

# An extension of the Sensmaking-Intuition Model (SIM) by defining ethics: an answer to Sonenshein.

Olivier Charpateau

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#### ABSTRACT

Abstract: Sonenshein based his Sensmaking-Intuition Model of ethical decision on a critical approach the rational models. In his model, sens-making for the ethical issue construction and the intuitive process of decision are the central articulations. But the model doesn't give a clear definition of ethics, suggesting that all ethical decisions can be evaluate on a scale of individual or collective behavior. But this scale doesn't represent the multiplicity of ethical orientations. I review the most important philosophical ethicals systems and expose the implications on the Sonenshein's model. I propose some modifications and suggest orientations for future researches.

#### **Keywords**

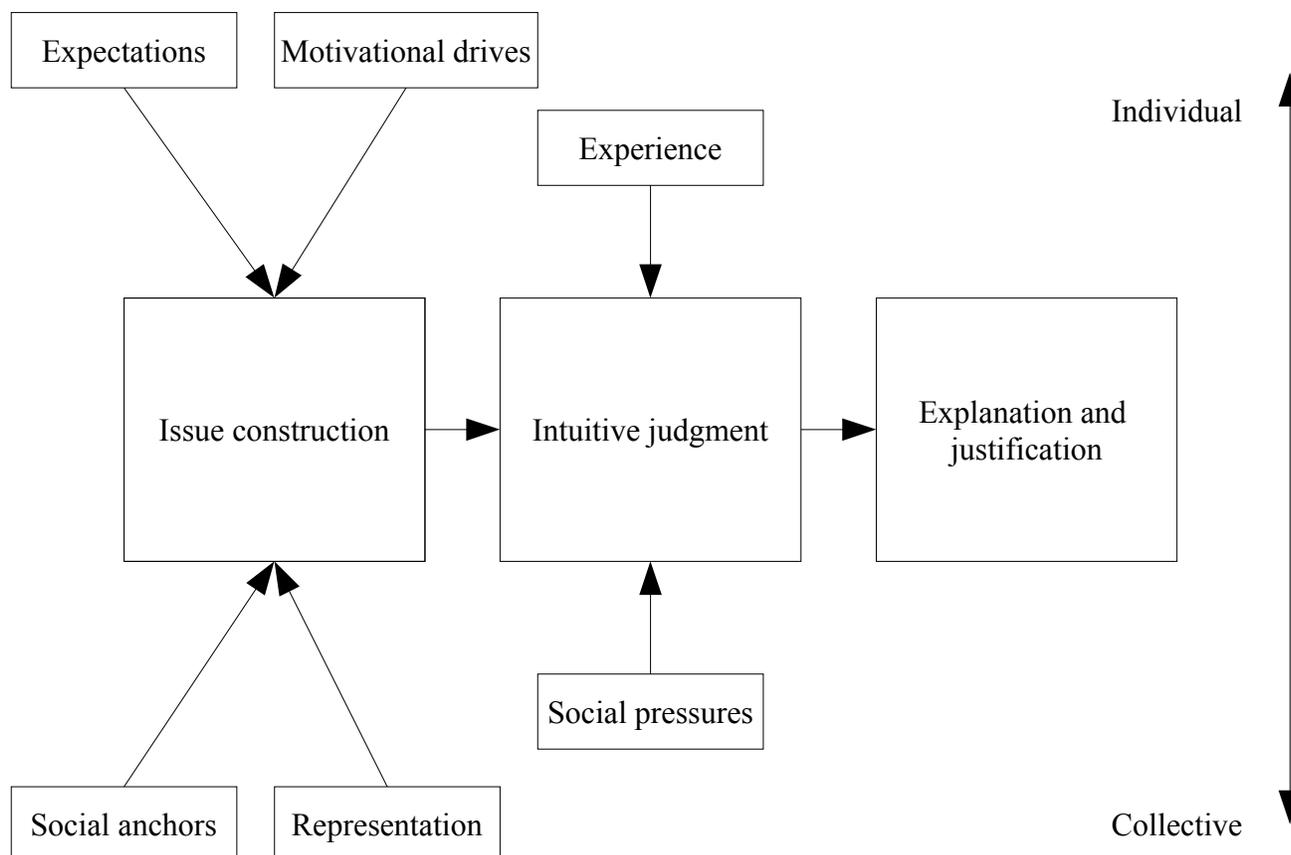
Sensmaking-Intuition Model, ethical decision model, business ethics.

In 2007 Sonenshein proposed an ethical decision model. This model presented a large number of new orientations dealing with ethical decision. They were based on a list of critical analysis of the mainstream and the use of very different theoretical approaches. This model, as most of ethical decision models presents, however, a weakness: the concept of ethics is not clearly defined and the notion of ethical decision is partial. So, making a definition of ethics based on the main philosophical ethical systems will clarify how the model comes into the ethical field of research and legitimate it. But this definition will reveal the amplitude of nuances and points of view, and the complexity of the question, overstepping the bounds of the opposition between Collective and Individual. I propose then, to introduce some modifications in the model to take account of those results and I suggest some new propositions for further researches.

### **The foundation of the Sensemaking- Intuition Model (SIM)**

Sonenshein grounded his model (Figure 1) in a large number of critics of the most important theoretical approaches of ethical decision. The most important are the weakness to use rationality as process of decision, the impossibility to think to all consequences of the decision, and the rationalization a posteriori. This last point disables the possibility to understand the intuitive side of the decision.

**Figure 1 Sensemaking-Intuition Model (SIM)**



Sonenshein proposes a model without rationality introducing three stages.

The first stage is the Issue Construction. The ethical dimension of the situation does not preexist to the decision. Sonenshein claims that the ethical problem is caused by ambiguity or uncertainty in the context of decision. Four sources are implied in the issue construction. Two sources are individual. Expectations and motivational drives depend on the psychology of individuals. It leads to select information depending on their own culture and education. Individuals are educated to recognize some kind of important information and then are reluctant to react to other

stimuli in the context. Two sources are collective. Social anchors are the behavior of social group surrounding and helping him, or not, to integrate the information of the context. The representation is an imaginative projection by the individual of what others may be thinking of the situation.

The second stage is the most important modification of the ethical decision approach. Sonenshein posits that ethical judgment, in opposition to rationalist approaches, is first intuitive. This is due to psychological attitudes that drive individuals judgment with emotions and feelings before other kinds of cognitive reasoning. This point of view is reinforced, according to Sonenshein, by the fact that some fundamental philosophers used depicted intuition as a central element of ethics.

The third stage occurs when an individual has to explain his decision. This justification is generally very rational because it is the best way to convince interlocutor or oneself.

The output of the model is a behavior assumed on a binary scale “collective vs individual”. This represents a choice of definition of ethics, and represents a point of view witch reduce the efficiency of the Sonenshein's model. Jones (1991) argued that most of models were not leaning against a strong definition. I agree with this point of view. There are three kinds of models with three kinds of ethics definition. First, Trevino (1986) and Hunt & Vitell (1986) don't define what is ethical or non ethical even though their model presents an ethical decision. Second, some models propose that ethical decision arises when it matches with the social acceptance (Ferrell & Gresham 1985) or the professional best practices (Bommer, Gratto, Gravander & Tuttle 1987). Third, some authors state a decision is ethical when it complies with laws and if it is morally acceptable by the majority (Jones 1991 ; Beu, Buckley & Harve 2003 ; Brass, Butterfield &

Skaggs 1998). Thus, this represents an important weakness of those models because those definitions, when they exist, are strong simplifications of the wide range of ethical way of thinking. Then their use in order to explain or predict behaviors are restricted. Only Cavanagh, Moberg & Velasquez (1981) have touched the problem of the variety of definitions, but they did not introduce it in their model. Unfortunately, Sonenshein did not explicitly define ethics neither. Actually he exposed his own perception of ethics in the shape of the model. The six sources of influence and the three steps of ethical decision lead to a unique scale based on an individual or a collective criteria. But this criteria is one of the multiple ways to analyze ethics. Next section will present the different forms of ethical values and the different ways of to reach the most ethical status in each form.

### **The philosophical sources of ethical values**

The aim of this part is to demonstrate that ethical values can't be analyzed on the sole "individual vs collective" criteria. I will show the diversity of points of view by displaying three different moral streams of philosophy amongst the most important.

If the relationship between an individual and others is the ground of ethical philosophy, not all authors are thinking that thinking for himself is bad and thinking for collectivity is good. Their point of view deeply depends on, first, the nature of the reference to good and bad, and second, the way to achieve the good. For Kant, the origin of the good is God (Kant 1792: 315-318). Humans are free to try to take the way of transcendence or to stay in their natural statement. What is good is what the religion can translate from the divine will. And the recognition of the legitimacy of others to get human respect is necessary. So the collective approach is recognized.

God, as a source of good values can be found in the radical stream of protestantism. Weber exposed in a main book (Weber 1967: 91) that the good and the bad are defined by God but that human can't have access to this definition. The reason is that God's will is unreachable for humans. So that, humans have to do what they can do best without wondering why they are doing it. From this point of view, if one knows trading very well, he or she has to do so for himself. If another has skills for social activities, he or she has to act the way to help others. An other source of good behavior is the necessity for human beings to interact with others. Morin (2004: 17-66) explains that a human being can't live without other humans. Society is a system and all negative influence on one element can lead to great negative results on other elements. Therefore, not thinking about the implications of one's own behavior on others is a kind of sociological suicide. The collective behavior is a necessity. It can be the same approach for Levinas (1992: 93) but with a different reason, and even if his point of view associates in the same time some divine moral values. It is necessary to be careful to others because they belong to the mankind. But from his point of view, the recognition is achieved through the presence of the human face. It means then, that the collective behavior can exist only if the actor knows directly the other person. The third stream is utilitarianism. According to Mill (1843: 101-103) and Bentham (1834), the good is to seek the utility of any action. The authors claim an individual can account for his happiness (Bentham 1834, vol 1.: 18-19). What is important is to accumulate knowledges and technologies able to keep away ill and death (Mill 1871: chapter II). This approach proposes an other reference for the good: the good is what is useful.

The fourth stream is the legal one as Rawls presented it (1971). What is good is what is legal. But this orientation can be right only if the legal system is grounded on two notions. First, moral of

society that represents the base of some western legal system. Thus, rules are the reflect of the good and bad behavior for humanity. Second, the ability of the system to tend to an optimum. This last argument means that at the optimum, the rights of everyone are at their tops and that it is impossible to improve the rights of an individual without affecting the rights of others.

All those ethical systems in philosophy show that there is a multiplicity of values defined as good, and that those values are dogmatical. According to Schwartz (1992), about 56 fundamental moral values can be mapped all around the world population. They are not equally used in the different geographical groups to solve ethical dilemmas. At last, I argue that the diversity presented is a sample of the wide range of ethical systems in the world. For instance, the rational and universal ethics based on principles, is not shared by zen believers. According to them, there is no way leading to an absolute good or an absolute bad consequence. Any action has a two sides. The first (yin) is negative and the second (yang) is positive. The two sides are opposed but not exclusive. They are complementary so that it can't exist a perfect behavior. Therefor, the critics I made are reinforced by the existence of many other ethical thinkings getting the ethical values and process more complex and can't be studied through a unique scale of assumption of ethical decision.

### **The methods for ethical behavior**

For Kant, the best way is rationalism. He assumes that rational reasoning can be used to anticipate any ethical situation. Kant suggests to think about all the action in life as if they had an universal impact. So, rationalism is the best way. From the utilitarianism point of view, the best way to reach the good behavior as an aim, is to accumulate technologies and knowledge. It

represents then a kind of rationalization. If the origins of good values are different, the way of taking ethical decision seems to be closed by. In this way the two main authors (Mill and Bentham) suggest to accumulate first capitals, eluding any intuition or any emotion. This fundamental proposition is logical if we consider the context of their writings. Mill and Bentham wrote their work in the first half of 18<sup>th</sup> century. The rising of new technologies, the turn of science and knowledge in the field of biology, chemistry, physics could let hope a perfect future with no more diseases, no more fears. But in order to improve sciences one needed to accumulate capitals. This personal accumulation has to be rational, but can't be universal. They suggest to accumulate goods and capitals in order to improve the wellbeing of people in a close perimeter (family, friends...). For the others, they rely on the natural regulation by the market, to spread them the benefits of value accumulation. The market represents a mean for all to reach happiness, even if everyone can only act for his or her own very close acquaintances. So that, by using the Sonenshein's model, I would say that this kind of behavior is more individual than collective. But owing to the mobilization of the market as a regulator, it could be understood as a smooth collective approach. And the same decision and behavior can be understood differently if individuals justify their decision by a kind of lack of concern for the consequences. In this case it could really be interpreted as an individual behavior. This last point is close to the classical economical analysis. From this point of view, the unique acceptable behavior is the seeking of benefits. Nevertheless, Smith admits that intuitive judgment is used in ethical area, even though Friedman excludes it.

In a different way, Rawls suggest that ethics is a process leaded by rationality and self interest (Rawls 1971/1997: 37-38). This is grounded in a fundamental assumption. Legal system is able to

define what is good or bad, then the individual ethics is just the choice to be compliant with it.

In the Morin's ethical system, ethical behavior is the consequence of two dynamics. The first one is the contingency of an individual to the humanity. It leads to a universal recognition of others as alter egos. The second one is the assimilation of local moral rules set by the social group. The first step is the moral contingency when the group imposes moral norms. The second step is the acceptance and the adoption of this moral norms that substitute old personal moral norms. Then it becomes the new ethics of the individual.

According to Levinas (1982: 85-101), the recognition of the face of someone implies a recognition of the human part of any alter ego. This implies, for him, a universal accounting that can't be made over to any tool or medium. So, the responsibility is necessarily direct and can't be based on a legal system or an artifact which could unburden oneself.

In other words, the same objective of ethical values can be reached by different ways, and those last are not necessarily not rational. This demonstrates the weakness to scrutinize the ethical behavior through the unique prism of "individualism vs collectivism". Furthermore, some ethical decision, seen as individualist, can be interpreted as collectivism in a medium or long term as soon as a medium is summoned up to regulate social activities via some economical or legal rationalism. Then by assuming that ethical decision is first and mainly intuitive, Sonenshein puts the rational aspect of some ethical systems aside.

I propose then a definition of ethics as follows: ethics is a group of personal values based on what an individual believes good or bad and leads him to behave.

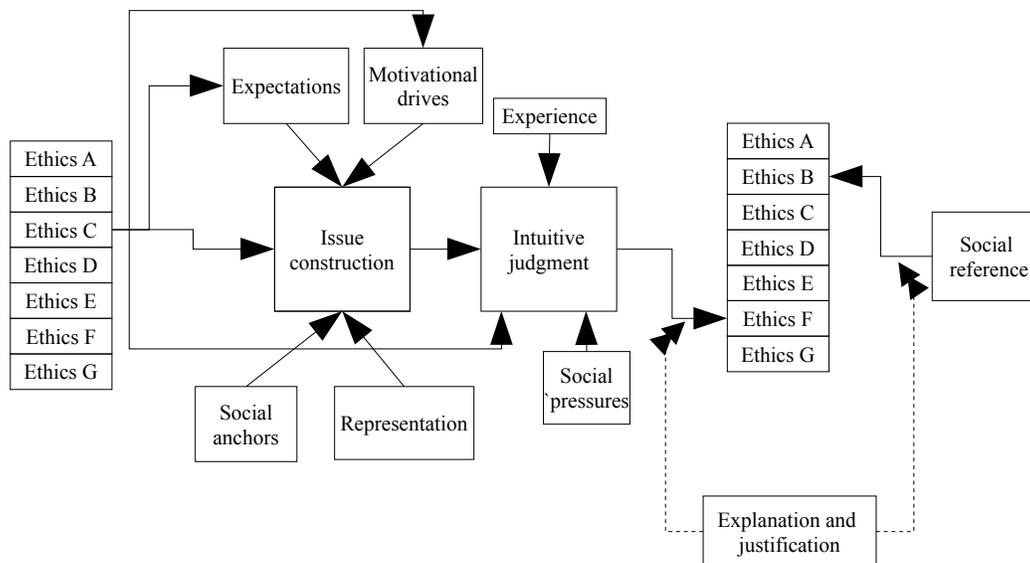
## New developments for the Sonenshein's model

I will now show that a sharp definition of ethics is will permit to improve the efficiency of the decision model on three points: implication for inputs and outputs of model, implication for the issue construction and implication for judgment. This drives to a modification of the Sonenshein's model.

### The new model

I propose hereafter (Figure 2) an adaptation of the Sonenshein's model.

**Figure 2 Sensemaking-Intuition Model adaptation**



I have shown that there are many different references for good and many different ways to behave in order to reach the different status of good. This has four main impacts on the model (figure 2).

The first one is the input of the model. Since good values are based on dogmas, no research can

demonstrate that one is better than another (Gregoire 1967:6-7). I agree with Sonenshein, the sense of the issue is done by the individual. But it means that the ethical issue is dependent on his ethics. So, the input of the model should be a matrix of different values depending on the different perception of ethical good values. Actually, Sonenshein claims that issue construction is influenced by expectations, motivation drives, social anchors and representations. But Expectations and motivation drives are working like filters made of culture of the individual. Then this ethics is an important part of individuals culture. So, the type of ethics will influence the issue construction. In other words, the individual will construct an issue closer to one's own ethical point of view, rather than using all dimensions of all ethical systems.

The second impact is the influence of the ethics on the intuitive judgment. I showed that different ethical systems are using different way of behaving ethically. If the ethical decision process is not necessary rational, it doesn't mean that rationalization is systematically excluded. So that, the ethics of an individual influences the second stage of the model. The way of judgement will be more or less intuitive or rational, depending on the ethical reference the individual uses. An individual with a non-rational based ethics will certainly construct an intuitive judgment, unlike an other individual with a rational based ethics will decide more rationally.

The third impact concerns the evolution of the ethical behavior. At the input of the model, an individual has an ethics (Ethics C for example on the figure 2). According to Sonenshein, the two stages influence this ethics and the output is the same or a different sort of ethics (Ethics F for example on the figure 2). If there is a variation of type of ethics between before and after decision, it can create a psychological discomfort. As a kind of ideology, ethics is a group of values deeply grounded in the individual (Flament & Rouquette 2003). Therefore, a punctual

modification caused by local influences can create a double-bind (Bateson 1980). This psychological consequence and the ethical influence of the context are used by the differential association theory to explain how an individual without criminal activities and with good education can behave with no compliance with social rules if one's is progressively immersed in a deviant social context (Sutherland & Cressey 1970). More important, the individual remains the conscious of the legal and sociological expected behavior, creating a double reference to ethics. That scheme is established for blood crimes as well as for salaries deviation (Skinner & Fream 1997). The salary avoids temporary his own values and will need to rationalize his behavior to reduce the double bind.

The fourth impact is the justification process. The social reference is what the group expects from an individual in the situation. It means that it can be an individual or a collective behavior, a rule or a moral compliance. The choice of the social reference is of prime necessity and has to be not influenced by the researcher ethics. If there is a difference between social expectation and ethical behavior, the individual will use justification to suppress the gap. Because the individual understands the expectations and give them the sense, the conformity of the behavior with social expectations are not obvious, even if the individual is highly susceptible of influence at the first and second stage of decision.

The justification and the rationalization depend on the reason of the issue construction. Here, Sonenshein claims that the ethical issue is built when there is ambiguity or uncertainty. This position is coherent with Trevino's affirmation (1986) and is the origin of the Sensemaking-Intuition Model. But, I think that other situations could lead to an ethical issue construction, depending on the personal sensibility. The first is when the individual projects his own

understanding of what others in the situation are thinking. Goffman explained (1988: 194) that in a situation each person believe knowing what others are expecting as moral behavior. This perception is not necessary a reality (it is an interpretation) but drives the individual to behave in the way one's imagines what others think.

The second situation is when ethical values are in contradiction with the values of the organization. I mean that there is no uncertainty, but a clear conflict of values. It is the case, for example when deontological codes are driving people to behave in a different sens than they would naturally. There are numerous studies dealing with the impact of codes of ethics on the behavior. The results show that the efficiency is not evident and people react differently depending on the situation. Some codes are useless (Ferrell & Weaver 1978 ; Webley & Werner 2008), some drives salaries to a more acceptable behavior ( McCabe & Trevino 1996 ; Peterson & Dane 2002) and others lead to an unacceptable one (Weaver & Trevino 2001).

The third situation is a will of the organization to keep some “spaces” free from deontology in order to let the salary creating his or her own reference and/or let the possibility to react very quickly to an environmental modification (Frese & Fay 2006: 261-262). This lack of reference permits to realize tasks that are not anticipated but are finally necessary to reach the objective (Clot 2000: 119).

Therefor, I argue that the output of model should be the same matrix of ethical systems letting arising the influences of the two first stages. And this output should be compared to the input for rationalization and to the social expectations for the justification.

## Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to propose an improvement of the Sonenshein's model. I first exposed why his model could be improved, and especially why the definition of ethics was lacking. Then I presented how the diversity of definitions could have an incidence on the three stages of the original model and their articulations. Those modifications contribute to a better connection with other theories and empirical results. This new version permits to propose some future research orientations.

The first orientation could be to identify how each ethics (ethics A, ethics B, ethics C...) influences the different stages of the model and how each ethics is dependent on the Issue Construction factors (Expectations, motivational drives, social anchors, representations).

A second orientation could lead researchers to study which of the ethical values or the ethical method is more susceptible to influence.

A third orientation could be to observe if ethical dependence on issue construction context could be justified or rationalized depending on the rationality or the intuitive judgment.

Those orientations would permit to better understand the and the contextual influence of sociological and instruments (codes of ethics), depending on the variety of ethics of their salaries.

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