

Developing Moral Intelligence

OLLI Spring 2017—Kat Baker, PhD, kat@hopethroughhealinghands.org

RESOURCES

<http://ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu/video/intro-to-behavioral-ethics>

Prentice, Robert A. *Teaching Behavioral Ethics* (February 2, 2014). Journal of Legal Studies Education.

Linker, Maureen. *Intellectual Empathy: Critical Thinking for Social Justice*. University of Michigan Press, 2015.

SELF-REGULATION & BEHAVIORAL ETHICS

Daniel Goleman defines self-regulation, one of the capacities of emotional intelligence, as “controlling or redirecting disruptive emotions and impulses.” Understanding new research into behavioral ethics helps us further develop our self-regulation skills in the direction of moral intelligence. Robert Prentice, a professor at the University of Texas at Austin, states that this research demonstrates that context matters, “that people of good character, even if they are skilled at moral reasoning, may do bad things because they are subject to psychological shortcomings or overwhelmed by social pressures, organizational stresses, and other situational factors” (Prentice, 7). He explains:

When it seems to people that they are reasoning through to a conclusion regarding what is the moral course of action, often they are simply rationalizing a conclusion that the emotional parts of their brains have already reached. ...There is a mountain of evidence that people often make ethical judgments intuitively and nearly instantaneously ...and only later do the cognitive portions of their brains...activate. The cognitive centers may, but more commonly do not, overrule the judgment already made intuitively (Prentice, 9).

In other words, our emotions can lead us astray when we are unaware of their influence over us. Our cognitive centers become prone to errors, leading to misconceptions and biases that color our thinking. In *Intellectual Empathy*, Maureen Linker explains: “Cognitive biases are habits of thinking and reasoning that may make it easier to take in and organize information but may nevertheless get in the way of adequately assessing evidence and considering alternative points of view. Cognitive biases often serve to preserve our existing web of belief rather than making it more flexible and open to new sources of information” (Linker, 194). Some common biases are:

Confirmation Bias

A common bias whereby we seek out and pay attention to evidence that confirms our existing beliefs and ignore or discount evidence that disconfirms our existing beliefs. Confirmation bias is related to our tendency to be conservative with regard to significant changes in our belief systems (195). “The challenge...is how to maintain a coherent web [of belief] while still paying attention to information or experiences that may feel uncomfortable or unnecessary...Our tendency toward confirmation bias is a tendency to hold on not only to the content of our beliefs but also the emotions and expectations associated with those beliefs. And when it comes to our beliefs about social identities such as race, gender, sexual orientation, class, religion, etc., the interaction between content and emotion is strong and sometimes volatile. For this reason, these are some of the most difficult beliefs for us to examine critically and empathetically” (Linker, 38).

Obedience to Authority

The pleasure centers of human brains light up when they please authority. People are conditioned from childhood to please authority figures—parents, teachers, and the police officer down the block. It is well for societal order that people are generally interested in being obedient to authority, but if that causes them to suspend their own independent ethical judgment, problems can obviously result. Most worrisome is the subordinate who focuses so intently upon pleasing a superior that he or she doesn't even see the ethical issue involved because the ethical aspect of the question seems to fade into the background. Egil “Bud” Krogh, who worked in the Nixon White House and headed the “Plumbers Unit” as its members broke into the office of Daniel Ellsberg's psychiatrist, provides a good example. Krogh was so intent upon pleasing his superiors that he never activated his own independent ethical judgment. Only later, when people started being indicted, did Krogh look at what he had done through an ethical lens (Prentice, 21).

Conformity Bias

It is likely an evolutionarily sound strategy for people to take their cues for behavior from those around them, but they can take this too far, especially when they suspend their own independent ethical judgment and defer to the crowd. ...Peer pressure...is not only unpleasant, but can actually change one's view of a problem [by affecting the perception areas of the brain]. The carrot of belonging and the stick of exclusion are powerful enough to blind us to the consequences of our actions. People who join new workplaces look to their employees for cues as to appropriate work behavior, and unsurprisingly, if they perceive coworkers acting unethically, they will be more likely to do so themselves. When people believe that their peers are predominantly untruthful in a given situation, they often tend to be untruthful as well; dishonesty is contagious. When officials at the Petrified Forest attempted to discourage pilfering by posting a sign regarding the large amount of pilfering that was occurring, pilfering tripled because it now seemed the norm (Prentice, 22).

Rationalizations

In addition to biases, we must also regulate our strong tendency to rationalize our behavior. Prentice explains that "The human ability to rationalize is perhaps the single most important factor that enables good people to give themselves license to do bad things. Therefore, one of the best things we can do to preserve our moral intent is to monitor our own rationalizations." The six most common categories of rationalization are described by Prentice in the *Ethics Unwrapped* video series:

The first category is **denial of responsibility**, where we are consciously doing something unethical, but choosing to do it anyway because we can shift the responsibility to someone else, which substantially mitigates our feelings of guilt. So if you find yourself saying "I know this is wrong, but my boss has ordered me to do it," a little alarm should go off in your head warning you that you are about to go off the ethical rails.

The second category is **denial of injury**, where we consciously choose to do something wrong because the supposedly slight harm involved makes it not seem so bad. So, if you find yourself saying, "I know this is wrong, but shareholders have diversified portfolios, so no one will really be hurt by a small lie or a little earnings management," that alarm bell should go off again.

The third category is **denial of victim** where we choose to do something wrong because some fault we attribute to the victim makes it seem to us that the victim deserves the harm.

The fourth category is **social weighting** where we consciously choose to do something wrong, but by weighing our bad actions against those of people who do even worse things, we can make ourselves appear almost heroic...at least in our own eyes. So, if you find yourself saying, "I know this is wrong, but my competitors do stuff that is way worse," then you should realize you are about to make a big mistake.

The fifth category is the **appeal to higher loyalties**, where we consciously do something wrong, but justify doing it just this one time by elevating loyalty to our firm or our family to a preeminent position. So, if you find yourself saying: "I know this is wrong, but my company needs help," or, "I know this is wrong, but I have a family to feed," it is time to rethink.

Sixth and last...is the **metaphor of the ledger**. Here we do something that we know is wrong, but conclude that it is justified in this case, perhaps because of our perceived mistreatment at the hands of our victim.

This does not exhaust the categories of rationalizations, of course. But if you will practice monitoring your own rationalizations and talk out your difficult decisions with a trusted confidant who can call you on them, you increase your chances of leading an honorable life by preserving your moral intent. You will be less likely to write yourself an ethical "hall pass" if the little alarm bell in your head goes off when you hear yourself rationalizing.