Introduction to Behavioral Ethics
Questions for classroom discussions

1) When asked the vast majority of people will agree with the following two statements. Would you agree with them also?

- “I have solid, well-considered ethical beliefs that can be altered only by reasoned arguments or new evidence.”

- “I have character and integrity that will carry me though when I face difficult moral choices.”

2) Probably the strongest finding from the last decade’s research in behavioral ethics is that people simultaneously think of themselves as good people yet frequently lie and cheat (typically in a minor way). Is this consistent with your experience? Do you agree or disagree with the following statements from researchers in the field?

- “The empirical evidence seems to point to the conclusion that we lie and cheat much more often than we care to admit. At the same time, we strive to maintain a positive image of ourselves, and moral values are a central component of our self-image.” (Francesca Gino)

- “Essentially, we cheat up to the level that allows us to retain our self-image as reasonably honest individuals.” (Dan Ariely)

- “Evolution prepared us humans to be devious, self-serving, and only half-honest, inclined to grab the lion’s share of goodies without being thrown out of the group. Homo sapiens became wired for truthfulness only to the extent that it suited us, pleased others, and preserved our reputations. We are willing to break rules to benefit ourselves, but only within limits we can justify. We are good and fair, most of the time—at least in our own minds—but that doesn’t exactly make us straight shooters. … Our internal cop stops us only when we contemplated big transgressions.” (Mark Matousek)
3) Do these statements from the experts who research in the field of behavioral ethics change your mind about your answers to the questions in #1?

4) Most empirical research indicates that religiosity is not a significant factor in ethical behavior. Atheists and religious people tend to say that the same actions are ethical and unethical. And while religious people tend to give more money and time to their churches and synagogues, religious and nonreligious people otherwise have similar profiles in terms of altruism and volunteerism. Does this surprise you?

5) Have you known good people to do bad things? Either personally, or you've heard or read about episodes in the media?

6) If so, how would you explain their conduct?
Additional Teaching Note

This video introduces students to concepts explored in more detail in several other "Concepts Unwrapped" videos on the Ethics Unwrapped website, as well as in the documentary “In It to Win: The Jack Abramoff Story” and its accompanying short videos. Anyone who watches all or even a good part of these videos will have a pretty solid introduction to the concept of behavioral ethics.

Behavioral ethics is a new field drawing on behavioral psychology, cognitive science and related fields to determine why people make the ethical decisions, both good and bad, that they do. Much behavioral ethics research addresses the question of why good people do bad things.

Behavioral ethics may be the “next big thing” in ethics education. N.Y.U. recently asked Prof. Jonathan Haidt, whose research is a major part of the new learning in behavioral ethics, to create a behavioral ethics course there. And John Walsh, who helped create the Office of Compliance Inspections and Examinations at the SEC, recently wrote in Corporate Counsel that the “ultimate promise of behavioral ethics...is that it provides pragmatic tools that have been demonstrated to work.”

A detailed article with extensive resources for teaching behavioral ethics is Prentice, Robert. 2014. “Teaching Behavioral Ethics.” Journal of Legal Studies Education 31 (2): 325-365; and may be downloaded here:


Additional Resources


There are many new books on this general area. They include:


Transcript of Narration
Written by Professor Robert Prentice

Most people understand that ethics is important, but when they think of studying it, they conjure up visions of Aristotle or John Stuart Mill because ethics has traditionally been taught in philosophy departments. Or, they think of preachers giving sermons to build up the character of their parishioners.

These are important ways to think about ethics, but studies show that philosophers aren’t any more ethical than the rest of us, even though they are likely better at moral reasoning. And, it turns out, there is no strong correlation between traditional measures of character and ethical actions, which is why we constantly read in the newspaper about good people doing bad things.

The latest approach to teaching business ethics, which is highlighted in many of the short videos in this series, comes from the new field called behavioral ethics, which studies how and why people make the ethical (and unethical) decisions that they do. Behavioral ethics focuses in large part upon why well-intentioned people sometimes make bad decisions and do not live up to their own ethical standards.

Many psychological biases and decision-making heuristics (short-cuts) cause people to make unethical decisions in violation of their own standards. Sometimes these missteps are made consciously; more often they are made subconsciously. Organizational pressures that exist inside many firms and social pressures that are ubiquitous in society can also make it difficult for people to act ethically. The study of behavioral ethics largely focuses upon these situational factors which, the evidence indicates, can overwhelm a person’s character. For example consider:

- The Conformity Bias—which is the tendency people have to take their cues for proper behavior, including ethical behavior, from their peers rather than exercising their own independent ethical judgment.

- Role Morality—which is the tendency many people have to use different moral standards as they play different “roles” in society— for example, to take ethically questionable actions in their role as loyal employees at work to advance their company’s profit goals that they would never take at home to put money in their own pocket.
• The *Overconfidence Bias* – which is the tendency of people to be more confident than is objectively justified by their abilities and characteristics, including in their moral character and their ability to act ethically.

These concepts, and other covered in our series, certainly do not exhaust the ethical traps that our minds can lay for us, but they make a good start at warning people who sincerely want to act ethically about psychological biases and organizational pressures that may trip them up. This information should be very helpful to people who want to improve the ethicality of their decision making and actions, and to firms that wish to create environments in which their employees’ ethical decision making can flourish.