

Being Your Best Self, Part 4: Moral Action

This video introduces the behavioral ethics concept known as moral action. Moral action involves taking the necessary steps to transform the intent to do the right thing into reality. This includes moral ownership, moral efficacy, and moral courage.

Even if people are aware of ethical issues they encounter, able to determine the correct choice to make, 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.

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.

An excellent method for teaching people to convert their ethical choices into ethical action is Mary Gentile’s Giving Voice to Values (GVV) program. Her book explains useful methods to prepare and voice your values, and the [GVV website](#) offers supporting materials for learning. For an introduction to GVV, watch the *GVV Series* of videos from Ethics Unwrapped that embody the essence of the GVV program. This *Moral Action* video draws substantially from them.

This video is the fourth 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 (see *Moral Intent*); and finally, (4) be able to act on that intent (this video, *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 *Self-serving Bias* and *Incrementalism*.

The case study on this page, “High Stakes Testing,” explores the decisions, intentions, and actions some parents took in response to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. For a case study about taking moral action against gender discrimination in the workplace, read



“Pao & Gender Bias.” For a case study about free speech and moral action in the student protests of racially motivated offenses at Yale and the University of Missouri, read “Freedom of Speech on Campus.”

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: altruism, integrity, moral agent, morals, and prosocial behavior.

Discussion Questions

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?

Additional Resources

Gentile, Mary C. 2010. *Giving Voice to Values: How to Speak Your Mind When You Know What’s Right*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Hannah, Sean T., Bruce J. Avolio, and Fred O. Walumbwa. 2011. “The Relationships between Authentic Leadership, Moral Courage, and Ethical and Pro-Social Behaviors.” *Business Ethics Quarterly* 21 (4): 555-578.

Kidder, Rushworth M. 2005. *Moral Courage*. New York: HarperCollins.

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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"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."