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Title: Decision-making: between reason and the ethico-political moment

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Table of Contents

1 Introduction ............................................................................................................................................. 1
2 Classical decision making models and Ethical Decision Making (EDM) ........................................... 4
3 Beyond the rational model: enter politics .............................................................................................. 7
4 Post-foundationalism and the ethico-political moment ............................................................................. 11
5 Deciding beyond reason: Ellsberg & the Pentagon Papers ................................................................. 16
6 Sustaining the ethical bricoleur .............................................................................................................. 22
7 Discussion: humour and friendship ...................................................................................................... 28
8 Conclusion ................................................................................................................................................ 34

1 Introduction

In his classic study The Functions of the Executive (1938) Chester Barnard identified decision making as one of the four key features of organizations.¹ Later luminaries of management similarly locate decision making at the core of management (Simon, 1957). Indeed, it has been proposed as possibly the most important of all managerial activities (Mintzberg, 1989). It might therefore be expected that the ethical and political basis for decision making – as contrasted with the ethics and politics of decision making – would have received some extensive consideration in the literature on management and organisations. To the contrary, writers who focus on ethics are

¹ The others were: specialization, incentives and authority.
typically concerned to identify normative perspectives, or benchmarks, that can provide guidance for action (by managers, other stakeholders etc.) in situations of uncertainty. Consideration of politics (power and contestation in socially constructed environments) is avoided as it risks introducing a contingent and relativist dimension that would destabilise the seemingly universal normativity upon which an appeal to an ‘ethics’ benchmark relies (codes of ethics exemplify this logic). In contrast, for those who are attentive to the politics of organisational decision making, talk of ethics is largely avoided as it risks introducing a dubious normativity that diverts attention from the primacy ascribed to power in the formation of decisions and decision contexts. In sum, theorisation of decision making in organizations lacks a perspective in which the interplay of the ethical and the political is placed at the centre.

A concern to develop an alternative to this entrenched approach has inter alia motivated the production of a post-foundational genre of post-structural political philosophy. This emergent stream of work is informed, for example, by Foucault’s refusal to presume that (a non-contingent) truth, as a universal benchmark of ethical behaviour, can be disembedded from relations of power (Foucault, 1986) and/or by Derrida’s insistence that the structure and meaning of any social order – and therefore also of our identities as individuals (our sense of ‘self’) within that order - are forged in a confrontation with radical undecidability that gives form to both ethics and politics.

In the following sections, we consider briefly the development of the field of organizational decision making (ODM) literature focussing first on how Dewey’s classical ‘stages’ model of rational decision making has been taken up in mainstream
ethical decision making (EDM) studies in a way that, by marginalising the political, reduces the undecidable, self-problematising ethical to the merely instrumental, self-justifying moral. We then consider developments in ODM theory where attempts to deal with the limits of the classical stages model have led to a focus on power games. These approaches are ultimately revealed as implying understandings of the political that, at their limits, rely on moral perspectives whose formation (in ethicality) cannot be explained. We then outline a post-foundational ontology that identifies decision making as a confrontation with, and contingent resolution of, undecidability. This locates the ethical and the political in a radical ethico-political moment (or stream of moments) that is held to underpin both the construction of any social order and its attendant truths (as evidenced in its morality and power games, for example). This ontology has significant implications for understanding the relationship between ethics, politics and self-identity. To illustrate the point we explore the history of Dr Daniel Ellsberg’s leaking of the Pentagon Papers, an act not only with significant ethical and political implications (including accelerating the end of the Vietnam War and, indirectly, the impeachment of President Nixon) but one that is also bound up with significant challenges and adjustments to Ellsberg’s self-identity. Post-foundational analysis brings the moment of decision into sharp focus but says little about how individuals confront and survive this moment (or to put it more prosaically, if as Kierkegaard says the decision is a moment of madness, how is it that most decision makers are not found to be mad?). When considering the Ellsberg case, we draw primarily on Laclau’s post-foundational analysis of the ethics and politics of the decision. Identifying a silence, or oversight, in Laclau’s analysis we then turn briefly to two other post-structuralist authors – Levinas and Critchley - to explore the role of emotional investment in processes of decision-making and identification. So doing,
we contribute to a rarely explored aspect of the post-structural challenge to the autonomous, self-contained subject and point to friendship, as ‘the other’ of ‘cronyism’, as a facilitator of the passage through undecidability which we take to be the hallmark of ethical decision making.

2 Classical decision making models and Ethical Decision Making (EDM)

The dominant conceptions of organizational decision-making are all derived from an idealised model that sees decision-making as a rational, mechanical and algorithmic process (Clegg et al., 2007) consistent with modern management ideas, such as those of Taylor (1967/1911) and Fayol (1949). In the modern period, this idealised, or classical, decision making model can be traced back to Dewey’s (1910) identification of five consecutive stages in the decision-making process starting with (1) recognition of an issue requiring a decision and then proceeding by (2) defining the issue, (3) identifying solutions, (4) evaluating solutions and finally (5) implementing the preferred solution.

A variant of this stages model is evident in the more politically-focused variants of organizational decision making (ODM) theory advanced by Herbert Simon (1959) and his associates where the model has been extensively and creatively reworked (through the concepts of satisficing, bounded rationality etc., discussed later) without disrupting its basic, or founding, logic (Clegg et al., 2007). In the subfield of ethical decision making (EDM), the classical/idealised stages model continues to be highly influential. For example, recent studies (Calabretta et al., 2011; Albrecht et al., 2010; Ma, 2009) identify the four most highly cited studies in the field of business ethics as
relating to EDM, and all these studies (Jones, 1991; Hunt and Vitell, 1986; Trevino, 1986; Ferrell and Gresham, 1985) rely on the classical model.

Summarising the distinctive elements of the dominant EDM model, Jones asserts that:

“Human decision-making processes are often activated by the presence of a problem that requires a solution or response and often some form of action (Bazerman, 1986). Moral decision making is no exception; the process begins with a problem, which includes a moral component. … For the moral decision-making process to begin, a person must be able to recognize the moral issue.” (1991, 380)

In this dominant EDM model, moral issues are conceived as emergent from the social, cultural, economic and organizational environment in which decision-makers are embedded. But the model offers minimal illumination of what is involved in the process of emergence (and recognition), and in how this process relates to the formation of individual identities and subjectivities (including the individual’s values and ‘moral cognitions’). What occurs in making (or constructing) a decision is effectively ‘black boxed’ – that is, unexamined and so under-theorized, with regard, for example, to social interaction (with its attendant issues of politics and power games) and the formation of judgements, intentions and actual behaviours. Ultimately, ‘ethical decision making’ becomes largely confined to taking moral decisions (decisions and calculations about what counts as good or right in situations where a range of actions are possible and must be chosen between), while genuine ethical dilemmas (having to make a decision and act in a situation where it is impossible ever to calculate or decide what is the right thing to do) are disregarded or
overlooked, perhaps because their elimination by an adequately refined EDM model is assumed. The *undecidability* of the ethical can become so conflated with the *uncertainty* of the moral that it then seems unproblematical to say, in EDM literature, that “the terms moral judgment and ethical decision making [can be] used synonymously.” (Trevino, 1986, 604).

More recently, proponents of a constructionist approach to EDM have begun to recognise and attend to the political nature of decision making. For example, the presumption that a moral dilemma can be positively identified has been challenged by views that “foreground the ability of individuals and groups to interpret situations and problems differently” (Martin and Parmar, 2012, 294). Crossan et al. (2013) explicitly recognise the political nature of the decision making process, but in doing so they reaffirm a commitment to the classical model where the moralising individual’s “self-reflection on previous experiences can…serve as a buffer against the strong pressures of external situations to act against one’s virtuous core” (Crossan et al., 2013, 576). Other approaches pay more attention to the intuitive and non-conscious processes of sensemaking that underpin decision making (Hunter, 2012). Here, a confrontation with ambiguity is more clearly recognised as the context of decision making; issue construction is conceived to reflect individuals’ expectations and motivations; and in decision making, it is considered that “individuals first use intuitions and then use post hoc (moral) reasoning” (Sonenshein, 2007, 1027). In such work, there is some recognition that “the very idea of sensemaking collapses distinctions between cognition and action (Weick, 1979), making clear bifurcations among stages difficult” (Sonenshein, 2007, 1035). But in resorting to ‘post-hoc reasoning’, such analysis retains a commitment to the classical stages model – decisions may be made
intuitively but ultimately they need to have been reason-able (see also Thiel et al., 2012).

The approaches briefly reviewed in this section are indebted to the classical stages model and hence to the tendency to reduce the ethical (as a crisis in confrontation with the undecidable) to the moral (as a more or less reasonable decision among, possibly ambiguous, options). Largely unexplored are alternative philosophical orientations that would open the ‘black-boxed’ stages of EDM by considering how, for example, ‘power’, ‘identity’ and ‘interests’ are inextricably and continuously present and enacted in, and throughout, decision making. Such an opening challenges the inclination to evade consideration of the ‘black box’ of an intractable undecidability by conflating it with a potentially tractable, controllable notion of uncertainty. In the following section, we consider the significance of ‘power’ before turning to address the significance of undecidability for ethical decision making.

3 Beyond the rational model: enter politics

In contributions to the ODM literature broadly defined (which are often ignored by proponents of EDM), concerns about the idealism and objectivism of the rational, stages conception of decision making are addressed, in part, by Simon’s focus upon bounded rationality and satisficing. As he notes when writing about satisficing, “the term environment is ambiguous. We are not interested in describing some physically objective world in its totality … what we call the environment will depend on the “needs”, “drives” or “goals” of the organism” (Simon, 1956, 130). The significance, and dependence, of decision-making with regard to context was to become more
explicit in Cohen, March\(^2\) and Olsen’s (1972) ‘garbage can’ model. There decision making, far from being a linear rational activity, is conceived as a more random and even anarchic process resulting from the largely accidental coming together of participants, problems and solutions at choice opportunities. Readily available answers provide *acceptable* ‘fixes’, rather than being placed on hold until *the* solution to the (objectively defined) problem has been exhaustively calculated. In similar vein, Lindblom’s ‘science of muddling through’ emphasises how decision making in organisations is “a process of successive approximation to some desired objectives in which what is desired itself continues to change under reconsideration” (Lindblom, 1959, p 86), and how the frameworks with which we approach and understand choices are strongly path dependent and hence subjective (ibid., p 88).

Notwithstanding that these approaches conceive of decision making as a contingent, partial and negotiated process, there is no close consideration of how, for example, the ‘acceptability’ of a decision is determined. What Pettigrew terms “the politics of organizational decision making” (1973) suggests that acceptable decisions are “a function of the balancing of various power vectors” (Pettigrew, 1972, 202). To be clear, what is meant by ‘balancing’ is not the impartial identification and weighing-up of different options but, rather, the push and pull of different forces (or ‘power vectors’), with the outcome resulting from the more effective mobilization of resources by one party to outflank or overcome opponents. Instead of studying decisions as an outcome of rational, if imperfect (e.g. satisficing), processes, it is politics, in the form of a struggle between people with “access to varying amounts of resources” (Pettigrew, 1972, 202), that is placed at the centre of the decision making

\(^2\) March had co-authored, with Simon the influential *Organizations* (March and Simon, 1958).
process and which accounts for its outcomes. It is within political struggles that the elements of decision making – meanings, demands, contexts – are constructed, realized or frustrated.

Pettigrew’s analysis of decision making as an outcome of “processes of power mobilization attempted by each party in support of its demand” (1972, 202) resonates with what Lukes (2005; 1974) identifies as the first and second dimensions of power. The first dimension is in play when decisions are made in situations of overt conflict and contestation between competing interests. The second dimension refers to the making, or constructing, of decisions by circumventing or suppressing issues, thereby preventing them from becoming foci/objects of decision-making (Lukes, 2005, 22). In *The Politics of Decision Making*, Pettigrew (1973) reports a strategic decision concerned with IT procurement in which there were overt conflicts between factions within management but he also provides instances where power was mobilised to suppress the articulation of any oppositional positions by ensuring that they were kept off the agenda.

The original element in Lukes’ (1974) contribution to the study of decision making is his identification of a third, more pervasive and insidious, dimension of power which operates to inhibit the very formation of certain preferences and associated grievances. It is not that such preferences are directly frustrated within, or covertly excluded from, processes of decision making. Rather, they never appear:

“is it not the supreme and most insidious exercise of power to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the
existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they see it as natural and unchangeable, or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial?” (Lukes, 2005, 28)

Pivotal here is how domination relates to socialisation. If people are so thoroughly socialized into a social order that they accept it and their own identity as natural or given, then they are (rendered) incapable of imagining alternatives and of voicing demands that might ‘speak’ of those alternatives. This third dimension is distinguished by how “compliance to domination [is secured] through the shaping of beliefs and desires, by imposing internal constraints under historically changing circumstances” (Lukes, 2005, 143-4). However, the positing of this third dimension of power begs the question: how can the ‘real interests’ of an individual or a group be disentangled from the internal constraints that represent dominant interests?

It is at this point that analysis in which the focus is upon dimensions of power in decision making approaches its limits. The difficulty for Lukes’ formulation of the third dimension of power lies in the assumption that beliefs and desires can be shaped in ways that secure compliance to domination. In making this assumption, his analysis slides towards social determinism where, in effect, there are no decisions. Why not? Because, following Lukes’ formulation of the third dimension of power, choices, ethical or otherwise, are illusory as they are very strongly conditioned, if not determined, by social imperatives including those of morality (i.e. moral imperatives). The scope for ethics is vanishingly reduced as choices are all (pre)determined by the meanings presented to, and imprinted upon, us by society.
4 Post-foundationalism and the ethico-political moment

So far, we have suggested that EDM theory effectively marginalises the political while the focus upon politics in ODM theory is at the expense of ethics. The inability to theorise at the same time both the ethical and the political, we have suggested, is associated with the limitations of the rational stages model to which EDM and ODM are indebted.

To avoid the separation of ethics and politics, we commend a turn to a post-structural approach where undecidability (rather than mere uncertainty) is placed at the centre of ontology. Specifically, we engage and commend Laclau’s thinking which turns away from conceiving of social reality (e.g. ‘interests’, ‘morality’, ‘structures’, ‘power’ etc.) as the pre-existing objective ground of decision making. Instead, decision-making is understood as a series of moments of ethico-political articulation that retroactively invoke, and hence objectify, the social reality they aspire to represent (see Laclau and Mouffe, 2001, xi). In the decisive act, social reality is instantiated, made present (presented) and represented. The force or power of this representation derives from its success in presenting the variant of social reality that it enacts and objectifies as if it was already there (hence the term retro-active). To be clear, this approach does not fall victim to the (idealist) position that reality is equivalent to representations of it. To the contrary, it recalls that representations never capture the reality that they seek to disclose but that, nonetheless, they retroactively invoke and objectify it.

This perspective places decision making at the very centre of the continuous reconstruction of social reality. Through processes of identification and objectification - with regard to established moral imperatives, for example - subjects repeatedly
confront and precariously prevail over an inherent openness and associated undecidability in social reality. In these processes, social reality is invoked and instantiated retroactively in a way that suggests that it was already there but is now disclosed (see Dyrberg, 1997, 16). In Foucauldian terms, these are continuous, contextualised processes of subjectivation as well as objectification. As Skinner (2013, 916) has characterised this process:

“Subjectivation occurs through the subject locating her/himself within a field of commonly accepted moral conduct, as a subject of that moral conduct, whilst objectivation occurs concurrently through assessing one’s performance as an ethical subject in the light of one’s actions through “self-reflection, self-knowledge, self-examination” (Foucault, 1984, 29)”

What Skinner terms subjectivation-objectivation involves, we contend, a continuous process of decision making “exercised by every individual on a daily basis…The only prerequisites are to be capable of thinking and acting” (Skinner, 2013, 918). Each of us is continuously engaging, less or more consciously and deliberately, with the contingency (undecidability) of the social world that demands the making of decisions. Subjectivation is not socially determined or automatic, even when it becomes routinised and unreflective. Its outcome is objectivation, and social reality is thereby retroactively instantiated.

In this formulation, social realities with which we identify as subjects are retroactively instantiated (given meaningful form or objectivity) through and out of the continuous stream of decisions that we each make every day. They are never closed or totalised. Closure would imply that meanings (the sense and significance we make of the world
and of ourselves as subjects of/in that world) are immutable. It would imply that every ethical dilemma could ultimately be reduced to an algorithmic moral calculation and the political would become merely the working through of structural determinism. As we have seen, the classical stages model, by disregarding (or occluding) the disruptive and dislocatory effects of undecidability, leads either to the reduction of the ethical to the moral or of the political to determinism. Implicitly the stages model presumes the possibility of closure and, in doing so, it excludes any possibility of recognising, and attending to, the space of undecidability in social reality that is the condition of possibility of decision making.

The very idea of a decision, and we might add of human freedom, presumes that things are not predetermined: they can be different, they can change and can become otherwise. This implies that social reality is open to reinterpretation and alternative invocations. The relationship between decision making and the openness of social reality is explored extensively by Ernesto Laclau in an approach which is indebted to Derrida’s insights into deconstruction. A central insight of deconstruction is that, in an open system, the formation of any meaningful order (such as language or social reality) relies on the occlusion of undecidability. This occlusion is necessary to create the semblance of stability and continuity in the meaning(s), or sense, of the system. Making the world meaningful (as occurs for example in Skinner's subjectivation-objectivation process) entails a stabilisation (or sedimentation) of meanings that relies upon the occlusion of undecidability. But because undecidability can never be removed from the system, every meaning is vulnerable to deconstruction that, in turn, exposes (reactivates) the undecidability within it.
This understanding, developed within a post-foundational genre of post-structuralism, identifies undecidability as both the necessary condition of possibility of any social order and the locus of the decision. To expand briefly: for Laclau, “Undecidability should be literally taken as that condition from which no course of action necessarily follows.” (1996, 78) The moment(s) of decision become(s) necessary and constitutive as social order. Social relations are instantiated and sedimented (and so become accepted as ‘normal’) through an occlusion of undecidability that they produce (or perform) but which they can never completely conceal (as to do so would be to effect closure which is impossible). It is by exposing the inescapable presence of undecidability that deconstruction “reactivate[s] the moment of decision that underlies any sedimented set of social relations” (Laclau, 1996, 78 original emphasis). “The political and ethical significance of this”, Laclau continues, “is that by enlarging the area of structural undecidability it enlarges also the area of responsibility - that is, of the decision.” (Laclau, 1996, 78 emphasis added) This makes it possible, and necessary, to reclaim the ethical from its unhelpful conflation with the moral, and also to locate undecidability at the centre of decision making as an ethical and political moment. That said, it is necessary for any decision to go through ‘the ordeal of the undecidable’ (Derrida, 1992, 24) if it is to count as an ethical decision, rather than a calculation or a habitual response.

We are now in a better position to expand upon a distinction to which we alluded earlier. We understand ‘being ethical’ as a process (or stream of moments) in which, by “going through the ordeal of the undecidable” (Derrida, 1992, 24), the individual “‘invents’ him/herself as an ethical subject through the practice of making decisions beyond rules” (Weiskopf and Willmott, 2013, 471). Morality, by contrast, is (for us)
the application of a particular ethico-political stance. Typically, the morality, or the moral orientation, adopted is itself embedded in the dominant social order. It approximates to, and may be idealized as, a set of seemingly natural and/or universal principles but it is inescapably coloured by its historical situatedness. Ethics, in contrast, is associated with the suspension of such recourse to a pre-existing moral orientation. When framed in this way, the decision is conceived as a commitment to, or identification with, a system of meanings *that come into being with the decision* (that is, retroactively). Of course, the decision takes place in an historically and culturally distinctive context (Clegg et al., 2007). But it is inescapably a confrontation with undecidability at the limits of that context:

“the moment of *decision, as such,* always remains a finite moment of urgency and precipitation, since it must not be the consequence or the effect of this theoretical or historical moment, of this reflection or this deliberation, since it always marks the interruption of the juridico- or ethico- or politico-cognitive deliberation that precedes it, that *must* precede it. The instance of the decision is a madness, says Kierkegaard.” (Derrida, 1992, 26 original emphasis)

Returning to our opening reference to Barnard, decision making is perhaps not just one of (four) key features of the (re)production of organization through processes of organizing but is *the* key feature. Even when routinized and rationalized, every decision is unavoidably political *and* ethical. It necessarily mobilises one or more dimensions of power in order to privilege some form of order that inescapably forecloses other possibilities. The decision is always forced inasmuch that “to choose a course of action implies an act of coercion with respect to other possible courses of action.” (Laclau, 1990, 171). It is a necessary coercion as it is only through a violent
act of identification, in which other possibilities are forcefully excluded, that agents can differentiate and constitute themselves as subjects in a social order.

This approach offers an alternative to more established analyses of decision making by avoiding the shortcomings ascribed to them. But it also faces at least two distinct, though related, challenges. First, it may be asked: if the decision is a moment of madness, then how is it relevant for understanding ‘normal’ decision making in organisations? Second, if the decision arises in coercion, are we condemned to understand decisions only as acts of power and the political? How, in the face of radical and un-nameable undecidability, can we understand what it means to be ethical?

5 Deciding beyond reason: Ellsberg & the Pentagon Papers

When examined from a post-foundational perspective, the decision is a moment of action where undecidability is encountered – with implications for, and impacts on, each agent’s identifications. As Laclau puts it, “…if, when I decide, I am taking a course of action which was not predetermined, in that case the decision does not follow automatically from what I already was, but rather through it I am also constituting myself and, at the same time, repressing other possibilities open to me.” (Laclau, 1990, 171 emphasis added). The possibility of taking an alternative course of action implies that the decision is not a calculation which mobilises a pure, transcendental objectivity; and neither is it socially (pre)determined. As Dyrberg points out: “As the limit idea of decision making, rational persuasion is the point where the supposed highest moment of decidability is also the moment of
undecidability…It follows that decisions – rational persuasion included – are always marked by this disjunction; hence they cannot be algorithmic” (Dyrberg, 1997, 37). Persuasion and even consensus are, as we argued above, inescapably acts of ‘coercion’ in the sense that they involve a measure of identification with a particular order and so foreclose other possibilities (Dyrberg, 1997, 38). The madness of the decision refers to an a-rational (non-algorithmic) instantiation of, and identification with, a particular order as a means of neutralising and domesticating and thereby occluding undecidability. It is mad because it is a commitment without the possibility of its justification being supported by reasoning that is external to itself.

The issue, then, is not whether a decision calls prior identifications into question but how, and the extent to which, it does so. Where the decision sits comfortably with prior identifications, it will be more readily experienced as rational and reasonable, because it engages and affirms the agent’s established ways of occluding undecidability. Such a decision is unremarkable or routine, and so it may pass unnoticed precisely because it is not reactivated as political or ethical. On reflection, we can recognise how we are constantly making decisions – over what to do, what to say, what to write – decisions that are typically experienced as comparatively unproblematic, and so are rather undemanding so long as they do not call into question our identifications with(in) existing structural contexts. In the absence of reflection, we do not even recognise our engagement with, and occlusion of, undecidability. It is when we are prompted to reflect and/or when our identifications become precarious or are breached that we experience increased exposure to, and are forced into, a more direct confrontation with undecidability. In this moment of out-of-jointness, previously sedimented identifications become unsettled, reactivated and
rearticulated in a traumatic (maddening) search for new meanings and orderings - as Garfinkel’s (1967) breaching experiments attest.

Weiskopf and Willmott (2013) consider such a process when examining the decision of Dr Daniel Ellsberg, a former RAND employee, to leak the Pentagon Papers (hereafter the Papers) to The New York Times in 1971. This notorious act of whistleblowing was a catalyst for an accelerated ending of the Vietnam War and, indirectly, contributed to the impeachment of President Nixon. This example is taken up not because it was unambiguously ‘ethical’ and/or ‘political’ but, more prosaically, because it is well documented and forms the basis of Ellsberg’s lengthy memoir, *Secrets*. A loyal servant of the state, brought up in a solid Jewish middle class family which had converted to Christian Science, Ellsberg initially identified strongly with, and willingly served within, an apparatus (or governmentality: Foucault, 1997) of secrecy. As a senior RAND consultant, he worked as an advisor at the highest levels of the Pentagon where he was trusted with access to state secrets. Keeping those secrets, Ellsberg reports, was “virtually part of one’s core identity” (Ellsberg, 2010, 774).

In Ellsberg’s account, his passage to the final act of leaking the Papers resulted from a growing sense of discomfort with, and questioning of how, the Pentagon presumed the personal loyalty of its staff and its consultants to the President. This loyalty, which also presumed Ellsberg’s identification with its demands, was regarded as more important than “obligation to truth, to fellow Americans, and to other human lives” (Ellsberg, 2003, 43-4): “for the Congress, the press, and the public to know much
about what the president was doing for them, was at best unnecessary and irrelevant.” (Ellsberg, 2003, 43-4)

Ellsberg’s identification was challenged by a series of events. They included: a public encounter with Henry Kissinger, National Security Advisor to the President, where disconcerting silences in the prevalent account of the progress of the war were exposed³; a realisation from reading the Papers that secret US policy on Vietnam went well beyond what was admitted by the Executive and, more importantly, far exceeded what relatively informed and sceptical outsiders, including journalists and members of Congress, had been led to believe or, with few exceptions, could conceivably imagine; personal contacts with anti-war campaigners; and finally the reaction of Patricia Marx, a peace activist who became Ellsberg’s wife, who, when given extracts of the Papers to read by him, pointed out that they used the ‘language of torturers’. (Weiskopf and Willmott, 2013, 477-480)

In our interpretation of these events, they instigated a gradual but dislocating process of reactivation of Ellsberg’s prior sedimented identifications (with the morality of the Pentagon and with his identity as a privileged insider), leading to the ‘madness’ of the final, decisive moment when he determined to leak the Papers to The New York Times. At that point, Ellsberg forever forecloses the possibility of old identifications (as trusted Pentagon insider, for example), although, and crucially, the full ramifications of his actions were incalculable. In hindsight, Ellsberg makes sense of the decisive moment as experiencing a “personal sense of obligation and urgency, of

³ The prevalent account was that the war was trending down. However while US troop numbers were falling Ellsberg knew that Indochinese casualties, refugees and bombing tonnages were all trending up. (Weiskopf and Willmott, 2013, 477)
moral imperative” (Weiskopf and Willmott, 2013; Ellsberg, 2003, 257) where he could no longer continue to postpone making public the contents of the Papers despite being unable to calculate the personal consequences of such action (e.g. the uncertain prospect of a long prison service as well as widespread vilification).

Ellsberg’s process of decision making, we contend, was not a careful calculation between alternatives. Instead it involved an extended process of letting go of old, largely routinised identifications leading (in this case) to a crisis and irrevocable act that forces him to find new identifications. So, for example, his developing identification with other anti-war activities left him feeling liberated but also “naked and raw” like the experience of “shedding that skin” (Ellsberg, 2003, 268). Subsequently, when re-inscribed as a political activist and campaigner, Ellsberg has commented on material published on Wikileaks.org, such as the 260,000 classified State Department cables released by Bradley Manning. Ellsberg’s new identifications have to be formed in a world disrupted by the moment of decision but they were not fully or algorithmically anticipated. Instead Ellsberg has had – was forced - to rebuild (and re-sediment) his identifications; and he has had to do it in a world changed by his actions, and in which that change has offered new identification possibilities and challenges which might have been partially anticipated or glimpsed, but not grasped or comprehended in advance – for example, as ‘hero’, ‘peace campaigner’, ‘traitor’, ‘madman’ ‘wild man’, etc.

But if the decision arises in undecidability then what basis is there for being ethical? As a moment of non-algorithmic urgent precipitation, or even madness, Ellsberg’s whistleblowing is clearly political, not only because it involved the mobilisation of
the media (New York Times and many other newspapers) to expose the Pentagon’s exercise of what Lukes identifies as the three dimensions of power, but also because it had, and continues to have political significance. Not least, it is seen as a precursor and justificatory point of reference to more recent leaks of state secrets by Bradley Manning and Edward Snowden. But what makes it also ethical?

In their detailed examination of Ellsberg’s whistleblowing, Weiskopf and Willmott (2013) argue that his engagement in practices, including his relationship with Patricia Marx, opened him to ‘the other’ – notably, the Indochinese casualties and refugees silenced and unnamed in the dominant Pentagon discourse – which previously Ellsberg had regarded as unfortunate but necessary collateral damage. And that it was this ‘opening up’ which initiated a process of radical dis-identification with the state’s pursuit of the Vietnam War, resulting in Ellsberg’s fateful decision. In Ellsberg’s words, a process of dis-identification enabled him to find loyalties long unconsulted: loyalties to “our [US] constitutional system, to countrymen, to one’s humanity” (Ellsberg quoted in Bok, 1989, 207). In Ellsberg’s account of his whistleblowing, and especially in his language of ‘unconsulted loyalties’, one might discern an attempt at identification with an alternative discourse (or ordering of discourses). This suggests a possible, fumbling articulation of a new set of (perhaps largely un-nameable) significations that had the potential for Ellsberg to resediment his identifications around them.

But we may also detect recourse to prior identifications rather than the madness of a confrontation with radical undecidability. In an in-depth, carefully researched but unauthorised biography, Wild Man, written by an experienced and well-respected
biographer (Wells, 2001), Ellsberg is depicted as a brilliant but narcissistic fantasist. He is portrayed as someone who expected to enjoy a glittering career but, when this ambition was unfulfilled, largely as a consequence of his irascible and hectoring nature, Ellsberg sought recognition and admiration by contriving to obtain, copy and then leak the Papers. Far from being a heroic individual who courageously and selflessly fought an unjust and unresponsive ‘system’, Wells’ account of Ellsberg presents a highly complex, flawed figure who pursued his dreams of social recognition and celebration by abusing his position of trust. It was Ellsberg’s “frustration over his inability to influence events, to move the levers of power, and his anger at the rejection of his ideas (perhaps one might say narcissistic rage)”, according to Wells, that “were probably pivotal to his transformation…He may have released the Papers partly out of ire or vengeance at those in the establishment who had turned their back on him” (Wells, 2001, 316, 344).

When viewed this way, Ellsberg’s actions appear more like a vindictive or narcissistic (ab)use of power by leveraging access to the Papers for purposes of revenge and/or self-aggrandisement, rather than an ethical act. How then can a post-foundational perspective help us understand the decision as a radical moment that is ethical as well as political?

6 Sustaining the ethical bricoleur

To explore this question, we turn to Laclau’s post-foundational perspective in which the passage through a confrontation with undecidability is the moment of decision that retroactively instantiates some social ordering. This passage has ethical and political
consequences as it forecloses other, unrealised possibilities. As a consequence of undecidability, Laclau observes, “We live as bricoleurs in a plural world, having to take decisions within incomplete systems of rules (incompletion here means undecidability)...It is because of this constitutive incompletion that decisions have to be taken” (Laclau, 1996, 79 original emphasis). When interpreted from this perspective, Ellsberg’s moment(s) of decision to leak the Papers can be understood as a final break with a prior investment in a particular normative order, in the form of an instilled sense of patriotism, that inhibited his commitment of an act of ‘treason’. Clearly, his action, or actions, involving a ‘moment’ or ‘moments’ of ‘madness’, demonstrates that decision making is irreducible to any particular normative order. In Laclau’s assessment, the inescapable presence of undecidability means that our understandings of what it means ‘to be or do better’ are irremediably open to disruption, deconstruction and revision. So, whatever we take to be ‘good and right’ or even ‘the best’ at any point in time “is never good and right enough” (Torfing, 1999, 282), nor could it ever be so.

Laclau’s theorization of ethical bricolage focuses predominantly on its implications for how we confront undecidability, and thereby become:

“ethically and politically responsible in the course of taking a decision, because the decision is called for by the dislocation of the structure, which reveals its undecidability and implies the absence of a voice of structural necessity speaking through the subject. The subject is forced to invent new solutions and make unheard-of moves in a situation in which there are no solid foundations to build upon.” (Torfing, 1999, 285)
For Laclau, dislocation of the structure – the impossibility yet necessity of achieving social closure – is at the core of social existence, and it is what renders decisions, which produce a (precarious) sense of closure, both politically and ethically significant. Decision-making is political because it (re)presents an immanent voice of apparent structural necessity articulated through the subject, and it is ethical because it (re)constructs the social world in a particular way. Ethical bricolage may be a process of decision-making informed by political commitments to particular values – of democracy, justice, etc. - and it has unintended as well as somewhat anticipated political consequences (e.g. ending the Vietnam War more quickly). Nevertheless, it requires incalculable invention in the absence of “foundations to build upon” (Torfing, 1999, 285). It involves “a moment of investment which is not dictated by the nature of its object” (Laclau, 2000, 81) – that is the ‘object’ (or partly anticipated objective) in which the investment is made. It involves the madness of thinking the unthinkable and of acting beyond calculation.

Ethical bricolage implies a commitment to making decisions that hold true to the ultimate emptiness of our values and associated claims. This does not imply nihilism but, rather, an appreciation of how the ethical bricoleur holds his or her favoured normative framework open to question while simultaneously acknowledging and bearing witness to the dislocated and undecidable nature of his/her own self-identity. The bricoleur recognises not only the decision but also his/her own self-identity as inherently undecidable and deconstructable. It is a deconstructability to which Ellsberg speaks when commenting upon the reaction of the media following publication of devastating revelations from excerpts from the Papers. For any one of the “pillars of the Establishment”, such as the New York Times,
“to contemplate challenging to this degree in action that urgent judgment of the president and commander in chief in wartime would have been in the most literal sense unthinkable, before it happened...They [media commentators] were going through the same process I had, learning the need to think for themselves, to use their own judgments about what was right for them to do in a crisis, discovering their own readiness to risk recrimination and face heavy penalties when they had to.” (Ellsberg, 2003, 399 emphasis added).

What we take from Laclau here is that the madness of the decision opens us to the inescapable presence of undecidability. Laclau’s formulation of ethical bricolage focuses mainly on the structural aspects of the decision. Largely ignored by Laclau is the question of how such a bricoleur can maintain and sustain his/her (changing) self through the madness of the decision. Ellsberg’s language of crisis, risk and fear of penalties points to this dimension in which the moment of decision, by retroactively instantiating some new and uncertain identification, challenges and undermines not only previously held identifications but even our sense of self (our sense of having a coherent continuing identity that is ‘me’). To illuminate this aspect, we consider here two possible approaches that have been advanced from a post-structural perspective. First we briefly consider Levinasian ethics and then we turn to Critchley’s identification of humour as the subject’s way of coping with the infinite demands of Levinas’s ‘other’. What these approaches share with Laclau is an attentiveness to the post-structural de-centred subject and its ethico-political significance. Where they differ is in their attention to, and their respective understandings of, how human

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4 In what we take to be a closely related concern, Critchley has previously critiqued Laclau’s theory, arguing that it “requires an ethical dimension of infinite responsibility to the other if it is not going to risk collapsing into the arbitrariness of a thoroughgoing decisionism.” (Critchley, 2004, 116)
beings face and cope with this condition – in other words, how the space of the political, and especially the ethical, is navigated from the perspective of self and identification.

Levinas. For Levinas, the ethical resides in how “from the start, the other affects us despite ourselves” (1991, 129) as an inescapable and infinite felt responsibility for one’s neighbour, the ‘other’. Since this responsibility is infinite (we can never reach a stage where we can say we have fully met all our responsibilities to others), it is irremediably undecidable. The impossibility of fulfilling this responsibility is compounded by how our experience of selfhood routinely develops into “a reflexively constituted sense of self-identity” that “has the effect of ‘encrusting’ the self and thereby blunting moral sensibility.” (Roberts, 2001, 110) This encrusted sense of self distances us from our infinite responsibility for the other: it renders that responsibility easier to bear but also harder to fulfil. The possibility of ethics requires and entails an erosion of this encrusted self (my sense of who ‘I’ am) as encrustation distances me from the other, and so diminishes my ethical sensibility: it cushions my responsibility for the other. A condition of ethical action is the recovery - or (re-)discovery - of an identity “forged in my encounter with my neighbour, which denudes me, and which is prior to the self consciousness that is always a recuperation of the self.” (Roberts, 2001, 112).

Critchley. Critchley’s thinking is strongly influenced by Levinas, but informed also by an earlier extended dialogue with Laclau (Critchley, 2004; Critchley et al., 1996), Critchley’s (2007) proposition is that the primacy accorded by Levinas to ethics implies an inescapable demand upon the subject in the face of the ‘other’. This
demand is too weighty to be met coherently by resorting to the prescriptions of a normative order with which the self routinely becomes identified, or ‘encrusted’. Indeed, for Critchley the demand is so excessively burdensome that it “runs the risk of chronically overloading – indeed masochistically persecuting - the subject with responsibility” (2007, 11). As he puts it:

“…the subject is defined in terms of a division between itself and an exorbitant demand that it can never meet, the demand to be infinitely responsible. The ethical subject shapes itself in relation to a demand that splits it open.” (Critchley, 2007, 69)

The central and pressing question, then, is how this extreme demand can “be borne without crushing the ethical subject” (Critchley, 2007, 69) or resulting in its encrustation. Rejecting any possibility of access to an authentic or undivided subjectivity that can transcend this condition, Critchley argues instead for an originary in-authenticity as “the core of subjective experience” (2007, 78), and he proposes humour “as a practice of minimal sublimation that both maintains and alleviates the division of the ethical subject.” (2007, 11) Humour, and particularly self-deprecating humour, he contends, “allows the subject to bear the excessive, indeed hyperbolic, burden of the ethical demand without that demand turning into excessive self-hatred and cruelty.” (Critchley, 2007, 78-9) This levity is found, for example, in the grandiose and hubristic efforts of a ‘split’ self that endeavours to control and restore itself by emulating a pre-divided status. From this perspective, the subject better placed to cope with the demands of infinite responsibility is the subject who has developed “a maturity that comes from learning to laugh at oneself, from finding oneself ridiculous.” (Critchley, 2007, 83) When leavened in this way, the demand of
infinite responsibility is no longer “paralysing the ego”. Instead, the “experience of an unattainable future, a perfectibility that I can never bring to perfection”, Critchley argues, “drives the ethical activity of the subject.” (2007, 84 emphasis added).

7 Discussion: humour and friendship

Our consideration of Levinas and Critchley here is not intended to supplant or revise Laclau’s post-foundationalism but merely to inform a supplement to Laclau’s position. Laclau himself takes issue with the Levinasian presentation of ‘ethics as first philosophy’ – a scepticism which, as we have seen, is affirmed by Critchley. For Laclau, as for Derrida, the ethical has no extra-discursive basis from which to derive a normative orientation or benchmark for decision making. Levinas, in Laclau’s (2000, 81) words, “did not resist the temptation to give some sort of content to ethics”. For Laclau, the inescapable moment (of decision in a confrontation with undecidability) is not ‘just’ a matter of ethics, as Levinas contends, but is ethico-political. It is a “moment of madness” in which an investment is made in some normative order - with both ethical and political consequences – notwithstanding that “no normative order ... is, in and for itself, ethical” (Laclau, 2000, 81).

As we have noted, Critchley focuses, with good reason, on the fact that this ethico-political moment of madness is potentially infinitely demanding so that without some form of coping mechanism or ‘practice of minimal sublimation’, the subject risks dissolution into paralysis rather than being driven to ethical action. Critchley proposes self-deprecating levity as this sustaining practice but in the case of Ellsberg it is far from clear that it was self-deprecating levity which sustained him through crisis.
Ellsberg’s account of his whistleblowing includes little levity, even though a number of episodes are, arguably, quite comical and even farcical. Even if Wells’ biography is unduly derogatory about Ellsberg, it does highlight an earnest intensity about him evident in a tendency to take himself a little too seriously. Although Ellsberg is reported by many of Wells’ informants to have a well developed sense of humour (he even wrote a humour column for his school magazine: Wells, 2001, 66), by all accounts Ellsberg rarely directed that humour to himself,\(^5\) inclining instead to lampoon others. The freelance writer, Peter Schrag, who spent a good deal of time with Ellsberg, observes that “The first time I met him in 1971 he struck me as a person who was “too perfect, perhaps, too compulsively eager to be correct, too intense, too committed, too illiberal with himself.” He had, as one of his friends said, very little capacity for self-irony” (Schrag, 1974, 32).

If, as it seems, it was not humour\(^6\) that enabled Ellsberg to address what Critchley terms the chronic overloading of the subject by an unfillable demand, might there be some other coping mechanism(s) at work here? Whereas Critchley focuses on the subject’s relation to his/her self, Laclau’s focus is less self-directed, and more attentive to the collective/social, understandings of the subject. Might Laclau’s thinking help identify other ways of sustaining the subject when enduring processes of subjective dissolution and reconstruction that accompany the madness of the decision?

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\(^6\) Critchley does not deny the possibility that means other than humour can sustain the chronically overloaded subject in the moment (or stream of moments) of the decision. But, perhaps because of the origination of his argument in a Levinasian view that invites a focus on the ethical/individual subject, he does not explore other, less ‘internalized’ possibilities
If we attend to the years before Ellsberg decided to leak the Papers, he went through a protracted process of transformation in which new orientations to ‘the other’ developed but also new friendships and relationships were formed. Ellsberg reflects on the process of dissolution and reconstruction in terms of exchanging a narrow loyalty to state (embodied in the President) and pursuit of career for a broader or higher loyalty to the lives of others (see Ellsberg, 2003, xiii-xiv)

This language of loyalty, we contend, resonates more with interpersonal concepts of allegiance and also to friendship than more self-directed concepts of responsibility and self-deprecating humour. Friendship and direct interpersonal relationships, rather than self-deprecating humour, seem to have been more significant for Ellsberg. What enabled him to reach the decision to leak the Papers, and to deal with the consequences, we suggest, was, in substantial part, not humour but friendship.

Ellsberg makes numerous references to the importance of friendship. Especially important was Tony Russo who worked with him at RAND, assisted him in copying the Papers, and so also faced imprisonment⁷. A pivotal moment, which signified to Ellsberg the importance of friendship, occurred at a talk by Randy Kehler, a prominent peace campaigner, given on August 28th 1969. Kehler’s speech was a catalyst for Ellsberg’s determination to risk prison in order to shorten the war:

“[Kehler] mentioned his friends who were in prison and remarked that he would soon be joining them, it had taken me several moments to grasp what he had just said. Then it was as though an ax split my head, and my heart

broke open. But what had really happened was that my life had split in two”

(Ellsberg, 2003, 272)

Hearing Kehler’s talk and, especially, the reference to his friends led Ellsberg to break
down and retreat to the men’s room where he slid down onto the tile floor and, for the
first time in his life, sobbed uncontrollably for an hour (see also Ellsberg, 2002). We
understand by this that Ellsberg now fully faced the decision in all its undecidability.
Or as he puts it, “What I had just heard from Randy had put the question in my mind,
What could I do, what should I be doing to help end the war now that I was ready to
go to prison for it?” (Ellsberg, 2002). Within a month, Ellsberg began to copy and
then distribute the Papers.

It had taken the care and encouragement of Ellsberg’s friends to ready him for this
decision, and it would take further support from his friends (including his second wife
Patricia Marx, mentioned earlier, who he had recently married) to act on as ‘mad’ and
uncertain a decision - rife with further trauma and the loss of old subjectivity - as to
leak the Papers. Care for the fragility of his position and his self was found, in
Ellsberg’s account, less in internally generated humour than in trusting himself to the
protection of his friends – trusting that their love and loyalty-as-care would carry him
through, and throughout, the dislocatory trauma of his treasonable act and its
consequences, supporting him as he found and formed a new subjectivity and
associated set of identifications (e.g., as a political activist). Growing confidence that
his friends would be there for him enabled Ellsberg to take the momentous decision to
leak the Papers – something that he had been contemplating, but also repeatedly
postponing, for years.
The importance of loyalty and of how his ‘madness’ would be understood by others is also evident in Ellsberg’s account of why he invited his children (13 and 10) to accompany him to the print shop where copied the Papers. Anticipating how his leaking of the Papers would be reported by the media, and would not be challenged or counteracted by his estranged wife with whom his children lived, Ellsberg writes:

“They would read right away, and hear on television, that their father was a traitor. That I had gone mad, done something bizarre. I wanted them to have a memory that they could hold on to that would counter those stories. If they could spend an evening with me while we copied the papers, they could see that I wasn’t acting weird, wasn’t crazy. I was working with friends, in a matter-of-fact way…they would know that it might be necessary, it might be the right thing to do, in some circumstances to take an action that would send them to jail” (2003, 305 original emphasis)

By a ‘friend’ we do not understand Ellsberg to mean close associates, people whom he had known for many years or someone who is uncritically supportive. Those understandings of friendship overlap with understandings of cronyism as “a derogatory sense of friendship with a trace of political corruption or preferential treatment about it”. (Khatri and Tsang, 2003, 290) Even in its least derogatory sense, this understanding of friendship often points to a relationship which mutually reinforces and supports friends’ established identities by glossing over limits and differences. Instead, by ‘friendship’ we refer here to the ‘other’ of, or alternative to, the glossing, preferential and unquestioning colleague or comrade. For us, the friend is someone “who makes you aware of where your limits lie. He or she directs your
attention towards the boundaries that enclose us, and thus towards possibilities of freedom” (Garlick, 2002, 570). This characterization seems particularly apposite for Ellsberg’s transformation during which, in effect, elements of an encrusted, unthinkingly patriotic self were challenged by his friends, and then progressively dissolved as he questioned, transgressed and erased the boundaries that maintained his silence as a keeper of secrets. In this regard, friendship contains a strongly transgressive power. While any friendship is threatened by betrayal (French et al., 2009), it is not reducible to loyalty-as-allegiance where a preoccupation with preserving the boundaries of friendship exerts mutually suffocating effects.

There is some resonance here with Grey and Sturdy’s (2007) almost singular discussion of friendship in which they note that, despite being a common experience when working in organizations, there is almost no literature on friendship in organizations. When analysis does touch on themes close to friendship – such as trust, support, coaching, goodwill, buddying – they tend to be instrumentalized. Instead of appreciating the value of friendship for decision makers, its significance is framed in terms of whether its manifestations and proxies are “functional or detrimental to organizational performance” (Grey and Sturdy, 2007, 163). The examination of friendship is thereby confined within a narrow, managerialist agenda. Marginalised, at best, is the importance of friendship as a lived, organizational phenomenon with, potentially, critical, emancipatory significance. In contrast, our examination of decision-making has moved beyond these confines to appreciate the central relevance of undecidability and the role of friendship in addressing its demands, as illustrated by Ellsberg’s decision to leak the Papers. While Ellsberg’s friendships were drawn mainly from outside the organizations for which he worked (e.g. RAND, Pentagon),
they are nonetheless of relevance for analysing his actions; and, more generally, they suggest that studies of the significance of friendship (e.g. for decision making) should not be confined to those formed within work organizations.

8 Conclusion

In this chapter, we have commended an approach that marks a departure from more established analyses of decision which are yoked to a narrow conception of performance. In their purview, politics and ethics are variously denigrated or commended for their contribution to more effective decision-making; and the presence of politics is invoked to explain deviations from rational outcomes. With regard to ethics, much analysis of decision-making in which reference is made to ethics presumes or proposes the existence of a particular normative framework against which the ethics of a decision can be assessed. In contrast, the approach commended here contends that “only that aspect of a decision which is not predetermined by an existing normative framework is, properly speaking, ethical” (Laclau, 2000, 82). The existence or influence of normative frameworks is not denied; but there is an insistence that undecidability precedes such frameworks and cannot be eliminated by them. Complying with a normative framework may provide welcome relief from ‘moral doubt’ but it is precisely undecidability that is “the condition of possibility of ethically responsible decision making” (Clegg et al., 2007, 404).

Our commendation of a post-foundational orientation, drawing predominantly on the insights of Laclau, anticipates the formation of an ethical decision maker who accepts the political necessity of assessing what is good and right while acknowledging and
defending what is recognised to be, inescapably, the contingency and mutability of every normative standpoint. Such a decision maker confronts the hubris of his or her own politicisation and subjectivity not as a means of dissolving or denying identity but, rather, as a way of sustaining a sense of identity in the face of its incipient dissolution. It is almost as if, in recognition of the arrogance and naivety of imagining that we matter, or that we can make a difference, the challenge is to find a way of renewing and reenergising the perennial struggle with undecidability. Self-deprecating humour, in the form of “laugh[ing] at oneself, from finding oneself ridiculous” (Critchley, 2007, 83) is a potent means of renewal and revitalization, but it is not singular or exhaustive. We have suggested that friendship may offer another, more other-directed way of sustaining people through the madness of the decision. Whatever additional ways there may be, we conclude by recalling and adapting the relevance of Gramsci’s exhortation about the intellect and the will. In the face of pessimism of the intellect but also of the perceived imminent dissolution of the self, post-foundationalism invites us, as ethical and political subjects, to find ways of rekindling and sustaining optimism of the spirit.
References


