

Morality Plays
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Introduction

My work as a facilitator and trainer is with inventing, products and services. This combines facilitating creative thinking and analytical thinking, using processes I have learned from Synectics™ and TRIZ (The Theory of Inventive Problem Solving).

The starting attitude needed from participants in any innovation session is that they believe there are many solutions possible. If they have a mindset which is seeking “The Solution” then the session will be difficult. But when we wander through possibilities and find that there are many “solutions” another problem arises.

I am often asked, “which solutions are best?” Sometimes this is an easy question to give guidance on, because I can suggest that the Ideal Final Result concept from TRIZ makes clear where your solutions should be heading. Ideal Final Result suggests only choosing solutions in which both harm and cost are reduced, irrespective, if possible, of weighing up benefit. Compromise is not a good path for solutions.

But sometimes solution fields occur across different levels of “system, sub-system and supersystem,” and with different levels of complexity at each level of the system.

We might be working on a device and find a technical solution (the system level is satisfied) but find that the user is more likely to be confused as it does not act in ways which make other similar devices – like the computer controlled devices which abound now and which do wonderful things if you could only make sense of what it is you are trying to do.

In these situations the choice, deciding which is the ‘right’ solution, takes on a more non-rational aspect and, worthy of exploration on occasions, a moral overtone.

Because at times I was verging on the moral question, I thought I would explore Morality from a TRIZ perspective, and I think it yields some interesting structures to the question of morality.

I am indebted to Jerry Handspicker for help on this issue. Jerry worked for a time for the World Council of Churches and facilitates community and church meetings in the USA.

Morality explored

Issues of Morality exist, I propose, on at least 3 different levels of systems.

Level 1: At the level of subsystem, if we have removed all harmful effects within the subsystem and there are no harmful effects on other parts of the system, we can say that the solution is 'fit for the purpose', and in this way is a 'good' solution.

For much of our education we are educated (told) to believe that this is how we solve problems and this is what problem solving is all about. We are asked to 'get it right.' It is either right or it is wrong. We are assessed on how much we get right and get wrong. It is one or the other.

Many issues of Morality are actually issues of Fitness for function (is it a "good" solution?) or positiveness of function (does it do any "good?").

When looking at small parts of the system it may well be that there is a right and wrong for solutions, though experience suggests this is less often than we assume. Certainly if our maths is wrong, or the knowledge we have taken to be right is wrong, then we are likely to get a wrong result. Judging what is right is sometimes more difficult, but we do have TRIZ IFR to guide us as well as suggestions from Trends of Evolution of devices and removal of contradictions.

It is a pity we do not have a language to classify this level of right and wrong. Introducing words with moral overtones seems harmful in itself. I would suggest we drop such words and consider this level of problem solving as being about 'fitness for purpose.'

Many or most problems, however, exist with strong interactions at least between two levels, and judging right and wrong for these is more difficult.

Level 2: Let me consider a simple problem with mostly known solutions.

If I have a headache I could take a pill. At the subsystem level it is fit for purpose, as the headache disappears.

However, at the system level, at the level of my general health, mental and physical, it may not be fit for purpose. At the system level, I should solve my headache by reducing my stress, going for a walk, changing my job.

Solving one simple problem at the subsystem level without consideration of other levels can be considered as not a good solution but not so bad a solution (it makes life easy to solve some problems just where they occur and not see everything as part of everything else).

But if we do this all the time we can move our judgement to a harsher state and say it is a bad solution. At some point the solution finding at the subsystem level becomes distinctly harmful at the system level, and we begin to say this is the wrong thing to do.

If we have a friend who is solving all problems by taking more pills we would say to them, with a moral tone in our voices, if it is serious enough, “This is Wrong”.

What we mean by this level of judgement is that their general behaviour is bad, and this is something they need to solve at least at the level of system and not subsystem.

It seems reasonable to make such judgement of solution finding at the system level as being good or bad, right and wrong. What we mean is that our judgement is one of evaluation at the level of system, and we judge if the system is healthy or unhealthy.

Level 3: Following the ideas of Keegan and others, we might see however that there are many many occasions when decisions we make about how to solve problems are at least at level 3 complexity. They involve the supersystem as well as the system and subsystem.

If I continue the story of taking pills, then it might be that the pill taker is a member of a family with small children. The pill taking does impose some risk of harm at the supersystem level in that the children may accidentally take some pills. But the pill taking may be inducing an attitude in the children that taking pills is the way to solve problems. Now we have harm at the level of the supersystem, the family unit. The general problem solving strategy being developed in the family is one of solving only the immediate, short term problems, and the family becomes dysfunctional.

Levels 4 and higher: It is easy to see how one can extend this complexity into levels 4 and higher, where the community, the friendship groups, and eventually the national and international political decision making is influenced by local ‘system level’ decision making. Mostly the rights and wrongs of such events are from ignorance of perspective, failing to see how simple decisions at one level affect decisions at another level. Our comments get stronger, but only in the increase of tone, so we might say, this is wrong, or this is really wrong, or this is really really wrong. But our judgement in morality terms would tend to reflect on the stupidity of the acts, not the evilness.

Morality

So far, I have explored only the ideas of levels of fitness for purpose. As we move into higher levels of complexity we need to take more care about how system levels interact, but the basic functional evaluation is about fitness for purpose.

Many of the debates that occur around world issues, whether it is about politics, health, education, wealth, happiness, show high levels of confusion, mixing moral tones with questions about fitness for purpose at different levels. I believe a TRIZ systems level analysis, using tools for the identification of Contradictions and tools for solving those Contradictions would remove the need for moral overtones and solutions would be seen to be much simpler, being about how to solve problems without interacting effects across system levels.

There is another aspect to the concept of morality, however, that also needs exploring. This revolves around the balancing of the power to act and intent and benefit.

My initial exploration of resolving Contradictions was assuming that these could be resolved because some independent judgement could be made about how to balance benefit and harm, where some compromises had to be made. Although we try to remove all compromise, there will always be some, if only at the level of time, 'should I solve the problem today this way or tomorrow in a better way?'

Quite often there is no resolution of Contradictions because there is no agreement about benefit. I may solve a problem which is brilliant for me but bad for my next door neighbour. It is both a 'good' solution for me and a 'bad' solution for my neighbour.

I might be asked to consider resolving this as the supersystem level, but I can choose not to be interested in this level of solution. And if I have enough power, then I can continue my resolution for as long as I wish.

Many business projects involve compromises because in reality there is an unclear allocation of power, an unclear exploration of benefit, and maybe a dishonest declaration of intent.

What at a local level is a simple poor solution overall, good for me but bad for my company, becomes, after a while, a really bad solution for my company. But if in the end I am paid off to leave the company even then it might be good for me. Our judgement shifts from good and bad in terms of fitness for purpose into good and bad as evil or good (as the opposite of evil not the opposite of bad), based on our judgement of purpose or intent of the person with power. And the more power they had the higher rating of evil we give to them.

Such complex evaluations we leave to courts of law, and judgement by fellow citizens, because there is no fine logical resolution for them, we sit in judgement, with care.

Ethics

With the coming of the notion of "Corporate Responsibility" many companies are seeking some way of placing guidance notes in the system for employees to use when they are faced with these moral issues.

A company's ethical policy statement is really a set of rules for making decisions, in the hope that they, as a company, will not be found to be guilty of acting in a Morally incorrect way. For some issues this is perfectly clear, because it is a declaration of "Good behaviour" at some supersystem level. An ethical position on using suppliers who pay fair wages to their employees is a creation of a decision embedded in the supersystem of employment practice.

But ethical policy statements cannot be expected to resolve all moral dilemmas, for there will be some which have harmful effects in one supersystem or another. Where guidance notes of this kind fail the company may have a set of Value Statements, which are not so much rules as statements of what are regarded as good and not so good ways of doing, and maybe being.

So a Value statement about Valuing Customers can be used, though not precisely, to guide a decision maker when faced with choices which are not ideal in any direction.

The complexity existing in such situations, however, means that at times it is not easy to interpret any explicit statements of Ethics and Values. In such situations, the innovation session might well be enhanced by the use of Theatre, creating Morality Plays, to allow people to be playful with their interpretations of situations and explore possible solution routes without being fixed on any one.

In such situations it may be found that what started as a Moral Dilemma can be reduced to a simple solution at a lower level.

Or it may be that we need to examine not only solution options but also our interpretations of our own moral codes. These codes have been developed within each of us from our experience as children, from our parents, teachers, friends and enemies. They have been developed from stories, from films, from books, from TV and radio. The Morality Plays exist out there now and guide us, albeit subtly, but if we are to be open to significant innovation, where the rules are no longer clear, then this part of our decision making also needs exploring, with care.

For this we can use narratives, storytelling, celebrations, play writing, acting, using key words, such as courage, trust, sacrifice, intent, and using the solution possibilities as the focus of the exploration.

Summary

The concepts of levels of solutions, for subsystem, system and supersystem offer a sound approach to judgement about solutions, and combined with tools for identification and then removal of contradictions, offer a logical process for the examination of issues which may on the surface seem to be about morality in a higher sense, but in practice can be resolved purely in terms of fitness for purpose at different system levels.

Having cleared what ground we can with analysis and problem solving at this level, it becomes much clearer what are the remaining political and social issues, which then bring in issues of power to act, intent and fairness of benefit.

Whether we are talking about it being right to spend large amounts of money to improve air traffic when millions are starving, or right to wage war against a state when most citizens of that state may be innocent and powerless, should begin at the level of analysis of fitness for purpose. Only when we are satisfied that we have explored all reasonable

options for resolving all Contradictions can we reasonably shift our evaluation of the morality of decision making to: ‘What is the right thing to do when there is no logical resolution of possible solutions?’.

At this time, the use of theatre, creating Morality Plays with staff and exploring options seems to offer an approach which keeps Morality on board as an issue but does not disallow other analytical options should they become possible.

It may be that many of the blocks to innovation are actually based on our moral uncertainty when faced with radically new options.

So, I wish to add Morality Thinking to the tools of Innovation, which are intellectual, whether they are creative or analytical thinking tools.

All correspondence welcome.

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Keegan, Robert, “In Over our Heads,” Harvard University Press, 1997

Pirsig, Robert, “Lila, An enquiry into morals,” Bantam Books, 1991

Personal Review, 12/10/02

So, the session happened and here is my personal review, only one view of course and there will be many.

First I want to thank all who took part. Those who were willing to share their doubts and uncertainties and those who were happy to jump into this experiment and see where it went. Both are very useful.

Experiments

Even in hard science it is very easy to set up an experiment in such a way as to confirm what we want as an outcome. Our subconscious is smart enough to calculate what we want and design things in such a way as to get what we want! For more on this explore Bayesian Theories (a statistical account of the relationship between hypotheses experiments and evaluation of outcomes) and also Rita Carter’s great new book Consciousness, (Wiedenfled and Nicolson, 2002).

I think it was my conscious wish to begin the experiment with as little pre-planning as possible, so that I was not biasing the outcome, but this does mean that I was winging it, only having vague thoughts about where it might go and how to deal with any outcomes.

My thanks for understanding go to all those involved.

What was learned for me

I certainly took on board that this is an area which can feel very sensitive. Some felt, I think, it should be handled by dialogue not role play, and maybe some felt it should not be part of a business proposal, except in respect of dealing with Values and Ethics.

Some felt that the issue is too important not to bring it to the fore in business.

It was clear, I think, that to dig deep, to explore differences between ethics, values, beliefs and moral codes would in a real situation take a lot of time. That role plays may need to be repeated and reviewed several times, to help deconstruct what we mean and maybe to invent ways in which outcomes would fit our ethics, our mission, our values and our deeper moral codes.

Time for dialogue is likely to be extensive, with agreed groundrules for what is private, personal, and perhaps religious belief, and what we are prepared to explore with others on morality which is part of our working lives, what makes us decide between two or more options for which there is no simple resolution based on ethics and values or some mission statement.

My impression was that it was easier to express what we mean by values, which are often understandable as one or two word expressions, like valuing trust, integrity, equality, fairness.

Statements of ethical principles, as agreed groundrules, also seems possible, which are statements of what we feel we should and should not do to be true to our values.

Moral codes we live by, which give us a sense of what we are comfortable with and what we are not comfortable with, which guide our decisions when Values and Ethical Agreements do not provide solutions, seem more difficult.

We are presented, I believe, with Morality Plays, in Film, Literature, Poetry, Song and Dance, on TV and in Theatre. How might we take these stories, and construct our own, to help people in business build reliable strategies so that people can work within their own moral codes is my wish for this experiment.

The Future

I do not wish to own this as a business proposition, indeed making this a business would seem to be pretty complicated. If people wish to experiment with this idea all I would ask is that we keep in touch and share out experiments, to learn from each other.

Rather, I saw it as maybe a Moral decision on my part not to exclude it when engaging with clients, to be open to the opportunities to deal with some difficult issues including Morality.

Pirsig's Book, Lila, an Enquiry into Morals, was storytelling as part of an investigation. I would like to see this as continuing storytelling and playing out stories through role play, in the hope it helps us understand how Morality can be introduced as a workable concept for businesses.

If others wish to share in this review I am happy to collate views and keep people posted.

With every best wishes and many many thanks to those who took part

Graham Rawlinson