

Tangible & Abstract: Sports Edition

This video introduces the behavioral ethics bias known as the tangible and abstract. Tangible and abstract describes how we react more to vivid, immediate inputs than to ones removed in time and space, meaning we can pay insufficient attention to the adverse consequences our actions have on others. Being aware of the effects requires keeping one’s ethical antennae up and using a certain amount of [moral imagination](#) to envision how the consequences of one’s decisions might ripple out across society as a rock dropped in a pond creates ripples across the water.



As noted in the video, decision-making is naturally impacted more by vivid, tangible, contemporaneous factors than by factors that are removed in time and space. People are more moved by relatively minor injuries to their family, friends, neighbors, and even pets than to the starvation of millions abroad. This perspective on decision-making can cause problems that have ethical dimensions.

The video gives several examples. Auditors who certify financial statements and stock analysts who put forward investment advice are particularly susceptible to this phenomenon because the victims of their inaccurate financial statements or errant investment advice are most likely nameless, faceless members of a large investing public who, one may easily rationalize, should have diversified portfolios anyway.

Engineers at Ford who put the Pinto on the market despite the car flunking numerous crash tests, might also have been affected by this phenomenon. If they did not put the car on the market, it would have been easy to see the immediate impact all around them: the company and their colleagues might have suffered humiliation and job losses. But if they decided (as they did) to put the car on the market despite its safety flaws, the victims of any accidents would be nameless and faceless. Their injuries were only hypothetical—mere impersonal future statistics.

If people look only at the short-term impact of their decisions in the immediate area, they may well act unethically in a way that has serious adverse effects upon many people. To refuse to recall a defective product might save money for the company in the short run, but leaving a dangerous product on the market might harm hundreds or thousands in the long-run.

Related to the concept of the tangible and abstract is the notion of *moral distance*. Pressing a button in an airplane to drop a bomb from 30,000 feet in the sky may weigh less on the conscience than pulling a trigger on a rifle to kill a clearly visible human being not far away. The farther a person is located from the impact of the consequences of his or her actions, the easier it is to act immorally. Since capital markets are supposedly so efficient that individual players can have little direct impact, they often feel very distant from the potential victims of their misdeeds. As business is increasingly done at a global level, the impact of decisions regarding a company’s supply chain and its impact on workers thousands

of miles away may increasingly seem like something a businessperson can ignore. But when, as happened in 2013 in Bangladesh, a factory building collapses, 1,100 workers are killed, and headlines appear around the world, it becomes clear that a different decision should have been made.

To learn about related ethics concepts, watch [Moral Imagination](#), [Causing Harm](#), and [Ethical Fading](#).

Terms defined in our ethics glossary that are related to the video and case studies include: [ethical fading](#), [moral agent](#), [moral imagination](#), [subject of moral worth](#), and [tangible & abstract](#).

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.

Discussion Questions

1. Studies show that people tend to be more upset about the death of a pet than the deaths of thousands of people in a faraway place like Africa. Is that consistent with your experience?
2. Charities find that they can stimulate more giving by describing the case of a single, named victim of a tragedy (earthquake, flood, war, etc.) than by presenting statistics about thousands of victims. Does that make sense to you? Should things work that way?
3. Assume that an admissions officer at a university meets with an applicant who is nice, attractive, polite, earnest, and marginally qualified for admission. Will it be easier to give that applicant the last slot in the class if the officer knows the identity of the applicant who will now be denied that last slot or if the officer does not know who that second person is?
4. Can you think of an instance where you made a decision to act (or not to act) that you might have made differently had the consequences of your decision been made more vivid to you?
5. Can you develop a hypothetical scenario in a business setting where the “tangible & abstract” phenomenon might help cause someone to act unethically?
6. How can a CFO or an investment banker or a manager of a chemical company protect themselves from the potentially odious impact of “the tangible and the abstract” on their ethical choices?

Transcript of Narration

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The bias of the tangible and abstract is a subtle yet powerful psychological influence on human decision-making. Research shows that we are impacted more by factors that are tangible, vivid, and immediate to us in time and space than we are by factors that are abstract, conceptual, and distant from us in time and space. For example, relatively minor injuries to our family, friends, and even our pets affect us more than the starvation of millions of children on the other side of the world or the suffering of millions of animals in factory farms.

Our natural tendency to give greater value to the tangible over the abstract in decision-making can cause ethical missteps. Consider climate change. One of the major reasons we haven't taken the steps to save the planet that science tells us are necessary—such as significantly curbing fossil fuel emissions and living more sustainably—is that doing so is expensive and inconvenient for us right now. These costs are tangible and immediate. On the other hand, the benefits of making these tough changes will go mostly to people we don't know at some point off in the future. For many of us, unfortunately, the costs seem simply too burdensome and the benefits too abstract to motivate us to take action today.

The bias of the tangible and abstract can cause moral missteps in the world of sports, too. For example, star cyclist Tyler Hamilton doped at the Tour de France. When accused, he falsely denied doping. Later, he explained: “Look, I lied. I thought it would cause the least damage. Put yourself in my shoes. If I had told the truth, everything's over. The team sponsor would pull out, and fifty people, fifty of my friends, would lose their jobs. People I care about.”

Hamilton clearly valued the immediate, tangible interests of his team, his friends, and, of course, himself. He also ignored the more abstract damage that his cheating would ultimately have on other racers, other teams, and the integrity and popularity of the sport.

Even though the bias of the tangible and abstract can be hard to detect, it's clear that our decisions will sometimes have a harmful impact on others if we're not careful. Just because we don't see the effect of our choices and actions on those around us, doesn't mean there isn't one.

So, to compensate for the tangible and abstract and be our best self, we must use our moral imagination and look to the horizon and beyond when making choices and decisions.

Bibliography

Max Bazerman & Anne Tenbrunsel, *Blind Spots: Why We Fail to Do What's Right and What to Do about It* (2011).

Tyler Hamilton & Daniel Coyle, *The Secret Race: Inside the Hidden World of the Tour de France: Doping, Cover-Ups, and Winning at All Costs* (2012).

Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* (2010).

Robert Jackall, *Moral Mazes* (1989).

Scott Plous, *The Psychology of Judgment and Decision Making* (1993).

Additional Resources

The latest resource from Ethics Unwrapped is a book, [*Behavioral Ethics in Practice: Why We Sometimes Make the Wrong Decisions*](#), written by Cara Biasucci and Robert Prentice. This accessible book is amply footnoted with behavioral ethics studies and associated research. It also includes suggestions at the end of each chapter for related Ethics Unwrapped videos and case studies. Some instructors use this resource to educate themselves, while others use it in lieu of (or in addition to) a textbook.

Cara Biasucci also recently wrote a chapter on integrating Ethics Unwrapped in higher education, which can be found in the latest edition of [*Teaching Ethics: Instructional Models, Methods and Modalities for University Studies*](#). The chapter includes examples of how Ethics Unwrapped is used at various universities.

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

An article written by Ethics Unwrapped authors Minette Drumwright, Robert Prentice, and Cara Biasucci introduce key concepts in behavioral ethics and approaches to effective ethics instruction—including sample classroom assignments. Published in the *Decision Sciences Journal of Innovative Education*, it can be downloaded here: "[Behavioral Ethics and Teaching Ethical Decision Making](#)."

A detailed article written by Robert Prentice, with extensive resources for teaching behavioral ethics, was published in *Journal of Legal Studies Education* and can be downloaded here: "[Teaching Behavioral Ethics](#)."

Another article by Robert Prentice, discussing how behavioral ethics can improve the ethicality of human decision-making, was published in the *Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics & Public Policy*. It can 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.