Being Your Best Self, Part 3: Moral Intent
Questions for classroom discussions

1. Do you want to be the sort of person who does the right thing? Why or why not?

2. Most people want to be “good” people, yet often do things, typically minor, of which they are not proud and would not want others to know about because their actions would reflect poorly on their character. How does this happen?

3. Think of something that one of your friends, family or acquaintances did recently that you view as wrong. What rationalizations did they give for their actions?

4. Think of something you have done that you now believe was wrong. What rationalizations did you give yourself at the time?

5. Watch the Ethics Unwrapped video Jack and Rationalizations and explain how his rationalizations do or do not line up with the categories of rationalizations compiled by Anand, Ashforth, and Joshi mentioned in this video.

6. Think about a recent scandal where a business person or politician or sports figure did something unethical. Then imagine what rationalizations that person might have used to give himself or herself permission to act immorally.

7. DeSteno wrote: “Ayn Rand had it right when she said, ‘Rationalization is a process of not perceiving reality, but of attempting to make reality fit one’s emotions.’ We humans possess a strong, innate desire to view ourselves as competent and upstanding, meaning that when we fail ourselves in some way, we tend, consciously or not, to explain it away.” Do you agree? Why or why not?

8. In the 1980s movie, The Big Chill, the character played by Jeff Goldblum said: “I don’t know of anyone who can get through the day without two or three juicy rationalizations. Rationalizations are more important than sex.” Do you agree? Why or why not?

9. Have you ever mistreated someone or allowed someone else to do so because you didn’t like them?

10. Have you ever done something that you know in retrospect that you shouldn’t have but you did it because you wanted to help out a friend, a family member, or an organization you belonged to?
Case Study: Christina Fallin: “Appropriate Culturation?”

In March 2014, twenty-seven year old Christina Fallin, daughter of Oklahoma Governor Mary Fallin, found herself at the center of controversy when she posted an image of herself wearing a red Plains headdress on Facebook and Instagram with the tag “Appropriate Culturation.” Fallin posed for this photo as a promotional piece for her band, Pink Pony. Public outcry criticized Fallin for appropriating Native American cultures, sparking uproar on social media and leading to protests at their shows.

In response, Fallin and Pink Pony removed the photo and released a statement on their Facebook page explaining their aesthetic appreciation for Native American culture. Fallin told the Indian Country Today Media Network that, “I think Native American culture is the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen, so I was naturally drawn to it.” Musician Wayne Coyne of The Flaming Lips became involved in the issue when he fired bandmate Kliph Scurlock for criticizing Fallin online. To show his support for Fallin, Coyne posted Instagram photos of several friends and a dog wearing headdresses.

Some argue that Fallin’s photo could be an example of artistic appropriation. Throughout history, artists have borrowed objects and images from everyday life as well as other cultures in order to re-contextualize the object in a new manner. On the other hand, some argue that non-Native Americans do not have the right to adorn a headdress at all. Taking a sacred or meaningful object out of context is problematic even when touted as “art.” Summer Morgan, member of the Kiowa tribe in Oklahoma, believes that Fallin may have had good intentions, but there are better ways to express her appreciation of Native American cultures. Morgan believes that headdresses are not fashion accessories. Following Kiowa tradition, only men can own war bonnets and each feather represents a war deed. Female relatives may be given the right to wear a male relative’s war bonnet, but only after they understand what’s expected of them when they wear it, how to treat it properly, and when it is acceptable to wear.
Resources:

The Most Interesting Governor’s Daughter in the Country

The Daughter of Oklahoma’s Governor Caused an Uproar After She Posed in a Headdress for her Indie Band

Oklahoma Governor’s Daughter Mocks Native American Protesters with ‘War Dance’

Native Americans React to Christina Fallin’s Fake War Dance Performance

Christina Fallin, in Her Own Words: ‘I’m Tired of the Misinformation’
http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2014/05/02/christina-fallin-her-own-words-im-tired-misinformation-154690

Oklahoma Gov’s Daughter: A Woman in a Headdress is ‘a Beautiful Thing’
http://indiancountrytodaymedianetwork.com/2014/03/07/oklahoma-govs-daughter-woman-headdress-beautiful-thing-153915

When Friends Disagree: Debate over Native American Mascot

Discussion Questions:

1) Did Christina Fallin do something ethically prohibited in posing in a war bonnet? Does it make a difference that she claims to love and respect Native American culture? Fallin wrote, “Please forgive us if we innocently adorn ourselves in your beautiful things.” Do you view her act as innocent or not?

2) How should educators teach students about cultures other than their own? Do you think it is possible to avoid perpetuating stereotypes of other cultures?

3) What if Fallin’s record label asked her to pose in the war bonnet to gain publicity for her music? Would it make a difference if this were simply a business decision to sell records?

4) Would it make a difference if the photographer of this image intended to hang it in a gallery as “art?” What if the goal of the artist was to make viewers mad or uncomfortable? What if the artist created this image as a way to engage viewers in critiquing both Native American and non-Native American cultures?

5) Is cultural appropriation always a bad thing? Why or why not?
Additional Teaching Note

*Moral Intent* is the third of a four-video package that addresses how people can be their best selves. As noted in other teaching notes, 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.

Even if a person sees the ethical aspects of a decision and has the philosophical tools to make the right choice, he or she still needs to want to do the right thing. If a person has no moral intent, then moral awareness and moral decision making are useless. One to two percent of Americans are probably psychopaths who don’t care about doing the right thing (Babiak & Hare), but most everybody else does.

One of the most significant findings in behavioral ethics research in the past ten years is that most people wish to (and do) think of themselves as being ethical and yet, at the same time, they often (daily, if not more often) lie a little or cheat a little to get what they want. How do people who want to be good give themselves permission to be bad? There are many reasons, but the human ability to rationalize is one of the most significant factors. Joshua Greene has written that “Rationalization is the great enemy of moral progress.”

In the teaching note on moral decision making, we noted DeSteno’s study where 100% of people thought the right thing to do was to flip the coin, but 90% did not do so but thought that what they did was just fine. How did they manage that contradiction? According to DeSteno, it was their ability to rationalize. “This tendency to delude ourselves—to rationalize our own untrustworthy behavior—is a finding that’s quite robust, having been replicated both by us and by others many times.”

Rationalizations tend to fall into familiar categories. We all use rationalizations and see others use them on a daily basis. Students generally have no difficulty in spotting rationalizations used by others and, when pressed, will usually own up to their own.
We need to keep our eye on our colleagues and call them out when they use rationalizations to give themselves excuses to fail to do the right thing. But we must also monitor our own rationalizations, which is easier to do if we are familiar with the most common ones.

Ethics Unwrapped’s videos on the **Self-Serving Bias** and **Conflict of Interest** are nice complements to this video.

**Additional Resources**


Moral Intent is the third step in being your best self. Most people wish to think of themselves as good people, but they also desire the benefits that can come with acting unethically. Therefore, substantial empirical evidence indicates that most people on most days lie a little and cheat a little. As psychologist Dan Ariely points out, we tend to lie and cheat, but only up to the level that allows us to retain our self-image as reasonably honest individuals. 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. Professors Anand, Ashforth and Joshi studied the most common rationalizations and placed them into six categories.

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 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 in Anand and colleagues’ categorization 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.