Thinking and Acting Like a Professional: How Do Accountants Conceptualize Ethics?

By L. Melissa Walters, Ph.D., and Teresa M. Pergola, DBA, CMA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY
A study finds that accounting professionals do not internalize virtue ethics and, in particular, professional code-based virtues, as a frame for ethical reasoning.

The way an individual thinks helps inform their ethics as well as judgments about moral dilemmas and resulting moral intent. Cognitive bias or unethical conduct may result from poor or limited frames. This problem is often compounded when individuals are unaware of the frames they use or unable to see alternative views. Accounting professionals must cultivate awareness of and engage appropriate moral frames, referred to here as conceptual metaphors, to exercise proper judgment and ensure ethical action.

A conceptual metaphor refers to the conceptualization of one subject in terms of a different subject. In simple terms, a conceptual metaphor is a cognitive frame that allows us to think and reason about something in terms of something else.1 A common example is how humans conceptualize “time as a resource.” This metaphor frames our understanding of time in terms of monetary resources and, thereby, allows us to reason that it can be borrowed, budgeted, invested, saved, used, or wasted.2 Such conceptual metaphors are powerful drivers of human thought, especially with respect to abstract domains of understanding such as ethics.3
Moral concepts are largely based on underlying metaphors that offer practical frames for ethical conceptualization and reasoning. Different metaphors carry different terms and logic and, as a result, offer different rationale for ethical reasoning. But since such metaphors are embedded in the cognitive unconscious, individuals are largely unaware of and tend to reason and act automatically in terms of these underlying frames. Lack of awareness of such conceptualizations may limit ethical judgment and/or allow hidden biases, errors, or risks into the reasoning process. Understanding the metaphors engaged to frame and make sense of moral issues can offer insights into how we reason and act (or fail to act) when confronted with ethical dilemmas.

Classic normative philosophies, such as consequentialism, contractualism, deontology, justice and fairness, pragmatism, and virtue ethics, are ingrained in contemporary societal mores and, as such, serve as conceptual “root” metaphors. Root metaphors are foundational metaphorical concepts that govern one’s overall world view and, as a corollary, other supporting conceptual metaphors engaged to make sense of experience.

Table 1: Normative Philosophies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Normative Philosophy</th>
<th>Key Concepts/Terms</th>
<th>Concept Logic/Rationale for Ethical Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Consequentialism</td>
<td>Consequences, impacts</td>
<td>Ethicality assessed in terms of net consequences or impacts (i.e., benefit/harm) of the potential act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contractualism</td>
<td>Moral agreement, cooperative behavior</td>
<td>Ethicality assessed in terms of conformity of the potential act with a hypothetical social “contract”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deontology</td>
<td>Duty, motives</td>
<td>Ethicality assessed in terms of the intent of the potential act with respect to a duty, obligation, or rule</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Justice/fairness</td>
<td>Fairness, justness</td>
<td>Ethicality assessed in terms of impartial equality (procedural) or relative equality (distributive) of the potential act with respect to individuals involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pragmatism</td>
<td>Useful practices</td>
<td>Ethicality assessed in terms of practical usefulness (or workability) of the potential act to produce the desired moral consequence/outcome</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtue ethics</td>
<td>Character traits, values</td>
<td>Ethicality assessed in terms of individual virtues or moral character as reflected by the potential act</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Normative philosophies frame moral issues differently and offer alternative terms and logic for reasoning (see Table 1).

VIRTUE ETHICS AS A ROOT METAPHOR FOR ACCOUNTING ETHICS

While each of these classic normative philosophies offers a valuable cognitive frame for reasoning, virtue ethics has particular significance as an ethical root metaphor for accounting. Virtue ethics focuses on the individual virtues, or dispositional character traits, that lead to proper ethical conduct. Virtues may be characterized as intellectual virtues or instrumental virtues. Intellectual virtues influence an individual’s intent to exercise professional judgment and consist of character traits, such as integrity, truthfulness, independence, and objectivity. Instrumental virtues impact an individual’s willingness to act and consist of behavioral traits, such as diligence, resourcefulness, persistence, and courage. Accountants must possess apt intellectual and instrumental virtues to enable ethical intent and action.

Professional codes of conduct (e.g., those of IMA® (Institute of Management Accountants), International
Accounting Education Standards Board, and American Institute of Certified Public Accountants) articulate expected virtues for the accounting profession. Code principles define the essential character traits that professional accountants must possess. Code rules define the logic that practicing accountants must follow to exercise proper professional judgment. That is, codes are prescribed virtue ethics frames for accountants.

The significance of virtues to accountants suggests that practitioners should engage virtue ethics, as defined by a relevant code, as a root metaphor to frame ethical judgment. But it is common knowledge that accountants do not always act consistent with professional virtues, so it raises the question of whether accounting professionals actually internalize virtue ethics as a root metaphor for ethical reasoning.

LONGITUDINAL STUDY

We designed a longitudinal study to explore this question. Its basic purpose was to examine how accounting professionals think and reason about ethics. More specifically, it was designed to elicit conceptual metaphors engaged by accounting professionals to frame ethical issues.

As individuals are not normally aware of conceptual metaphors, and such cognitive frames are hardly evident, simply asking subjects to identify framing metaphors is of limited usefulness. One way to reveal underlying framing metaphors is by examining language. Research in cognitive semantics suggests linguistic expression reflects underlying cognitive activity and, as such, offers evidence of unconscious conceptual metaphors. Images have also been used to provide symbolic evidence of such underlying framing metaphors. In this study, we analyzed subject-selected images and the language used by subjects in associated written narratives to elicit underlying conceptual metaphors; we then examined the terms and logic of elicited conceptual metaphors to identify normative root metaphors.

The expectation was that professional accountants would employ conceptual metaphors consistent with a virtues-based cognitive frame informed by professional codes of conduct. In any case, revealing the cognitive frames engaged during ethical thinking may offer valuable insights and enable enhanced ethics education or professional strategies to reduce bias and ensure accounting practitioners think and act based on expected professional virtues.

Subjects and Data

Subjects consisted of aspiring or continuing accounting professionals enrolled in a required graduate-level business ethics course within a master of science in accounting program. We gathered data from subject responses to two reflection exercises completed during the course. The first reflection exercise asked subjects to identify an image that represented business ethics and then write an accompanying narrative to explain the selected image. This provided both symbolic (image) data and linguistic (narrative) data to serve as a basis for eliciting unconscious conceptual metaphors.

For instance, a subject might select an image of a directional road sign, navigational map, pathway, roadway, or crossroads or intersection of roadways and then describe ethical reasoning in the associated narrative using language such as “choosing the correct path,” “mapping out directions,” “standing at a crossroads,” “turning in the right direction,” “things can get off track,” “this is a dead end,” “a wrong turn,” or “reaching an ethical destination.” Such images and language use indicate a classic conceptual metaphor often referred to as the “journey metaphor,” which includes travel-related terms and logic consistent with an expedition, trip, or quest and a goal of reaching a particular destination. An “ethics-as-a-journey” conceptual metaphor, in turn, can be interpreted to suggest an underlying consequentialist root metaphor (i.e., suggesting directional decisions made during travel undertaken to reach the correct destination, the desired or positive consequence).

The second reflection exercise asked subjects to explicitly identify the normative philosophy with which they most identified subsequent to coverage of this material in class. This provided conscious identification of a preferred root metaphor for ethical reasoning. We collected subject responses over 19 terms covering a period of approximately eight years, which resulted in 377 responses, of which 329 were useable.
**Methods**

We analyzed images and written narratives that subjects provided in response to the first reflection exercise using symbolic and linguistic analysis, respectively, to identify underlying conceptual metaphors. We each independently analyzed images and narratives and then reconciled discrepancies via reassessment and agreement. Images indicated classic visual metaphors for ethics (e.g., angels and devils, street signs and signals, pathways and roadways, balancing scales, handshakes, and teams and meetings), which, in turn, suggested corresponding root metaphors.

For instance, as mentioned previously, images depicting pathways or roadways suggest an underlying journey or travel metaphor, a classic conceptual metaphor analyzed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. Journey or travel metaphors used to conceptualize ethics generally indicate an underlying root in consequentialism (i.e., destinations are conceptualized as outcomes) or possibly pragmatism (i.e., the right path is the one that leads to the desired destination). The narratives were largely consistent with images and offered linguistic and explanatory evidence to confirm categorization of the identified metaphors.

In the second reflection exercise, subjects identified their preferred normative philosophy, the one with which they identified most. Again, we examined responses and reconciled apparent conflicts. We then summarized identified normative philosophies and compared them to the root metaphors elicited from image and narrative analyses.

**Results and Implications**

Analysis of the images and narratives and preferred philosophies resulted in three primary findings. First, the majority of subject images and narratives did not reflect virtue ethics as a central, underlying root metaphor. As Figure 1 indicates, the most prevalent root metaphor elicited from subject responses was consequentialism (35%) followed by virtue ethics (28%) and contractualism (17%). Of those subjects who did engage a virtue ethics frame in their narrative, none indicated a professional code of conduct as the basis for relevant virtues. This suggests that most subjects have not internalized virtue ethics as a root metaphor for framing ethical issues, and those who have do not base this frame on virtues prescribed by the profession. This may be an artifact of the study, as subjects were either full-time or part-time graduate students, and many did not possess extensive professional practice experience. Limited exposure to relevant professional codes or the application of relevant virtues in practice would likely result in incomplete or poorly internalized code-based virtue frames. In any case, the result suggests subjects were either unaware of core virtues defined within relevant codes or did not attribute great significance to such codes or virtues as a basis for ethical reasoning. This indicates a need for greater exposure to professional codes and application to practice issues.

![Figure 1: Elicited Root Metaphors](image-url)
defined within relevant codes may result in ethical judgment in conflict with professional expectations. Furthermore, practitioners who do not possess necessary intellectual and instrumental virtues may fail to establish sound ethical intent and/or fail to act aptly on intentions, especially when confronted by a potentially compromising situation or unethical environment.16

Second, some subjects’ narratives reflected poorly defined frames or conflicting (i.e., mixed) metaphors. Images were sometimes vague or conflicted with language in the narratives, or, alternatively, language in narrative descriptions lacked consistent internal logic or reflected the existence of different, incoherent framing metaphors. This could simply reflect subject failure to carefully articulate explanatory details within written responses to the first reflection exercise. Alternatively, it may suggest weak or incoherent internalization of root metaphor concepts. Research suggests that clear, strongly internalized values are key to consistent ethical action, especially when individuals face pressures or situations that may compromise judgment.17 If virtues are not strongly internalized, inconsistent behavior or lack of action may result even if the frame embodies appropriate professional virtues.

Third, most subjects did not identify virtue ethics as their preferred philosophy in the second reflection exercise. Moreover, and more interestingly, there was little correspondence between the root metaphors indicated by images and associated narratives and the normative philosophies students consciously identified as their preferred moral frame. Only 35% of the subjects who specifically identified virtue ethics as a preferred philosophy engaged this root metaphor as a frame in their narrative. This suggests a lack of awareness of internalized frames, which is not surprising given Lakoff and Johnson’s assertions that such metaphors are largely unconscious. But it is worthy of note that lack of awareness precludes critical reflection that can reveal hidden biases or limitations inherent within a frame and, thereby, allow for improved ethical judgment.

ENCOURAGING THE “RIGHT” METAPHORICAL FRAME

The central conclusion of the study is that most aspiring accounting professionals do not internalize virtue ethics and, in particular, professional code-based virtues as a root metaphor or frame for ethical reasoning. Professional virtues are critical to sustaining the integrity of the accounting profession. So, how do we get accounting professionals to internalize code-based virtue ethics as a frame for ethical judgment? The profession has long attributed ethics failures and unethical conduct among accounting practitioners to poor ethics education. But academics is just a starting place and can only go so far. Accounting academics, the professional community, and practice environments are all pieces of the puzzle. Figure 2 (see p. 6) summarizes suggestions for each area, which will be briefly discussed in the next section.

**Accounting Academics**

Aspiring accountants need to understand moral frames and how they impact professional judgment and conduct. Courses in which ethics are taught should cover moral frames (e.g., normative philosophy, conceptual metaphors, reasoning models, professional codes, etc.) and demonstrate how different frames result in different rationales for judgment. In addition, instructors should include critical reflection to enable awareness of biases and limitations inherent in such frames.

Aspiring accountants also need to understand the expectations of professional accountants and how those expectations relate to fulfillment of professional responsibilities. As such, instructors should teach virtue ethics as a key frame and emphasize the critical role of intellectual and instrumental virtues in exercising ethical judgment and conduct, respectively. It is also important to cultivate appropriate virtues in students via detailed coverage of relevant professional codes. Reflective exercises and simulations that focus on applying codes may support internalization of code virtues and facilitate habitual use of code-based virtues as a frame. In addition, future academic research is needed to examine the use of different educational strategies to support internalization of virtue-based frames.

**The Accounting Profession**

Practicing accountants are expected to engage virtues based on relevant professional codes. Research
indicates that virtues explicitly defined within codes are perceived as highly important, whereas excluded virtues are considered less important.18 Crucial intellectual and instrumental virtues must be defined within professional codes so appropriate significance is attributed to such dispositional character traits.

Most professional codes currently focus on intellectual virtues, but instrumental virtues receive less attention. For instance, the principles underlying the IMA Statement of Ethical Professional Practice include honesty, fairness, objectivity, and responsibility.19 These principles are the professional virtues members are expected to possess and act upon. Honesty, fairness, and objectivity are essentially intellectual virtues that provide a basis for an individual’s intent to exercise professional ethical judgment, whereas responsibility is an instrumental virtue that provides the basis for an individual’s willingness to act based on intellectual virtues. That is, while honesty, fairness, and objectivity may provide the rationale for action, only a strong sense of responsibility will lead one to act, especially if doing so is risky. A greater emphasis on instrumental virtues (e.g., moral courage, resourcefulness, and persistence) within professional codes may strengthen the willingness to act in the face of pressure to compromise.

It is important to note that it is difficult to internal-
ize a concept, even when informed by strong intellectual virtues contained within a professional code, if one is repeatedly confronted by practice pressures to the contrary. Leaders within the professional community must exhibit conduct that publicly demonstrates code virtues as the basis for action and practice relationships. All professionals should actively embrace relevant codes and associated virtues (intellectual and instrumental) and promote them as conduct expectations and practice norms. Code virtues must also be readily enforced by means of sanctioned disciplinary proceedings to reinforce their importance.

**The Accounting Practice Environment**

Accountants are often confronted by situational conflicts and pressures unique to their professional role, and, as a result, individuals do not always act on their intentions, even when framed aptly. As such, code virtues may be insufficient to incite ethical action if not supported by organizational culture. Companies can establish a corporate culture to reinforce stated virtues and facilitate ethical action based thereon by managing frame awareness as well as supporting leadership, values, and norms.

Corporate leaders must openly embrace key virtues, communicate their importance, and create an environment where situational influences allow for and encourage desired behavior. It is also critical to integrate key intellectual and instrumental virtues into corporate codes and embed code virtues into corporate culture in the form of stated values and practices. Companies must integrate stated values into policies, decision making, employment practices, incentive systems, support systems, and disciplinary actions to establish code virtues as workplace practice norms.

In addition, employees may be engaged in educational workshops to support awareness of common frames, alternative frames, and associated biases. Training simulations may also allow employees to practice applying codes as frames and reflect on this activity to promote internalization of organizational virtues. A closer look at the ability of ethics training and practice simulations to deepen a commitment to ethical action based on professional code virtues would offer further insights.

Finally, organizations should carefully monitor and manage alignment between common frames, code-based virtues, stated organizational values, and workplace norms, as conflicts can arise that may compromise ethical conduct. Conflicts must be quickly identified and procedures established to address these issues; employees should also have access to support resources (e.g., ethics advocates or helplines) to assist in resolving such conflicts and properly applying code virtues.

It is difficult to change the way individuals think and act. If we want responsible behavior on the part of accounting professionals, it is imperative that all three constituencies (academics, the professional community, and the practice environment) provide the same message, as the sustainability of the profession depends on the exercise of professional virtues.

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**ENDNOTES**


5. Lakoff and Johnson, 1980.


22 students identified journey metaphors suggesting consequentialism as a moral frame. Forty-four students identified handshake metaphors and teamwork metaphors suggesting contractualism as a moral frame. Twenty-one students identified justice or scale metaphors suggesting a virtue ethics moral frame. Twenty-three students identified classic good vs. evil metaphors; these metaphors suggested differing moral root metaphors (consequentialism, deontology, or virtue ethics) depending on the linguistic expressions used within the narrative.

Incomplete responses were omitted, and one semester’s responses were lost.

This may be a factor contributing to the often-reported ineffectiveness of codes to drive behavior. Further research is needed to establish and validate this potential link.


Lagan, 2019, and Goldberg and Bettinghaus, 2015, also discuss the importance of enabling awareness of frames and associated biases.