon and how it permits a person to act differently in business than in other areas of life. "We engage in 'aggressive' accounting practices, not illegal ones. There may be some 'externalities' associated with a strategy, not harmful to others or the environment" (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004, p. 226). This type of language euphemism becomes ethically dangerous because it shifts the attention to economic concerns and provides not only descriptors but also explanations of activity. Moral contemplation outside prescribed standards may never be perceived

and, thus, is unlikely to be considered a legitimate point of view. An exemplary study of this effect showed that sanctioning systems resulted in a focus on business aspects in contrast to a focus on ethical aspects when no sanctions were present (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 1999). A character lens, however, might increase an individual's awareness of certain practices and behaviors occurring in the promoted culture and how an individual can begin to question those norms. A moral agent with strength in justice and transcendence would have the capacity to question the value and reward systems; strength in accountability would be able to accept and acknowledge their power as a moral agent; and strength in courage would have the capacity to act (e.g., voice). However, weaknesses in character significantly decrease a moral agent's ability to perceive the situational forces (business culture, norms, power structures, political dynamics, etc.) at play and to perceive their own moral agency.

Character can be particularly useful in illuminating why individuals fail to perceive situations as ethical. While a character approach has not been directly examined as a potentially important framework to moral awareness (see O'Fallon & Butterfield, 2005), there is some evidence of related factors that indicate its importance. Evidence for the character strength of compassion, a key element of humanity, has been shown to increase the attention and empathy to other members of the organization who are suffering (Jane et al., 2006). Similarly, perspective taking was found to increase ethical sensitivity to moral issues (Sparks & Hunt, 1998). Additionally, individuals who avoid harming others when making moral decisions show more resiliency to adhering to ethical codes of conduct during times of turbulence (Chonko et al., 2003). Thus, the moral agent's strength of character can lead to greater awareness of the moral issue in a situation, particularly when the issue affects others.

While Aristotle admitted that some dangers are terrible beyond human strength (Aristotle & Apostle, 1984), rarely do situations fall under this classification; yet, they overwhelm individuals with morally appropriate dispositions (Doris, 1998). The Good Samaritan study is a classic example of this, in which Darley and Batson (1973) reported that "according to the reflections of some of the subjects, it would be inaccurate to say that they realized the victim's possible distress, then chose to ignore it; instead, because of the time pressures, they did not perceive the scene ... as an occasion for ethical decision" (p. 108). From a character standpoint, inadequacies in humanity and an over emphasis on drive lead the moral agent to privilege "getting things done" (results-oriented) over "a concern for other's well-being" (compassion). For example, Bergeron (2007) suggested that organizational citizenship behaviors are negatively related to performance due to the reallocation of time from the job task to the helping behavior. Thus, helping others in the workplace results in

a significant cost to an employee. These types of pressures can be powerful in directing the individual to misinterpret moral events and lead an individual toward perceiving an event as amoral.

Problems of this nature can result from misinterpreting relatively simple situations such as the occurrence of the bystander effect. Staub (1978) found that when situations present ambiguous cues, individuals engage in less helping behavior. Moreover, interpretation can be clouded by ego defensiveness, an over-concern with viewing the situation from the decision maker's perspective (related to humility). Individual differences in sensitivity to the needs and welfare of others can lead to marked differences as well. Some require a serious and obvious interpretation of a situation (e.g., serious physical harm) while others are so sensitive that each cue from another person takes on momentous moral implications (Hunt & Vitell, 1986). Gioia (2013) argued that in cases like the Ford Pinto disaster where leaders failed to recall the faulty car, the issue was not based on the wrong ethical standards but rather was due to the failure to recognize the ethical aspects of the decision.

A character-infused judgment approach informs awareness while the individual engages in the situation and as the situation unfolds. Character strengths can help the decision maker to understand the ethical nuances that either did not exist initially or were not initially apparent. This point is exemplified in cases of financial scandals that begin with simple inconsequential violations of professional norms and continue with more serious implications, such as harm, emerging later in the process (Reynolds, 2006). Thus, we argue that awareness consists of more than a single instance of awareness; rather, awareness is an emerging process (Monin & Jordan, 2009) that requires the agent to make judgments about the stimuli and possibly revisit awareness, oftentimes during other moral stages, as the issue develops.

Some scholars have contended there is a linear process to ethical decision making (Ferrell & Gresham, 1985; Hunt & Vitell, 1986; Jones, 1991) such that a failure to recognize the moral issue will lead to a failure to engage the moral decision-making process. Moral awareness has thus been treated as a pivotal point in moral decision making, making this step a prerequisite for ethical behavior (Jones, 1991). Other scholars contend that even though each step is distinct and may influence the next, activation of one step does not necessarily lead to the next (Rest, 1986; Tenbrunsel & Smith-Crowe, 2008), and a fluidity of the components is also possible (Reynolds, 2006). The possibility for both a sequential and non-sequential process suggests that the agent may simultaneously move through the decision-making process but also insert and combine components as the issue evolves.

## Judgment

When moral awareness is activated, the second component of Rest's (1986) decision-making model, moral judgment, supports deliberation of the possible courses of action and deciding which course is morally right. Whether moral judgment follows moral awareness has some mixed evidence with some evidence supporting the relationship between the two variables (Singhapakdi et al., 1996) while other evidence found no relationship (Valentine & Fleischman, 2003). Within the empirical literature, moral judgment is important because it has been found to be associated with moral action (Blasi, 1980) in numerous studies predicting both positive (e.g., helping, whistleblowing, and resistance to pressure from authority figures) and negative (e.g., cheating and stealing) behaviors (Greenberg, 2002; Rest & Narvez, 1994; Treviño & Weaver, 1992; Treviño & Youngblood, 1990). Moral judgment according to Rest's model differs from the judgment dimension of character in that the former describes the *process* of conscious deliberation toward the virtue of justice, while the judgment dimension of character incorporates the application of justice but also the other character dimensions in situationally appropriate ways (Seijts et al., 2017). Judgment is central to determining which character dimensions are necessary and activated based on the situational context.

Moral judgment, for both Rest (1984) and Kohlberg (1981), comprises distinct and invariant stages of development and follows a deontological lens (characterized by rights, rules, and responsibilities), whereby individuals must balance their own interests with those of others, and thus moral thinking is based on assignment of rights and responsibilities in a social system to provide cooperation and stability (Elm & Weber, 1994). But in practice, moral judgment stretches beyond these boundaries. Even within the confines of a legal system, a judge's "effort always exceed[s] adherence to rules. ... A judge begins with established laws but employs practical wisdom [or judgment] to determine how it should be applied in particular situations and when departures are warranted. ... Rules provide the guidepost for inquiry and critical reflection" (Thiele, 2006, p. 5). Thus, a character-infused view addresses questions about *how* collective and universal laws and values should be applied. It, therefore, accounts for situational contexts, not merely as an antecedent or a moderator to moral thinking but also as important to the interpretation of what is a good decision.

Scholars have suggested that moral judgment is, to a large extent, context-dependent (Derry, 1987; Higgins et al., 1984; Treviño, 1986) and thus is a function of an individual's level of moral reasoning in conjunction with the socio-moral environment in which the individual is embedded (Elm & Weber, 1994). This context dependence may result from the respondent's familiarity with

the context (e.g., in less familiar situations, an individual may rely on environmental cues when making judgments about how to behave), the activation and prioritization of norms and values associated with certain domains (e.g., financial concerns in a banking context; Turiel & Smetana, 1984), or the characteristics of the issues, such as the moral intensity of the issue (Jones, 1991). Management research has found that individuals can use different moral judgment strategies in different roles. For example, managers invoke lower stages of moral judgment when making decisions in the managerial domain than when making decisions in a more general life domain (Weber, 1990). The evidence suggests that context can activate particular values and schemas associated with certain roles or identities an individual has formed to influence moral judgment. Character therefore can help the moral agent to respond to these contextual influences by recasting which values an individual should service, favoring virtuous values over non-virtuous ones.

Virtues are distinct from other types of values in that they are universally accepted as virtuous because they are believed to universally contribute to human flourishing and are necessary elements of human morality and well-being (Alzola, 2012). Values, on the other hand, can be situationally specific (e.g., organizational values), person specific (e.g., family values), culturally specific (e.g., personal space), and time specific (e.g., Victorian etiquette) and thus are bounded by these particular factors. In virtue ethics, values are insufficient because an individual can hold certain moral values but be inconsistent in enacting those values (i.e., low integrity), or they are realized only when other values have been satisfied. Empirical evidence has shown that people who value morality will often do bad things (Bazerman & Gino, 2012; Ruedy et al., 2013).

Some aspects of virtuous values already exist in the judgment of moral issues. Both Kohlberg (1981) and Gilligan (1993) asserted the role of justice and caring, respectively, as cardinal virtues in moral development. However, these virtues merely serve as frameworks to prioritize the universal laws an individual should ultimately uphold without consideration for how an individual can embed these virtues into moral judgment or how an individual might handle situations in which values can conflict. Character can help the ethical agent to recast moral judgment and offer a way to resolve such conflicts in values. Character-infused judgment would dictate that a person of moral character not only consider virtuous values in the moral judgment process but also generate the final moral judgment to be in service of virtuous values. In other words, moral judgment should be informed by virtues (i.e., the 11-character dimensions: courage, integrity, humility, etc.) and be formed with the goal of being virtuous (i.e., making moral judgments that are courageous, supported by integrity, humility, etc.). The issue of

virtuous and non-virtuous values will also be revisited when discussing intentions.

In making a moral judgment, an individual often must choose to engage in the process of deliberation to come to an adequate solution—a critical juncture missed by most empirical work on moral judgment, which involves presenting a scenario and instructing the participant to engage in judgment. The cost of deliberation must be weighed against the benefits of deliberating the right decision (Bok, 2008). For instance, deliberating can be avoided because the act of doing so is uncomfortable and difficult and may confront individuals with information that would be difficult to ignore. Thus, it may be easier to simply not engage in the process in the first place and take a position of ignorance. “I didn’t think about it” is much easier to accept than knowing what was right but lacking the courage and integrity to follow through. Alternatively, in choosing not to deliberate, there may be a sense that an individual maintains their moral virtue by allowing the situation to make the decision, removing any accountability for the decision. To engage with one’s morality and uncover limitations and deficiencies can be frightening and requires tremendous humility and courage. In this instance, drawing upon humility supported by courage would allow an individual to delve deep into their own cognitions and honestly confront their limitations. Virtues such as courage, integrity, justice, accountability, and humility, as mentioned above, are important in the process to engage judgment, to deliberate about the judgment, and then to ask whether one is willing to accept the decision.

## Intention

Cognitive theories of moral decision making have indicated that other factors descending from judgment may prevent action, such as a lack of courage to act (Rest, 1986), situational factors (Jones, 1991) and moral disengagement (Bandura, 2016). While the motivating influence of moral knowledge is undeniable, its capacity to overcome other obstacles to moral behavior is questionable (Reynolds et al., 2014). Knowing that it is wrong to cheat and steal is a necessary yet insufficient condition for integrity; an individual must also give sufficient weight to the importance of the virtue of honesty and have the courage to follow through (Gentile, 2010). Thus, EDM is more than simply knowing what the ethical solution or course of action is (i.e., moral judgment); it also involves the intention to carry out the action. The third component of Rest’s model, ethical intention, is planned action, or what an individual has in mind to do.

As we have argued, any moral decision-making process toward deliberating on the right action is incomplete without consideration of moral character. In taking a consequentialist approach, we might weigh the cost and benefits of our choices of action, but we might weigh the wrong factors or

weigh them on the wrong scale. For instance, we may commit to an action that is most defensible to others instead of committing to an action that carries the ideals of virtuous behaviors. Our principles help guide our moral compass, but how consistently we choose to engage our principles, whether we even choose to deliberate on a decisional conflict, and whether we are committed to carrying out the chosen decision are questions of character.

Moral motivation research has resulted in varied theories from biological and evolutionary perspectives (Joyce, 2007), to behaviorism and learned social behaviors (Bandura, 1977), attitudinal and rational models (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1974), and education as a cause (Piaget, 1965), but the theories traditionally have not been applied within a moral philosophical framework. Some exceptions, however, have shown that moral philosophy can be useful in understanding how individuals come to form ethical intentions. Work on moral rules, for example, has shown that it can lead individuals to have greater ethical intentions. Individuals with a strong belief in universal moral rules exhibited low intentions to commit unethical acts, regardless of the perceived integrity of their leaders. For individuals who do not adhere to a belief in universal moral rules, intention to commit unethical acts decreased as the perceived integrity of the leaders increased (Peterson, 2003).

However, moral rules can also be detrimental to ethical intentions. For example, one empirical study showed that the ethical intentions of chief executive officers (CEOs) are more affected by the degree to which the CEO applies different standards and rules to their business and personal lives than by industry environmental pressures or organizational or situational characteristics (Morris et al., 1995). Thus, adherence to particular rules can lead individuals to compartmentalize and separate parts of their identity to maintain positive self-evaluations of their moral selves. Additionally, deontological theories are limited on how to address less than ideal moral motivations, particularly in terms of developing individual strengths to counteract situational pressures. For example, virtue ethics would describe situational forces, such as role identity in CEOs, as challenges to character because it can lead to a lobotomy of personal character through the shaping of non-moral values over moral ones, such as a sole focus on shareholder value. These types of norms have made it easier to remove character from everyday practice through the artificial delineation of work and private life.

Rest (1986) described ethical intentions as the servicing of moral values over other values. However, values such as ambition that can often come into conflict with moral values. Non-moral values can be so strong and attractive that they compromise the moral ideal. Non-moral values such as environmental scarcity creates uncertainty for corporations, leading executives to resort to expedient, but unlawful,

behavior (e.g., Baucus & Near, 1991; Szwajkowski, 1985; Vaughan, 1982) and industries to place competitive conditions on CEO's ethical intentions (Barney, 1991; Rumelt et al., 1991). Thus, choosing the moral option requires an individual to value morality over other values, which can be difficult.

In situations of violating group or social norms, the agent may have feelings of disloyalty or rebellion, particularly in the case of a strong in-group, a strong identity with and a commitment to an organization, or a strong cultural value. For example, empirical evidence has demonstrated that employees will engage in pro-group unethical behaviors when feelings of group inclusion are threatened (Thau et al., 2015). The individual may even believe that they do not have a right to question the norms and values of the group or that there is an obligation to advocate those values. Even more, some individuals may be unable to handle the implications of deciding among the various demands and prefer, instead, to see their life as guided by external standards (Bok, 2008). In either case, choosing which course of action to take involves violating one set of values over another.

## Behavior

To engage in moral action, once ethical issues have been identified, adjudicated, and intentions are established, is the final stage of Rest's (1986) EDM model termed moral behavior. In attempting to explain why some individuals are able to follow through with their intentions, scholars have enlisted a number of individual level variables thought to be important in this process (e.g., belief systems, identity, commitment, and patterns of past behavior). While these variables have been shown to be important in ethical behaviors, they can be recast as essential components or outcomes of character that have been inserted into the descriptive literature. For instance, perceived behavioral control refers to the perceived ease or difficulty of performing the behavior; it is assumed to reflect past experience as well as anticipated impediments and obstacles (Beck & Ajzen, 1991). If the moral course of action is anticipated to be extremely difficult or the individual has found that past experience with carrying out the moral decision was unsuccessful, the intention will unlikely result in action. Similarly, the reverse is also true: past success can lead to greater likelihood of perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991).

One of the pillars of developing and strengthening character comes from the development of virtuous habits that lead an individual to become a person who possesses the virtuous trait. Virtuous habits allow a person to not only strengthen their perceived behavioral control when faced with a moral conflict (Beck & Ajzen, 1991) but also to develop a capacity to bypass the cognitive process of moral deliberation with greater ease (i.e., reducing the cognitive load). To the

extent that virtue can be accomplished by automatic processes, there is less need to expend cognitive resources to engage in the EDM process—that is, to depend on conscious choice—lessening vulnerability to non-virtuous behavior (Baumeister & Exline, 1999). Empirical support for this premise has been shown in numerous past studies (Eagly & Chaiken, 1993; Muraven et al., 1999). Some studies have demonstrated that current and future behaviors are more strongly determined by past behaviors than cognitions, as suggested (Sutton, 1998) by the theory of reasoned action (intention predicts behavior; Ajzen & Fishbein, 1974). Past research has shown strong empirical support for connection in health-related consumption and behaviors (e.g., consuming fast food and sweets, smoking, exercise) (Bagozzi & Kimmel, 1995; Godin et al., 1986; Mullen et al., 1987; Norman & Smith, 1995), in alcohol and drug use (Bentler & Speckart, 1979); and in dishonest behaviors (Conner & McMillan, 1999; Marcoux & Shope, 1997).

While individual past behaviors show considerable consistency over time, the past behaviors clearly do not directly cause subsequent behavior; rather, they are correlated as long as the underlying determinants of the behavior do not change. This underlying determinant can come through acting without consciously choosing, particularly when carrying out the habituated processes that control much of the behavior. Several studies have shown that past habituated behavior predicts subsequent behavior more strongly than even intentions and perceived behavioral control do (Bagozzi & Kimmel, 1995; Godin et al., 1986; Norman & Smith, 1995; Towler & Shepherd, 1992). Further, studies of individuals who show exemplary moral behavior have reported a high degree of automaticity (Narvez & Lapsley, 2005, 2009) with little conscious reasoning or mental conflict (Blasi, 2005; Colby & Damon, 1992).

Similarly, unethical behaviors can follow the same reasoning with continued unethical behaviors occurring through bypassing the conscious process. These behaviors can be especially difficult to unlearn when the context rewards individuals for the behavior, further reinforcing the habituated process. Thus, while (im)moral behavior can occur through conscious moral reasoning, conscious moral reasoning is not always necessary for (im)moral behavior. As such, the formation of virtuous or vicious habits can strengthen or undermine character, leading to the ease of unethical or ethical behaviors through both the conscious and non-conscious pathway.

Behaviors, either habitual or conscious, can have a marked effect on subsequent behaviors as they become encoded in experience and inform future decision making (Moore & Gino, 2015). The act may eventually lead to a habit of being that begins to influence cognitive processes. In turn, it can produce a cyclical effect on the other aspects of EDM by disengaging one or more stages and essentially

result in the equivalent of a character lobotomy (Ashforth & Anand, 2003; Gino & Bazerman, 2009). While good habits are foundational to character, it is difficult to practice good habits without the motivational aspect of character to sustain the good habits, particularly in the face of external pressures. Some approaches used by scholars to study motivational aspect of character involve moral identity (Blasi, 1983, 2004) and moral commitment (an outcome of identity; Aquino & Reed, 2002; Dane & Pratt, 2007). Some researchers have linked identity to motivation through the virtue of integrity. Blasi (2004) indicated that the ability of moral identity to serve as moral motivation is based on the inherent human tendency to be motivated to act consistently with one's own self-view.

In supporting the integrity of the self toward congruency between values and behaviors, the virtue of accountability is necessary in that when certain virtues become central to an individual's identity, there is a heightened sense of obligation, responsibility, and desire to live consistently with those virtues (Hardy, 2006). Further, other character virtues are also thought to be essential to moral motivation, such as courage, because living in line with one's moral identity can be interpersonally difficult (i.e., challenging superiors or entire groups) and personally risky (e.g., job loss or becoming an outcast).

Courage has been suggested as a particularly important virtue in explaining and predicting the behavior of those who have the strength to follow through on their ethical beliefs and judgments (Treviño et al., 2006). Rest (1984, 1986) acknowledged that the behavior stage is particularly difficult, and is wrought with impediments, unexpected difficulties, fatigue and frustration, distractions, and allurements that keep an individual from realizing their intentions. He thus recognized that character in the form of courage (tenacious, determined, resilient, and confident) is an important attribute of ethical behavior. Rest (1986) also suggested that temperance is imperative to resisting temptation and gaining a level of self-mastery toward the pursuit of an individual's goals, despite considerable external pressures. Thus, it is only when moral virtues are important to an individual's identity, coupled with sufficiently developed virtues that the individual is able to behave in accordance with their moral values.

Past research offers support for the assertion that contextual level predictors have a significant influence on individual decisions (Forte, 2004). In the organization realm, cultures, rewards, and belief systems profoundly influence employee thinking and, therefore, are important influences on an employee's ethical or unethical behavior (Baucus & Beck-Dudley, 2005). Research on the banking industry has shown that banking employees engage in greater deception during the reporting of a coin toss than do employees in other industries (Cohn et al., 2014). This evidence supports

the powerful impact of environmental factors in controlling an individual's behavior, highlighting the need for the individual, as a moral agent, to navigate ethical dilemmas.

Character offers insight into developing the strength, motivation, and resources needed to act in accordance with an individual's conscience and ensure that the conscience itself is strong, to countervail the constant assault it continuously receives. Properly habituated character can silence temptations to vice and will lead individuals to consistently and predictably conduct themselves with virtuous intentions; the individuals are thus robust and resistant to contrary situational pressures in their behavioral manifestations (McDowell & McFetridge, 1978).

## Reflection

While reflection was not a stage in Rest's (1986) model of EDM, it was introduced by Crossan, et al. (2013) as a fifth component. Reflection is critical to the learning and development process of EDM because the practice of virtues is through habit, requiring an iterative process with contemplations regarding an individual's responses to ethical problems. As such, reflection is critical for the "continual learning that occurs when individuals reflect upon one's own, or others,' ethical or unethical conduct" (p. 573). However, it is possible for a person to engage in poor reflection—creating dysfunctional attitudes, interpretation and narratives about oneself (albeit more coherent narratives)—just as a person can have poor awareness, poor intentions, poor moral judgment, and poor actions (Bortolotti, 2011).

Reflection has various meanings. For example, Raelin (2001) describes reflection as the conscious and explicit practice of periodically stepping back to ponder and search for meaning or reasons of past experience and, thus, entails an *ex post* orientation (Yanow & Tsoukas, 2009). This restricts the action of reflection to a particular time and space, thus isolating reflection as a kind of quiet and pondering experiencing as opposed to one that can occur in the moment as the action occurs. Other scholars see reflection as a way to transform a situation from confusion and uncertainty to one of clarity and coherence (Dewey, 1933; Schon, 1983). However, the moral agent may not always experience the kind of tension or uneasiness that results from confusion or uncertainty about the past but may engage in reflection as a way to reinterpret an event, bring new meaning to existing meaning, or to correct a previously reflected upon event. Critical reflection arose as a systematic process to address the shortcomings of reflection, to not only examine the events of the past but to question assumptions and presumptions of purpose and intentions (Weaver et al. 2014) and to question important historical and socio-political context in order to create new ways of thinking and acting (Raelin 2001). However, the questions of *who* is critically

reflecting and how does the quality of judgment of the moral agent fundamentally change the quality of reflection have not been addressed.

Character-infused reflection contends that the moral agent is at the center of quality reflection. It acknowledges that reflection is not only an important aspect of the EDM process alongside awareness, judgment, intention, and behavior (Crossan et al., 2013); it is also a process that is essentially moral (Birmingham, 2004) but reaches beyond moral boundaries to include the quality of judgment by the agent while reflecting. While character-infused reflection acknowledges that the practice of reflection is needed to bring experience into learning, it is the character of the reflector that transforms the individual from reflecting on basic detection and correction of error (Schon, 1983) to a space that allows for a certain kind of reflection. This space is where the reflector might confront his/her vulnerabilities, examine past, present, and future identity narratives, see connections between themselves and others, and examine the quality of their own reflection (meta-reflection) (Tiberius, 2008).

### Developing Character to Support EDM

The foregoing discussion about the importance of character in EDM begs questions about how it can be developed. We contend that understanding how it can be developed reinforces an understanding of what character is and how it functions. Scholars have provided broad guidance on this question. For instance, leader-as-learner approach to help leaders learn how to navigate a VUCA (Volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity) world (Antonacopoulou and Bento 2018), incorporating somatic learning to developing critical reflection (Rigg, 2018), art-based methods of learning (Crossan et al. 2018), such as sensuous learning, to help break difficult habits and address vulnerabilities (Antonacopoulou, 2018a), and the 4R GNOSIS approach to critical action learning (Antonacopoulou, 2018b). Some of these learning perspectives have been applied to character development such as the 4R GNOSIS approach to the development of phronesis (character-infused judgment) by way of strengthening reflexivity (Antonacopoulou, 2018b), or the role of critical moments in the shaping and development of character (Byrne et al., 2018). However, we seek to add value to the discussion by parsing out reflection specifically since it is both a stage in the EDM process and an element of character under the dimension of humility that can be developed. Thus, we can examine what it takes to develop character-infused reflection while simultaneously revealing how it transforms our understanding of the process of reflection. As described previously, research on reflection has viewed it largely from a learning and reflexivity lens, whereas we seek to expose what it means to develop character-infused reflection.

Virtue ethics is concerned with instilling the right character traits that will lead to taking the right action. But excellent character is “developed over time, it cannot be learned or developed in a compressed format” (Judge, 2001, p. 75). In strengthening and deepening character, reflective learning is critical to enhancing ethical understanding and enabling the agent to apply character to a variety of new situations. The connection between morality and reflection can also be understood from the virtue ethics perspective such that moral thoughts, actions, and attitudes proceed from moral character; thus, a moral life is bound by integrity through wholeness of character (Reno & Crossan, 2017). Reflection becomes essential and is embedded in the moral character of the individual: a way of being. In this regard, reflection is essentially moral (Birmingham, 2004).

In virtue ethics, reflection is a critical component to an individual’s moral development and progress toward living a virtuous life (Merritt, 2000). Virtue ethics incorporates reflection by encouraging a person to do the right thing for the right reason (Mintz, 2006). Some scholars have critiqued virtue ethics on the grounds that an individual cannot improve character and conduct through reflection on moral exemplars (Doris, 2002), that achieving the good life is about living virtuously and not just thinking about other people who have the virtues (Merritt, 2000). However, character-infused reflection is more than examining moral exemplars or turning back on past experiences; reflection needs to be done with the purpose of living virtuously. To live virtuously, or to live a good life, however, requires us to examine *who* we should become and *who* we are becoming while we are reflecting.

To live a good life means that, upon reflection, it is a life that can be affirmed (Hume, 1978). It means that we cultivate ourselves in ways that foster human flourishing. We are creatures of reflection, we cannot help but ask ourselves reflective questions such as how should I live and have I lived a good life. But these questions center on the self—the “I”—so it is impossible to answer these questions without examining “who am I.” Reflecting allows us to understand how the “I” has arrived here, but it also allows for the exploration of “who am I becoming” as one of the purpose of reflecting is to learn from the past to shape the future.

It is however only through the lens of virtue ethics that addresses the moral agent and the character development of the moral agent. Character dimensions are an amalgam of virtues, personality traits, and values, which enable moral and personal excellence. They work together, regulating and strengthening one another towards an ideal in conduct and in reflection. This regulative ideal is therefore an intricate part of character development (Tiberius, 2008). Thus, being a person who is reflective (a behavior associated with the dimension of humility), is situated within the larger

constellation of the dimensions of character. It may take courage and transcendence to be reflective, for example.

### Developing Quality Reflection

Quality of reflection requires the ability to know what and how to reflect. A character-infused perspective would provide a framework for what to reflect on as an individual can reflect on whether character was exercised in past events (e.g., Did I act courageously, with integrity, with humility, etc.). How an individual should reflect might involve a critical perspective that accounts for the moral agent and the context.

When the object of reflection encompasses the consideration of what to examine and the reasons for choosing a course of action, an individual can begin to explore whether the assumptions and presuppositions are appropriate (Mezirow, 1998). There is extensive literature on tools and techniques to aid in reflection such as mindfulness (see Rigg, 2018 for an in depth discussion), reflective conversation (Schon, 1983), critical action learning (Trehan & Rigg, 2015), journaling (Gray, 2007) and embodied practices using art-based methods (Adler, 2015; Sutherland, 2012) that we do not discuss here. Rather our purpose is to provide a perspective of reflection that is unique to character because understanding reflection within the constellation of all dimensions of character, fundamentally reshapes both our understanding of reflection and what it takes to become a person who is reflective.

Character-infused reflection is not a tool for reflection but an orientation. It does so by bringing the moral agent to the fore and recognizing that the agent has a choice to be made, including the boundaries of the choice. Reflection allows an individual both to step outside the boundaries of a situation and acknowledge that he/she is defined by the situation. A simple example of stepping outside a situation occurs when a person enters a new organization and questions why routine procedures are done in a particular way. Thus, character-infused reflection is to understand the reflecting agent within context by acknowledging that there are real constraints imposed by the socio-political environment, power differentials, or limitations in resources (Moore, 2017) but to also elevate the potential power of the moral agent in effecting change. Just as there are bad apples that can direct an organization towards unethical business practices, so too can an apple (or a barrel) of character extrinsically disrupt an immoral context.

The recognition that assumptions, standards, and paradigms are contextually defined creates the opportunity to transform an established frame of reference and adjust habits of mind and behavior, toward the development of a virtuous character. Embedded within character-infused reflection is the dimension of judgment, which accounts for the

situational awareness required of reflecting well. Judgment, relies on the support and strength of the other 10 dimensions of character such that a virtue does not become a vice. For example, a high level of justice without the supporting humanity becomes an idiosyncratic view of what is right; without accountability becomes a preaching without the practice; and with weak humility, what is left is a hypocrite.

Some conditions can provide opportunities to practice virtuous behaviors while others will provide opportunities to practice vicious ones. Moreover, reflection grounded in a character-infused perspective can lead an individual to recognize that expression of character is contingent on the situation (situational awareness as dictated by the virtue judgment) but also recognize that the agent can choose how to express character within (and beyond) those constraints (a defining aspect of the virtue transcendence).

### The Space of Character-Infused Reflection

Reflection can be initiated when an individual encounters some difficulty in making a decision, to make sense of the decision. Reflection can be a tool to learn from the past (Hill & Stewart, 1999) or it can be triggered by a sense of discomfort that is attached to a past event or experience (Boyd & Fales, 1983). But reflection can occur beyond thinking about past actions. Schon (1983) advocated that reflection-in-action is necessary for learning, and it entails building new understandings to inform actions as the situation is unfolding. But how an individual orients themselves each day, what an individual chooses to develop and pay attention to, and how an individual interprets and make meaning from actions is influenced by strength of character. Schon's reflection-in and -on action does not account for the quality of reflection that can differ when there are differences in strength of character. Reflecting with courage means to dismantle protective shields in order to understand vulnerabilities. Further, reflecting with judgment means to know when to reflect and when to stop reflecting:

I think we need to think and reflect better...we need to know when to think seriously about our values, character, choices, and when not to. A crucial part of wisdom is knowing when to stop reflecting and to get lost in experience. (Tiberius, 2008, p. VII).

As such, reflecting itself, does not necessarily produce beneficial results. An individual may be preoccupied with finding out why failure occurred and halt experimenting in new ways. The ability to know when to enter and when to exit reflection also means that reflection can exist at any moment and enrich and deepen other experiences. For EDM it means reflecting while becoming aware, making moral judgments, forming intentions, or during action.



Reflection in consideration of a virtue-based ethics creates a link to the past (experiences), present (action), and future (virtue-based orientation) character of the moral agent. Without reflection, individuals enter, analyze, and proceed with each new ethical experience without learning from past experiences (Crossan et al., 2013). Character thus provides a full account of reflection and considers that “reflection is not a one-way, linear process; it is an alternating current, flowing back and forth between intense focus on a particular form of experience...yet seriously hampered by high levels of external or internal demand to react” (Boyd & Fales, 1983, p. 105).

## Future Research Agenda and Conclusions

To understand and manage decisions in an ever-increasingly complex world, requires a consideration of character, grounded in virtue ethics, alongside traditional decision-making frameworks to account for such complexities. This paper takes a dive into exploring the contours of the decision-making landscape to show that character-infused EDM can counterweight the contextual undercurrent that challenges individual character, resulting in poor/unethical decisions. We endeavored to articulate the theoretical connection between character and Rest’s EDM process to show how pivoting attention to the moral agent recasts the nature and quality of the decision-making process. Furthermore, we also highlight the entanglement of the individual-context relationship revealing that they operate in a recursive web to influence the EDM process. That said, the moral agent’s ability to endogenously disrupt the prevailing context will depend on the agent’s strength of character. How, when, where and with whom the moral agent chooses to disrupt will depend on the individual’s character-infused judgment. Lastly, we discuss in detail the development of the moral agent anchored in reflection to describe how character can be strengthened. Through this process we aim to reinvigorate a character perspective to EDM.

Correspondingly, we have proposed propositions (see Table 3) that we believe would contribute to putting virtue ethics in the center of not just the business ethics field but also general management. Each of these propositions represents a separate study but our intention is not to limit character to these ten. The common thread among them is the character of the moral agent and how strengths or weaknesses in character will fundamentally alter the nature of the EDM process. Thus, we challenge scholars to ponder the implications of their own work in organizations (relating to ethics or not) to question whether the character of the individual or the group/team made up of individuals would change the quality and fundamentals of the theory, process, or model of interest. Scholars have discussed strengthening

the vertical learning process to elevate the individual competencies as well as horizontal expansion (e.g., collective expertise) (Engeström, 2000). However, we propose that scholars also need to consider deepening the process to create a stronger foundation to supplement the vertical and the horizontal. Developing character means not just reflecting on, but also through the activating, strengthening, connecting, and sustaining all character dimensions (Crossan et al., 2018). Character is complementary to every facet of organizational life because it supports other types of individual (technical skill), group (team cohesion), and organizational level (organizational renewal) development.

As described at the outset, misconduct occurs in every facet of organizational life from the individual to the collective, at a localized and global scale, and covers inappropriate action in the private (2008 financial crisis), public/government (Panama Papers), academic institutions (Varsity Blues Scandal), and even touches not-for-profit organizations (IOC doping scandal). Character highlights the fact that misconduct often arises from “too much of a good thing” (Antonakis et al., 2017); when one or a set of character dimensions are privileged over the others, leading to deficiencies in those undervalued dimensions. For example, those who contributed to the financial crisis and the Panama Paper scandal were likely high on drive but deficient in justice and humanity. Thus, future research could insert character into the equation to better understand the nature of misconduct.

Our application of character was specific to EDM but character can be readily applied to JDM, as have deontological and consequentialist perspectives in the rational-based decision-making discourse. As discussed, the demarcation of issues containing ethical components and those that do not is difficult to distinguish and may only become apparent as the situation progresses. A virtue perspective can offer important considerations to the decision-making literature, particularly with respect to the delineation between ethical and non-ethical judgment processes. Specifically, Dewey (1933) argues that every action, even a seemingly trivial action, has potential moral implications because it is connected to other actions. Actions join together to form conduct, which leads to habits and, in turn, forms the character of the actor (Birmingham, 2004).

Finally, there are implications for both research and practice surrounding the development of character. The engaged scholarship approach by Crossan et al. (2017) bridged research and practice, thereby offering a pragmatic approach that could be employed by both researchers and practitioners. We view the character development agenda as offering significant potential, with opportunities for researchers to examine the following: (1) whether and how character development interventions transform organizational practices; (2) whether and how such interventions influence the individual and collective experience of what are often dysfunctional

influences of context; and (3) whether and how such interventions influence the quality of EDM and JDM. There are organizations already working on developing character and embedding it in organizational practices (see Crossan et al. 2020), which offers promise for practitioners, and opportunities for researchers to study these initiatives.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

**Informed consent** Informed consent does not apply.

**Research involving Human Participants and/or Animals** This paper does not involve Research involving Human Participants and/or Animals

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