

Ethical Pitfalls in Action

If you are like most people, you want to be a good person, and you want others to think of you as a good person. You also think of yourself as a good person. But (again), if you are like most people, you can think of moral mistakes you have made. Maybe you wish you could have a “do-over” regarding some (or many) of these ethical missteps. Why is it that you – an essentially good person – have made these moral errors? Why is it that *all of us* make these moral missteps and stumble into doing unethical things?

Well, a big emphasis of behavioral ethics is on this simple question: Why do good people do bad things? Behavioral ethics is the science of moral decision-making, which explores why and how people make the ethical (and unethical) decisions that they do. The videos in this series address this fundamental question by focusing on some of the influences that can adversely affect our moral decision-making. This is far from an exhaustive list; there are a great many pressures and influences that affect our thinking, choices, and actions in the moral realm.

These videos examine:

- Obedience to authority: the tendency we have to wish to please those in charge, like managers and coaches.
- The conformity bias: the tendency we have to take our cues for proper behavior in most social contexts from the actions of others, such as friends and teammates.
- The self-serving bias: the tendency we have to gather information, process information, and even remember information in a manner that advances our self-interest.
- The overconfidence bias: the tendency we often have to be overconfident regarding our own abilities, including in the area of moral decision-making.
- Framing: the tendency we have to be overly influenced by things that are in our frame of reference when we make moral decisions, but insufficiently influenced by factors that we have omitted (maybe unintentionally) from our frame of reference.
- Incrementalism: the slippery slope—the frequent failure we have to notice that ethical standards are being eroded a little bit at a time.
- Role Morality: the tendency we have to use different ethical standards as we play different roles in life and society.
- Loss Aversion: the tendency we have to prefer avoiding losses to gaining rewards.
- Tangible & Abstract: the tendency we have to be impacted more by vivid, tangible, and contemporaneous factors than by factors that are removed from us in time and space.



Discussion Questions

1. Sometimes athletes face various temptations to do wrong. They may consider using performance-enhancing drugs in order to, well, enhance their performance. Or, they might tamper with their equipment. For example, as baseball players have sometimes used corked bats and NASCAR drivers have used oversized carburetors to get more power. Do you think that athletes would be more likely to fudge the rules if their coaches ordered them to do so? Explain your reasoning.

Assume that your baseball coach told you to use an illegal bat. Or your soccer coach told you to play aggressively in a way that might injure a player on the opposing team who was wearing a knee brace. Would you be more likely to cross a line if your coach urged you to do it? Why or why not? If the answer is “yes,” then that is obedience to authority in action.

2. Studies show that people are more likely to litter in an area where others have obviously littered. As you drive down the highway, are you more likely to speed if other drivers around you are speeding? Why or why not?

Assume that (at the end of practice) your coach always orders the team to run 10 laps. Then the coach heads home. The other players get in the habit of running just eight laps and calling it done, since no one is monitoring them. Are you more likely to cut your laps short because your teammates are doing so? Explain. If so, that’s the conformity bias in action.

- a. What if the others on the team were running all ten laps?

3. We have all evolved to generally look out for our own best interests. That’s how we survive to reproduce and pass on our DNA.

Assume that you are competing in a hotly-contested game and a referee has to make a call on a close play: Did the batter check her swing in time? Was the wide receiver juggling the ball as he went out of bounds? Did the center block the shot before it hit the backboard or afterward (which would be goal-tending)? When this happened, were you more likely to think the referee got it right if the call went for your team than if it went against your team? Explain.

- a. Were you more likely to protest if the close call went against your team? Why or why not? If so, this is the self-serving bias in action.

4. March Madness is exciting each year, in part because college basketball fans are curious to see which top seeds will fall by the wayside early in the tournament. Almost every year, a #3 seed gets knocked off by a #14 seed. Twice, #1 seeds have lost their first game to #16 seeds.

Assume that you see such an upset on television. Might you wonder whether the higher seed had taken the opponent lightly, suffering from overconfidence in their ability? Explain your reasoning.

- a. Might you see echoes of such overconfidence if you compared your view of yourself as a good person with past ethical missteps you know you have committed? Why or why not? If so, this is the overconfidence bias in action.
5. Old-time Major League Baseball manager Leo Durocher was a fiery competitor, known for statements such as:
- “Nice guys finish last.”
 - “I believe in rules. Sure I do. If there weren’t any rules, how could you break them?”
 - “Win any way you can as long as you can get away with it.”
 - “If I was playing third base and my mother rounded third with the winning run, I’d trip her up.”

Clearly, Durocher focused on winning to the exclusion of pretty much every other consideration. Assume that in the bottom of the ninth inning of a baseball or softball game, which will decide the league championship, you are playing third base. An opposing player (not your mother) rounds third with the potential winning run. You notice that all eyes – including the umpires’ – appear to be on the right fielder who has scooped up the ball and is preparing to throw to home plate. Caught up in the moment, you trip the runner, preventing the score. Will you later regret that action? Why or why not?

- a. Will you regret it if it was caught on camera? Explain.
 - b. Did you make a spur-of-the-moment decision because winning was the only thing in your frame of reference at the time, crowding out any ethical concerns? If so, framing may have played a role.
6. Incrementalism is the slippery slope. Sometimes people cut a small ethical corner and nothing bad happens. Continuing to cut the corner can become the “new normal” and next thing you know, they cut a slightly bigger corner and so on.

Assume that you play minor league ball for a team that doesn’t pay much, as is typical for minor league ball. But the team reimburses you for the money you spend on meals. Given your low salary, this money comes in very handy. One day a couple of your teammates mention that because the team doesn’t require them to show receipts, they add \$2 to every meal for which they claim reimbursement. You think if they’re doing it (and haven’t been caught), this can’t be too bad. After all, they seem like nice people. You start doing the same thing. Then, a little while later, you change the \$2 bump to \$4. You recently moved into the starting lineup, so you are even more underpaid than before. After a bit, you move the \$4 to \$5 (it’s just one dollar more) because inflation has been so severe lately. And on it goes.

- a. Can you see yourself doing this? Why or why not?
- b. If not, can you at least imagine some other player doing it? Explain. If so, that’s incrementalism in action.

7. Role morality is the idea that sometimes people fail to live up to their own ethical standards because they feel that they are playing a certain role that excuses them from those standards. They might normally have personal principles against killing another human being, but because they've enlisted in the military it now seems okay to kill enemy soldiers.

Assume that you play for an NFL team (Team A) and have really given it your all (as your parents taught you to do). However, despite all your hard work, things have not worked out for various reasons. Team A has traded you to Team B. You also intend to throw your heart and soul into helping Team B win. As it happens, due to a paperwork mistake, you have two copies of Team A's playbook. After the trade, Team A asks you to return your playbook, and you do. But you still possess the other playbook. You mention this in passing to your new coach at Team B, who says: "Fantastic! We'll need to see that playbook ASAP!" In your new role as a loyal player for Team B, will you be tempted to hand over the playbook? Why or why not?

- a. Up to now, as a loyal player for Team A, you have kept the playbook confidential. How has the trade to Team B affected your decision? Explain. If you are tempted, that is role morality in action.
8. Loss aversion exists because people tend to hate losses more than they enjoy gains. Therefore, they will take risks, sometimes including taking illegal actions, to avoid losses that they would never take in order to secure the gains in the first place.

Assume you are a high school tennis player in a state where players make the calls as to whether the opponent's ball has hit inside the line or outside. The schools cannot afford to pay umpires to make such calls. You are very good. Indeed, you have won every match your freshman, sophomore, and your junior years. As a senior, you are undefeated and are in the state championship singles round. One more win, and you will be the only player in your state's history to be undefeated for four consecutive years. Your town's newspaper has sent a reporter to the match to write an article about you, if you win. Rumor is that you might be a "Face in the Crowd" in the next issue of Sports Illustrated. Might this situation change how you look at this next match from a gain frame ("I want to win, like always!") to a loss frame ("OMG, if I lose then my perfect record is down the drain, the newspaper story goes away, and I can kiss my appearance in SI goodbye!")? Explain your reasoning.

- a. If you look at this from a loss frame, might that way of looking at the match increase the temptation for you to miscall an opponent's shot at a crucial point in the match? Why or why not? If this happens, it's loss aversion in action.
9. People are typically influenced more by factors that are close in time and geography than by factors that are more distant from them in time and space. This is often called the bias of the tangible and the abstract. It means we are often more concerned with the impact our actions will have right now on others nearby than we are about the impact our actions will have on others sometime in the future or on those who are far away geographically.

Assume that after a successful professional baseball or fastpitch career, you became a coach in the major leagues and are now a manager. As part of a package deal to acquire a needed starting pitcher, your general manager has also acquired a utility infielder. Your team is now one player over the roster limit. As manager, you need to cut someone and ship that person to the minor leagues. The new infielder, whom you do not know and have never met, has nearly identical statistics (batting average, fielding average, home runs hit, etc.) as your current utility infielder. You like your current infielder, who has compiled a reasonable record in four years on your team's roster, though has never starred. Will you find it easier to cut the new infielder? Explain. If the answer is yes, that could be the tangible & the abstract at work.

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