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Over the past ten years, leaders in American higher education have needed to make difficult decisions in response to a decline in public trust, a global pandemic, and, most recently, rapid changes in ideologies and governmental priorities. These complex challenges impacting higher education continue to shift and evolve.

Institutions often need to manage complexities such as these and others in unison. As one example, in academic medicine, an institution may be adjusting to the new norms of U.S. executive actions and addressing mistrust in science and medicine. Simultaneously, it may be making plans for leadership transitions at multiple levels and negotiating relationships with health system partners. All of this must occur while working to sustain and strengthen institutional missions in concert with institutional values.

These times of significant, multifaceted change require leaders to make difficult choices, often with little time for careful thought or inclusive consultation. Jackall (1988/2010) in his sociological account of corporate managers, suggests that the institutional structures that set up those limitations often resemble a “moral maze”, where shifting expectations and pressures can sometimes place moral principles in tension with institutional priorities, career considerations, and personal values. More recent scholarship extends the concept to military leadership (Ohlsson et al., 2020), signaling not only its continued relevance but also the prevalence of competing institutional and personal demands across diverse leadership settings.

In recognition of ethical tensions, we suggest that such situations call for examination of experiences, feelings, and actions in relationship to the individual good (character development), institutional good (mission alignment), and societal good (shared responsibility). Applying the

KNN Framework for Flourishing (Maurana et al., 2024), including its elements of character, caring, practical wisdom, and flourishing across socio-ecological systems, we offer reflection questions for integration into practice and scholarship. We postulate that these questions, even when decisions remain unchanged, support leadership driven by practical wisdom and moral responsiveness rather than impulse and fear.

To ground our approach, we begin by outlining the KNN Framework for Flourishing that serves as the conceptual foundation for the reflection tools we propose. We continue with a review of relevant literature on reflective practices amid tensions that put pressure on character and reasoning before sharing three matrices of reflection questions to be used to guide **reflection-for-action, reflection-in-action, and reflection-on-action**. We conclude with a brief description of a qualitative study still in the planning stages that will explore how embedding reflection into leadership routines fosters character, caring, and practical wisdom toward flourishing even in moments of urgency and uncertainty.

Reflection as a Flourishing Practice Undergirded by Character, Caring, and Practical Wisdom

The KNN Framework for Flourishing integrates virtue ethics, ethics of care, and socio-ecological theory to provide health professionals and leaders a comprehensive approach to solving complex cultural and workforce challenges. The Framework defines flourishing as the aspirational aim of health professions and relies on Su's (2020) Aristotelian framing of the concept: “a wholeness—of being and doing, of realizing one’s potential and helping others do the same” (p. 10). Furthermore, the Framework conceptualizes flourishing not as an individual state alone, but an active, reciprocal process that is affected by the contexts in which people live

and work and also influences stagnation or transformation in those contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1981; McLeroy et al., 1988).

Socio-ecological theory posits that each ecological system, identified broadly in the KNN Framework as individuals, learning environments, practice environments, and society, are interconnected and influence one another. In ideal scenarios, the influence would always be productive and positive, but both experience and the review of literature presented in the following section suggest that, at times, there are negative interactions and often tensions, making attention to character, caring, and practical wisdom essential for navigating complex and conflicting dynamics that emerge among interconnected systems.

The KNN draws its conception of character from work at the Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues (2022) and defines character as “a constellation of characteristics—moral, civic, intellectual, and performance—formed over time and manifest in dispositions and practices” (Maurana et al., 2024, p. 2). Tronto's (2013) application of ethics of care extends our understanding of civic virtues by emphasizing relational responsibility. Tronto identifies attentiveness, responsibility, competency, responsiveness, engagement, and citizenship as moral qualities for a caring democracy. These qualities focus less on individual virtue and more on meeting the needs of others. The KNN Framework for Flourishing presents both individual character and relational caring as essential elements of flourishing across interrelated socio-ecological systems.

Practical wisdom (phronesis) or, “using acquired experience to discern the right way to do the right thing in a particular circumstance, with a particular person, at a particular time” (Maurana et al., 2024, p. 2; Schwartz & Sharpe, 2010), serves as the integrative function that blends virtue ethics and care ethics toward doing what is “right” when the meaning of that is

neither pre-determined nor obvious. It is both an expression of character and discernment of when and how to care. Rather than universal, it is context-specific, applied to particular circumstances, people, and moments. We hypothesize that individual and shared reflection can cultivate each of these elements toward flourishing in health with each socio-ecological system contributing to the transformation of the others.

In addition to the elements of the framework, it is important to clarify our use of some terms we use throughout our discussion within the context of the integration of virtue ethics and care ethics. We understand *ethics and ethical* through a neo-Aristotelian lens, closely tied to virtue ethics and character development. To live ethically is to live in accordance with virtues that are cultivated over time and expressed through action (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2022). Ethical dilemmas arise when virtues come into tension. Tension may occur between types of virtues such as between performance and intellectual virtues (e.g., ambition and integrity), or within a single virtue type such as between moral virtues (e.g., honesty and loyalty). This virtue ethics view is enriched by an ethics of care which foregrounds attentiveness and responsiveness in relationships, reinforcing that ethical judgment involves both the cultivation of internal character and its expression through engagement with others.

In popular use and philosophical literature, *ethics* and *morality* are often used interchangeably or without clear distinction (Brooks et al., 2019) as they both are concerned with discerning what is “right”. This tendency is evident in many of the sources presented in the literature review. For our present purpose, *ethics* refers to the practice of acting with virtue guided by practical wisdom (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2022) and shaped by relational interdependence (Tronto, 2013). *Morality*, following Dahl (2023), involves relational obligations toward others and the reasoning and actions that arise from those concerns. Our

relational interpretation of morality reflects an ethic of care which frames care as both a moral value and a shared civic responsibility (Held, 2005; Tronto, 2013).

While both ethics and morality involve relational responsiveness, ethics tends to emphasize the cultivation of character and wise judgement (Jubilee Centre for Character and Virtues, 2022), whereas morality often emphasizes context-specific obligations and reasoning shaped by relationships, power, and lived experiences (Schein, 2020; Tronto, 2013). In this way, morality can be viewed as dynamic, mapping assumptions, beliefs, and facts to relational concerns (Dahl, 2023).

Recognizing the interdependence of ethics and morality clarifies why it is beneficial that the KNN Framework emphasizes both character formation and relational caring responsibility as essential elements for flourishing. Ethics without moral context risks abstraction while morality without ethical cultivation risks relativism.

In virtue ethics, moral action is not merely rule-following but the expression of a well-formed character in response to particular circumstances, guided by practical wisdom. Whereas virtue ethics emphasizes character formation, care ethics, particularly as articulated by Joan Tronto (2013), locates morality in the lived realities of human interdependence. Morality arises from the recognition of others' needs, the responsibilities embedded in relationships, and the social structures that shape who gives care, who receives care, and how. It is concerned not only with individual virtue but with the quality of our collective practices and institutions. Taken together, these perspectives suggest that morality encompasses both the internal qualities of the moral agent and the external realities of those affected by their actions. It is both a matter of “being” and “becoming” good through the development of character and “doing” good through responsive, relational engagement with others.

Moral responsiveness, drawing from Joan Tronto's (2013) application of an ethic of care refers to the capacity and willingness to recognize, interpret, and respond to the moral dimensions of a situation. It emphasizes attentiveness to the needs of others and the ability to adjust one's actions based on how those needs are experienced and expressed by care receivers. Viewed through an integrated lens that includes both ethics of care and virtue ethics, moral responsiveness is the expression of virtue in relational and contextual terms through individual action and systemic change.

Having outlined the KNN Framework for Flourishing and defined some central terms, we explore how current scholarship addresses tensions that challenge leaders' character and judgment along with reflective practices in higher education leadership. This literature review highlights the need for structured reflection tools that align with the KNN Framework's emphasis on character, caring, and practical wisdom. The review uncovers the ways in which tensions among individual, institutional, and societal goods are experienced by active and developing leaders. We then share three matrices of reflection questions designed to help leaders consider each of these goods through the elements needed for flourishing—character, caring, and practical wisdom. Finally, we introduce possibilities for a qualitative pilot study to explore how leaders engage with the reflection matrices with the goal of informing iterative refinement and guiding future research.

Understanding Ethical Tensions Through the Literature

To explore how reflection supports ethical leadership in higher education, particularly in navigating tensions between individual, institutional, and societal goods, we conducted a systematic literature review of scholarly articles and book chapters published between 2015 and

2025. Our aim was to understand how current scholarship conceptualizes reflection not just as a personal practice, but as a tool for ethical discernment in complex leadership contexts.

Using the search string “ethical leadership AND reflection AND higher education,” we searched Scopus, Web of Science, ERIC, and PubMed databases. This process yielded 66 unique entries. Each entry was initially screened by reviewing the abstract to assess its relevance to our guiding question: *How does reflection help leaders navigate ethical tensions across multiple socio-ecological systems?* Articles that appeared relevant were then read in full to determine their suitability for inclusion. Ultimately, we selected 15 articles that offered substantive engagement with reflection in the context of ethical leadership within higher education. This two-stage screening process allowed for a focused and rigorous selection of relevant sources.

The review found that undergraduate, graduate, and professional students are often the subject of articles, though reflective practices of active leaders in academia and other settings are also represented. However, rather than inquiry on the use of reflection, the articles concerning active leaders are more likely to provide narrative reflection of personal experience. For example, Forsyth et al. (2024) share their reflections on how their institution managed a restructuring initiative and their involvement in those changes. Hailu and Cox (2022) share personal reflections of black women in academic leadership. Donkers et al. (2021) rather than sharing reflections, argue that the practice is lacking among Dutch intensive care professionals and is needed to address moral distress. This distribution (see Table 1 in the appendix) suggests a strong emphasis on students as emerging leaders, with fewer studies examining reflective practices amid ethical tensions of those currently in leadership roles.

Having mapped the scope of the literature, we turn to a discussion of tensions that leaders navigate. Tensions often surface not only among types of goods (individual, institutional, and

societal) but also within them. Analyzing the literature through this lens illuminates the complex nature of ethical decision-making in which leaders attempt to balance personal values with institutional demands, negotiate power, and respond to societal pressures.

At the individual level, academic leaders often face tensions that arise from the internal conflict between personal integrity and professional ambition – internal and external goods as MacIntyre (2007) defines them. Illustrating this tension clearly, Hailu & Cox (2022) describe the difficult choice between acting with integrity and pursuing disciplinary status: “One of the most difficult choices I had to make as a department chair was to decide between being a leader of integrity regardless of what came my way or to focus on disciplinary status and my future” (p. 182). This candid reflection reveals the importance of self-awareness and willingness to confront uncomfortable trade-offs.

In addition to internal conflicts, individual goods often clash with institutional expectations. In their examination of the reflections of graduate students in a service-learning leadership course, Yamagata-Lynch et al. (2022) found that “Participants shared in their online discussions how difficult it can be to lead ethical behavior when others at work simply want to get the job done” (p. 200). This insight highlights the everyday challenges leaders face when ethical commitments conflict with workplace norms and the difficulty in integrating reflective practices into leadership routines when workloads are intense, and efficiency is a form of self-preservation. For example, Donkers et al. (2021) found that fatigue and a hectic work culture both contributed to lack of reflective practice among intensive care professionals.

For these reasons, reflection should be approached as a trainable skill that one can integrate into their regular routines rather than an isolated practice one must set aside separate time to use, a necessity rather than an elective. Hedberg (2017) notes that while faculty identify

values-driven pedagogy as the ideal for cultivating ethical behavior, their actual practices tend to default to compliance-driven approaches, suggesting a disconnect between personal convictions and institutional norms. When leaders habituate asking themselves questions to identify and consider the tension between intention and practice, they can develop stronger awareness of the power they both hold and cede.

The interplay between individual intentions and institutional norms highlights the reciprocal relationship between character and culture. Lumby (2019) and Ohlsson et al. (2020) each argue that reflection can help leaders avoid using power to manipulate others or rely on self-serving behavior. Lumby (2019) points out that leaders often distance themselves from their power to gain acceptance or respect but also warn that doing so without self-awareness can lead to unethical decision-making. They argue, “The often unconscious process of disavowal or blurring of power is entirely understandable and, in many ways, adaptive to the requirements of leading in higher education. However, working in the dark, without self-awareness, has obvious disadvantages. Without self-awareness, ethical choices cannot be made” (Lumby, 2019, p. 1626). Ohlsson et al. (2020) emphasize that navigating the “moral maze” of ethical tensions requires deliberate reflection of how leaders move between formal and informal institutional structures. Without it, leaders may misjudge the ethical dimensions of their influence, allowing structural pressures to override integrity despite good intentions.

At the societal level, reflection enables leaders to consider how their actions align with broader responsibilities. Harris (2020) critiques the influence of neoliberalism on educational leadership, arguing that leaders must move beyond managerial efficiency and engage in administrative action that serves the broader societal good. This call to challenge dominant systems requires more than technical skill. It demands reflective practice that helps leaders

recognize when institutional expectations conflict with responsibilities to society. It requires leaders to reflect on whether institutional preservation justifies the societal cost especially when advocating for marginalized communities or resisting political pressures. Schrier et al. (2024) reinforce this point, noting that many leaders are surprised to learn that ignoring others' values is itself unethical. Reflection, then, becomes a way to expand ethical awareness beyond personal or institutional interests to include civic and democratic responsibilities.

Forsyth et al. (2024) reinforce this by advocating for ethical infrastructure, such as climate surveys and individual dialogue, that supports leaders in making caring, inclusive decisions. These tools are not just procedural; they invite reflection on how institutional change affects individuals and communities. Reflection, in this context, becomes a way for leaders to weigh personal convictions against institutional constraints and societal needs, allowing for more thoughtful and principled action. Together, these scholars highlight that reflection is a critical tool for navigating the ethical tensions embedded in leadership.

The literature also identifies a variety of practices to cultivate reflection among emerging and practicing leaders. These practices include guided journaling, formal reflective writing, interviews, discussions, and experiential methods such as role-play, simulations, and case study evaluations. These practices serve not only to surface ethical tensions but to cultivate moral awareness. For example, Hedberg (2017) employed guided journaling and discussions to support student exploration of social identities, while Schrier et al. (2024) used simulations and reflective writing to prompt students to consider equity and democratic responsibility in fictionalized policy-making contexts. Table 2 (see appendix) summarizes the distribution of reflective practices across the reviewed literature.

While most of the studies mention the sort of reflections used, few detail the specific questions that guide the reflections. Hedberg (2017) stands out in this regard, offering a rich set of prompts that encourage learners to consider their moral development and the relational impact of their leadership. Similarly, Lvina (2025) offers a structured approach to reflection with several sets of questions to reflect on a team-based simulation, each drawing on philosophical traditions such as the theory of rights, Rawls' conceptualization of justice, and utilitarianism. Greater attention to guiding questions can help connect reflection to character, caring, practical wisdom, and flourishing across socio-ecological systems, prompting leaders to consider not only their actions, but the motivations that underlie them, how their decisions impact others, and what values drive them.

Building on insights from the literature, we propose three reflection matrices that operationalize concepts from the KNN Framework for Flourishing. Each matrix is designed to deepen reflective practices by guiding leaders to examine ethical tensions across socio-ecological contexts informed by the interconnected elements of the framework: character, caring, and practical wisdom toward flourishing.

Reflection Matrices for Leading with Character

We draw on the influential work of Killian & Todnem (1991), who introduced a widely adopted typology of reflection that includes three interrelated modes: reflection-in-action (reflecting during decision-making), reflection-on-action (reflecting on past experiences), and reflection-for-action (ongoing reflection to guide future decision-making). This typology has shaped decades of scholarship on reflective practice, particularly in education, where reflection is seen as a pathway to developing professional agency. Applying these categories to leader reflection extends their relevance and offers a structure through which leaders can learn to

regularly and continuously consider their agency, the values that guide them, and the virtues and dispositions upon which they rely. Through this training and habituation, reflection becomes more than a reactive tool; it becomes a discipline.

The reflection matrices we describe in this section provide templates for considering moral commitments and personal values during each of these practices. Grounded in the core elements of the KNN’s Framework for Flourishing, each matrix includes representative questions that prompt reflection on character, caring, practical wisdom, and flourishing within individual, institutional, and societal domains. To support both ethical development and moral responsiveness, concepts that differ in emphasis but converge in practice, the reflection matrices aim to help leaders navigate tensions that arise between internal character and external relational demands across socio-ecological systems.

Reflection-for-Action

The **reflection-for-action matrix** provides reflection questions that a leader can consider during times of relative calm, when a decision is not immediately necessary, and pressures are neutral or low. The questions in this matrix support leaders in cultivating a personal understanding of flourishing while also considering how their values shape institutional culture and societal outcomes.

Reflection-for-Action Reflection Matrix			
	Individual	Institutional	Societal
Character	How do I respond when my character is challenged or tested?	How does my personal character influence how I engage with institutional/departmental/program level decisions?	When have I acted with humility by offering space for others in the community with more knowledge or expertise to lead?

Caring	How will I remain open and responsive to feedback from those I aim to support or serve?	How do our systems or policies reflect care for faculty, staff, and students?	Who has historically been excluded from these conversations?
Practical Wisdom	Reflect on a difficult decision in which there were multiple ethical options. How was that decision made?	How am I supporting others in their ability to act wisely?	What are the particular needs, values, or lived experiences I must understand more fully before acting?
Flourishing	How do I define flourishing for myself, beyond productivity or achievement?	What institutional practices promote finding and meeting one’s meaning and purpose?	What does a flourishing society look like to me?

Reflection-in-Action

The **reflection-in-action matrix** is designed to support leaders while they are actively engaged in decision-making, particularly when those decisions carry significant ethical or institutional consequences. The challenge, of course, is that leaders often face significant time constraints and high pressure, making reflection feel impractical or impossible (Van Der Steen et al., 2025). One leader that Van Der Steen et al. (2025) interviewed commented that the demands on her time required her work to be limited to short, 30-minute meetings and that the hour and a half she was scheduled to spend talking about reflection with the interviewers would “probably be considered as an afternoon off” (p. 100). Her concern illustrates the pressures on leaders to consistently be in an active state of problem-solving and therefore a need to build reflection into their processes.

When reflection is woven into the fabric of daily leadership through brief pauses, structured check-ins, or reflective dialogue it can reduce the cognitive load of high-stakes decisions by clarifying values, surfacing assumptions, and fostering adaptive thinking. Research suggests that structured reflection strengthens metacognition and decision-making competence (Becker et al., 2023). In this way, reflection is not a luxury but a leadership competency.

The questions presented in the reflection-in-action matrix are designed to promote real-time awareness of one’s actions and how they will potentially resonate personally, within institutional culture, and in broader societal contexts. These prompts guide leaders to assess alignment with personal and institutional values as well as potential ripple effects beyond the institution with particular attention to impact on vulnerable groups. By fostering this multi-level awareness, the matrix helps leaders find grounding in their moral commitments even when time is limited. While it may seem difficult to engage in reflection under pressure, we posit that the matrix supports skill building and habit development through repeated use. Over time and with practice leaders will be able to activate it quickly.

Reflection-in-Action Reflection Matrix			
	Individual	Institutional	Societal
Character	What virtues are showing up in my leadership right now, and where might I lean in more?	How might this action shape and be shaped by the ethical culture of the institution?	How does this decision contribute to building trust?
Caring	Am I resisting the urge to act out of habit or convenience?	Am I fostering conditions where care is shared, not just delegated or expected?	How does the decision affect vulnerable populations?
Practical Wisdom	What habits or assumptions are surfacing, and how are they affecting my	How are my current choices reflecting both personal and shared values?	What societal norms or systems am I reinforcing or

	ability to respond wisely?		challenging through this decision?
Flourishing	Am I acting in ways that reflect what truly matters to me?	How does this decision potentially reflect or challenge institutional values?	How might this action affect the flourishing of others beyond my immediate context?

Reflection-on-Action

While reflection-in-action supports moral responsiveness in the moment, reflection-on-action allows leaders to critically evaluate their decisions and make sense of past choices with the goal of preparing themselves to act ethically in future situations. The questions in the **reflection-on-action matrix** are designed to deepen awareness and strengthen leadership accountability. This matrix provides opportunities for evaluative reflection in which leaders can look back on their actions and decisions to retrospectively assess their impact and meaning. The questions encourage leaders to consider not just outcomes but also the processes that were used and the relationships that were involved. Taken together, the three matrices reinforce the cyclical nature of reflective practices.

Reflection-on-Action Reflection Matrix			
	Individual	Institutional	Societal
Character	What assumptions did I make about the character virtues of others?	What long-term effects will this decision have on the institution? What precedents are we setting for future leadership?	Did this decision promote habits of integrity, courage, or compassion in the public sphere?
Caring	What caring actions did I take that may not have been visible to others, and how	What role did trust, dialogue, or collaboration play in	How did I consider the needs of others in this decision process (individuals,

	did they contribute to the project's integrity?	how needs were interpreted and met?	communities, society-at-large)?
Practical Wisdom	Are there subtle ways my usual ways of thinking or acting showed up in this situation? How did they help or hinder wise action?	How did my desire to conform to institutional or external norms influence the decision?	What trade-offs did I make to satisfy competing interests? How do I feel about the trade-offs?
Flourishing	In what ways did I prioritize my own goals and how did that impact others?	Whose purpose and meaning were centered in this action, and whose were overlooked?	Did I make space for others to express what matters most to them?

The three reflection matrices, reflection-for-action, reflection-in-action, and reflection-on-action, work together to support a dynamic, cyclical process of ethical leadership toward human flourishing. Reflection-for-action invites leaders to engage in intentional planning, aligning their values, goals, and anticipated impact with the needs of those they serve. Reflection-in-action supports responsiveness in the moment, enabling leaders to adapt with practical wisdom and relational attunement as situations unfold. Reflection-on-action, in turn, offers space for retrospective evaluation, allowing leaders to assess the outcomes, processes, and relational dynamics of their decisions. Taken together, these matrices cultivate a deeper awareness of how leadership practices contribute to or hinder flourishing. They also reinforce the reciprocal nature of flourishing as both shaped by and shaping the contexts in which people live and work.

The reflection matrices offer a theoretical scaffold for understanding how leaders engage with ethical complexity. Future research can build on this foundation by exploring how these

reflective processes can be operationalized in practice, how they intersect with power and positionality, and how they contribute to transformational change and flourishing cultures.

Future Directions: A Call for Reflective Practice and Research

While the guiding questions presented in this paper have not yet been empirically tested, their potential effectiveness can be understood through both theoretical grounding and practical plausibility. Rooted in virtue ethics and an ethic of care, these questions are designed to cultivate qualities consistently emphasized in the ethical leadership literature examined in the literature review: moral awareness, relational attentiveness, and thoughtful action. They do not prescribe specific outcomes but instead foster the conditions under which ethical discernment can occur.

The value of reflection itself is well-supported in scholarship. Reflection enables leaders to slow down reactive decision-making and interrogate assumptions. Last and Lillyman (2023) and Pool-Funai and Summers (2023) frame reflection as a core competency for ethical leadership, arguing that it is more than a personal habit but a transformative practice. Together, these guides offer theoretical support to reflection not only as educational tools but as a foundation for values-driven leadership.

The reflection question matrices we propose here extend these guides by connecting reflection explicitly to flourishing, character, caring, and practical wisdom across socio-ecological systems. Their effectiveness lies in their capacity to prompt deep personal and relational inquiry. These questions invite leaders to move beyond compliance or convenience and toward a more principled, ethically and relationally grounded approach to leadership. Tony Ghaye (2008) supports this view by presenting reflection as a practical tool for institutional transformation. His concept of participatory and appreciative action and reflection (PAAR)

aligns with the intention behind these guiding questions in that they offer a strength-based, collaborative approach. As he says, “If we change the questions we ask we have a chance to change the conversation we have with others” (Ghaye et al., 2008, p. 392). This insight invites further exploration into the questions leaders ask themselves and each other and how they can shift leadership culture and practice.

Despite widespread endorsement of reflection as a leadership competency, little is known about how structured tools such as these matrices shape reflective habits among active leaders. Future research should investigate not only the impact of the questions themselves but also how different orientations to reflection, such as open reflection, focused reflection, relational or collaborative reflection, and deep reflection shape and influence ethical reasoning. Understanding these variations can clarify how reflection becomes a habituated leadership practice, as different orientations may cultivate different habits of mind such as openness to dialogue or perspective taking. Researchers might also examine how the matrices function across varied institutional settings, exploring their influence on decision-making processes, leadership development, and institutional culture. Comparative studies across sectors and leadership levels could illuminate how context shapes the uptake and impact of reflective practices. Such studies would help clarify both the practical value and limitations of the matrices, offering guidance for their adaptation and implementation in real-world leadership development efforts.

Toward that end, we are considering a qualitative pilot study examining how leaders in academic medicine engage with the matrices both on a routine basis and when facing difficult institutional decisions. Participants from various levels of leadership could be invited to use the reflection matrices and share evaluative feedback on the overall approach and the specific

questions. This formative evaluation would be examined for themes to support iterative improvement of the matrices and generate recommendations for when and how to use them.

To be clear, we do not advocate for a utilitarian assessment of these reflection tools or judging the ethical value or moral underpinnings of leadership actions or consequences. In recognition that ethical, moral leaders will have reasonable disagreements, we propose instead that the matrices be examined for their impact on leader meta-awareness of the decision-making process and their agency within that process. Examples of useful research questions include the following:

- **Adoption and Integration:** Under what conditions do leaders use the matrices? What challenges do leaders encounter when attempting to integrate use of the matrices into their routines?
- **Experience and Impact:** How do leaders describe the experience and impact of reflecting while using the matrices as a guide? In what ways do leaders perceive the matrices as influencing their decision-making or leadership practices?
- **Influence on Reasoning:** How do leaders see the guiding questions shaping their ethical reasoning, relational awareness, and/or leadership identity? To what extent do leaders attribute changes in their reflective practices to the structure of the matrices or the individual questions?

Data sources such as recorded discussions, written reflections, and interviews could be analyzed to explore how leaders engage with the matrices and its questions as well as how they describe any influence of these tools on their reflective practices, their relational awareness, or their decision-making processes. An exploratory design would allow for a nuanced understanding of how participants experience the reflection process and how it can be habituated

over time. Insights from a pilot study could inform design principles for embedding reflective practices into leadership routines and developing a more robust research agenda.

Although further research is needed, the theoretical grounding of these matrices suggests that they hold promise as tools for fostering reflection on character and relational obligations to navigate complex tensions. Grounded in the KNN Framework for Flourishing, they encourage leaders to consider the role of character, caring, and practical wisdom in the promotion of flourishing across socio-ecological systems. Ultimately, the KNN Framework supports the cultivation of leaders who are morally responsive decision-makers. Future inquiry will build understanding of how these matrices shape reflective habits, character development, and moral reasoning. By advancing this work, we can move toward leadership cultures that promote self-awareness and prioritize thoughtful discernment in decisions that affect individuals, institutions, and society.

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Appendix 1: Literature Review Tables

Table 1: Distribution of Subjects in Literature Review	
Subject	Article
Undergraduate Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alvidrez et al. (2024) • Chunoo (2025) • GuramatunhuCooper & Headrick (2022) • Hedberg (2017) • Lvina (2025) • Schrier et al. (2024)
Graduate and Professional Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yamagata-Lynch et al. (2022) • Haritas & Harini (2025) • Harris (2020) • McDaniel et al. (2021)
Academic Leaders and Faculty	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forsyth et al. (2024) • Hailu & Cox (2022) • Lumby (2019)
Leaders in Other Professional Setting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Donkers et al. (2021) • Ohlsson et al. (2020)

Table 2: Distribution of Reflective Practices	
Reflective Practices	Articles
Guided Journaling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chunoo (2025) • Haritas & Harini (2025) • Hedberg (2017) • Schrier et al. (2024)
Formal Reflective Writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Alvidrez et al. (2024) • Hailu & Cox (2022) • Harris (2020) • McDaniel et al. (2021) • Schrier et al. (2024) • Yamagata-Lynch et al. (2022)
Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Forsyth et al. (2024) • Haritas & Harini (2025) • Hedberg (2017) • Lumby, J. (2019) • Ohlsson et al. (2020).
Discussion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chunoo (2025) • Harris (2020) • Hedberg (2017) • McDaniel et al. (2021).

	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Schrier et al. (2024)• Yamagata-Lynch et al. (2022)
Role Play/Simulations/Case Studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Chunoo (2025)• Harris (2020)• Schrier et al. (2024).