

## **V. SOME BASIC OPERATIONS AND GUIDEPOSTS**

The Woodstock process initiates a journey to understanding how our moral knowing works. This task is greatly helped as we locate certain essential features or guideposts of the decision-making process. As further background on the Woodstock process, we highlight some guidepost to notice along the way.

### ***A. An Inner Drive toward Moral Responsibility***

We begin with an awareness that our sense of moral responsibility is embedded in our very makeup. This sense is not imported into us from the outside. It is a part of who we are. Test yourself to see if it is not true. Recall a time when you suddenly heard a child's cry, received an ominous call, or happened upon a scene with things out of kilter. What was the first sensation or feeling? These are times when something almost erupts from within us driving us out of ourselves to care for or about someone or something else. These were times when we are moved to respond to a person, a thing, or an event. We can feel this drive even if its source and direction are not clear. An energizing feeling of care directs our attention outward. The important fact to notice is that this dynamism exists and that it mobilizes us to act with respect to objects or persons outside of ourselves. This same dynamic moves us pushes us to know the right thing to do.

### ***B. A Series of Acts***

Each moral decision can be broken down into an interlocking series of distinct steps or actions. The fundamental, outward-directed drive not only propels us to our moral judgments but also guides us through each of these stages along the way. The process begins with our searching for, paying attention to, and understanding all the relevant facts. This stage matures with our coming to a judgement as to how to best explain the given situation, event, or occurrence. Immediately, we move on to understand and judge what is at stake. This calls us to grasp the values involved and with that grasp we move to the act of decision and implementation. This series of acts often proceeds so fluidly and swiftly that we only notice the end result. However, underneath what might appear as a smooth arc from initiating impulse to action lies this series of connected operations. Good moral decisions occur when the acts at each stage along the path are performed well. Conversely, when we fall short we find that one or more of the acts in the series are neglected or haphazardly done.

### ***C. Our Frame of Reference***

We never operate in a vacuum, morally or otherwise. All of our actions, including our acts of moral decision, take place within a frame of reference or horizon. This horizon includes within it all that we know and care about, the ideas, conditions, and assumptions that guide us in our perceiving, understanding, explaining, valuing, and judging. It determines the reach or limit of what we can understand and the judgments we make at any particular time. What we know and value or disvalue determines what we are attracted to and what we try to avoid.

There are also things we know that we do not know. There are matters we have a hunch we might come to learn about someday but presently lie beyond our reach. In math this idea is often represented by the symbol  $x$ . We recognize that there also exists world so far beyond our experience that it exceeds our ability even to question or probe the possibilities.

#### ***D. The Dynamic at Work***

Our horizon, what we know and care about, changes over time. The inner drive powering us through our acts of moral decision can, in the process, also enlarge and elevate our horizons, causing us to expand the scope of the good we desire. Experience just as clearly demonstrates that our choices can move us in the other direction. We can shrink morally.

We come to sense and appreciate the dynamic at work in us that is directing our attention and driving our efforts to value. This value-seeking motivational thrust drives us beyond ourselves and pushes us in the development and promotion of virtues. What can be seen in individual operations one can also be found in business transactions and organizations.

## **VI. SOCIAL ORGANIZATIONS AND BUSINESS TRANSACTIONS**

The Woodstock process is not limited to individual considerations alone. There are also guideposts to note when considering organizations and transactions.

#### ***A. Understanding the Social Dynamic of Business***

Our growth in competence and good moral decision-making is half-baked at best if we only consider ourselves as isolated individuals. That simply is not the world we live and not the world of business and the professions. Our companies, firms, and associations exist as social structures. They gather and organize individuals to provide needed goods and services for vast numbers of people in society. They do this through many systems, patterns of cooperation, and interactions that ease the process along. In business, we many people who are required to cooperate in one fashion or another in order to accomplish a particular goal.

In this context, it is clear that the decisions we make will not only affect our own growth or decline; they also impact the organizations where we work and the ways of doing business generally. What we experience of the dynamic at work in ourselves is also applicable to our business organizations. The systems and behaviors of an organization either promote or discourage the inborn value-seeking thrust of the individuals within their organizations.

### ***B. Internal Structure of Transactions***

Any business or commercial transaction is a social construct. It has an internal structure with identifiable steps or stages. Little can be attained by any one individual acting alone. Most goals and objectives can only be met when a numbers of participants successfully negotiate each of the stages. As a result of this social structure, moral obligations are imposed on all participants to do what is necessary to proceed through each stage because they must successfully move through each stage if the goals of the transaction are to be met.

#### *An Illustration*

Look at an ordinary office lease to help illustrate. The stages of a lease transaction begin with (i) initial introduction of the parties and validation of their intentions, (ii) qualification of the parties' abilities to perform under an anticipated lease, (iii) inspection of the premises, (iv) negotiation of the terms of the lease, (v) documentation, and (vi) final formalities. Each stage is ultimately aimed to secure facilities for a tenant to conduct its business and to provide steady rental income for the landlord. These are fairly clear goals.

The clear goals of the transaction serve to highlight the aims and related structures within each participating business. Beyond the goals of the landlord and its rental agents and those of the tenant and its agents, the lease transaction may also involve architects, contractors, the tradespeople who build out the space, government inspectors, utilities, business machine and furniture providers, bankers who help finance the transaction, and the attorneys who document the lease. Each organization has its own specific goals with respect to the transaction. Each has to cooperate if the deal is to be done. The patterns of cooperation and resultant obligations among the several participants necessary to complete the lease transaction can be noticed.

From the example of a simple office lease transaction one can generalize to any business deal and identify, and even chart, the necessary stages, patterns of cooperation, and resulting obligations that combine to make that business deal the social structure that it inevitably is.

### ***C. The Health of the Organization***

Good moral decisions in business require people to notice the scheme or series of stages necessary to complete a transaction. Organizations and associations of people must cooperate to get the deal done. Accordingly, any topic under review at a WBC meeting will inevitably take into account the effect a given course of action will have on the health of an organization and upon the soundness of the cooperative arrangements that make the deal possible.

## VII. TOPICS

The core of a WBC meeting is the consideration of a topic or case. To aid WBC chapters, we have collected in the pages that follow Part II the background readings, suggested Scripture passages, exercises and questions for topics. These topics include a curriculum for the first year of a new WBC chapter (1-12), to moral decision-making for the second (13-23), and others that have promoted stimulating chapter discussion (24-39).

After the course of a year or so, following the topics as presented, the members of a chapter might wish to take on new topics as they bubble up in discussion. This kind of selection usually occurs during the period of reflection at the end of the WBC chapter meeting. These topics, and the order recommended here, are offered as an aid to those beginning participation with a WBC group.

Some of the cases have proven so rich and provocative that groups have decided to return for one or two additional sessions in order to probe them more deeply. This happened, for example, when a chapter addressed the topic, "Compensation." At the end of the first meeting, the group chose to pursue the question of compensation at different levels (entry level employees vs. compensation for the highest executive), and used the minutes of the prior meeting for the background reading. Key questions raised during the session became focus questions for the next meeting. At the conclusion of the second meeting, the group decided to revisit the topic one more time to address the role of compensation systems in the promotion of ethical or unethical behaviors. Again, the minutes served as background for the upcoming meeting.

Since this is a cumulative process, members of new chapters should feel free to identify more current articles from the business press or elsewhere to illustrate a particular topic. Some chapters have asked outside guests to make brief presentations and then join in the discussion which follows. Several alternative Scripture passages and background readings are given in case a chapter chooses to stay with a particular topic for more than one meeting.

### *A. Topics for the First Year*

The national Woodstock Business Conference has published a Formation Book that reiterates some of this background and explanatory material and summarizes the articles and Scripture passages for the first 12 topics to be used in the first year. These topics, in the order presented, help kick off a chapter and familiarize members with the process in an energizing manner.

### *B. An Illustration of a Topic at Work*

On one occasion, the topic that day was "What happens to a company's benevolent practices when it faces financial hard times?" The WBC chapter began its meeting with the usual self-introductions, opening prayer, Mission Statement, and reading and reflection upon a passage from Scripture. It was the account of Peter's dramatic threefold

denial of Jesus. The vice president of an international electronic equipment firm opened stating, "This passage tells me that in our business lives we should stand up for what we believe. It doesn't have to be a popular sentiment." From the opposite end a man spoke up:

The thing I take from this story is that Peter put himself at risk. He was the only disciple there in the courtyard. He was probably scared half to death, knowing it was not going well for Jesus who was inside right then on trial for his life. Peter was in a very difficult place. He must have felt awful when he denied knowing his good friend Jesus. Peter was just a man. He was trying to get through the night.

Others resonated with Peter's dilemma. They saw a kind of futility in his situation.

What could he do there, anyway? On the other hand, that kind of rationalization is only too familiar to all of us. It is human to try to rationalize in order to get out of becoming involved in a mess.

During the discussion on the topic one entrepreneur said:

It seems to me that Peter's story applies to us. We have similar fears, similar confusions. We are sometimes at a loss to know the right thing to do. Today, the question is how do we either find or re-find our moral compass when we need to act? There has to be a bridge somewhere.

### ***C. Topics on Moral Decision-Making***

As a follow up after the first year, a series of topics (Topics 13-23) have been designed to help find the moral compass, to promote moral understanding. In these topics we attempt to come to grips with our successful (and sometimes less than successful) acts of understanding and deciding in everyday business life. We look to see what is going on so that we might come to know how better to tackle problems and issues when they arise. With moral knowing, like any skill, we become more proficient with practice and are helped by intelligent coaching along the way. Moreover, our religious faith can offer important guidance for growth in moral knowing, deciding, and acting.

We realize that in our business and professional lives we are never alone. We find ourselves living and working with others. We are in a world that is God's creation; sustained by God's grace and saved by God's redemption. It is, at the same time, a world that is quite hospitable to evil and sin.

Our moral compass or guidance system, our skills in moral knowing and decision-making, all relate to living in this very dynamic world, where we and others are subject to change, to growth and decline. This dynamic world is in turn shaped by our participation in it with others. The idea of a moral compass is born of the notion that our time at work is but part of a lifetime's journey where we have the freedom to choose who and what we are to make of ourselves and how we will affect those we love. This series of topics aim

to foster the development of more reliable moral guidance systems. For this awesome, exciting, and challenging journey of ours, we all need a good compass and up-to-date charts.

***D. A project for the year***

We recommend that Woodstock Business Conference members challenge themselves to undertake a group project each year. As an example, WBC chapters exploring the moral decision-making topics can help others promote sound judgments by developing a consensus statement based upon their experience locating and refining their moral compass. Such a consensus statement, to be drafted toward the end of a year, should contain:

*(1) a brief description of what participants learned as they explored their acts of moral decision-making,*

*(2) a list of the valuable questions to ask,*

*(3) an itemization of the traps and pit-falls to good moral decisions, and*

*(4) recommendations as to what might help individuals and organizations locate a reliable moral guidance system.*

(An example of the kinds of questions others find valuable is contained in the Woodstock Theological Center's book, *Ethical Issues in Managed Health Care* (Georgetown University Press, 1999), called "Questions to Guide Ethical Decision Making" and is set out in the Appendix.)