



SaskEthics

An Ethics Newsletter for Catholic Healthcare Organizations in Saskatchewan

The Rubik's Cube of ethics

Dear *SaskEthics* Readers,



Twice over the past month, I have had to take a deep dive into one of the building blocks of Catholic ethical theory: the parts of a moral act. Despite my role as a Catholic healthcare ethicist, this doesn't usually happen to me. So, I've taken it as a sign that I should pass some of this knowledge on to *SaskEthics* readers.

In Catholic thought, we describe an action as 'good' if the person doing it is acting *freely* and 1) they are doing a *good thing*; 2) they have *good intentions* while doing it; and 3) the *circumstances* surrounding the action are good. When you think about it, getting all of those conditions to align is a very high bar. How often do we intentionally choose to do the right thing for the right reason at the right time?

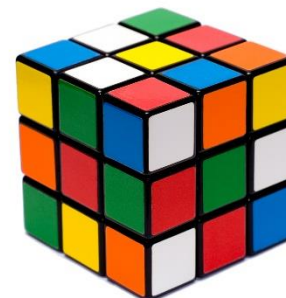
It might be helpful to think of these conditions as the sides of a Rubik's Cube where everything needs to be snapped into place perfectly before we can say with confidence that a good action has been carried out. The good news is that God has

solved the first two sides of this Rubik's Cube for us. In every situation that we could possibly think of, we are able to start from the premise that every human being has an inherent *dignity* that cannot be taken away. This makes them worthy of *respect*.

This may all seem very academic, but it becomes practical when we consider how we need to care for each other during times when it may be difficult to make good choices.

For example, consider someone who is suffering from an addiction. When they use a drug that is harmful, I would argue that none of the conditions of an ethically good action are met. They are harming themselves, often in response to a psychological trauma and, perhaps most importantly, they do not have full control over their actions. How can we help them?

To return to my Rubik's Cube analogy, this person has only two sides of their Rubik's cube solved. And unfortunately, these sides,





representing dignity and respect, are turned away from the person who is struggling. Our first goal should be to help them see the solved sides, i.e., to recognize their inherent dignity and begin to see themselves as worthy of respect.

One way that we can do this is to help the person work on another side of their Rubik's Cube. In most cases, the only dimension of the ethical action that we can help them with is the circumstances of their action. We can't stop them from using a harmful substance, but we can give them the tools they need to begin caring for themselves and others.

This is what we are doing when we employ harm reduction tools. In a nutshell, the phrase 'harm reduction' describes the set of interventions designed to minimize the harmful consequences of an action. In addictions medicine, an example of harm reduction is providing a sharps container for the disposal of used needles. This changes the circumstances in

which the person is acting, and the hope is that as these circumstances are improved, it will open the door for the person to work on the other sides of the Rubik's Cube, i.e., to regain their full capacity for decision making and choose to do good actions for good reasons. (For those of you who would like to learn more about harm reduction, a presentation can be found [here](#).)

How have you been helped to complete your ethics Rubik's Cube? How does your team support others to develop their own ethics capacities when making good decisions seems impossible?

And full disclosure: I've never completed a Rubik's Cube in my life. Let me know if you have any tips!

Dr. Mary Heilman,
Bioethicist, St. Paul's Hospital & CHAS
(306)-655-5197
mary@chassk.ca



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