

Being Your Best Self, Part 3: Moral Intent

This video introduces the behavioral ethics concept known as moral intent. Moral intent is the desire to act ethically when facing a decision and overcome the rationalization to not be ethical “this time.” 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 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, 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. We all use rationalizations and see others use them on a daily basis. 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. For a closer look at rationalizations, watch *GVV Pillar 7: Reasons & Rationalizations* and *In It to Win: Jack & Rationalizations*.

This video is the third 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 (see *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 (this video, *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 *Moral Equilibrium* and *Moral Imagination*.

The case study on this page, “Christina Fallin: “Appropriate Culturation?”,” examines the intentions of a musician after she posted a controversial picture on social media and was criticized of cultural appropriation. For a case study about how rationalizations can impede one’s own intentions, read “Abramoff: Lobbying Congress.” For a case study about the effects of everyday moral licensing by consumers as they shop, read “Buying Green: Consumer Behavior.”

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.

Terms defined in our ethics glossary that are related to the video and case studies include: integrity, moral equilibrium, moral imagination, moral reasoning, moral relativism, morals, and values.

Discussion Questions

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?

Additional Resources

Anand, Vikas, Blake E. Ashforth, and Mahendra Joshi. 2004. “Business as Usual: The Acceptance and Perpetuation of Corruption in Organizations.” *Academy of Management Perspectives* 18 (2): 39-53.

Ariely, Dan. 2012. *The (Honest) Truth About Dishonesty: How We Lie to Everyone—Especially Ourselves*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.

Babiak, Paul, and Robert D. Hare. 2006. *Snakes in Suits: When Psychopaths Go to Work*. New York: HarperCollins.

DeSteno, David. 2014. *The Truth about Trust: How It Determines Success in Life, Love, Learning, and More*. New York: Hudson Street Press.

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

Greene, Joshua. 2013. *Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason, and the Gap between Us and Them*. New York: Penguin Press.

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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“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 to 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."