The Ethical Guardrails Model: A Tool for Understanding and Reducing Ethical Mistakes

N. L. Reinsch, Jr.
Georgetown University, USA

Vanda Pauwels
Texas Tech University, USA

Clyde D. Neff
Lubbock Christian University, USA

Abstract. We build on the work of Moore and Gino (2015) and of Rest (1983, 1986) to develop the Ethical Guardrails Model (EGM). The EMG shows students how personal behaviors, relationships, and habits can help them to avoid ethical mistakes in the workplace. The EGM illustrates the components of ethical business behavior, incorporates a new deliberative component, specifies five ways in which ethical behavior may become derailed, and describes practices that can help a person to avoid derailment. We also describe our use of the EGM in the business ethics classroom, an experience that has changed our approach to teaching business ethics.

Keywords: ethics pedagogy, instructional model, ethical derailments, ethical guardrails.

1. Introduction

Building on the work of Moore and Gino (2015) and of Rest (1983, 1986), we present the Ethical Guardrails Model (EGM). Business ethics educators can use the EGM to encourage students to adopt personal behaviors, relationships, and habits that will help to prevent ethical derailments. At the suggestion of a

colleague, we refer to such preventative practices as "guardrails" (J. Sauerwein, personal communication, September 16, 2021).

We approach business ethics with what Midgley (crediting Aristotle) calls a "biological attitude, which takes the world as a continuous organic whole" (2002, p. 250, n. 11). We believe this approach—focusing on the "whole person, not just a detached rational faculty" (Midgley 1994, p. 178)—reflects an emerging consensus. Walker and Hennig conclude that psychological research points toward morality being rooted in "dynamic interdependencies among the various components of moral functioning (cognition, emotion and behaviour)" (1997, p. 323). Murphy argues that Christian ethicists have too frequently slipped into an emphasis on spirit or will, neglecting the human body (2006). And, in her extensive philosophical analysis, Midgley argues for "the unity of that very complex creature, a human being" and for the "need to respect that unity in our view of morals" (2003, pp. x, xvi)

Our work, while educational in focus, fits within this larger conceptual approach. The EGM encourages students to understand how a variety of human factors shape moral behavior; this includes ethical frameworks, deliberative reasoning, hours of sleep, focused or unfocused attention, personal narratives, and unconscious self-interest.

In presenting the EGM, we first locate it among various approaches to business ethics education. Next, we link the EGM to the models of Rest (1983, 1986) and of Moore and Gino (2015). We then describe how the EGM explains ethical derailments and offer examples of preventative guardrails. Before concluding, we describe our use of the EGM in the classroom and report student responses.

2.   Two Dimensions of Business Ethics Pedagogy: Content and Objectives

In past decades, scholars and educators have developed—and sometimes disagreed about—various approaches to business ethics education (e.g., Cameron and O'Leary 2015; De Los Reyes *et al.* 2017; Felton and Sims 2005; Gulseren *et al.* 2021; Jackson *et al.* 2016; Medeiros *et al.* 2017). One enduring division is described as one between normative and behavioral approaches (De Los Reyes *et al.* 2017; Treviño and Weaver 1994). But, because of historical factors sketched by De Cremer and Vandekerckhove (2016), issues of content and objective are sometimes confounded so that it is not clear whether the normative-behavioral distinction concerns course content or instructional objectives.

We distinguish between course content (philosophy or social science) and course objectives (influencing or informing). Course *content*, reflecting professors' differing professional training in methods of discovery (Boyer 2016), tends to emphasize the results of *philosophical* analyses, the results of *social science* studies, or a combination. In shaping course *objectives*, educators may

focus on *influencing* students to behave in certain ways or may aim at *informing* students about factors related to business ethics behavior, or a combination.

Educators who emphasize philosophical content may tend toward seeking to influence their students but could, alternatively, present their materials as an informative history of ethical thinking. Educators who fill their courses with reports of social science research may tend (more than their philosophically inclined colleagues) toward informing their students, but they can also use the results of behavioral research to support hortatory admonitions.

We can describe the EGM with each of the two continua. Since the EGM grows out of behavioral research, the model fits more easily with social science content than philosophical content. However, a course focusing on philosophical analysis could incorporate the EGM as an introduction to behavioral research. Furthermore, since we developed the EGM to help students avoid ethical mistakes in the workplace, the model may be more compatible with courses aimed at influencing rather than informing. But the EGM could be presented as a descriptive account of ethical behavior.

Although we will show that the EGM has unique attributes and benefits for business ethics education, we recognize other instructional approaches that also broaden the focus of business ethics education beyond ethical analysis. Examples include Gentile's "giving voice to values" pedagogy (2017), Aquino's social-cognitive model (Aquino *et al.* 2009), materials designed to help students develop their personal virtues (e.g., Eriksen *et al.* 2019), techniques for enhancing moral courage (e.g., Christensen *et al.* 2007), at least some streams of research on embodied narratives (e.g., Cunliffe and Coupland 2011), and the efforts of Treviño and colleagues to harness the "hidden curriculum" of business school culture (e.g., Eury and Treviño 2019). Within the corporate training space, Covey's (2016) emphasis on seven habits also deserves mention. While these approaches are valuable, the EGM complements them by providing a more comprehensive overview and a way of understanding how judgement relates to other components.

3. The Rest and Moore-Gino Models

Many business ethics educators create or adopt a model of decision making. Examples include models advanced by Treviño (1986), Jones (1991), Herndon (1996), Bartlett (2003), Reynolds (2006), Woiceshyn (2011), Zona *et al.* (2013), and Schwartz (2017). One of the older models—perhaps the most influential of all—was developed by Rest (1983, 1986).

3.1. The Rest Model

Rest, like Kohlberg, focused on the process of cognitive development. However, Kohlberg distinguished between "moral judgement and moral behavior," recognizing that judgment by itself did not constitute behavior (Jorgensen 2006, p. 187). The distinction between moral judgment (a part) and moral behavior (the whole) was even more explicit in Rest (1983, 1986) who proposed that ethical behavior includes four components: (a) becoming *aware* that a decision has an ethical dimension, (b) applying moral principles to reach an ethical *judgment*, (c) forming an *intention* to act ethically, and (d) performing the intended *action*. Rest stated that while the awareness-judgment-intention-action sequence seems logical, "the components do not follow each other in a set temporal order as there are complex feed-forward and feed-backward loops" (Rest *et al.* 1999, p. 102). In short, Rest placed the components in what he regarded as a logical sequence, not to "depict a linear sequence in real time" (Rest 1986, p. 5).

   In contrast to Rest's emphasis on cognitive analysis, scholars now recognize that human behavior does not always result from processes that are conscious, cognitive, and logical (e.g., Haidt 2001; Kahneman 2011). This recognition facilitates the identification of cognitive biases (e.g., Fay and Montague 2015; Phillips-Wren *et al.* 2019). In a related research stream, scholars are studying brain functioning, enhancing our understanding of the roles of affect, cognition, and consciousness (e.g., Greene 2014; Reynolds 2006; Robertson *et al.* 2017; Schwartz 2016). However, these studies remain, for now, focused on improving human judgment—or, at least, showing how judgment can malfunction—and, with a few exceptions (e.g., Ayal *et al.* 2015; Fujita and Carnevale 2012), do not offer recommendations for putting their insights into practice.

   While reviewing the then-available literature, Rest sought to "identify the various . . . elements in an ensemble of processes involved in the production of moral behavior" (1983, p. 558). According to Rest, the first component (called "awareness" or "interpreting the situation") is related to "moral sensitivity" and involves both cognition and affect (1983, pp. 559, 560). The second component (called "judgment" or "analysis") "involves determining . . . what *ought* to be done" (Rest 1983, p. 561). The third component (called "intent") "involves deciding what one actually intends to do" (1983, p. 563). Rest recognized "moral motivation" as a potential driver of intent but concluded that none of the then-available views of moral motivation was "supported by very strong, complete, or compelling research evidence" (1983, pp. 565, 568). Rest described his fourth component ("action") as "executing and implementing a plan of action" (1983, p. 569). Rest concluded that "failure to behave morally . . . can result from deficiencies in any component" (1983, p. 569).

   Historically, however, the Rest model has been used to facilitate a narrowly cognitive approach (Whitbeck 1991, as cited in Cameron and O'Leary, 2015, p. 276). Rest contributed to this narrow focus by identifying moral judgment as the one component of the four that was "distinctively and uniquely moral" (1983, p.