Being Your Best Self, Part 1: Moral Awareness Questions for classroom discussions

1. It was Albus Dumbledore in *Harry Potter* who said “You see what you expect to see, Severus.” Can you think of a situation where that has been true for you and perhaps caused you to miss something important?

2. Watch Daniel Simons’ videos on selective attention, such as: 
   

   What did these videos tell you about selective attention?

3. Would you agree that if you have your ethical antennae up that you will be more likely to detect an ethical issue you face than if you are focusing completely on pleasing your boss, being part of your team, or perhaps meeting a production quota? What does that tell you about how you have to approach your job if you wish to be a moral person?

4. Who should be primarily responsible for keeping ethical considerations in your frame of reference as you make decisions in the workplace? Your boss? Or you? Why?

5. If you do not see the ethical dimensions of a question that you must resolve and you are fortunate enough to accidentally make the correct ethical choice, have you really acted ethically?

6. Think about the last time that your gut told you not to do something. Was it right or wrong?

7. For one of the people in the video, relying on her gut failed her in matters of personal relationships. For another, relying on his gut helped him reach the right solution regarding the identity of a car bomber. What lessons can we draw from these two experiences?

8. Has the desire, articulated by one of the speakers in the video, to trade future pain for present happiness ever caused YOU to do something unwise? Something immoral?
Case Study: Teaching Blackface: A Lesson on Stereotypes

In 2014, Alan Barron, a white middle school history teacher in Michigan, was placed on administrative leave because of a history lesson that his administration viewed as racist. While teaching about racial segregation laws during the Jim Crow era, Barron played a video showing a white entertainer in blackface. During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, white actors commonly painted their faces with makeup to depict black individuals. Barron explained that the purpose of the video was to show how stereotypes of African-Americans were portrayed at one point in American history. During the lesson, an assistant principal who was observing the classroom demanded that Barron stop the video because she “concluded that Barron’s lesson about how entertainers used to be racist was itself racist.” Barron was subsequently suspended.

Many parents spoke out against Barron’s suspension. Adrienne Aaron, whose African-American daughter was in Barron’s eighth grade history class at the time, said that her daughter was not offended by the lesson and thought that the subject needed to be discussed. Aaron stated, “[My daughter] was more offended that they stopped the video...History is history. We need to educate our kids to see how far we’ve come in America. How is that racism?”

After two weeks on leave, the district allowed Barron to return to his classroom and the superintendent stated, “The teacher in question was placed on paid leave to give the district time to fully consider what occurred in this classroom. As a result of incorrect information, a highly respected and loved teacher, and one who has done much for his students and community, has had to endure a public airing of what should have ended through a district discussion.”
Resources:

Middle School Teacher Suspended For Showing Video About White Actors Wearing Blackface
http://news.yahoo.com/middle-school-teacher-suspended-showing-video-white-actors-122027921.html

Monroe teacher suspended over black history lesson

Community comments on Facebook
https://www.facebook.com/monroenews/posts/10152456292741692

Do’s and Don’ts of Teaching Black History
http://www.tolerance.org/article/dos-and-donts-teaching-black-history

Monroe teacher reinstated after segregation lesson

Discussion Questions:

1) Do you think Mr. Barron was demonstrating moral awareness or a lack of moral awareness by showing the video of the minstrel show? Explain your position.

2) Do you agree with the assistant principal’s decision to shut down the video during the observation? Was she demonstrating moral awareness or lack of moral awareness? Explain your position.

3) Should Mr. Barron have warned his students that some of them could have been offended by the racism portrayed in the video? Why or why not? Is it ever necessary for teachers to provide disclaimers about content that they use in their classrooms?

4) Should teachers be prevented from showing examples (books, films, photos, etc.) of historical events and/or practices that are considered racially insensitive by today’s standards? Why or why not?

5) What do you think is the best way to teach about stereotypes? Is it possible to do this without offending someone?

6) Many people viewed political correctness as the main issue of this case. Can you think of an example in which political correctness promoted ethical behavior? How about an example in which political correctness led to unethical behavior?
Additional Teaching Note

*Moral Awareness* is the first video of a four-video package that addresses how people can be their best selves. No one will ever be perfect. The research derived from behavioral ethics (much of which is illustrated in various Ethics Unwrapped videos) demonstrates how cognitive biases, social and organizational pressures, and situational factors can make it difficult for even well-meaning people to act as ethically as they would like. Behavioral ethics often focuses on why good people do bad things. But that same research also gives guidance as to how people can come closer to living up to their own standards. That is the purpose of this four-video suite, Being Your Best Self.

Looking at the entire process, it seems sensible to conclude that a person who wishes to act ethically must (a) recognize ethical issues when he or she runs across them (moral awareness), (b) have the ability to reach a defensible resolution of the question as to what is the right thing to do in that setting (moral decision making), (c) desire to do the right thing (moral intent), and, finally (d) be able to act on that intent (moral action). The four videos in this package address these four aspects of leading a moral life. As the video notes, these four steps were originally enunciated by Professor James Rest and colleagues, although we have adapted them slightly.

Moral awareness is the first step to acting ethically. If in their personal or professional lives people do not realize when they face an issue that it has ethical dimensions, they may act unethically without even realizing it. The most significant problem here is attentional. People can become so focused on pleasing the boss, on being part of the team, on reaching bonus or production goals that the ethical dimensions of an issue can fade from view. Our Concepts Unwrapped video on Ethical Fading makes that point. So does our video on Moral Myopia. Our videos on framing are also relevant (one in Concepts Unwrapped and also Jack & Framing in Cases Unwrapped) because how people frame issues they face heavily influences the decisions they will make. If people do not keep ethics in their frame of reference, they may frame every decision as simply a dollars and cents question, and that can lead to disaster (as Jack Abramoff found out).
People realize that they will, throughout their professional lives no matter what their profession, have to stay current regarding the theories, facts, and procedures that are important in their profession. Auditors must learn the latest auditing standards. Lawyers must keep up to date on new case law. Physicians must stay abreast of the latest medical research, and so on. What people often do not realize, however, is that being prepared to act ethically every day is just as important as knowing their profession’s latest technical standards. Some organizations will constantly remind their employees to act ethically. But others will not. Indeed, some organizations may pound away at profit or production goals every day, paying little or no heed to legal or ethical constraints. That is why it is every person’s individual responsibility to keep ethics in their frame of reference when evaluating decisions that must be made. Unless people pay attention, they may conclude that a plan of action is the right thing to do because it helps their firm meet production goals without even considering whether that plan of action violates the law or will adversely impact people outside the company.

So, people must intentionally and consciously try to always keep ethical issues in their frame of reference. But they should also remember that they are hard-wired to make ethical judgments in certain settings and should never ignore (though sometimes they may ultimately decide to override) “gut feelings” that can be a hint that the intuitive system of their brains spots an ethical issue that their conscious mind may have overlooked.

Having students watch Daniel Simons’ videos on selective attention is a fun way to illustrate the point that people tend to see what they expect to see and tend not to see those things that they are not looking for. Here is his personal website that can lead you to his other materials: http://www.dansimons.com
Additional Resources


Transcript of Narration

Written and Narrated by Professor Robert Prentice

Many of the Concepts Unwrapped videos use the research generated by the new field of behavioral ethics to illustrate how difficult it can be to do the right thing, even for people who are “good folks.” A desire to please authority or to fit in with the group may cause people to act inconsistently with their own moral values. The slippery slope can cause people to fail to notice lapses in moral judgment made by themselves or others. The list goes on, but the underlying lesson is clear: It’s not easy to always be a good person, even if you want to be.
But behavioral ethics can also give us guidance as to how to act more ethically and induce others to do so too. According to Professor James Rest, there are four key steps to acting ethically, which we have modified slightly. First, people must perceive the ethical dimensions of an issue that they face. This is Moral Awareness. Second, they must have the ability to decide upon a course of action that is ethical. This is Moral Decision Making. Third, they must have the desire to act on that ethical decision. This is known as Moral Intent. Fourth and finally, they must have the motivation and courage to act upon that desire, which we call Moral Action. This video explores the first step to your best self, which means developing Moral Awareness.

Absent moral awareness, people might accidentally make the “right” choice, but they might also accidentally make an unethical choice because they are focusing upon other aspects of the decision calculus and inadvertently omitting any ethical considerations.

Studies on selective attention prove that people generally see what they expect to see. If you focus too much on pleasing your boss, on getting along with your co-workers, on meeting sales quotas or bonus targets, you may not even see an ethical issue which is right there in front of you. The phenomenon that Professors Bazerman and Tenbrunsel call “ethical fading” and Drumwright and Murphy call “moral myopia,” can blind all of us to ethical miscues if we are not careful.

It is our responsibility, as people who wish to live ethical lives, to keep ethics in our frame of reference. We can do so by reminding ourselves every morning in the shower that we wish to be good people and that to meet that goal we must constantly strive to act ethically just as we must constantly strive to gain more knowledge and skill regarding the technical aspects of our jobs. Looking out for ethical minefields is part of our personal and professional responsibility every day.

Behavioral ethics teaches that we must practice listening to our moral intuition—to our gut—rather than turning all ethical discussions into legalistic exercises like lawyers weighing both sides of the issue or accountants parsing technical language in an attempt to justify a position that intuition tells them is wrong. Our gut instinct is not always right, but we would be foolish to ignore it. Psychologists DeSteno and Valdesolo say this: “When faced with a moral decision, take a few seconds to pause and listen to your inner voices. Is there a hint of guilt, a hint of shame, a gut feeling of unease? If so, don’t ignore it.” This is your moral awareness awakening.

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