

Being Your Best Self, Part 2: Moral Decision Making

This video introduces the behavioral ethics concept known as moral decision making. Moral decision making is the ability to produce a reasonable and defensible answer to an ethical question.

Moral decision making is such a broad topic that it can hardly be captured in a single video. Many ethics teachers sensibly spend much of their time contrasting deontological (rule-based) approaches to deciding ethical issues to consequentialist approaches. Understanding these approaches is critical, but it is also important to understand that many ethical decisions are made intuitively before the brain's cognitive processes can implement these approaches and that people are often deontologists in some settings and consequentialists in others. With the exception of known cognitive biases and the effects of organizational and social pressures, it is unclear why people choose one approach in one setting and the other in a different setting.

This video is the second 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 (this video, *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 a related behavioral ethics concept that is one of the most prominent cognitive biases affecting moral decision making, watch *Self-serving Bias*.

The case studies on this page explore the difficulties and stakes of making a moral decision. In "Retracting Research: The Case of *Chandok v. Klessig*," a researcher makes the difficult decision to retract an article after the results of the original research cannot be reproduced. "Flying the Confederate Flag" examines the heated debate over the decision to remove the Confederate flag from the South Carolina State House grounds. For a case study about the struggles of making a moral decision when taking care of a patient deemed legally incompetent, see "Patient Autonomy & Informed Consent."

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: conflict of interest, consequentialism, deontology, moral absolutism, moral cognition, moral imagination, and self-serving bias.

Discussion Questions

1. Professor Marianne Jennings noted in the wake of the Enron-era scandals: “[n]o one within the field [of ethics] looks at Jack Grubman [the scandal-ridden former telecom industry stock analyst]..., the fees structures, the compensation systems, and the conflicts [of interest] and frets, ‘These were very nuanced ethical issues. I never would have seen those coming.’” Do you agree or disagree that most white collar criminals that we read about in the newspapers and see on TV should have known that what they did was wrong?
2. How is it that respected members of the community who have been very successful in business make decisions to engage in inside trading, pay bribes to get business, and fudge earnings numbers?
3. Why is it that most people can easily see how conflicts of interest affect other people’s decisions, but many people have faith that they themselves can remain objective even in the presence of such conflicts?
4. This video talks about how the self-serving bias can make it difficult for people facing a decision with ethical dimensions to make the right choice when their interests are involved. What other factors that are illustrated in Ethics Unwrapped videos can make it difficult for a well-meaning person to make the right choice?
5. When you do use the cognitive processes in your brain to try to resolve ethical dilemmas, are you a deontologist who focuses more on rules or a consequentialist who focuses more on outcomes? Or are you both? How do you decide which approach is decisive in any particular setting?
6. Tilly is a pathologist. Late one night she was alone in the lab performing an autopsy. She was extremely hungry, but wanted to finish her work before she left for the evening. She notices some strips of flesh left from an earlier autopsy. She cooked the flesh on a Bunsen burner and ate it, then finished her work. Did Tilly act immorally? Why or why not?
7. Is it right to pay a bribe to induce a government entity to approve a program that will benefit people? How would you decide? How would you ensure that your self-interest was not unduly affecting your decision?

Additional Resources

Cathcart, Thomas. 2013. *The Trolley Problem Or Would You Throw the Fat Guy Off the Bridge?*. New York: Workman Publishing Company.

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

Edmonds, David. 2014. *Would You Kill the Fat Man?: The Trolley Problem and What Your Answer Tells Us about Right and Wrong*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

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

Haidt, Jonathan. 2012. *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*. New York: Vintage Books.

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

Written and Narrated by

Robert Prentice, J.D.
Business, Government & Society Department
McCombs School of Business
The University of Texas at Austin

“Being aware that an issue presents a moral dimension is step 1 in being your best self. Step 2 is Moral Decision Making—having the ability to decide which is the right course of action once we have spotted the ethical issue. Sometimes this can be very difficult, as multiple options may seem morally defensible (or, perhaps, no options seem morally acceptable). Sometimes people face difficult ethical choices, and it is hard to fault them too much for making a good faith choice that they think is right but

turns out to be wrong. However, most white collar crimes—overbilling, insider trading, paying bribes, fudging earnings numbers, hiding income from the IRS, and most other activities that lead people to end up doing the perp walk on the front page of the business section—do not present intractable ethical conundrums. They are obviously wrong. The problem isn't that we haven't read enough Kant or John Stuart Mill.

More commonly, the problem is that we are unaware of psychological, organizational, and social influences that can cause us to make less than optimal ethical choices. Our ethical decision making is often automatic and instinctive. It involved emotions, not reasoning. When we think that we are reasoning to an ethical conclusion, the evidence shows that we typically are simply rationalizing a decision already made by the emotional parts of our brains.

Our brains' intuitive system often gets it right, but not universally. So, we should never ignore our gut feelings when they tell us that we are about to do something wrong. But, our intuition does not always choose the ethical path. An important reason that the intuitive/emotional part of our brain errs is the self-serving bias, which often leads us to unconsciously make choices that seem unjustifiable to objective third parties observers.

As a simple example, a *U.S. News & World Report* survey asked some people: "If someone sues you and you win the case, should he pay your legal expenses?" Eighty-five percent of the respondents thought this would be fair. The magazine asked others: "If you sue someone and lose the case, should you pay his costs?" Now, only 44% of respondents agreed, illustrating how our sense of fairness is easily influenced by self-interest. If we are not careful, we will not even notice how the self-serving bias influences our ethical decisions. Authors Bronson and Merryman report that "[i]f you're a Red Sox fan, watching a Sox game, you're using a different region of the brain to judge if a runner is safe than you would if you were watching a game between two teams you didn't care about." How can we combat the self-serving bias?

There is some experimental evidence that if we know about the self-serving bias, we can arm ourselves against it and minimize its effects. We must focus not just on being objective, but on doing what it takes to ensure that others see us as objective. We will naturally judge our own decisions with a sympathetic eye, but we know that others will not necessarily do so. So if we do what it takes to cause objective third parties to trust our judgments, we should go a long way toward overcoming the impact of the self-serving bias.

We should also pay especially close attention to our profession's code of conduct and our employer's code of ethics, because such standards are normally aimed primarily at minimizing conflicts of interest and their unconscious impact on our decision making. The self-serving bias is far from the only psychological or organizational factor that can cause us to make the wrong ethical choice, but it is certainly a big one!"