Being Your Best Self, Part 4: Moral Action Questions for classroom discussions

1. Can you think of a situation where you wanted to do the right thing, but found yourself unable to do it? What prevented you from acting according to your values?

2. Can you think of a situation where it was difficult to do the right thing, but you managed to do it? What factors were present that enabled you to live up to your values?

3. Can you imagine an ethically-tinged problem that you may run into in your future personal or professional life? How do you hope that you will respond when you encounter that problem?

4. What does it mean to take “moral ownership”? Can you think of a situation where you took moral ownership? And of one where you did not?

5. How does a person go about deciding how and when to take moral ownership?

6. Which of Ethics Unwrapped’s Giving Voice to Values videos resonated most strongly with you?

7. What do you think of the “liked versus respected” dichotomy suggested by one of the people interviewed for the video?

8. Have you had the courage to lose a job or something else that was valuable, as did one of the interviewees who forfeited a teaching job for the sake of integrity? How did he summon the courage?
Case Study: High Stakes Testing

Since the enactment of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB), some parents, teachers, and administrators have taken their own stand against something that they believe is harmful for public education and American children: high stakes testing. Under NCLB, every child in the U.S. must achieve proficiency in reading and math. While each state can determine its own level of proficiency, a child’s ability to advance to the next grade level, and even graduate from high school, hinges on passing a standardized test. Across the U.S., children in minority communities have been more likely not to receive a diploma due to low-test scores on mandated exams.

Assessment has many benefits. Advocates of large-scale assessments claim that it is an objective and fair measure of student achievement. Results show how students, or groups of students, measure up against one another and broader standards. Ideally, all children throughout the country will receive an equal education, and testing can help educators target where instructional improvements are necessary. Sonja Brookins Santelises, Vice President of K-12 Policy and Practice for the Education Trust, acknowledges that there is too much rote test preparation, but argues that we must work together to reduce the achievement gap among student populations. The founder of nonprofit organization StudentsFirst and former Chancellor of D.C. Public Schools, Michelle Rhee, also sees standardized testing as a means to reduce this gap. She states, "It’s not inconceivable for a student to be receiving all A’s and B’s on her report card but still be stuck far behind her peers in other districts and states across the country. And without standardized testing, that child’s parents, teachers and principal would have no idea."

Opponents, however, firmly believe that high stakes testing is problematic and even ruinous to our educational system. There is no research to corroborate that standardized testing, a multi-billion dollar industry controlled by three large U.S. corporations, is effective. Teachers complain that they are forced to “teach to the test,” leaving little or no time for subjects that are not tested, such as art, social studies, and science. Parent and former teacher Edy Chamness founded a Facebook group in 2011 to rally parents in her community to protest against school accountability and standardized testing requirements. Other parents, including Maeve Siano of Celina, Texas, similarly felt that the preparation and stress associated with testing were more likely to damage her son than help him. Celina Superintendent Donny O’Dell stated, “Our country was basically founded on rebellion, so to speak. So I don’t hold that against any of these parents, but we as educators have to do what we have to do...and we need some form of accountability.”
Resources:

Testing, Assessment, and Excellence
http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/schools/testing/merrow.html

Is the Use of Standardized Tests Improving Education in America?
http://standardizedtests.procon.org/

High Stakes Testing
http://www.education.com/reference/article/high-stakes-testing1/

Crash Test
http://www.texasmonthly.com/story/crash-test/

Standardized test backlash: More parents pull kids from exams as protest

Testing the Limits: A Texas Mother’s Radical Revolt Against Standardized Tests
http://www.texasobserver.org/mother-against-standardized-testing/

Michelle Rhee: Opting out of standardized tests? Wrong answer.

Discussion Questions:

1) What is your view on the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001? What is your view on standardized testing in particular?

2) If you were a teacher or administrator who disagreed with standardized testing, but would be at risk of losing your job if you acted on your beliefs, what would you do?

3) Many detractors of standardized testing argue that it is ruining education and is a detriment to our children. Did Edy Chamness demonstrate moral action by opting her child out of testing? How so or how not?

4) Many supporters of standardized testing argue that education needs some form of accountability, without which we would be failing our children. Do you think districts that enforce standardized testing are demonstrating moral action? Why or why not?

5) Whose responsibility is it to determine what students should learn and how they should be assessed? Defend your position.
Additional Teaching Note

*Moral Action* is the fourth 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 people are aware of ethical issues they encounter, are able to determine the correct choice to make in responding to the issue and truly wish to do the right thing, they still may not be able to convert that awareness, decision-making ability, and intent into action. Sometimes people fail to do the right thing even though they know what it is and want to do it.

The gold standard for teaching people to convert their ethical choices into ethical action is Mary Gentile’s *Giving Voice to Values* (GVV) program. Her book is excellent. The GVV website is awash with useful materials.

http://www.babson.edu/Academics/teaching-research/gvv/Pages/home.aspx

Ethics Unwrapped is delighted to have eight *Giving Voice to Values* videos that embody the essence of Dr. Gentile’s GVV program. This *Moral Action* video is not nearly as complete as the GVV videos and draws substantially from them.

Discussion questions two and three are drawn from the GVV materials. It is enlightening for students to consider the factors that might make it difficult to act on their values in one setting but relatively easier in another. Which of those factors might they control? How might they address the ones they don’t control in order to change them so that acting becomes easier?

Many students may be able to conjure up situations where *by themselves* they were able to change the trajectory of a situation. Often times, bosses and colleagues are making poor ethical choices because of the self-serving bias, or incrementalism, or any number of other behavioral factors that can cause poor decision making. It is not because they actively wish to do the wrong thing. By simply pointing out the error of their ways, just one person can often change the consensus.
Additional Resources


Transcript of Narration
Written and Narrated by Professor Robert Prentice

Even if you are aware of an ethical issue, correctly select a defensible ethical choice, and have the desire to do the right thing, you may still be unable to translate all that into moral action. Professor Hannah and his colleagues argue that it takes three things to turn moral intent into moral action, and those are moral ownership, moral efficacy, and moral courage. Fortunately, the teachings of behavioral ethics can bolster all three.

We take moral ownership when we feel a sense of psychological responsibility over the ethical nature of our own actions and of those around us. To create moral ownership, we must battle the forces that cause ethical blindness and moral myopia. All the behavioral-based advice given in other videos as to how we can avoid ethical fading, make ethical choices, and ratchet up our moral intent should assist us in increasing our moral ownership.

Moral efficacy is a belief in our ability to act ethically and to induce others to do so in the face of moral adversity. Often people have an abstract desire to do the right thing, but just don’t feel empowered to resist all the forces of authority, conformity and the like that can make it difficult to do so. But we must remember what’s been called the “power of one.” Although it is natural for us to feel isolated and lonely and therefore believe that we can’t possibly have an impact, evidence shows that often a single, ordinary person can make a difference. Our bosses and coworkers may just be looking at things the wrong way and, if given a couple of
good reasons to change their minds, would do so. And that ability to persuade, can create a feeling of moral efficacy. Sometimes others may not have the courage to lead, but would have the courage to follow.

Mary Gentile read more than a thousand essays by Columbia University MBA applicants who had been asked to write about whether they had in their professional lives been asked to do something that made them ethically uncomfortable and how they had dealt with the situation. Almost all of the applicants had faced a difficult ethical situation. A little more than half just did what they had been asked to do, even though it seemed wrong to them. They didn’t feel they had a choice. About ten percent had the courage to just walk out the door rather than get stuck in an unethical culture. Of the rest, a small group tried to do the right thing and failed, but most tried to do the right thing and succeeded! They found that if they just made a forceful case for their ethical position, they often won over their bosses and co-workers.

Finally, moral courage is necessary to translate moral decisions into moral action. Late ethicist Rushworth Kidder defined moral courage as “a commitment to moral principles, an awareness of the danger involved in supporting those principles, and a willing endurance of that danger.” We may want to do the right thing, but be too timid to stand up to our superiors or peers. Or, perhaps we lack the courage to risk the loss of our job. How can we muster moral courage?

Professor Gentile recommends that, first, we should all be thrifty and set aside “go to hell” funds. It will obviously be easier for us to screw up the courage to do the right thing when we have set aside money to pay living expenses while we look for another job than if we owe money all over town.

Second, Gentile recommends that we should visualize and accept the fact that part of our professional journey will likely involve facing ethical dilemmas that will require us to make sacrifices in order to have the type of career, and consequently the type of life, of which we can be proud. By anticipating or normalizing the idea that we may have to take career-threatening risks in order to preserve our integrity, we expand our vision of what we are capable of. We can, in fact, do what is necessary to be our best selves.