

Role Morality

Questions for classroom discussions

- 1) Do you agree that a person should have one set of morals for family and church and another set for his or her employer?

- 2) Have you ever done anything that made you feel uncomfortable to please an authority figure or to help your company that you would not have done to help yourself? Have you been tempted to?

- 3) Have you ever broken some rules to help out a friend in ways that you would never have done to help yourself? Have you been tempted to?

- 4) Have you ever seen someone act unethically and justify his or her actions by saying “I’m just doing my job?” What did you say or do in response? What should you have said or done?

- 5) Has an employer ever explicitly asked you to set aside your own ethical standards?

- 6) How can you guard against being the victim of role morality?

Additional Teaching Note

This video introduces students to concepts explored in more detail in several other “Concepts Unwrapped” videos on the Ethics Unwrapped website, as well as in the documentary “In It to Win: The Jack Abramoff Story” and its accompanying short videos. Anyone who watches all or even a good part of these videos will have a pretty solid introduction to the concept of behavioral ethics.

Behavioral ethics is a new field drawing on behavioral psychology, cognitive science and related fields to determine why people make the ethical decisions, both good and bad, that they do. Much behavioral ethics research addresses the question of why good people do bad things.

Behavioral ethics may be the “next big thing” in ethics education. N.Y.U. recently asked Prof. Jonathan Haidt, whose research is a major part of the new learning in behavioral ethics, to create a behavioral ethics course there. And John Walsh, who helped create the Office of Compliance Inspections and Examinations at the SEC, recently wrote in *Corporate Counsel* that the “ultimate promise of behavioral ethics...is that it provides pragmatic tools that have been demonstrated to work.”

A detailed article with extensive resources for teaching behavioral ethics is Prentice, Robert. 2014. “Teaching Behavioral Ethics.” *Journal of Legal Studies Education* 31 (2): 325-365; and may be downloaded here:

<http://ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Teaching-Behavioral-Ethics-by-Robert-A.-Prentice.pdf>

A somewhat dated, but still serviceable introductory article about teaching behavioral ethics is Prentice, Robert A. 2004. “Teaching Ethics, Heuristics, and Biases.” *Journal of Business Ethics Education* 1 (1): 57-74; which is accessible through Google Scholar.

Additional Resources

Bingham, John B., W. Gibb Dyer, Isaac Smith, and Gregory L. Adams. 2011. "A Stakeholder Identity Orientation Approach to Corporate Social Performance in Family Firms." *Journal of Business Ethics* 99 (4): 565-585.

Gibson, Kevin. 2003. "Contrasting Role Morality and Professional Morality: Implications for Practice." *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 20 (1): 17-29.

Jackall, Robert. 1988. *Moral Mazes: The World of Corporate Managers*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Prentice, Robert. 2014 (forthcoming). "Behavioral Ethics: Can It Help Lawyers (And Others) Be their Best Selves?." *Notre Dame Journal of Law, Ethics & Public Policy*. <http://ethicsunwrapped.utexas.edu/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/BehavioralEthicsArticle.pdf>

Transcript of Narration **Written by Professor Robert Prentice**

Sometimes organizational and psychological pressures cause even good people to act unethically. In a lawsuit over a car wreck, an insurance company representing the defendant demanded the right to have its doctor examine the plaintiff. When he did, the doctor found that the plaintiff had a life-threatening brain aneurysm. Because it would have disadvantaged the insurance company's defense, the doctor did not tell the plaintiff, who did not find out for two more years. Why would a doctor keep this vital information from an injured man? Obviously, the doctor viewed his job as protecting the insurance company's financial interests, Hippocratic Oath be damned. This is an example of something ethicists call role morality.

Role morality has been defined as feeling that you have permission to harm others in ways that would be wrong if it weren't for the role that you are playing. Role morality often involves people acting in ways that they would view as clearly unethical if they were acting on their own behalf, but because they are acting on behalf of their employer or a client, they view their actions as permissible.

In a detailed study of a corporation, sociologist Robert Jackall found that many employees segregated their personal beliefs from the ethics of their workplace. He quoted an officer as saying: “What is right in the corporation is not what is right in a man’s home or in his church. What is right in the corporation is what the guy above you wants from you. That’s what morality is in the corporation.”

When people check their personal moral code at the door, they can suddenly become capable of doing horrendous things. After World War II, Albert Speer, Hitler’s Minister of Armaments and War Production, said that he viewed his role as an “administrator.” As a mere administrator, he convinced himself that matters relating to human beings, including, of course, the Holocaust, were not his concern. This man checked his humanity at the door.

A study by professors at Brigham Young University found that family businesses are more likely to act in a socially responsible way than bigger companies. The family name is on the door and officers want to act in ways that reflect well upon their family. However, people working in bigger corporations find it easier to separate their personal feelings of how business should be done from their role inside the organization. We cannot leave behind our personal beliefs as to right and wrong when we walk through our office doors.