

# WHAT IS WRONG WITH US?

What does the ethics scandal at Penn State tell us about ourselves? And how can science help us to understand how such a thing could happen here?

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# Who Am I?

*Speaking poetically...*

- Am I a *fallen angel*? If so, then I should be fundamentally discouraged and deeply ashamed.
- Am I a *rising animal*? If so, then there is every reason to be proud and encouraged, even in the midst of the increasingly dire ethical collapses I see transpiring around me.

# Where Am I?

In the middle of reality. The order of reality (to speak in a medieval fashion) is as follows:

First **Being**, then **Truth**, and then **Goodness**

# This seems ridiculously abstract. Why is it important to prioritize Being?

Fair question. Prioritizing *Being* over *knowing* facilitates the adoption of a cognitive posture “open” to Being. Many people today operate with “closed” cognitive structures, functioning as if Being had nothing more to reveal to them. The two most common ways people close themselves to the further revelation of truth is (1) to adopt an *extreme* lack of interest in it and (2) to claim already to possess it.

Also, in “closed” cultures such as ours, the primary tool of truth—language—is widely used to deceive, even to the point of knowingly distorting cognitive functioning. This produces widespread delusion, and to counter it one must reclaim the ability to enter into the silent place of open awareness and listen to Being directly. Plato and Aristotle referred to this when they stressed that philosophy “begins in wonder.”

The capacity for wonder cannot be quantified or tested, and it is increasingly absent in contemporary schooling, even in the humanities.

I am very practical and I don't have the time for Philosophy. Also, not all of your ideas are compatible with my ideology.

- To eschew self-examination on the grounds that one is **“practical”** virtually guarantees that the assumptions operating beneath the level of one's ordinary awareness to shape experience and behavior will remain hidden. Accordingly, one's inner world and experience will continue to be shaped—and in some cases fully programmed—by unconscious psycho/cultural constructs.
- And functioning out of an **ideology** means that instead of letting reality inform one's “knowing,” one is instead projecting one's “knowing” upon reality.

# How Should I Live?

In  
obedience  
to  
command?

*or*

Constantly  
creating  
goodness?

- *“With a doctrine of commandments or duties...there is always the danger of arbitrarily drawing up a list of requirements and losing sight of the human person who “ought” to do this or that.”* Joseph Pieper, “The Four Cardinal Virtues”

# OK, so why are we experiencing what seems to be an ethical crisis?

- This is the question of the day, and there is no shortage of people eager to affirm that we are in the midst of an ethical crisis. Here is a somewhat typical statement from someone who spent his life working on Wall Street, Michael Thomas: *“I have lived what now, at 75, is starting to feel like a long life. If anyone asks me what has been the great American story of my lifetime, I have a ready answer. It is the corruption, money-based, that has settled like some all-enveloping excremental mist on the landscape of our hopes, that has permeated every nook of any institution or being that has real influence on the way we live now. Sixty years ago, if you had asked me, on the basis of all that I had been taught, whether I thought this condition of general rot was possible in this country, I would have told you that you were nuts. And I would have been very wrong. What has happened in this country has made a lie of my boyhood.”*

# The Chinese Fortune Cookie

Just as I started to work on this presentation, I got the following fortune cookie: *“Yesterday’s philosophy is today’s common sense.”*

It struck me that this thought relates to our topic because what we today think of as “ethics” was largely created at the beginning of the modern world in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries as speculative ideas. Accordingly, it may be that our problem today is not that we are failing to be ethical. It is that **the entire way we think about ethics is obsolete and increasingly inadequate to the challenges of our time.**

This is not entirely bad news. In a bigger picture, what is now appearing as corruption and collapse is also part of a larger evolutionary process involving an upgrade of our cultural ethical “defaults.” Our “winter” of discontent is leading to an ethical “spring” with newly budding defaults.



# Are people less ethical than they used to be?

Speaking generally, the opposite is the case. If **ethical awareness** is the recognition by an individual of the rights and dignity inherent in the existence of other individuals, thereby giving rise to some version of the golden rule, then that awareness is growing globally and is at an all-time historical high.

This is crazy! If people are more ethical than ever, why so many spectacular public ethical failures?

**Ethical behavior is *derivative***, being the natural result of *ethical awareness* (i.e. of understanding the priority of the common good and of loving one's neighbor as oneself). The locus of the "problem," then, is not the quality of our *behavior*; it is the level of our *awareness*. The "solution" is to increase our ethical awareness. With most people, this is happening.

It is most unfortunate, however, that in terms of ethical awareness, the most powerful people in our society seem to operate with the least evolved version of it. To make matters worse, the ruling powers also efficiently commandeer our most advanced knowledge about how the human brain works in order to delude and manipulate us more effectively, thereby keeping great numbers of us uninformed and functionally deluded.

Please explain what it means to say our cultural defaults, especially in the area of ethics, are obsolete.

Fair enough. I am working with an evolutionary perspective according to which our understanding is constantly evolving and growing. Many of our mainstream ethical ideas come from the Enlightenment period in which people were struggling to free themselves, especially economically, from the monopolies of Church and State. They therefore emphasized the *virtue* of self-interest. As Bernard Mandeville put it in “*The Fable of the Bees: or, Private Vices, Public Benefits*” (1714), we benefit the *whole* when we pursue our *private good*.

This is a foundational claim in a vast transformation of our ethical understanding. It is not new to claim that we humans are **selfish** by our very nature, but to claim that our selfishness is a virtue to be cultivated and not a character flaw—this is indeed a new claim! It is the basis of the current delusion that it somehow benefits the whole to ignore the common good and pursue instead an entirely private advantage.

Over time selfishness has become so deeply assimilated into our culture that the acceptance of it is now largely automatic, being part of the architecture of our understanding. It is one of our “defaults.”

# But isn't that true? *We are naturally selfish, right?*

- Yes, but not exclusively. We are also naturally empathetic and caring. Of course, the particular way we function—the way we blend self-interest and empathetic caring—is shaped by cultural expectations and models regarding the appropriate understanding and approach to the “good life.” Significantly, we are constantly encouraged in our culture to work and struggle to be materially successful. We soon get the idea that while it may indeed be “nice” to be empathetic and caring, the really essential thing is to be materially “successful.”
- Again, this elevation of the private interest over the common good now functions as one of our “defaults.”

# Empathy and caring—don't these go against our nature, which is to be selfish?

Recent advances in cognitive science have shown that the capacity for empathy and caring is biologically hard-wired into us. Significantly, this hard-wired biological capacity can be overridden by strong psycho/cultural ideas (what I am calling “defaults”). In spite of this, it seems that globally and culturally we are in the profound process of upgrading our “defaults,” moving to what Jeremy Rifkin calls an “empathetic civilization.”

# This process of identifying and upgrading our defaults sounds scary!

Indeed it is. Since our defaults normally function beneath the level of our ordinary awareness where they filter and “set up” our everyday experience, we are not generally aware of them.

Because they are hidden, to question them can feel “crazy,” like questioning core, bedrock reality.

- *“My sense is that the fear that is spreading like a wild fire across America is due, in large part, to a seismic shift occurring in our thinking about the most cherished values of American life: our notions of freedom, equality, and democracy. In other words, what we are really discussing—underneath the surface of the political and ideological debates—are our beliefs about the basic drives and aspirations of human beings.”*  
Jeremy Rifkin, “An ‘Empathetic Civilization’ response to why we have become so uncivil”

# Why bother?

In order  
to make a  
better  
world for  
others  
and a  
better life  
for  
ourselves.

- *“The ability to recognize oneself in the other and the other in oneself is a deeply democratizing experience. Empathy is the soul of democracy. It is an acknowledgment that each life is unique, unalienable, and deserving of equal consideration in the public square. The evolution of empathy and the evolution of democracy have gone hand in hand throughout history. The more empathic the culture, the more democratic its values and governing institutions. The less empathic the culture, the more totalitarian its values and governing institutions.”* Jeremy Rifkin.

# Watch out! This is getting into politics.

- Hmm. Aristotle defines politics as the pursuit of human betterment through public means, and he further classifies politics as a branch of ethics. The premise implied by your remark is that we should avoid talking about this. How utterly shameful. The ancient Greeks had a word for this. It is “idiot.”
- In their 2009 book, *The Spirit Level: Why More Equal Societies Almost Always Do Better*, epidemiologists Richard G. Wilkinson and Kate Pickett argue that a society's overall happiness is linked to income equality. They have found that it is equality—not more income or more consumption—that makes us healthier and more contented. Their research also shows that less equal societies like the United States have higher rates of anxiety and illness, violence, teenage pregnancies, obesity, and drug abuse. They also have significantly less public trust and greater levels of irrational fear.



# OK. So what does any of this have to do with Penn State?

An exciting development in ethics is the birth of research programs aiming to understand the physical, biological, and evolutionary foundations of morality. A major discovery is that morality is grounded in our bodily experience: we actually *feel* right and wrong in our bodies, and the stronger the physical feeling, the more potent the strength of our ethical response. Accordingly, the physical experience of **disgust** is the basis of our strongest moral feelings.

Research by Paul Rozin, Jonathan Haidt, and Rick McCauley indicates that the experience of disgust is related to the moral concept of purity. That is, when something we hold as sacred and pure is tainted, we experience the feeling of moral disgust. This is more than a metaphor. **The feeling of moral disgust is produced by the same neural and chemical processes that occur when we bite into something moldy and rotten.**

- *“Emotions are physical. They are very complex processes that occur in our brains, each serving vital purposes for our survival. Disgust in particular is the result of our bodily need to avoid toxic substances, especially rotten and poisonous foods. Thus it is most closely associated with bodily functions having to do with digestion.*

*At its most basic level, disgust can be thought of as the unpleasantness that arises when the body is contaminated. The brain has sensors to recognize when the body has been contaminated and it uses specific chemical markers to remember events that may have lead to the unpleasantness that followed.” Joe Brewer, “Ethics, Politics, and the Psychology of Disgust.”*

So are you suggesting that people were literally “disgusted” when they heard that children had been sexually abused in the athletic department?

- Absolutely. Think about it this way. Even when we have impeccable table manners, we would probably respond dramatically if we suddenly realized we had bitten into something rotten. Because people around the nation had the same neural response to the Penn State scandal that they would have had if they had discovered a dead rat in their stew, people reacted with anger and condemnation—often aiming their disgust towards the entire restaurant, as it were, and not just towards the particular rotten serving.

# As Joe Brewer explains:

Once we associate those negative feelings with an idea (like 'liberalism' or 'Obama the Muslim') it is very hard to shake off. The explanation for this comes from the field of evolutionary psychology, which explores the evolutionary origins of human thought and behavior. Animals that remember the foods that make them sick are more likely to survive and reproduce. So those who have a long memory of disgust are better adapted for survival.

Applied to politics, this phenomenon implies that once a political idea becomes a rotten apple it will remain a rotten apple. Disgust tends to stick around. This is why so much time, effort, and money is dedicated to painting the opposition with negative feelings. If a disgust response can be evoked, it will tend to stay around.

Think about the ramifications for gay marriage. If children are taught that homosexuality is disgusting, they will want to stay far away from it. As their moral sentiments develop, they will begin to see homosexuality as a contaminant in society. When thinking about the sacred institution of marriage, they will feel the threat of this impurity to something they want to keep clean. It's pretty easy to mobilize them against this threat because the feeling is long-lasting and easy to activate with a political sound bite.

There are two lessons to learn from this. First, if you want someone to support your idea (like the notion that addressing global warming might be a sensible thing to do), don't let it get associated with disgust....Second, if you want someone to oppose an idea, just riddle it with associations to the profane and impure. Do so with references to basic bodily functions and you'll be particularly effective.

These tactics have long been used in politics to the detriment of civil society.

But Penn State, and especially the football program, has long been associated with the highest ethical standards. How could something so unethical have happened there?

- Obviously this is not a uniquely Penn State problem. However, to understand how this could have happened at Penn State (of all places) let me turn to the recent book, *“Blind Spots: Why We Fail to Do What’s Right”* (Bazerman and Tenbrunsel, 2011) Drawing on the findings of evolutionary psychology and the new sub-discipline of “behavioral ethics” the authors take a careful look at how people in fact respond to ethical dilemmas.

# Please continue.

- First a clarification. Contrary to common opinion, most ethical problems do not take the form of a person deciding between right and wrong. Rather, ethical problems take the form of *ethical dilemmas* in which two subjectively attractive choices present themselves. Of course, one of the options may be illegal and/or immoral, but it almost always has some sort of compensating “good” attached to it. For example, it is clearly illegal to drink and drive, but those who do so are often primarily choosing to have fun, with breaking the law and risking an accident being secondary risks they are willing to take. Now the *assumption* of current ethics training is that people are fully aware they are facing an ethical dilemma, and the training is designed to encourage them to make the ethical choice. Behavioral ethics has found this assumption to be unfounded. Accordingly, traditional ethics programs are ineffective precisely because most people are *unaware* of the ethical ramifications of their decisions at the time that they make them.

## What is wrong with encouraging people facing an ethical dilemma to make an appropriate ethical choice?

- Of course, there is nothing wrong with that. It is just that it is generally ineffective. As the authors say, traditional ethics training programs “lack an understanding of the unintentional yet predictable cognitive patterns that result in unethical behavior.” What behavioral ethics has discovered is that when someone harms another in ways that violate the actor’s own conscious ethical beliefs, he or she is not generally aware of the contradiction. This is what the authors call “**bounded ethicality**.” As they put it, “...*functional boundaries prevent individuals from viewing a problem as an ethical one. Organizations often segment decisions within particular groups or disperse different aspects of a decision to different parts of the organization. As a result, the typical ethical dilemma tends to be viewed as an engineering, marketing, or financial problem, even when the ethical relevance is obvious to other groups.*” (16) This gives rise to what the authors call “**ethical fading**”—that is, where the ethical ramifications “fade” from the decision making process. The result is that decision makers fail to realize the ethical implications of their decisions. Over time, this allows “ethical sinkholes” to develop in organizations. The point is that many (if not most) ethical infractions are “rooted in the intricacies of human psychology rather than integrity.” (21) As a dramatic example, the “Nazi who said sorry,” Albert Speer, admitted at the Nuremberg trials that by classifying himself as an “administrator” he was able to function as if the human impact of what he did was simply not part of his job or concern.

So the suggestion is that structural biases in our thought processes blind us to actions that we would otherwise find unethical?

- Precisely. The authors point out that “ethical fading” occurs at the moment of decision and not before or after. They distinguish between our “**should self**,” which is active before and after a decision, and our “**want self**,” which activates and takes command precisely at the decision point. In other words, at the precise moment of decision, our thoughts are dominated by what we *want*, not by what we think we *should* or *should not* do. Our “should self” predicts we will be ethical and recollects, through unconscious memory revision and shifting standards, that we actually *were* ethical, but at the actual moment of our decision the “want self,” which does not cognize ethical requirements or ramifications, is actively in charge.

# This sounds like making excuses for misbehavior.

- It may sound like that, but that is not what it is. Again, the authors' point is that these ethical "blind spots" are the result of how we function cognitively. Another of their points is how our **focus** in making a decision can blind us to readily available and ethically relevant information. Perhaps you have seen the video of two groups of differently clad people tossing a basketball back and forth. The viewer is asked to count the number of times someone wearing a white shirt touches the basketball. It is difficult but not impossible to keep track of the touches, but it requires focusing on the ball. While the ball is being bounced back and forth among this group of people, someone in a gorilla outfit walks back and forth. **Most viewers simply do not see the gorilla!** Once revealed, however, it is almost impossible to imagine how one did not see the gorilla. Something similar, the authors say, is going on in decision making. The ethical factors are often the gorilla.



# It sounds too simple.

- It is more complicated, to be sure. Given that ethical blindness is often rooted in structural biases in our cognition, there is also such a thing as “motivated blindness.” This was likely involved in the Penn State example. Many in the athletic department can claim truthfully that they did not know, but also there was a strong motivation for them NOT to know! Also, there is the tendency in our culture to value outcomes over processes, which makes motivated blindness increasingly believable. After all, Paterno was a winner, and it is hard to imagine he would have become “JoePa” if his teams were not consistently victorious. Outcome over process.

It seems clear that we need more and harsher punishments for ethical infractions.

- The authors do not recommend this. Again, the assumption is that people who commit ethical infractions are aware of what they are doing. But this is rarely the case because of “bounded ethicality” and “ethical fading.” In addition, an organization’s formal ethics and compliance programs only represent the tip of the organization’s ethical infrastructure. The informal norms, patterns, and pressures in an organization exert far more influence on employee behavior than any formal efforts could. In the case of Penn State, Joe Paterno’s reputation for integrity made it correspondingly more difficult for anyone in the athletic department to question what was being done (or not). With JoePa in charge, you could just “know” the right thing was being done.

## Are you suggesting that the high ethical quality of the football program made a scandal like this more likely?

Yes. It is often the case that doing good can subtly become a license to misbehave. This is probably true with respect to Jerry Sandusky. The authentic good, charitable work he did made his scandalous, immoral behavior more subjectively feasible, not less. Also, the stellar reputation of the Penn State football program, especially with regard to full compliance with often Byzantine NCAA requirements, made it easier to think that nothing of this magnitude of wrong could happen in the bowels of the program.

- *“...behavioral ethics research in the areas of moral compensation and moral equilibrium suggests that organizational efforts to promote ethical behavior can actually be associated with an increase in unethical behavior. According to these theories, we each maintain a moral identity that we keep in balance by engaging in minor, compensatory moral behaviors. Because our moral behavior is dynamic, when we engage in a moral act, we may feel licensed to engage in immoral behavior in the future. Conversely, when we behave unethically, we may be motivated to behave more ethically in the future.”* Bazerman and Tenbrunsel, p. 114

# What can be done?

The best thing to do is to **change yourself**, but how? Here are some hints.

- First, begin to lead an examined life. Cultivate and increase ethical awareness by practicing a regular pattern of introspection.
- Second, we each operate with what you might call an intuitive system and a rational system. These are often seen in opposition, but they work best in alignment. Books like Malcolm Gladwell's "Blink," are valuable in validating the intuitive system and bringing it into the light, but they are damaging when they promote intuition over reason. Yes, intuition is fast where reasoning is slow, but our intuitive system is also more likely to be immoral. If your gut reaction differs from the decision you reach after conscious, rational processing, this indicates that something is not right. Don't simply choose one over the other but work to reconcile the inconsistency.
- Rehearse ethical challenges ahead of time. For example, imagine someone offers to pay you to lie. "Imagine" how you will respond.
- Work to become aware of your ethical "defaults." With this awareness (and with great effort) you can change them. Lacking this awareness, you will be stuck where you are.
- Finally, stop identifying with your ideas. Allow things (and yourself) to evolve, to change, to move. Be the larger awareness of the process and stop holding on to markers along the way.

# Thank you for the opportunity to share these ideas, and a final thought...

- ▣ Endeavor always to be kind, caring, compassionate, and loving, reminding yourself that the greatest joy and happiness comes from deep connections to others, not from possessions and material accomplishments (as cool as they may well be!).