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Moral Agency and Spiritual Intelligence

The self of decision-makers plays an important role in determining the ethicality of their decisions. Decisions might be understood as self-expressions of the decision-makers. Spiritual experiences have a vital role in developing the self of managers and therefore in improving the ethicality of their decisions (Zsolnai, L. 2004).

Ethics and Cognition

Modern Western theories of ethics state that ethical decisions can be made either by applying abstract *moral principles* (deontology) or by seeking to produce *good results* in the concrete real-world context (consequentialism). The decision-maker, the agent who makes ethical decisions, usually does not appear explicitly in these theories.

An alternative theory, virtue ethics, which goes back to *Aristotle*, concentrates on the *character traits* of the decision-maker. Virtue ethicists believe that the essence of ethical behavior is to realize virtues, such as honesty, righteousness or courage. Virtue ethics considers the decision-maker not as a real individual having a psychological makeup and values, but as an abstract human being who should exercise character traits adequate for the given choice situation.

Since decisions can be interpreted as *self-expressions* of the decision-makers, the chosen alternative (course of action) demonstrates the *ethicality of self* of the decision-maker in the given situation: "As inside, so outside."

Philosopher *Elizabeth Anderson* has developed the expressive theory of rational action. She defines rationality as action that adequately expresses our rational attitude toward people and other intrinsically valuable things. The ground of a person's reflectively held

values lies in his or her conception of what kind of person he or she ought to be: what kind of character, attitudes, concerns, and commitments he or she should have (Anderson, E. 1993).

Moral Agency

The theory of *moral agency* developed by Stanford University psychologist *Albert Bandura* gives a more complex picture of how human beings make ethical choices (Bandura, 1986, 1991). In this explanatory framework, personal factors in the form of moral thought and self-evaluative reactions, moral conduct and environmental influences operate as interacting determinants of each other. Within this triadic reciprocal causation, moral agency is exercised through self-regulatory mechanisms.

Figure 1 Albert Bandura

Transgressive conduct is regulated by two sets of sanctions: social and personal. Social sanctions are rooted in the fear of external punishment; self-sanctions operate through self-condemning reactions to one's misconduct. After people adopt moral standards, self-sanctions serve as the main guides and deterrents that keep behavior in line with moral standards. The adoption of moral standards does not create a fixed control mechanism within the person. There are many psychosocial mechanisms by which moral control can be selectively engaged or disengaged from detrimental conduct (Bandura, 1990, 1991). The mechanisms of moral disengagement enable otherwise considerate people to commit transgressive acts without experiencing personal distress.

Moral Justification: People do not ordinarily engage in reprehensible conduct until they have justified to themselves the rightness of their actions. In this process of moral justification, detrimental conduct is made personally and socially acceptable by portraying it in the service of valued social or moral purposes.

Euphemistic Labeling: Activities can take on markedly different appearances depending on what they are called. Euphemistic labeling provides a convenient tool for masking reprehensible activities or even conferring a respectable status upon them. Through

sanitized and convoluted verbiage, destructive conduct is made benign and those who engage in it are relieved of a sense of personal agency.

Advantageous Comparison: Behavior can also assume very different qualities depending on what it is contrasted with. By exploiting advantageous comparison injurious conduct can be rendered benign or made to appear to be little consequence. The more flagrant the contrasted activities, the more likely it is that one's own injurious conduct will appear trifling or even benevolent.

Displacement of Responsibility: Under displacement of responsibility people view their actions as springing from the social pressures or dictates of others rather than as decisions for which they are personally responsible. Because they are not the actual agents of their actions, they are spared self-censuring reactions. Hence, they are willing to behave in ways they normally repudiate if a legitimate authority accepts responsibility for the effects of their actions.

Diffusion of Responsibility: The exercise of moral control is also weakened when personal agency is obscured by diffusion of responsibility for detrimental conduct. Any harm done by a group can always be attributed largely to the behavior of others. People behave more cruelly under group responsibility than when they hold themselves personally accountable for their actions.

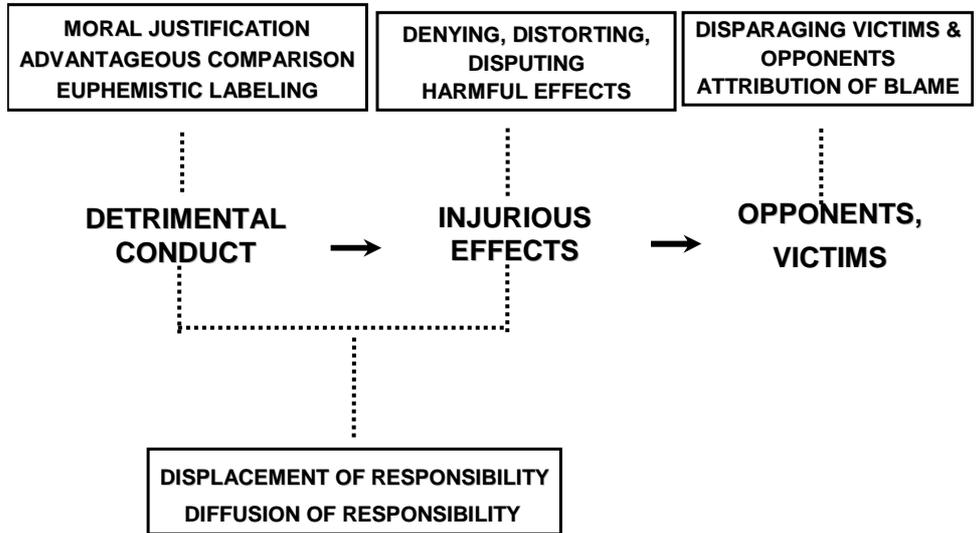
Disregarding or Distorting the Consequences: Another way of weakening self-detering reactions is by disregarding or distorting the consequences of action. When people pursue activities harmful to others for personal gain, or because of social inducements, they avoid facing the harm they cause or they minimize it. In addition to selective inattention and cognitive distortion of effects, the misrepresentation may involve active efforts to discredit evidence of the harm that is caused.

Dehumanization: Self-censure for injurious conduct can be disengaged or blunted by dehumanization that divests people of human qualities or attributes bestial qualities to them. Once dehumanized, they are no longer viewed as persons with feelings, hopes, and concerns but as subhuman objects.

Attribution of Blame: Blaming one's adversaries or compelling circumstances is still another expedient that can serve self-exoneration purposes. In moral disengagement by attribution of blame, people view themselves as faultless victims driven to injurious conduct by forcible provocation. By fixing the blame on others or on circumstances, not only are one's own injurious actions excusable but one can even feel self-righteous in the process.

Figure 2 Moral disengagement mechanisms

Figure 1



Source:

Moral disengagement can effect detrimental behavior both directly and indirectly. People have little reason to be troubled by guilt or to feel any need to make amends for harmful conduct if they reconstrue it as serving worthy purposes or if they disown personal agency for it. High moral disengagement is accompanied by low guilt, thus weakening anticipatory self-restraints against engagement in detrimental behavior. Self-exoneration for harmful conduct and self-protective dehumanization of others and treating them as blameworthy spawns a low pro-social orientation. Low pro-socialness, in turn, contributes to detrimental conduct in two ways. Having little sympathy for others both removes the restraining influence of empathy and defuses anticipatory guilt over injurious conduct. Under some circumstances, effective moral disengagement creates a sense of social rectitude and self-righteousness that breeds ruminative hostility and retaliatory thoughts for perceived grievances.

In many cases the workings of the moral disengagement mechanisms have been demonstrated (Bandura, A. Caprara, G-V. and Zsolnai, L. 2000). What is informative in these cases is that the moral collusion can end in justifying actions whose outcomes continue to be disapproved. The belief systems of the decision-makers may remain unaffected for a long time by practices that are detrimental to it as well as to the general public. Selective disengagement mechanisms are deployed to mask such a contradiction and to perpetuate harmful practices.

Research using scales representing each of the eight disengagement mechanisms are adding greatly to an understanding of how disengagement of moral self-sanctions fosters involvement in transgressive and antisocial conduct. Some empirical findings suggest that the more people are concerned with self-enhancement goals, the more they are inclined to resort to mechanisms that permit them to disengage from the duties and obligations of civic life and to justify transgressions when their self-interest is at stake (Caprara, G-V. and Campana, C. 2007).

The Role of the Self

If we want to improve the ethicality of management decisions we should enhance the development of the self of decision-makers toward a more inclusive, holistic and peaceful consciousness. Empirical evidence suggests that *spiritual experiences* help people transcend narrow self-conceptions and enable them to exercise genuine empathy with others and assume an all-compassing perspective.

Transpersonal psychologist *Stanislav Grof* recorded more than thirty thousand spiritual experiences. These included examples from psychedelic therapy, where the nonordinary states of consciousness are induced by chemical means; spiritual emergencies, which develop spontaneously for unknown reasons in the middle of everyday life; and holotropic breathwork, which is facilitated by a combination of faster breathing, evocative music, and a specific form of focused body work. These spiritual experiences involve "authentic experimental identification with other people, animals, plants and various other aspects of nature and cosmos." (...) "We typically undergo profound changes in our understanding of existence and of the nature of reality. We directly experience the divine, sacred, or numinous dimensions of existence in a compelling way" (Grof, S. 1998: pp. 2-17).

Figure 3 Stanislav Grof

Despite the rich diversity of spiritual experience, the main *ethical message* is always the same: love and compassion, deep reverence for life and empathy with all sentient beings. Grof summarizes the result of spiritual experiences as follows:

We develop a new system of values that is not based on conventional norms, precepts, commandments, and fear of punishment, but [on] our knowledge and understanding of the universal order. We realize that we are [an] integral part of creation and that by hurting others we would be hurting ourselves. In addition, deep self-exploration leads to (...) awareness of the possibility of serious experiential repercussions of harmful behavior, even those that escape societal retribution (Grof, S. 1998: p. 129).

Researchers at the *Maharishi University of Management* in the USA proved the development of leadership can be effected through development of transcendental experience. Students using the method of transcendental meditation scored the highest observed in published studies in the so-called Loevinger test, which measures the level of ego-development (Heaton, D. and Schmidt-Wilk, J. 2008).

Spiritual Intelligence

Oxford-based management thinker *Danah Zohar* introduced the term "spiritual intelligence." It is a transformative intelligence that makes us ask basic questions about meaning, purpose, and values. Spiritual intelligence allows us to understand situations and systems deeply, to invent new categories, to be creative and go beyond the given paradigms (Zohar, D. 2002).

In his "Viable Model of Spiritual Intelligence," *David B. King* defines spiritual intelligence as a set of adaptive mental capacities based on nonmaterial and transcendent aspects of reality, specifically those which are related to the nature of one's existence, personal meaning, transcendence, and expanded states of consciousness. When applied, these processes are adaptive in their ability to facilitate unique means of problem solving, abstract reasoning, and coping.

King suggests four main components of spiritual intelligence:

I. *Critical Existential Thinking*: the capacity to critically contemplate meaning, purpose, and other existential/metaphysical issues (e.g., existence, reality, death, the universe), and to come to original existential conclusions or philosophies; also, the capacity to contemplate nonexistential issues in relation to one's existence (i.e., from an existential perspective).

II. *Personal Meaning Production*: the ability to derive personal meaning and purpose from all physical and mental experiences, including the capacity to create and master (i.e., live according to) a life purpose.

III. *Transcendental Awareness*: the capacity to identify transcendent dimensions/patterns

of the self (i.e., a transpersonal or transcendent self), of others, and of the physical world (e.g., holism, nonmaterialism) during normal states of consciousness, accompanied by the capacity to identify their relationship to one's self and to the physical.

IV. *Conscious State Expansion*: the ability to enter and exit higher/spiritual states of consciousness (e.g., pure consciousness, cosmic consciousness, unity, oneness) at one's own discretion—as in deep contemplation or reflection, meditation, prayer, etc. (King, 2008).

Spiritual intelligence is badly needed in management. Management decisions considerably affect the life and fate of human communities, natural ecosystems, and future generations. The well-being of these primordial stakeholders requires *authentic care*, which may develop from experiential one-ness with others and with the universal source of creation.

See also *Transpersonal psychology, Spiritually based leadership*.

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