



Managerial Pluralism: Thirty Years of Teaching Business Ethics

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Accepted: 31 July 2024

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Abstract

The author reflects on 30 years of teaching business ethics at Harvard Business School. The paper presents tactical lessons for teaching courses in professional ethics and introduces “managerial pluralism.” This concept is akin to Isaiah Berlin’s value pluralism and directly addresses the complexity of ethical decision-making in business. Managerial pluralism also raises challenging questions about judgment, and the article argues that, while we can distinguish good and bad judgment, we fundamentally do not know what judgment is or how we make final judgments on complex moral and practical issues.

Keywords Harvard Business School · Judgment · Isaiah Berlin · Value pluralism · Managerial pluralism · Management decision-making · Business ethics · Practical ethics · Neuroscience and ethics

Introductory Remarks

I have now spent more than 30 years teaching business ethics at Harvard Business School. While I’m hoping for more years in my teaching career, milestone numbers invite reflection, and this seems to be a natural point to pause, look back, and draw lessons—for myself and for other teachers who want to prepare young men and women to grapple responsibly with the challenges they will face, in business, in other professions, and throughout life.

I’m aware that the lessons I’ve drawn can easily be dismissed. Isn’t business ethics an oxymoron, such as virtual reality or perhaps military music? Isn’t Harvard Business School, the so-called West Point of Capitalism, basically a finishing school for an American and more recently a global, cosmopolitan elite? And what about Plato’s question of whether ethics can be taught at all, much less to adult students in their late 20 s, whose values and characters are largely set? Perhaps teaching business ethics at Harvard Business School has been a fool’s errand.

Obviously, I disagree with these views. Over the years, my students have been remarkably diverse on almost every demographic dimension. A handful have been the sons and daughters of billionaires, some grew up in trailers at the end of dirt roads, but most of their resumes fall somewhere

in between. What they have in common is talent, energy, willingness to work hard, and a strong likelihood that in time they will have positions of responsibility in businesses and in a wide range of other organizations. None will have exemptions from the hard problems of work and life.

My colleagues and I in the Harvard MBA program have worked hard to prepare students for their futures. We want them to be effective, responsible, even exemplary leaders. This means they must understand the complex, technical domains of modern institutions, like finance, accounting, operations, and logistics. It means understanding the all-too-human challenges of working with and through other people to achieve goals. And it means understanding the ethical challenges they will face and learning how to think about these challenges in sound, useful, responsible ways.

Our approach to teaching ethics to MBA students has evolved significantly over the last three decades, as has my understanding of what ethics is and the most effective ways to teach it. Some of what I have learned can be summarized as tactical lessons for teaching business ethics and perhaps for a wider range of courses in professional and practical ethics. In addition to these tactics or perhaps interlaced with them is a deeper lesson about making the hard decisions of practical ethics, a lesson that can be encapsulated with the phrase “managerial pluralism.”

This term, of course, evokes the values pluralism of Max Weber, William James, Michael Walzer, and, most prominently, Isaiah Berlin. Managerial pluralism, as I understand it, is a practical, philosophically sound, and realistic

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perspective on the difficult, high-stakes decisions made by business executives and by other men and women in positions of responsibility. At the same time, managerial pluralism, like the more familiar versions of value pluralism, raises and fails to answer a serious question, the question of how to make final decisions on the hard, complex, uncertain problems of life and work.¹

Teaching Ethics at Harvard Business School

I began teaching ethics-related material more than 30 years ago, not long after HBS received a \$20 million bequest from John Shad, an alumnus and former banker. Shad also served as chair of the US Securities and Exchange Commission under President Reagan, and he made the bequest because he was dismayed at how many talented young men and women the SEC had investigated, indicted, or convicted of securities violations and other crimes.²

Shad hoped that HBS could create a course that instilled higher standards of ethics in MBA students, and he hoped that the HBS course would be replicated at other schools. In 1990, we introduced an ungraded, nine-session module called Leadership, Values, and Decision-Making (LVDM). Incoming MBA students took the module at the beginning of their fall semester, before the start of regular courses like accounting and finance.

I volunteered to join the teaching group that designed and taught the first version of LVDM, and I did this for two reasons. One was a personal predilection for complex problems. In a form of reverse delegation, the hardest problems in companies are delegated upwards and land on the desks of senior executives. These problems have high stakes, are riddled with uncertainties, can shape an entire company, and often raise complex legal and ethical issues.

The second reason was my long-standing interest in moral philosophy. As an undergraduate at Saint Louis University, a Jesuit institution, I was required to take several philosophy and theology courses, and I took others out of interest. Later, I had the good fortune to attend Oxford as a Rhodes

scholar, where I read Politics, Philosophy, and Economics and concentrated on economics and politics.

During the next decade, my interest in ethics and philosophy remained a spare time pursuit. I worked for the accounting firm then known as Price Waterhouse, decided to get an MBA from HBS because it seemed like a valuable generalist degree, and then earned a doctorate there with a focus on business-government relations. For several years, I taught courses in strategy and management, but my interest in philosophy persisted, and I read the major works of John Rawls, Robert Nozick, and Isaiah Berlin. Given these interests, teaching LVDM was a splendid personal opportunity.

Notice, however, that the name of this module didn't mention ethics or morality, and this was no accident. In fact, as we began planning the module, we referred to ethics as "the e-word," because we were unsure whether the HBS faculty or students would embrace an ethics course. Some colleagues wondered if the course required specialized training in moral philosophy; others feared it would be little more than preaching.

Tactical Lessons

We addressed these concerns, as well as John Shad's mandate, by building the LVDM module around a series of classic HBS case studies. The reading for almost every class described a manager confronting a complex organizational problem. These managers were in positions of leadership so their decisions would affect the livelihoods and lives of other people. None of these cases had clear "right" answers, many involved significant legal questions, and all of them raised issues of organizational values and basic ethical accountability.

We taught LVDM throughout the 1990s. The module was well received, and in 2004 we had the opportunity to expand it into a full-semester, graded, required course—the counterpart of marketing, finance, technology and operations, and other long-standing MBA courses. We called the course Leadership and Corporate Accountability (LCA).

Like its predecessor, the backbone of LCA consisted of case studies of managers confronting problems, but ethics had now come out of the closet. The basic framework for the course required students to analyze the case studies in terms of managers' economic, legal, and ethical responsibilities. We also introduced students to basic versions of consequentialism, deontology, and virtue ethics. Although all of the case studies have been replaced several times, we continue teaching the LCA course today to all MBA students.

LCA has been a major step forward for the MBA curriculum and in terms of John Shad's mandate. But are we really accomplishing what Shad hoped? Does the course have a lasting impact on students? The question of impact is, of

¹ Berlin's perspective on value pluralism, as articulated in his essay, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," emphasizes the incompatibility of fundamental values, rejects utopianism, and the necessity of human choice in navigating value conflicts. This reflects his broader critique of monistic philosophies and his belief in the irreconcilability of objective values. See Isaiah Berlin, "The Pursuit of the Ideal," *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

² A detailed overview of the early years of the Harvard Business School ethics effort is John S. Rosenberg, "An Education in Ethics," *Harvard Magazine*, October 2006, pp. 42–103.

course, one that all teachers and courses confront: in other words, do we do much more than put messages into bottles and toss them into the ocean?

Over more than two decades, the faculty teaching LCA have adopted a variety of approaches to raising the odds of helping our students make more responsible decisions during their careers. The most important tactical lesson is that it takes a village. LCA has been designed and taught each year by a highly diverse group of eight to ten faculty who teach the ten sections of the course. Some of these faculty members were experts in business disciplines like marketing and finance, some had graduate training in moral philosophy, others have been attorneys or former executives with significant management experience. This has enabled us to design a course that is realistic in managerial terms, helps students understand fundamental legal issues, and addresses ethical considerations in direct and, we believe, compelling ways.

For example, the course has always included several cases involving young managers facing complicated economic, legal, and ethical questions. We refer to these as YPIP cases—our acronym for “young person in a pickle.” A few of our cases have been success stories, but more of them chronicle difficulties or even disasters, so students can see the consequences of disregard for legal and ethical issues. And we have tried to show how easily this can happen, not just with case studies, but with social science readings on moral detachment and the Milgram experiments.

Finally, we frame the course for our students as realistic, practical preparation for serious management responsibilities. We emphasize explicitly and repeatedly that men and women who become managers and executives inevitably take on economic, legal, and ethical responsibilities and will typically be held accountable for meeting these role obligations.

Despite all these efforts, the question of long-term impact remains unanswered. Students evaluate LCA at the end of each semester, using the same template the MBA program uses for strategy, finance, marketing, and other mainstream courses. LCA has fared well in these ratings, despite a higher degree of difficulty. After all, other courses offer knowledge and analytical techniques that students can expect to use early in their careers. So we have some reason to believe and hope that the half-life of our efforts may be roughly the same as the overtly hands-on MBA courses.

The tactical lessons described above have served us well in the classroom. However, as I've continued to teach and reflect on what we call “the HBS ethics effort,” I have become aware of a more fundamental perspective underlying the complex ethical challenges facing business executives. I now think of this perspective as “managerial pluralism,” and it is the most important lesson of my 30 years of teaching business ethics.

Managerial Pluralism

I began learning about pluralism decades ago, when I was a doctoral student at Harvard Business School, by reading many of Isaiah Berlin's essays. These weren't assigned, and I read them in my spare time. In particular, I was captivated by his synthesis of philosophical analysis and historical context, as well as his distinctive prose style. At a deeper level, Berlin was lucidly articulating ideas and a sensibility that I shared.

Berlin shadowed me in subsequent years as I wrote and taught cases about difficult decisions facing business executives. The reason, I now see, was Berlin's conviction that fundamental human values are plural, incommensurable, and often in tension. I believe this is a precise, but partial description of the hardest problems of responsible business leadership. These are the challenges of managerial pluralism: making high-stakes decisions within a complex web of varied, sometimes incompatible ethical considerations, factual interpretations, and possible plans of action.

For example, for the last several years, we have introduced the LCA course with a case describing the decisions facing the CEO of a small biotechnology firm, called Biogen, after he learned that a life-enhancing drug for multiple sclerosis that his company had recently introduced might be implicated in two cases of a rare and potentially fatal brain disease.³

One decision was whether or not to withdraw the drug. The CEO had an obligation of non-maleficence, which would justify withdrawing the drug until the newly discovered risks were understood. But this obligation ran counter to the ethical duty of beneficence: tens of thousands of patients were taking the new drug and experiencing significantly reduced symptoms of a serious illness. The CEO also had an obligation to respect patient autonomy. This obligation could justify leaving the drug on the market, while informing patients about the newly discovered risks and letting them decide whether to continue taking the drug.

A clear lesson from our LCA experience is that the most compelling case studies for students resembled the Biogen case because they focus on ethically complex decisions. Some involve ethical dilemmas, with two or more ethical obligations in conflict. Others involve gray areas, where ethical obligations are shrouded in ambiguity and uncertainty, making the decisions even more difficult. Other cases involve situations in which someone is under pressure to do something unethical or is deceiving himself or herself about their ethical obligations. The fundamental ethical challenge

³ Joshua Margolis, Thomas DeLong, Terry Heymann, *Antegren: A Beacon of Hope*, Harvard Business School Case No. 9-408-825, Harvard Business School Publishing, November 14, 2007.

in these cases is the complexity of ethics itself—that is, the challenge of ethical pluralism.

What makes ethical dilemmas and gray area decisions so difficult for managers is the complexity of their responsibilities. This is because, in practice, “ethics” is an umbrella term for a complex web of ideals, ethical principles, legal obligations, moral guidance, norms, virtues, professional duties, exemplars of good and bad behavior, wisdom, religious injunctions, and homespun adages for living well.

The ethical challenge in our typical LCA cases is understanding the full range of moral perspectives that are relevant to a particular problem and then deciding which perspective or which cluster of ethical perspectives is most important. We encourage students to make decisions that enable them to meet as many of their ethical obligations as possible, and the challenge of ethical pluralism is deciding which moral claims are central and then prioritizing them. But ethical pluralism is only one of the challenges for managers making their hardest decisions. They have to work their way through two other layers of complexity.

One of these is factual, although the word “factual” simplifies this challenge. Executives must decide which aspects of a situation are central, what the risks are, and which expert or experienced views of a situation they should weight most heavily. In the case of Biogen, this meant deciding about whether the two cases of the brain virus were likely caused by the new MS drug or whether this was a distant possibility. This, in turn, raised other factual questions about the two patients’ medical histories, other medications they were taking, and other illnesses they may have been suffering, as well as the question of whether other cases of the brain disease were lurking in the data on the thousands of other patients taking the drug.

In some ideal world, all of the senior executives at Biogen would have agreed on the same view of the facts, risks, and uncertainties of the decision they faced. But they didn’t. As is often the case with hard gray area problems in business, thoughtful, well-informed individuals can see the same situation quite differently. Each of them is deciding what really matters, but none of them is a camera taking pictures. Instead, like the rest of us, they observe situations and then discern, pick out particular aspects, and concentrate on them more intently. And these interpretations can be incompatible and incommensurable, just as moral values are from the perspective of moral pluralism.

The other layer of complexity involves action. For an executive or a manager, this is the answer to the question of how to follow through on whatever decision he or she makes. This question may reveal my biases as a business school professor, but determining the crucial facts and the central responsibilities in a situation leaves the world as it is and leaves problems unsolved. Until you act, you resemble

a sculptor who has several images in mind but hasn’t picked up a chisel.

The question of action becomes complex because there are usually a range of ways to follow through on a decision, and these can also be incompatible. Biogen, for example, had a stark choice between suspending its drug, which it ultimately decided to do, and providing patients and doctors with information about the risks and letting them decide on the course of action they thought best. These action options were deeply incompatible with each other, as were some of the factual and ethical considerations confronting the Biogen executives.

Managerial pluralism also recognizes an even more complex set of tensions, trade-offs, and incompatibilities. These arise from the interplay among the ethical, factual, and action dimensions of a hard decision. Ethical considerations can influence what facts are prioritized; different interpretations of the facts, risks, and uncertainties of a situation can reshape views of what is ethical; and feasibility of possible actions can lead to a rethinking of ethical priorities. This dynamic interrelationship creates a multidimensional decision space within which deep tensions and inescapable trade-offs become even more complex.

In essence, managerial pluralism acknowledges the complexity and inescapable trade-offs of deciding what really matters, what is responsible, and what will work—when a manager or executive has to make a difficult decision. This view is akin to William James’s injunction: “Facts are good, of course – give us lots of facts. Principles are good – give us plenty of principles.”⁴ This can easily be construed as a broad sketch of managerial pluralism. The reference to “principles” can be construed as ethical principles, and the facts can be the salient facts about a particular problem and about possible action alternatives.

But this view leaves a fundamental question unanswered, and it is a question for both value pluralism and managerial pluralism: How should a business executive or anyone else facing a difficult ethical challenge in a complex, uncertain situation answer the questions of what matters, what is responsible, and what will work?

The Elusive Phenomenon of Judgment

I believe there is an answer to this question that is realistic, practical, but challenging. It originates in an unusual elective MBA course that I have been teaching for almost 30 years. Students in the course read and discuss serious literature rather than traditional case studies. The syllabus has

⁴ William James, *Pragmatism* (Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books, 1991) p. 10.

included *Antigone*, *Othello* and *Macbeth*, *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe, *Remains of the Day* by Kazuo Ishiguro, *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck, and *Hiroshima* by John Hersey.

All these readings show someone in a position of leadership who has final responsibility for making one or more difficult decisions, and the works of fiction provide an “inside view” of this challenge. We see these individuals worry, scheme, hesitate, commit, exult, and regret. We also see them exercise judgment, and this raises two questions: What is judgment and, for a pluralist, and how can we distinguish good judgment from bad judgment?

It isn't easy to answer either question because the idea of judgment is under siege today. The strongest attack comes from determinists. For example, Robert Sapolsky, a distinguished professor of biology and neuroscience at Stanford University, recently argued, in depth and detail, that our choices are predetermined by genetics, environment, hormones, and past experiences. Hence, what we view as judgment is simply our brains rationalizing predetermined decisions.⁵

This is, of course, the latest salvo in the long-standing battle among advocates of free will, determinism, and most recently compatibilism. This philosophical debate is fascinating; however, as I think about judgment, I put the debate to the side in the same way Samuel Johnson, the great practical moralist, dismissed Bishop Berkeley's idea that material objects existed only in the mind of God. Johnson's renowned biographer, James Boswell, wrote, “I never shall forget the alacrity with which Johnson answered, striking his foot with mighty force against a large stone, till he rebounded from it, ‘I refute it thus.’”⁶ Unless we put hard determinism aside, we are utterly stymied. Our starting point has to be the lived reality of thinking, deciding, committing, and exercising judgment.

But hard determinism isn't the only challenge to our familiar notion of judgment. A more nuanced challenge also emerges from contemporary neuroscience. This view holds that the human brain is among the most complex entities in the known universe, and that our understanding of it is still extremely limited—especially when it comes to the nature and workings of consciousness. A prominent neurosurgeon recently wrote this about his work: “The idea that I am cutting and pushing through thought itself, that memories, dreams, and reflections should have the consistency of soft white jelly, is simply too strange to understand, and all

I can see in front of me is matter.”⁷ How can we understand what judgment is when we know so little about our brains, our minds, our states of consciousness, and their interplay?

Not only do we know very little about what our brains are doing when we exercise judgment, we also know how badly our brains and our minds often perform basic cognitive tasks. This is the upshot of countless recent studies in social and cognitive psychology documenting scores of cognitive failures and biases. We overestimate our knowledge and abilities, confirm our biases, ignore contrary evidence, and skew heavily towards immediate, familiar examples. The list goes on and on.⁸

These studies also confirm what serious literature displays in vivid, often tragic detail: we are profoundly fallible creatures. And these works display another challenge to judgment, one that resonates with us personally, as we glimpse the minds of fictional characters making decisions. We see their judgment wavering, just as ours sometimes does. We may feel we have made a sound judgment, but how do we know? Is our judgment somehow self-certifying? Can we be sure that our final judgments aren't skewed by feelings, biases, or self-interest—or because we're having a bad day? What if our judgment tells us one thing in the morning and another at night?

Where does this leave us, if we want to know what judgment is and how to distinguish good judgment from bad judgment? My answer to the second question is that good and bad judgment are arrayed along a spectrum. Better judgment is based upon a more thorough and nuanced understanding of the facts, risks, and uncertainties of a situation. Better judgment relies on more thoughtful, imaginative consideration of the relevant array of ethical factors and the possible or likely tensions and conflicts among them. And better judgment is more pragmatic about what will work in the world as it is or what could work, with effort, imagination, political astuteness, and decent luck.

When responsible executives make their hardest decisions, these standards for good judgment are always beneath the surface. When they are thinking about critical uncertainties, strategic factors, or the fundamental driving forces in a situation, they are focusing on what really matters. When they think about their company values, broader ethical principles, implicit commitments, or religious precepts, they are asking what is morally central. And when executives look at a plan of action and assess its managerial, financial, political,

⁵ Robert M. Sapolsky, *Determined: A Science of Life Without Free Will* (New York: Penguin Press, 2023).

⁶ James Boswell, *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, as quoted in “The Samuel Johnson Sound Bite Page,” <https://www.samueljohnson.com/refutati.html>, accessed 7.29.24.

⁷ Henry Marsh, “I Often Have To Cut Into The Brain,” *Granta*, August 31, 2012, <https://granta.com/new-voices-henry-marsh/>, accessed 5.16.23.

⁸ The standard compendium of these cognitive flaws is Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011).

technological, and legal challenges, they are asking what will work.

In several essays, Isaiah Berlin considered the question of what counts as good political judgment, and his answers are consistent with this view of sound, responsible management judgment. His exemplars included Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill. They had, Berlin believed, a strong “sense of reality”—the ability to understand the specific context and nuances of a situation instead of relying heavily on abstract theories or generalizations.⁹ They recognized that values can be incompatible and incommensurable, and skillfully navigated these conflicts rather than seeking a single, unified solution. Finally, Roosevelt and Churchill had a sense of “what can be done in given circumstances and what cannot, what means will work in what situations and how far.”¹⁰

But this answer to the question of better and worse judgment raises the question of what actually counts as judgment. There are, of course, standard answers to this question. They say more or less that judgment is a cognitive process through which we form opinions, make decisions, and assess the rightness or wrongness of situations, actions, or people. Mark Twain, the American writer and humorist, supposedly said that Wagner’s music was better than it sounded. My view is that these standard definitions of judgment are worse than they sound. Judgment may be a cognitive process, but what is this process?

Near the end of my elective course, I introduce my view of judgment by retelling an ancient story, which has now made its way into contemporary culture. Versions of the story appear in ancient Hindu and Chinese texts, the myths of indigenous peoples, and the works of Western philosophers and mathematicians in recent centuries.¹¹ The tale suggests, I believe, an unorthodox, somewhat frustrating, yet realistic account of how we make these decisions.

The story describes a young man who approaches a revered guru and asks him what holds up the earth. The old man replies that the earth rests on the shoulders of a giant. The young man goes away, reflects on this answer, and then returns and asks, “Oh Master, what holds up the giant?” The ancient sage pauses, gazes into the sky, and reflects

seriously. Then he continues the dialogue by saying gravely, “My son, the giant stands on the shoulders of a great eagle.” The young man departs once more but soon returns and asks what supports the great eagle. The guru again pauses, looks into the sky, and ponders his answer. Then he says that the eagle stands on the back of a colossal turtle. The young man hears this answer, but he doesn’t leave. He immediately asks, “And what holds up the turtle?” This time the guru doesn’t pause or gaze into the sky. Instead, he looks directly at the young man and says, “Look, kid, from there it’s turtles all the way down.”

When I tell the story in a classroom, the reaction comes in two waves. The first is laughter, presumably because the solemn, revered guru loses control and blurts out his final reply, just as any of us might in an irritating situation. The second wave is subdued, murmured laughter, as students sense the profound issue the story raises. At one level, the profound issue is conceptual: it is the problem of infinite regression. The other level is personal: it is the dramatic way in which the guru ends his discussion with the young man and answers his questions.

The guru began reasonably, by listening to the young man’s questions and replying to them, but he soon realizes that these questions could go on forever, in an eternal regression, so the guru brings the dialogue to an end. In a way we don’t understand, he decides what is right by deciding what is right.

When we face a difficult moral choice and think it over carefully before reaching a decision, it feels like we are engaging in a process of reflection and analysis—and we should analyze and reflect before deciding. We should exercise the best judgment we can. But the final moment of decision remains opaque. It isn’t a butterfly on a pin. We can’t inspect, analyze, or deconstruct the final synthesizing moment of choice. It flits past us, and we barely see it.

Suppose you have to make a hard decision between A and B, and you finally choose A. You can give your reasons for your choice, but there were also good reasons for choosing B. This is what made the decision hard. It is why you were going back and forth between your options. But at some point you somehow decided that one set of reasons was stronger than the other. If someone interrogates you, as the young man did in the ancient tale, and asks you why one set of reasons for your decision was stronger than the other, you can probably explain further. But if someone follows his example and asks you for the reasons behind the reasons for your decision, you will reach a point where you have to say you have explained yourself as well as you can. This will be your version of, “From here, it’s turtles all the way down.”

What actually happens in these moments of final decision? The reality is that no one knows. We do make final decisions, and we give reasons for them. But why at bottom do we make one choice, which is justified by strong reasons,

⁹ Joshua Cherniss and Henry Hardy, entry for “Isaiah Berlin” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, first published October 26, 2004; substantive revision February 12, 2022, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/berlin/>, accessed 7.30.24.

¹⁰ Isaiah Berlin, “Political Judgment” in Henry Hardy (ed.), *The Sense of Reality: Studies in Ideas and their History*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997), pp. 40–53.

¹¹ A fascinating, brief overview of the history of this story and its many classic and contemporary versions is “Turtles all the way down,” June 2, 2022, *Wikipedia Foundation*, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Turtles_all_the_way_down.

rather than another, which was also justified by strong reasons? Like the guru, we somehow finally decide, but the crucial “somehow” resides in the deep recesses of our minds and spirits.

Our decisions about what is right ultimately resemble aesthetic or artistic judgments, rather than statistical or logical conclusions. We are saying that—in the end, on balance, and all things considered—we believe and feel that a particular decision seems right. We can and should articulate our reasons, but we can only do this up to a point.

We sometimes hear that to exercise good judgment on really challenging, uncertain, complex problems we should rely on our so-called moral compasses. But if we need a physical counterpart to understand what happens when we make final decisions, kaleidoscopes are a better choice. When we look through a kaleidoscope, we see shards of glass or plastic. When we are making a final decision, the shards we see are aspects of the situation that could be important, might define what is moral, and might indicate what may be practical. As we reflect on a decision, we are twisting the kaleidoscope. We are seeing different ways of combining these elements.

In these moments, there are many features of a situation that could be important, a range of relevant moral perspectives and principles, and several possible options for resolving the problem and moving ahead. When we make our final decisions, we decide about what matters, what our central responsibilities are, and about what will work. We are saying, in effect, “As I see it, this is what the messy details and uncertainties of the situation really boil down to, these are the most relevant moral principles and perspectives, this is what I believe will work as a plan of action, and this is what I believe is right.” That is how we respond to the challenge of pluralism.

Perhaps a full explanation of the elusive phenomenon of final judgment will someday emerge. Perhaps we will find the electrical and biochemical correlates of our decisions in the hundreds of miles of intertwined blood vessels and nerves in our brains. Perhaps we will have a definitive algorithm for predicting these decisions and techniques for improving them. Or perhaps we will learn that human consciousness cannot be understood with the instrument of human consciousness.

We don’t know what happens inside the black boxes of our minds, so it becomes especially important to think explicitly about what matters, what is moral, and what is practically achievable. By doing this, we improve our judgment by shaping what goes into the black box. This approach comes with no guarantees. We sometimes have to live with regrets. But it loads the dice in favor of sound, responsible, practical decisions. That is the perspective on managerial pluralism I leave with my students. For now, this is the best I can do.

In the last class in my elective course, we discuss Robert Bolt’s play, *A Man for All Seasons*. In a crucial incident, Sir Thomas More explains to his good friend, the Duke of Norfolk, why he has made a decision Norfolk views as dangerous and wrong: More will adhere to the Catholic doctrine of apostolic succession and refuse to accept King Henry VIII’s authority over the Church of England. More ultimately tells Norfolk, “...what matters to me is not whether it’s true or not, but that I believe it to be true, or rather not that I *believe* it, but that I believe it. I trust I make myself obscure.”¹² Norfolk has pressed More hard, and More, a gifted writer and speaker, acknowledges that he can’t explain with any clarity the foundational grounds of his decision. This may well be the case for all of us, when we exercise our judgment on the hard problems of work and life.

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¹² Robert Bolt, *A Man for All Seasons* (New York: Random House, 1962), p. 91.