

Being Your Best Self, Part 1: Moral Awareness

This video introduces the behavioral ethics concept known as moral awareness. Moral awareness is the ability to detect and appreciate the ethical aspects of a decision that one must make. Moral awareness is the first step to acting ethically. If in their personal or professional lives people do not recognize the ethical dimensions of an issue they face, 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, or producing goals that the ethical dimensions of an issue can fade from view.

Every person has the responsibility to keep ethics in his or her 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.

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 “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.

This video is the first of a four-video package that addresses how people can be their best selves. Looking at the entire process, it seems sensible to conclude that a person who wishes to act ethically must (1) recognize ethical issues when he or she runs across them (this video, *Moral Awareness*); (2) have the ability to reach a defensible resolution of the question as to what is the right thing to do in that setting (see *Moral Decision Making*); (3) desire to do the right thing (see *Moral Intent*); and finally, (4) be able to act on that intent (see *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 they have been adapted slightly in these four videos.

To learn about related behavioral ethics concepts, watch *Ethical Fading* and *Moral Myopia*.

This case study on this page, “Teaching Blackface: A Lesson on Stereotypes,” illustrates the importance of moral awareness when teaching about stereotypes and history. For a case study about how a young lawyer’s lack of moral awareness led to his role in the Watergate break-in, read “Krogh & the Watergate Scandal.”

Behavioral ethics draws upon behavioral psychology, cognitive science, evolutionary biology, and related disciplines to determine how and why people make the ethical and unethical decisions that they do. Much behavioral ethics research addresses the question of why good people do bad things. Many behavioral ethics concepts are explored in detail in *Concepts Unwrapped*, as well as in the video case



study *In It to Win: The Jack Abramoff Story*. Anyone who watches all (or even a good part) of these videos will have a solid introduction to behavioral ethics.

Discussion Questions

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: youtu.be/vJG698U2Mvo or youtu.be/FWSxSQsspiQ — 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?

Additional Resources

Bazerman, Max H., and Ann E. Tenbrunsel. 2011. *Blind Spots: Why We Fail to Do What’s Right and What to Do about It*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Chabris, Christopher, and Daniel Simons. 2009. *The Invisible Gorilla: How Our Intuitions Deceive Us*. New York: Crown Publishers.

Drumwright, Minette E., and Patrick E. Murphy. 2004. “How Advertising Practitioners View Ethics: Moral Muteness, Moral Myopia, and Moral Imagination.” *Journal of Advertising* 33 (2): 7-24.

Gino, Francesca. 2013. *Sidetracked: Why Our Decisions Get Derailed, and How We Can Stick to the Plan*. Boston: Harvard Business Review Press.

Johnson, Mark. 1993. *Moral Imagination: Implications of Cognitive Science for Ethics*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Kahneman, Daniel. 2011. *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

For resources on teaching behavioral ethics, an article written by Ethics Unwrapped authors Minette Drumwright, Robert Prentice, and Cara Biasucci introduces key concepts in behavioral ethics and approaches to effective ethics instruction—including sample classroom assignments. The article, published in the *Decision Sciences Journal of Innovative Education*, may be downloaded here: [“Behavioral Ethics and Teaching Ethical Decision Making.”](#)

A detailed article by Robert Prentice with extensive resources for teaching behavioral ethics, published in *Journal of Legal Studies Education*, may be downloaded here: [“Teaching Behavioral Ethics.”](#)

An article by Robert Prentice discussing how behavioral ethics can improve the ethicality of human decision-making, published in the *Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics & Public Policy*, may be downloaded here: [“Behavioral Ethics: Can It Help Lawyers \(And Others\) Be their Best Selves?”](#)

A dated but still serviceable introductory article about teaching behavioral ethics can be accessed through Google Scholar by searching: Prentice, Robert A. 2004. “Teaching Ethics, Heuristics, and Biases.” *Journal of Business Ethics Education* 1 (1): 57-74.

Transcript of Narration

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“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.”