In It To Win: Jack & Moral Equilibrium

In It To Win: Jack & Moral Equilibrium introduces the concept of moral equilibrium, which is the tendency people have to keep a running scoreboard in their heads that compares their self-image as ethical people to their actual behavior. People who realize they have not lived up to their own standards often seek opportunities to make up for those departures (“moral compensation”), while people who have done something good and are running a surplus in their ethical account sometimes grant themselves permission to not live up to their own standards (“moral license”).

Questions for classroom discussions: In It To Win: Jack & Moral Equilibrium

1) Can you explain moral equilibrium in your own words? How does it affect moral decision-making?

2) How does moral equilibrium apply to Jack Abramoff? What examples from his story can you cite to support your argument?

3) Can you think of an example from your own life where you or someone else fell victim to moral equilibrium?

4) How might you anticipate and/or mitigate the effects of moral equilibrium in your own life or decision-making?
Additional Teaching Note

The instructional resources in this series include a feature documentary, *In It To Win: The Jack Abramoff Story* (25 minutes), and six short videos (approx. 5 minutes each) that concentrate on specific decision-making errors people tend to make, as illustrated by Jack Abramoff’s story.

These decision-making errors are part of a new field of study known as behavioral ethics, which draws on behavioral psychology, cognitive science, and related fields to determine why people make the ethical decisions, both good and bad, that they do. 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:


*In It To Win: The Jack Abramoff Story* draws from footage shot when Jack Abramoff visited The University of Texas at Austin campus in spring 2012 to talk about his experiences and his life as well as corrupt lobbying in Washington, which he is now dedicated to reforming. Jack Abramoff is not someone who just “doesn’t get” ethics; rather, he is a smart man, a family man, a religious man, and a man who thought he was one of the “good guys” as he battled for his clients. In retrospect, he can see where he went wrong and appears to regret his errors deeply. Why couldn’t he see it at the time?

Most obviously, this documentary exposes personal and systemic ethical concerns in government, business, and economics. But beyond those areas, it is also appropriate for use in courses on journalism, film, policy, American studies, history, law, communications, and psychology. The film explores the ethics of documentary film-making, the responsibility of the individual to organizations and communities, the relationship between law and ethics, issues of power and privilege, and above all, the potential pitfalls any ambitious person faces when operating within a hyper-competitive environment.

See the Transcript of *Moral Equilibrium* below (from our Concepts Unwrapped Series) for more on the concept of moral equilibrium.
Background on Jack Abramoff

During the Bush Administration, super-lobbyist Jack Abramoff was perhaps the most influential lobbyist in Washington D.C. His excesses led to his downfall and that of Congressmen with whom he was closely connected, including Tom Delay (R-Tex.) who left Washington in disgrace and Bob Ney (R-Ohio) who went to prison.

Because of the access that Abramoff had to members of the Bush administration and their allies, he was at the center of one of the most significant political scandals since Watergate. For more information about Jack Abramoff’s life and career, see his Wikipedia page: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jack_Abramoff.

Books about the scandal include Jack Abramoff’s own account, Capitol Punishment: The Hard Truth About Washington Corruption from America’s Most Notorious Lobbyist (WND Books, 2011) and an exposé from journalist Peter H. Stone, Heist: Superlobbyist Jack Abramoff, His Republican Allies, and the Buying of Washington (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006). Movies about the scandal include a documentary, Casino Jack and the United States of Money (Dir. Alex Gibney, 2010), and a dramatization starring Kevin Spacey, Casino Jack (Dir. George Hickenlooper, 2010).

Transcript of Moral Equilibrium (Concepts Unwrapped Series)
Written by Professor Robert Prentice

Over the years we’ve all seen high-profile televangelists and “family values” politicians involved in sex scandals. You might have also noticed numerous cases of embezzlement by employees of charitable organizations. How is it that seemingly good people can act so unethically?

One factor is a psychological phenomenon known as moral equilibrium. The basic idea is that most of us want and indeed need to think of ourselves as good people. We keep a sort of running scoreboard in our heads, comparing our mental image of ourselves as good people to our actual behavior.

When we act in ways that don’t live up to our own ethical standards, we tend to feel bad and look for ways to make up for it. So we might do good deeds in order to restore balance to our internal scoreboard. This is called moral compensation.
On the flip side, when we do something good, we add points to the plus side of our mental scoreboard, and we then may give ourselves permission to fail to meet our own ethical standards. This is called moral licensing.

Moral compensation and moral license are the two components of moral equilibrium. Moral licensing is the scary one. It is what allows TV evangelists, family values politicians, and people who work for charities to start telling themselves how wonderful they are, and then to give themselves permission to depart from their own ethical standards. Importantly, these people don’t even realize how their past actions are affecting their current decisions.

One study asked two groups of people to write about themselves. The first group wrote about something they did that they were NOT proud of, and the second group wrote about something they did that they WERE proud of. Afterwards, both groups were asked to donate to charity or to volunteer.

The first group donated more to charity and volunteered more than the second group. The first group – bad deeds fresh in their mind – was engaged in moral compensation. The second group – focused on their own goodness – was practicing moral license.

There are many more studies on moral equilibrium, and they all make the same point: don’t get cocky! Just when you’re feeling especially good about yourself, you’re most in danger of giving yourself license to screw up.