Honest Rationales for Dishonest Behavior

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Cheating, fraud, racketeering, and other forms of dishonesty are among the greatest personal and societal challenges of our time. While the media commonly highlight extreme examples and focuses on the most sensational scams (e.g., those by Enron and Bernard Madoff), less exposure is given to the prevalence of "ordinary" unethical behavior—dishonest acts committed by people who value morality but act immorally when they have an opportunity to cheat. Examples include cheating on one's taxes and engaging in "wardrobing" (the practice of purchasing an item of clothing, wearing it, and then returning it to the store for a refund). When considered cumulatively, this seemingly innocuous and ordinary unethical behavior causes considerable societal damage (Ariely, 2008; DePaulo et al., 1996; Feldman, 2009). Wardrobing alone costs retailers over $10 billion per year according to a recent estimate by the National Retail Federation.

A growing body of emprical research shows how frequently such ordinary dishonesty occurs. For example, people report telling 1-2 lies per day (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998). Although not all lies are harmful, people do engage in a great deal of dishonest behavior that negatively affects others, and they do so in many different contexts, such as personal relationships (Canner, 2008), the workplace (Murphy, 1993), and sports. As an example, consider the "Spygate" incident that occurred during the 2007 National Football League (NFL) season. The New England Patriots were disciplined by the NFL for secretly videotaping New York Jets' defensive coaches' signals during a game, a violation of league rules.

Real-world stories and empirical evidence are consistent with recent laboratory experiments showing that many people cheat slightly when they think they can get away with it (Gino, Ayal, & Ariely, 2009; Mazar, Amir, & Ariely, 2008). In these experiments, people misreported their performance to earn more money, but only to a certain degree (about 10-20%)

above their actual performance and far below the maximum payoff possible. That is, most of the cheating was not committed by "a few bad apples" that were totally rotten. Rather, many apples in the barrel turned just a little bit bad. The evidence from such studies paints a troubling picture of human nature: People are often tempted by the potential benefits of cheating and commonly succumb to temptation by behaving dishonestly, but only "a little bit."

The evidence is striking in light of social psychological research that, for decades, has robustly demonstrated that people strive to maintain a positive self-image both privately and publicly (Allport, 1955; Rosenberg, 1979). Social identity theorists, such as Schlenker (1982) and Tajfel (1982), have argued that people want to feel good about themselves and strive to maintain a positive self-image, which presumably includes viewing themselves as moral. But sometimes this requires a little immorality combined with self-deception. For example, people embrace successes as their own and reject failures as circumstantial (Miller & Ross, 1975); maintain an illusion of control over unpredictable events (Langer, 1975); and, on average, rank themselves as *better* than average on positive traits (Alicke, Klotz, Breitenbecher, Yurak, & Vredenburg, 1995; Klar, 2002). In the same vein, people typically value honesty, believe strongly in their own morality, and strive to maintain a moral self-image (Greenwald 1980; Sanitioso, Kunda, & Fong, 1990). For instance, approximately 84% of individuals self-report that they are moral and honest (Aquino & Reed, 2002).

The gap between people's actual dishonest behavior and their desire to maintain a positive moral self-image has not been carefully investigated. We call this gap *ethical dissonance* (Barkan, Ayal, Gino, & Ariely, 2010). Ethical dissonance is similar to the familiar concept of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957)—the feeling of uncomfortable tension that comes from holding two conflicting thoughts at the same time. Ethical dissonance is the tension that arises

from the inconsistency between one's actual cheating behavior and one's ethical values or attitudes. We argue that the discomfort produced by ethical dissonance, similar to the consequences of cognitive dissonance, calls for some kind of adjustment. Prior research has examined situations in which observing the behavior of others leads people to think differently about their own moral character (see Monin & Merritt, this volume). For instance, recent studies on moral compensation show that people may boost their moral self-regard and be critical of others' morality to compensate for a threat to their self-concept in a non-moral domain (Jordan & Monin, 2008). Departing from this body of work, we focus in this chapter on situations in which ethical dissonance results from reflecting on *one's own past deeds*.

Despite their similarities, cognitive dissonance and ethical dissonance differ in one critical respect. A key aspect of many cognitive dissonance experiments is that behavior that contradicts a belief or attitude is public and cannot be denied or changed (e.g., eating meat during a meal with people who know the person has a strong belief in animal rights). As a result, people reconcile the tension they experience by adjusting their attitudes to be consistent with a behavior that has already been performed. By contrast, in the case of ethical dissonance the unethical behavior, such as a minor instance of cheating, is hidden from other people. Thus, the adjustments and corrections people make to cope with ethical dissonance do not necessarily require them to relax their contradictory internal code.

In this chapter, we identify the main adjustment strategies people use to reduce ethical dissonance. We seek to understand how people can seemingly benefit from dishonest behavior while simultaneously preserving a moral self-image. Specifically, we discuss three psychological mechanisms that enable people to rationalize and condone their unethical behavior: moral cleansing, local social utility, and social comparisons of one's own behavior to that of others.

Before presenting evidence in support of these three mechanisms, we discuss the role of ambiguity in people's reinterpretation of their bad deeds.

Reinterpretation of Ambiguous Unethicality

One way to resolve the tension between unethical behavior and moral self-image is to creatively interpret an incriminating behavior as an honest one. In many situations, people behave dishonestly enough to profit from their unethicality, but restrict the magnitude of their dishonesty. This restriction allows them to maintain a positive self-concept (Mazar et al., 2008) by noting their actions (e.g., "I am overclaiming") but not necessarily categorizing them as unethical or immoral (e.g., "I am dishonest").

In their s*elf-concept maintenance* theory, Mazar et al. (2008) identified two contextual variables that can affect a person's freedom to engage in creative reinterpretation of unethical behavior. The first is the behavior's degree of malleability. Previous research has shown that when moral categorization of a particular behavior is malleable rather than clear-cut (e.g., taking supplies from work), people can, and in fact often do, conceptualize their actions in acceptable terms, and thus avoid having to challenge or change their moral self-image (Baumeister, 1998; Schweitzer & Hsee, 2002). In one study demonstrating this tendency (Ariely, 2008), the experimenter left a six-pack of Coca-Cola in each of several of communal refridgerators on a university campus. In some of the refrigerators, the experimenter also left a plate containing six one-dollar bills. The cans of Coke quickly disappeared (within 72 hours), but the plates of one-dollar bills remained untouched. In a similar vein, participants in laboratory experiments tend to inflate their performance on a problem-solving task more when they are instructed to take tokens from a jar (later replaced by money) as a reward for good performance than when they are instructed to take dollar bills from a jar (Mazar et al., 2008). That is, being able to take tokens (or

cans of Coke) rather than cash gave participants greater leeway to make self-serving interpretations of their actions and thus decrease their level of ethicality.

A second contextual variable that may affect a person's ability to reinterpret unethical behavior is the saliency of ethicality at the moment a particular behavior is considered. The concept of *bounded ethicality* (Banaji, Bazerman, & Chugh, 2003) applies to situations in which people make unconscious decision errors that serve their self-interest but are inconsistent with their consciously espoused beliefs and preferences (e.g., engaging in in-group favoritism) – decisions they would condemn upon further reflection or greater awareness. For example, accounting firms have their own ethical code but also numerous reasons to view their clients' books in a positive light, including the auditing and consulting fees they receive from their client firms. Bazerman, Loewenstein, and Moore (2002) tested this conflict of interest by giving participants a complex body of information about the potential sale of a fictitious company. Participants were strongly biased toward the interests of their own clients. Moreover, they assimilated information about the target company in a biased way and were unable to adjust their biased evaluations even for monetary rewards.

If a lack of awareness helps people reinterpret their dishonest behavior as honest, drawing their attention to moral standards should reduce dishonesty. Indeed, Mazar et al. (2008) found that after being asked to recall the Ten Commandments, participants who were given the opportunity to gain financially by cheating, did not cheat at all, whereas those who had the same opportunity to cheat but were not given the moral reminder cheated significantly. Gino at al. (2009) also found that a subtle reminder of the possibility of cheating in a specific setting was sufficient to reduce levels of dishonesty.

Taken together, these findings suggest that cheating only a little (rather than to the maximum extent possible), engaging in highly malleable behavior, and lacking full awareness introduce ambiguity that blurs the criteria for judging what is right and what is wrong. Such ambiguity allows people to reinterpret their unethical behavior and whitewash it. However, when such ambiguity is absent, people's dishonest behavior becomes undeniably wrong. In the following sections, we focus on these kinds of unambiguous situations and identify three psychological mechanisms that people use to rationalize their unethical behavior and reduce ethical dissonance.

<div align="center">*Honest Rational Mechanisms*</div>

Moral Cleansing

The first of these mechanisms is moral cleansing. According to Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, and Lerner (2000), moral cleansing is an attempt to rid oneself of negative feelings after committing an unethical act by mental appeasement. This conscious process enables individuals to distance themselves from transgressions and turn a new page in their moral ledger. Moral cleansing can take place in at least three ways: physical washing and pain, moral licensing, and confession.

Physical washing and pain. Physical cleansing, such as bathing or washing hands, is a common religious ritual. For example, Christians practice baptism, a water purification ritual, in the belief that through the symbolic cleansing of their bodies they can also achieve a cleansing of conscience and soul (Zhong & Liljenquist, 2006). In the Jewish tradition, several biblical regulations specify that full immersion in a "mikve" (ritual pool) is required to regain ritual purity following ritually impure events. Physical cleansing is also central to Islam; "ablution" is the Muslim act of washing parts of the body in clean water to prepare for worship. Thus, major

religions include bodily purity rituals in the belief that physical cleansing ceremonies can purify the soul (see also Graham & Haidt, this volume).

Zhong and Liljenquist (2006) provided evidence for this association between physical cleansing and moral purification. In one experiment, participants were asked to hand-copy a short story written in the first person. The story described either an ethically selfless deed (control group) or an unethical act (experimental group). Participants were then offered a free gift and given a choice between an antiseptic wipe and a pencil. Those who copied the story describing an unethical deed were more likely to choose an antiseptic wipe then were those who copied an ethical deed. Furthermore, Zhong and Liljenquist found that within the experimental group in which participants recalled unethical behavior, those who washed their hands with an antiseptic wipe reported experiencing fewer moral emotions (such as guilt) than those who did not wash their hands. This result suggests that the sanitation wipes had psychologically washed away the participants' moral stains and restored a suitably moral self. Extending these results, Schnall, Benton, and Harvey (2008) demonstrated that when the notion of physical purity is made salient to individuals, moral judgments of others become less severe.

Related research has suggested that pain has positive qualities, as it provides a means of spiritual and moral cleansing (Klaassen, 2008). The Jewish people, for instance, use Yom Kippur to attempt to atone for immoral behavior during the previous year and seek forgiveness for wrongs committed against God and human beings. They do so by fasting and intensive praying for a period of 25 hours in the hope that God will inscribe their names in the "Good Book." And Wallington (1973) showed that people who violate moral rules tend to cause themselves to suffer in other domains (by giving themselves electric shocks) as a way of redeeming themselves from their previous unethical acts, even though no restitution resulted from their suffering.

Moral licensing. John Gotti, New York City's most infamous mob boss throughout the 1980s, created a charity in his name. As many have argued, the charity was genuine and not a front to make him seem more legitimate. What drives criminals to engage in humanitarian acts? One explanation is what Levav and McGraw (2009) call "emotional accounting." When people receive money under ethically questionable circumstances, they may feel bad, and they can sometimes reduce the negative feelings by engaging in ethical behavior. In a series of studies, Levav and McGraw found that people avoid spending money they received under unethical circumstances ("negatively tagged" money) on hedonistic expenditures (e.g., beach parties) and instead make virtuous expenditures (e.g., paying for someone's education). They hope that their virtuous conduct will reduce or "launder" their negative feelings about the windfall.

Likewise, early studies of compliance following a transgression suggested that participants were likely to engage in altruistic reparation. In a study by Darlington and Macker (1966), for example, some participants were led to believe they had harmed another person, whereas participants in the control group were not. All participants were then given an opportunity to engage in altruistic behavior toward a third party, in the form of agreeing to donate blood to a local hospital. The experimental group proved to be more altruistic than the control group. Participants seemed to reduce or balance their ethical dissonance by engaging in behavior on the other side of the moral scale.

Additional evidence for the tendency to "balance the scales" comes from studies of the reverse phenomenon, in which altruistic behavior releases people from their moral shackles and allows them to cross over into the realm of unethical behavior. According to Sachdeva, Iliev, and Medin (2009), people who feel sufficiently moral may lack an incentive to engage in moral action because of its costliness. They refer to this effect as *moral licensing*, which is a

component of a larger system of moral self-regulation (Zhong, Liljenquist, & Cain, 2009).

People may feel licensed to refrain from good behavior when they have amassed a surplus of

moral currency. This effect has been studied and supported in different domains, such as

stereotyping behavior (Monin & Miller, 2001) and consumer decision making (Khan & Dhar,

2007). Extending these findings to charitable giving and corporate ethical decisions, Sachveda et

al. (2009) found that a sense of moral superiority limited additional future moral behavior.

Finally, the hand-cleansing study mentioned above (Zhong & Liljenquist, 2006) also showed that

participants who washed their hands after recalling unethical behavior were less motivated to

volunteer to help a "desperate" student than were those who did not wash their hands.

The promise of confession. The acts of apologizing, asking for forgiveness, and turning

over a new leaf intersect at the points where religion and psychology meet guilt and shame. As

we have noted, Jewish people view Yom Kippur as a time to seek forgiveness for wrongs

committed against other human beings and God. In the Catholic Church, confession to a priest is

perceived as a curative act of faith and absolution (Tood, 1985). A priest we interviewed as part

of a research project described the function of the Sacrament of Penance, or confession, as

follows:

> People come to confession for the purpose of regaining the order in their lives, getting
> relieved as much as forgiven and redeemed. When you are worried about something, you
> need relief…The difference between talking to a priest and talking to your Mom or Dad
> is that you're actually talking to God through the priest.

There are advantages to viewing confession as a rationalization mechanism. First, by

providing relief to the confessor (Paavo, 2002), confession offers an effective way to resolve the

dissonance between one's perception of oneself as a moral person and any dishonest behaviors

one has committed. Confession can also help to reduce the likelihood of future dishonest

behavior. This optimistic prediction is supported by research, which has found that drawing

people's attention to moral standards can reduce dishonest behavior (Mazar at el., 2008). Thus, when unethical behavior is made salient via expectation or actual confession, people may subsequently (at least for a while) bear in mind the importance of ethical behavior and moral standards, and may try to be consistent with their moral values.

To test the effect of confession, Ayal, Gino, Mazar, and Ariely (2010) simulated a confession in a laboratory setting and measured its influence on people's dishonest behavior. The study employed a computerized perceptual task in which participants were placed in situations that induced a conflict between behaving honestly and maximizing self-interest. The perceptual task was divided into two phases, and the manipulation was introduced between the two phases. Half of the participants were assigned to the confession condition. They wrote about one bad thing they had done and then were asked to close their eyes and ask "God" or any other entity for forgiveness for that event. The other half, assigned to the control condition, wrote about their typical evening activities. In Phase 1, the two groups exhibited very similar levels of dishonesty. However, in Phase 2, after the manipulation occurred, participants in the confession condition reduced their level of dishonest behavior, while participants in the control condition continued to cheat. Moreover, in a follow-up experiment, when participants in the confession condition were informed at the beginning of the study about the confession manipulation, the reduction of the dishonest behavior started at the beginning of the experiment and continued after the confession manipulation. These findings suggest that expectation of confession and forgiveness as well as the actual act of confessing and receiving forgiveness have beneficial effects on honest behavior, at least for a while.

Yet confession may have negative effects on morality in the long run. If people are concerned about their moral self, a confession experienced as achieving forgiveness may act as a

moral offset that allows them to transgress again without disturbing their overall moral self-concept. Consistent with this idea, Ayal et al. (2010) found that the positive effect of confession was eliminated and even reversed with temporal distance. In the same vein, Harris, Benson, and Hall (1975) examined people's willingness to donate money before and after engaging in confession at a church. They found that people were significantly more likely to donate money to charity prior to rather than after making a confession. These findings support the notion of moral licensing. That is, after confession, people feel they have already restored their shattered moral self and thus have no need for the reparation that might otherwise be made by engaging in pro-social activities.

Local Social Utility

Not only is altruistic behavior observed after an unethical act has occurred (e.g., donating blood after engaging in wrongdoing), but at times altruistic motivation can serve as a justification for later unethical behavior. In many cases, when people cheat, they benefit not only themselves but other people as well. By focusing on the benefits that cheating may provide to others rather than emphasizing their own self interest, people may be able to view their actions in positive terms, avoiding a tarnished moral self-image (Baumeister 1998; Schweitzer & Hsee, 2002). The archetypical example of such reframing is Robin Hood, the folkloric hero who robbed from the rich to give to the poor. Gino and Pierce (2010) found support for this type of reframing in their study of the ways in which an employee's perception of a customer's relatively low socio-economic status may influence illegal helping behavior in the context of vehicle emissions testing. They found that a large number of car inspectors illegally passed customers who drove standard ("poor looking") cars that should have failed the emissions test,

but drivers of luxury vehicles were helped less often. The inspectors evidently empathized with customers who shared their modest economic status.

This phenomenon may be particularly relevant when people work in group settings in which others can benefit from their dishonesty. There are two ways in which focusing on others' gains from one's own cheating or dishonesty may help reduce ethical dissonance and enable one to benefit from unethical behavior without having to debit their moral account. The first is related to social psychological research on *diffusion of responsibility* (Latane, 1981). This concept refers to the possibility that the presence of others in group settings enables people to "de-individuate" and distribute responsibility among group members, thereby reducing their own responsibility and guilt (Diener, 1977; Zimbardo, 1969). For instance, Diener, Fraser, Beaman, and Kelem (1976) found that Halloween trick-or-treaters who were given the opportunity to steal candy and money did so more often when they were part of a group than when they were trick-or-treating alone. The concepts of diffusion of responsibility and de-individuation have been used to explain anti-normative social behavior in various domains, including social atrocities (Staub, 1996), computer-mediated communication (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984) and group decision support systems (Jessup, Connolly, & Tansik, 1990).

The second way in which the potential benefits to others of one's own cheating can help reduce ethical dissonance derives from the advantages people accrue from altruistic behavior (Loewenstein, Thompson, & Bazerman, 1989). Several studies have demonstrated that people care not only about their own benefits, but also about their utility to others (i.e., social utility; Loewenstein et al., 1989). For instance, a recent study showed that individuals are willing to forgo some of their pay to help a peer who is relatively disadvantaged (Gino & Pierce, 2009).

In many cases, social utility is in line with self-interest, and both are located in the grey region of the ethical to unethical continuum. Gino, Ayal, and Ariely (2010) conducted a series of laboratory experiments to simulate these kinds of situations. In their experiments, participants were asked to solve simple mathematical problems for pay, either as individuals, as part of a dyad, or as part of a three-person group. Performance over-reporting was used as a measure of dishonesty. In the dyad condition, the individual performance of each member was totaled, and each individual's payment equaled half of the dyad's total payoff. In the group condition, the individual performance of each member in the three-person group was totaled, and payment for each individual was equal to a third of the group's total payoff. In addition, the level of communication among the group members was manipulated.

Participants cheated more when their partners could benefit from their cheating, and they cheated even more when the group was larger and when there was more communication among group members. Moreover, this increase was due to the growth in the number of cheaters, whereas the average magnitude of cheating remained unchanged. These findings suggest that people may care about other group members' benefits, but they are also tempted to use social utility to rationalize their behavior. That is, individuals have the opportunity to cheat and then freely categorize their own bad actions (dishonest behavior) in positive terms (creating financial benefits for others). Consequently, more people fall prey to this temptation when operating in groups, because it is easier to justify, or rationalize, their unethical behavior as acceptable.

Social Comparisons

The presence of others is relevant to ethical decision making not only when individuals share in the social utility of their behavior, but also when others help to establish a standard for "ethical" behavior. By observing other people's unethical behavior, individuals can assess the

costs and benefits of particular transgressions (Becker, 1968). They may determine how frequent

this behavior is in a particular environment and, most important, where to draw the line between

ethical and unethical behavior (Cialdini & Trost, 1998; Gino et al., 2009). In short, people learn

the social norms related to dishonesty by interacting with others (Campbell, 1964) and observing

their behavior.

Cialdini, Reno, and Kallgren (1990) defined two kinds of social norms: *descriptive*

norms, which specify how most people behave in a given situation, and *injunctive norms*, which

specify the particular behaviors approved or disapproved of by most people. According to social

norm theory (Cialdini et al., 1990; Reno, Cialdini, & Kallgren, 1993), the social context

determines which of these two types of norms people attend to at a particular time and how they

impinge on an individual's immediate behavior.

This kind of social learning by observing other people's behavior suggests that when

people behave unethically, different social contexts can raise or lower the ethical dissonance they

experience. When the social context highlights descriptive norms (e.g., littering in a dirty

environment), it helps people justify their behavior and reduce dissonance. On the other hand,

when the social context highlights injunctive norms (e.g., littering in a clean environment), it

might exacerbate the dissonance. Other examples can be found in Bandura's classic studies

(Bandura, 1965; Bandura, Ross, & Ross, 1961) in which children exposed to an aggressive

model produced considerably more aggressive behavior toward a doll than did children who

were not exposed to the aggressive model. Moreover, this effect was stronger when an adult did

not comment on the aggressive model's actions or when an adult was not present in the room

(Hicks, 1968; Siegel & Kolin, 1959). Children in these studies may have interpreted the lack of

evaluative comments about the model's aggressive behavior and the absence of an adult in the room as signs of permission, which they then saw as justifying their own aggressive behavior.

This social norm theory hints at another important factor that could influence the way people interpret the unethical behavior of others—the degree to which they identify with the others (Tajfel, 1982). When identification is strong, the behavior of others should have a larger influence on observers than when identification is weak. In other words, when individuals observe the unethical misdeeds of in-group members, they should feel more comfortable in loosening their own ethical code. Field evidence for this theory was obtained in a large-scale survey of Australian citizens (Wenzel, 2004), which found that the presence of social norms elicited consistent behavior (i.e., tax compliance), but only when respondents identified with the group to which the norms were attributed.

Gino et al. (2009) conducted a laboratory study to investigate whether the effect of others' unethical behavior is contagious. In this experiment, college students were asked to solve simple math problems in the presence of others. In some of the conditions, participants were given the opportunity to cheat by misreporting their performance and earning undeserved money. More importantly, in some conditions, participants were exposed to a confederate who cheated ostentatiously by finishing a task impossibly quickly and leaving the room with the maximum reward. In line with social norm theory, the level of unethical behavior among group members increased when the confederate was an in-group member (indicated by wearing a regular T-shirt), but decreased when the confederate was an out-group member (wearing a T-shirt from a rival university).

Altogether, these findings support the intersection between social norm theory (Cialdini et al., 1990; Reno et al., 1993) and social-identity theory (Tajfel, 1982). Group members use

comparisons to their own group to maintain or enhance positive social identity and self-esteem, and as a consequence they are motivated to perceive an in-group member's transgression as a descriptive norm, making it less objectionable than if an out-group member performed the same act. Moreover, instead of using an out-group confederate's behavior as a model, people tend to highlight the injunctive norm and distance themselves from this "bad apple." This helps them to maintain a distinctive and positive social identity for their in-group (Brewer, 1993; Tajfel, 1982). Basically, people use the same behavior to maintain their self-esteem in both cases (in-group or out-group confederate), but in two very different ways.

This flexibility in reframing both others' and one's own behavior is also demonstrated by *moral hypocrisy*—an individual's ability to hold onto a belief while acting contrary to it (Batson, Kobrynowicz, Dinnerstein, Kampf, & Wilson, 1997; Monin & Merritt, this volume). More specifically, moral hypocrisy occurs when individuals' evaluations of their own moral transgressions differ substantially from their evaluations of the same transgressions enacted by others. In a study by Valdesolo and DeSteno (2007), participants in one condition were required to distribute a resource (e.g., time, energy) to themselves and another person by choosing to perform one of two tasks, an easy one or a complicated one. They could make the distribution either fairly (i.e., through a random allocation procedure) or unfairly (i.e., selecting the better option for themselves). They were then asked to evaluate the morality, or fairness, of their actions. In another condition, participants viewed a confederate acting in an unfair manner and subsequently evaluated the morality of this act. In line with moral hypocrisy theory, individuals who chose the easier task for themselves perceived their own transgression to be less objectionable than the same transgression enacted by another person. Testing this idea beyond the bounds of the self, Valdesolo et al. (2007) found that the boundaries of hypocrisy fluctuate as

a function of the self's affiliation with the target. Here again, hypocrisy targeted out-group members more than in-group members.

Finally, people's moral self-esteem can benefit directly from applying a strict ethical code to others' behavior. A recent study by Barkan et al. (2010) suggests that when people experience ethical dissonance created by their own past misdeeds, they develop a special sensitivity to others' unethical behavior; as a result, they judge it using stricter and harsher criteria than they apply to themselves. In a series of studies, participants were asked to write about a past wrongdoing that they regretted having committed. This manipulation created ethical dissonance. Alternatively, participants in a control group were asked to recall and write about a good deed they were proud of. People in the "ethical dissonance" group exhibited greater harshness and lower tolerance toward others' cheating than did the members of the control group. By being morally harsh on others who fell prey to temptations, individuals were able to distance themselves from this weakness and protect their self-image.

Conclusion

The research discussed in this chapter calls attention to a variety of situations in which people experience tension between behaving honestly and maximizing their own self-interest. The findings suggest that people reduce this tension in a variety of creative ways. They behave unethically enough to benefit but ethically enough to maintain a positive self-image and a defensible balance of ethical and unethical behavior. We identified three mechanisms that people use to achieve this balance. First, they take advantage of the ambiguity surrounding dishonest behavior and make do with a loose interpretation of the relevant ethical code. Second, when their actions are undeniably unethical, people use the social context to justify or excuse their unethical

behavior or to balance it with pro-social behavior. Finally, people distance themselves from their misdeeds by confessing and turning over a new leaf.

Although we distinguish between different kinds of mechanisms, there are interesting relations between them. First, some behaviors could be placed in more than one category. For example, altruistic donations of time or money might be viewed as part of moral cleansing. Alternatively, if people such as Robin Hood think about their past contributions to their ingroup before committing an unethical act, the contributions might fit in the local social utility category. Secondly, people can use more than one mechanism at a time. For example, when a man takes tax deductions that are not actually related to his work, he can justify this decision by using descriptive norms ("Everybody does it"). At the same time, he could also reinterpret the unethical nature of the behavior ("I talked with my aunt about work during this dinner"). Finally, the Harris et al. (1975) study shows that one mechanism can affect the use of another: People's willingness to donate money was higher before going to confession in a Catholic church than after such a confession. That is, after confessing, people felt they had restored their moral self and had no need burnish it further.

In closing, we consider a question Plato posed around 360 B.C.: Is there anyone alive who could resist taking advantage of the power of invisibility, given that being monitored by other people may be the only thing that prevents us from committing immoral acts? The literature we reviewed here suggests that others' presence does not always help to increase ethicality, because the others' needs and behavior may be used to justify our dishonesty. On the other hand, the fact that the psychological mechanisms discussed in this chapter function mainly to enhance our self-esteem and reduce internal dissonance suggests that we might experience dissonance even if we could become invisible at will.

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