

In It to Win: Jack & Moral Equilibrium

This video introduces the concept of moral equilibrium in the context of the story of former lobbyist and convicted felon Jack Abramoff. During the Bush Administration, Abramoff was the most influential lobbyist in Washington, D.C. He was also at the center of one of the most significant political scandals since Watergate.

Moral equilibrium describes our tendency to keep a running mental scoreboard in our heads that compares our self-image as an ethical person with our actual behavior. When we do something good, we think of ourselves as good people and then may give ourselves permission not to live up to our own ethical standards. This is called “moral licensing.” When we have failed to live up to our own ethical standards, we look for opportunities to make up for those moral lapses. This is called “moral compensation.” For more details and examples of this concept, watch *Moral Equilibrium*. To learn about ethics concepts that affect our moral equilibrium and moral licensing, watch *Being Your Best Self, Part 3: Moral Intent and Self-serving Bias*.

The kinds of decision-making errors that are the subject of *Jack & Moral Equilibrium* and the other five shorts in this video case are the focus of a field of study known as behavioral ethics, which draws upon psychology, cognitive science, evolutionary biology, and related disciplines to determine how and why people make the ethical and unethical decisions that they do.

This video draws from footage shot at The University of Texas at Austin when Abramoff visited campus to talk about his life and corrupt lobbying in Washington, D.C. It is part of a video case that includes a 25-minute documentary, *In It to Win: The Jack Abramoff Story*, six short videos that focus on specific behavioral ethics biases illustrated by Abramoff’s story, and a written case study. The documentary exposes personal and systemic ethical concerns in government and illustrates how well intentioned people can make serious ethical errors—and even commit crimes.

To learn more about the scandal that ended Abramoff’s lobbying career, read the case study on this page. For a case study on moral equilibrium, read “Buying Green: Consumer Behavior,” which examines how consumers may give themselves the moral license to lower their ethical standards in other contexts when buying more environmentally-friendly products.

Terms related to this short video and defined in our ethics glossary include: behavioral ethics, bounded ethicality, moral equilibrium, moral emotions, moral reasoning, and self-serving bias.



Discussion Questions for Jack & Moral Equilibrium

- 1) Can you explain moral equilibrium in your own words? How does it affect moral decision-making?
- 2) How does moral equilibrium apply to Jack Abramoff? What examples from his story can you cite to support your argument?
- 3) Can you think of an example from your own life where you or someone else fell victim to moral equilibrium?
- 4) How might you anticipate and/or mitigate the effects of moral equilibrium in your own life or decision-making?

Additional Resources

Books about the lobbying scandal include Jack Abramoff's own account, "Capitol Punishment: The Hard Truth About Washington Corruption from America's Most Notorious Lobbyist" (WND Books, 2011) and an exposé from journalist Peter H. Stone, "Heist: Superlobbyist Jack Abramoff, His Republican Allies, and the Buying of Washington" (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006).

Movies about the scandal include a documentary, *Casino Jack and the United States of Money* (Dir. Alex Gibney, 2010), and a dramatization starring Kevin Spacey, *Casino Jack* (Dir. George Hickenlooper, 2010).

The latest teaching resource from Ethics Unwrapped is an article, written by Cara Biasucci and Robert Prentice, that describes the basics of behavioral ethics, introduces the videos and supporting materials along with teaching examples, and includes data on the efficacy of Ethics Unwrapped for improving ethics pedagogy across disciplines. It was published in *Journal of Business Law and Ethics Pedagogy* (Vol. 1, August 2018), and can be downloaded here: "[Teaching Behavioral Ethics \(Using "Ethics Unwrapped" Videos and Educational Materials\).](#)"

For more 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.](#)"

Another 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 - *Moral Equilibrium* (From the Concepts Unwrapped Series)

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“Over the years we’ve all seen high-profile televangelists and “family values” politicians involved in sex scandals. You might have also noticed numerous cases of embezzlement by employees of charitable organizations. How is it that seemingly good people can act so unethically?”

One factor is a psychological phenomenon known as moral equilibrium. The basic idea is that most of us want and indeed need to think of ourselves as good people. We keep a sort of running scoreboard in our heads, comparing our mental image of ourselves as good people to our actual behavior.

When we act in ways that don’t live up to our own ethical standards, we tend to feel bad and look for ways to make up for it. So we might do good deeds in order to restore balance to our internal scoreboard. This is called moral compensation.

On the flip side, when we do something good, we add points to the plus side of our mental scoreboard, and we then may give ourselves permission to fail to meet our own ethical standards. This is called moral licensing.

Moral compensation and moral license are the two components of moral equilibrium. Moral licensing is the scary one. It is what allows TV evangelists, family values politicians, and people who work for charities to start telling themselves how wonderful they are, and then to give themselves permission to depart from their own ethical standards. Importantly, these people don’t even realize how their past actions are affecting their current decisions.

One study asked two groups of people to write about themselves. The first group wrote about something they did that they were NOT proud of, and the second group wrote about something they did that they WERE proud of. Afterwards, both groups were asked to donate to charity or to volunteer.

The first group donated more to charity and volunteered more than the second group. The first group – bad deeds fresh in their mind – was engaged in moral compensation. The second group – focused on their own goodness – was practicing moral license.

There are many more studies on moral equilibrium, and they all make the same point: don’t get cocky! Just when you’re feeling especially good about yourself, you’re most in danger of giving yourself license to screw up.”