

Chapter 2

You Are What You Do

Are you at home or perhaps on the road? Maybe you are in an airplane? Are you reading online, in a library, or listening to this book as you jog or drive down the street? Regardless of your location, the chances are that other people are not far off. We share this planet and co-create its successes or failures. As philosophers and scientists observe theoretically and empirically, our lives are socially constructed (Gergen 1997). How we behave is experienced by others, which generates collective meaning as we go about living our lives. We all have a hand in shaping this world, one day at a time.

A lack of ethical awareness and commitment to being morally sound can inadvertently contribute to moral hypocrisy. When there's a mismatch between who we think we are and what we actually do, it suggests a lack ethical alignment. The notion of living one's best ethical self is designed to foster goal setting and striving, to advance adult personal growth and development (Roberts et al. 2005). It is not intended to help you visualize or create an appreciative view that is left unattended. It is essential that we learn to want to make a sincere and forthright attempt at honestly knowing where our strengths and limitations reside. If you want to be ethical, you must first get honest with yourself about your motives and intentions. When you engage in a particular course of action, make a decision, or choose to behave in a particular way, you need to be truthful with yourself about the nature of your goal. In making ethical decisions, it is important to ask yourself, "Why am I choosing this particular action? Is it to get ahead, get my way, or to gain power over others? Is it to garner favor or to win? Or is it to be useful, be of service, or to empower others? What are my motives?"

The ethical character of our organizations and communities is forged in the context of others as we exercise our values. Being relational creatures, we offer a contribution to the world as we are simultaneously shaped by it. How we engage with one another is an essential element of our survival and growth. This affirms the importance of continuing to advance one's best ethical self, learning to manage your ethical identity in the context of others. We depend upon one another to live and thrive. When other people meet, engage, or work with you, who do they see?

Connecting Ethically

According to Robert Putnam, the fabric of a connected culture is represented by a type of social capital (Putnam 2000). His research describes how relational connectedness builds and enhances community strength. Thanks to the Internet, we are more connected to one another, now more than ever before. But these connections may lack quality. The forces of smartphones and Facebook continue to bring friends, users, and consumers into new and emerging communities. Communications taking place via technological platforms are often in an abbreviated form, while simultaneously taking time away from face-to-face interaction. Ironically, many of us are so busy relating to others virtually, we may not take the time to be present with those around us. An employee at AT&T shared with me that to get his colleague's attention at work, he had to send him a text, and the individual was standing right next to him. The text read "Look up!" Have you ever gone to dinner, class, or some event, and the people around you are so entrenched in dialogue with others online that it feels like they're somewhere else?

You might consider the following, make a concerted effort to look up from your computer or device and say hello, thank you, and smile to the people you encounter throughout your day. Do you make eye contact with those in need? Do you offer a handshake or hug willingly? Being ethical is about taking time for those around you. It is interesting that one of Oprah Winfrey's recent campaigns sought to prompt her fans to "just say hello." She describes how we all seek and need validation. Referencing the numerous guests she welcomed over the years to her program, "I started to see that pattern. And what I realized is that everybody is looking for the same thing. No matter if it's a politician or Beyoncé...we're all looking to know, did you see me, did you hear me, and did what I say mean anything to you? So just saying hello is a way of validating even a stranger" (Kurtz 2014, np) (Fig. 2.1).



Fig. 2.1 Do you recognize and acknowledge those around you? Image credited to Rawpixel/Shutterstock.com

Validation of others can be an opportunity to exercise your moral strength. For example, if a store clerk or attendant is having a rough experience with the equipment, technology, or other customers, do you react in frustration or reassure them it's OK, as you patiently wait your turn? When the cable, phone, or health insurance company sends you a bill that is wrong (for the third month in a row), do you get angry or strive to remain calm as you work things out with the service agent? If someone is doing something thoughtful, kind, or with a positive attitude, do you take time to explicitly acknowledge them and their efforts? Are your ethical values expressed by respecting others' space? Affirming the value of people and the planet can also be expressed by taking care of the natural environment and local community. Do you sort your garbage? Do you take bags to the store with you? Do you pick up stray trash on the ground (items you didn't toss), placing them in a wastepaper container? Do you support local business in your community? Do you help out at your local hospital, charity, community center, or youth club? Do you know your neighbors?

It's difficult to think locally sometimes, when we live in a world of virtual communication and global enterprise. It's exciting to have our citizenship broadened to the global community. But being a good citizen starts at home. In the West, citizenship typically means obeying the laws, taking care of one's family, maintaining your home, investing in education, and voting. Today we're also asked to be global citizens. Understanding one's responsibility on the local and global level is sometimes challenging and can potentially be overwhelming. How you present yourself, locally and globally, virtually or in person, is the way in which other people experience your ethical identity. Interactions fuel associations and judgments, as those observing you consider what your actions reveal about you. It takes time to make a conscious effort to be ethical.

Faster Is Better?

The human brain works to maximize efficiency. Nudging the preference for quick over slow, we are prone to take cognitive shortcuts (Kahneman 2011). Add to that, the notion that bad is often stronger than good, and we see how it becomes easier to jump to a focus on differences rather than similarities. Fueled by ego and fanned by arrogance, our natural tendency to impose personal self-bias can escalate our thoughts into extreme binary oppositions. Given that our brains naturally make sense of incoming information by use of categorizations, we tend to organize new input based on prior experiences, applying prior means of sense-making to file and understand incoming new material. This instinctive process, trying to make sense of the world we live in, can inadvertently create extreme distances between views. In the United States, for example, you can get into some heated debate very quickly based on liberal and conservative typologies. It seems obvious there are likely good, honest, and ethical people in both camps. And yet, within our daily communications with family, friends, and colleagues (at the lunch or dinner table) we can see

how differences can unintentionally become distorted, leading to grossly disrespectful or inappropriate inferences, rendering unethical thoughts, comments, and/or actions.

For example, a colleague of mine became distressed about a conversation he had with a lifelong acquaintance. He was quite literally distraught and disgusted by how his friend, a well-educated man whom he regarded as a learned associate, had become quite radical, using extremist terms like “fascist” to describe a political administration and their policies. In restraining himself from an over-heated diatribe, he pulled back from the situation. Rather than reacting with equal opposition, which he said he was tempted to do, he chose instead to reflect on how that person may have come to develop such an extreme stance. For most people, in the heat of the moment, it seems easier to just react to what we disagree with, rather than to listen and seeking to understand. This becomes especially difficult when the parties engaged may not be interested in listening to or considering any other view but their own. And it’s particularly disconcerting when their view seems hurtful, short-sighted, or potentially harmful to others. Words create the world we live in.

Moral responsibility is about creating inclusivity rather than exclusivity. Applied ethics is working to get along with others. It is reflected in your willingness to give respect, offer patience, and, if in disagreement, model empathy and compassion. Perhaps the way to understand views apart from our own is to appreciate the goodness in everyone. People typically get angry, resentful, and afraid when they perceive their rights are challenged, threatened, or they are being undervalued. People want to ensure what belongs to them is not taken and that they do not get left with less than what they think is their fair share. Extend yourself. Think about how others might feel and what leads them to value what is important to them. Broaden your understanding toward a completely different view. You might ask, “What has happened that might cause this person to feel this way?”

The pursuit of ethical growth is a form of art, one that is profoundly human. We are limited only to the extent that our imagination and/or faith are constrained. Coupled with a sense of responsibility and an acceptance of our own fallibility, we need to continue to embrace tolerance in route to learning. Encouraged by wise people who preceded us, we must acknowledge that we might be wrong. When we forget this fact, we can begin to believe we know only one truth and that the ends justify the means.

Perception as a Stage

Goffman (1959) wrote about how the perception of the self was a staging area for one’s character. This unseen, less formal, and privately constructed world is where perceptions and prior experiences are called upon “behind the scenes” to help people interpret information and make distinctions about themselves and others. This metaphor begs the question: What masks do you wear? Is your moral identity genuine? Are you authentic in your business presence (Figs. 2.2 and 2.3)?

Fig. 2.2 What masks do you wear? Image courtesy of [freeimages.com](https://www.freeimages.com)



Today we have an entirely new stage for identity, via virtual communication and the ethical self we portray using social media. When you respond, blog, share information with others, and present yourself to the world online, is this your ethical identity? Are your actions congruent with your best ethical self? How you act in person, is it consistently ethical? The roles you portray in all areas of your life—virtual, home, family, work—are they consistent with your values? Understanding is no small feat; it's complicated. With motivations that fuel competing desires for autonomy, power, security, and relational care, we can draw upon different value sets, given the current or pressing circumstance.

Mental schemas help each person make sense of what they see and feel, helping to create how they experience the world. As an individual takes this information in and engages with others, internal subjective cues contribute to perceptions, while simultaneously posing an influence upon and shaping the reality for other people as well. Our perceptions are continuously interlaced with the people who are around us. Generally, tacit cues are beliefs we draw upon from what we already know. But a personalized framework for how we see ourselves, a person's ethical identity, is constantly evolving as we participate in ongoing social interactions. Therefore, your character and ethicality is forged in the context of others.

This is based on the assumption that how life experiences are perceived, interpreted, and understood depends upon your thoughts and feelings in a particular place, context and moment in time. Continually influenced by basic needs, we see how our lives are continuously shaped and can move in different directions, given our attention or focus on seeking autonomy and change, care and empathy, power and competition, and/or security and stability. Movement toward personal growth, relationships, competition, or having a desire to stay in place may stay the same or shift. Additionally, the fluidity of self may be more robust in some people than in others.

We come to each moment with a unique view, shaped through our experiences, which we use to interpret the present reality. We face the day with particular needs and goals, given our current life space (based on health, family needs, work

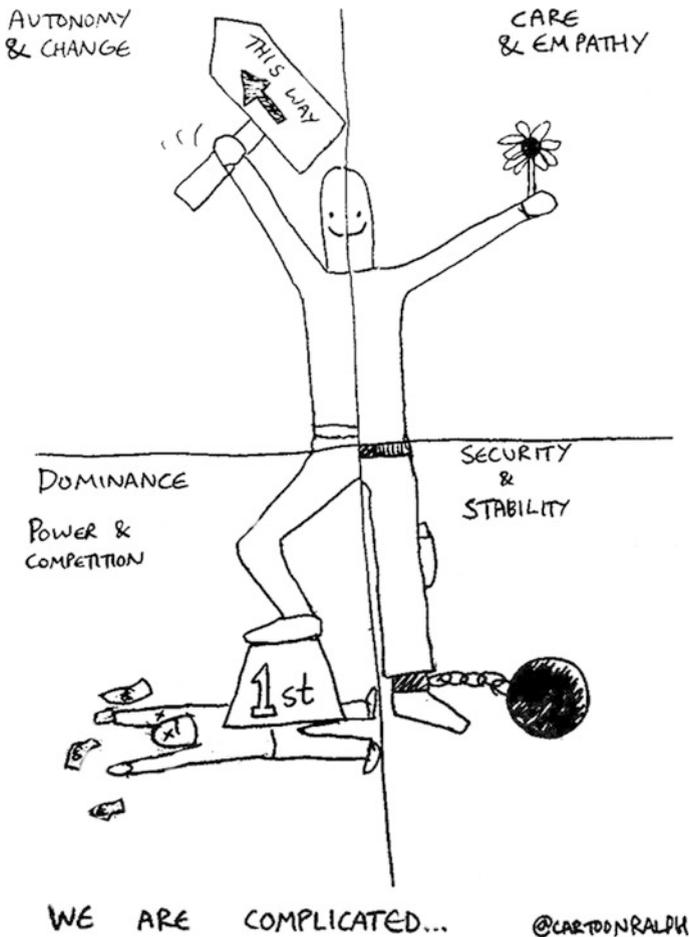


Fig. 2.3 The complicated self. Image credited to CartoonRalph

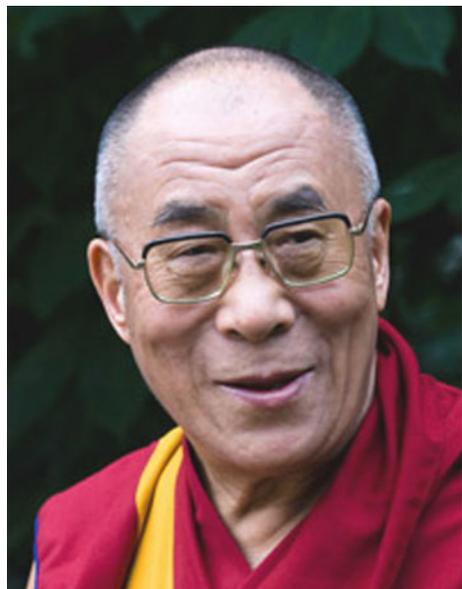
deadlines, etc.). Through head and heart, incorporating cognitive, emotional, and spiritual processes, we make sense of life on a day by day basis.

We shape the plot of our lives by how we see and react to the world around us. Everyone shares and narrates their own storyline in a world of other living beings, all doing the same thing. People may or may not be aware that they are the authors of their own text. Regardless, we are all cast members in a living play, simultaneously assuming a role in our own and other peoples' narratives. While the human life is experienced as your own personal creation, if you can rise above your individual lens, there are other splendid vantage points. Here, you are no longer the sole filmmaker, but an actor cast in the broader show. Perception from this grander view is achieved by thinking more holistically (i.e., where you are no longer at the center of everything).

The world is created by our own perceptions. Investments, the stock market, and currency itself are all viable because of the consensual beliefs that these things have value. What if we started to take more time and energy, striving to value others around us? What if we gave more time to consider others’ perspectives, exercising empathy, thinking about what might be important to them? Given the situation, take time to consider the needs of others. Ask yourself, what would I be thinking or feeling if I were in their shoes? What would be important to me if I were looking at the world from their eyes? Given this information, what might that person need to support their well-being? How might I work to better understand the needs of others? To help you address these concerns, you can assume a view of the situation as if you’re in a helicopter, getting up above yourself and garnering a broader picture of the grander scheme. While we each are tainted by our own lens even when we strive to be empathetic, efforts to look at the big picture, as it pertains to ethics, can help us see we are a part of a shared production, rather than the lead character in a one man/woman show.

Paradoxically, we are all cast as actors in this large unfolding event, as a solo and collective life-experience on earth. We share a common role and fate as we navigate our time here, together. Such a generalized observation has variances in interpretation, given one’s religious and spiritual beliefs. And yet, we are the same in the sense that we share a common platform. A personal sense of ethics comes not only from feeling compassion for others; it is also in thinking about the broader view and assuming a more holistic approach to business life. Ownership of personal responsibility stems from loyalty, which comes from respect between employees and their employers. This respect emerges by working together to achieve a common goal, one that strives to achieve goodness. As stated by His Holiness the

Fig. 2.4 His Holiness the Dalai Lama believes compassion and business go hand in hand. Image courtesy of His Holiness the Dalai Lama and photographer Tenzin Choejor



Dalai Lama, “The future is open. When there is intention to do good, there is no remorse” (2014). Hearing him speak at the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University in 2014, I was moved by his jovial nature and sincere belief that business and compassion are not mutually exclusive. When joined together, work and caring for others helps us evolve as spiritual beings (Fig. 2.4).

The Stories We Tell

Regardless of how complex or mundane the issue, we use stories to help us understand, move on, and even to inspire greatness. We tell ourselves stories to live (Didion 2006). Some writers weave tales of moral disintegration, driven by social fragmentation. Other stories give us the means to cope. Narratives help us deal with life’s challenges, providing examples of how to make sense of our circumstances. In the West, our values have been bolstered by stories that reinforce a belief in success, achievement, and self-confidence. Horatio Alger, Jr. is the author of a fictitious character who conveys the American myth that opportunity is available to all. In his stories he affirms the ideal of individual potential. While this allegory bears some truth, in that the ideology is based on self-efficacy, many Westerners believe that anyone can be successful with hard work and determination. On some level this perception helps shape the reality of industrious success, reinforced by spirit of capitalism and democracy (Fig. 2.5).

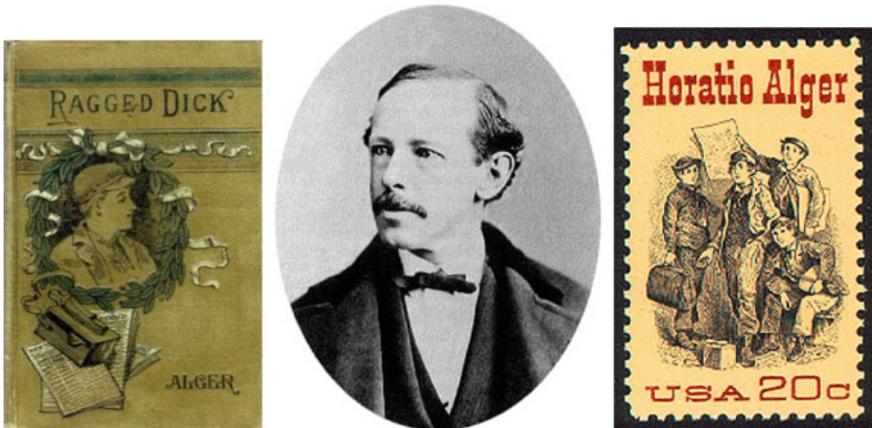


Fig. 2.5 Horatio Alger, Jr., the acclaimed novelist who told tales of children escaping poverty and his book “Ragged Dick”. Images are in the public domain. *Ragged Dick* is a story by Horatio Alger, Jr., serialized in *Student and Schoolmate* in 1867, released as a novel in May 1868 by A.K. Loring. It was the first in a six volume *Ragged Dick Series*, becoming the author’s all-time bestseller. The tale follows a poor chap’s rise to middle class respectability in nineteenth century New York City. Scholars have criticized its simplistic fantasy-approach toward class assimilation. Stamp reproduced from the United States Postal Service Stamp Gallery: <http://usstampgallery.com/view.php?id=e22cd461c068aea5dff1c3462214880d76b3e39c>

Alger's writing describes the adventures of impoverished boys moving from "rags to respectability" through "pluck and luck." The tales emerged as a genre, as widespread urbanization followed the Civil War, reflecting the rise of industrialism. The stories made heroes of impoverished boys who displayed uncommon courage and moral fortitude. Struggling against all odds, they worked to achieve wealth and acclaim. These rags-to-riches vignettes became popular, guiding many to believe in America as the land of opportunity. The majority of the lads in his stories experienced accidental good fortune that ushered their success. Rather than achieving riches because of hard work, sacrifice and determination, fame was an outcome derived from a sheer twist in fate. Frank Courtney's break in *The World Before Him* (1880) is a typical plot line.¹ Young Frank grabs his fortune by sheer luck. And yet, perceiving your potential with assuredness and self-confidence and a belief in the possibility of greatness helps to create that reality.

Between the late 1860s and Alger's death in 1899, Alger published more than 100 of these formulaic novelettes. As an author he paradoxically established his own fortune by simply pursuing his craft, ardently telling and retelling these mini-tales of success. Perhaps what is most relevant in the stories that relates to the ethic of hard work, is that success is not only the gift of luck, but found in an ability to have hope and to keep trying, despite failure. To believe in the potential for success, by putting yourself out there and being resilient, you have a greater chance for positive outcomes to emerge (Balaram 2008). When imagination and preparation meet opportunity, luck has a chance to thrive, contributing to more creativity and invention. So engrained is this myth in America, we see its representation in modern day culture, with an abundant focus on innovation and entrepreneurship.

Perhaps we can learn from our ancestors, many of whom were driven to discover a new way of life, one that supposedly offered freedom of choice (Fig. 2.6). In the United States, our forefathers endured horrific hardships brought on by war, hunger, mistreatment, disease, loss and death. But regardless of their circumstances, of those who survived, many carried with them an enduring hope for a better future. Americans have descendants from all over the world. Many of these people arrived with modest means and faced harsh and unforgiving circumstances. But they carried with them a faith, a belief in the notion of opportunity for themselves and their children. This entrepreneurial spirit is not solely based on the idea of wealth creation, but it is also about the potential for advancement. The social ideal of the "American Dream" means the ability to seek prosperity, which includes access to education. With education, people had the hope of viable options, the ability to choose what you might do for a living. Hard work and determination were valued, regardless of one's profession. These qualities helped to further define a "work ethic," which was a value of steadfast commitment to doing a job right and doing it well. The moral virtue of diligence was valued in its own right. Work was considered admirable. A person's work ethic stood for something of value.

¹See <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/4997/>.

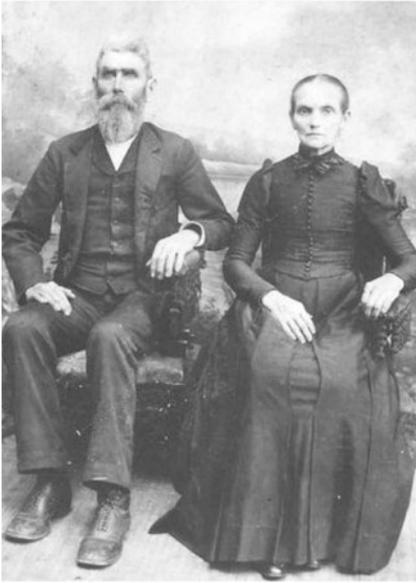


Fig. 2.6 Ancestors create our family narrative. Images (*top left*) courtesy of the Lang family, (*top right*) courtesy of the Sekerka family, (*lower left*) the Jenkins family; (*lower right*) the Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Horace W. Goldsmith Foundation Gift through Joyce and Robert Menschel

We know that having a belief in our own abilities is a powerful force in achieving success (Coffee et al. 2009). Research suggests when opportunities for development are precluded, self-efficacy is often compromised and performance can suffer. Studies in the area of resiliency reflect the importance of rebounding from failure, reaffirming a belief in self, and continuing to seek self-enhancement (Gillian and Rothstein 2010). A belief in the self is central in motivating action and in helping people recover from difficulties. Our images of who we think we are and who we think we can become, both real and perceived, shape what we experience and how we experience it. Recognizing the symbolic and socially-constructed nature of the human universe, scholars embrace the notion that positive images help create positive action (Cooperrider 1990). A recent empirical study conducted in the field revealed evidence for moral contagion as a result of other people's good deeds and moral self-licensing through one's own good deeds (Hofmann et al. 2014). This work also affirmed the integrated nature of happiness and a sense of purpose with acts of morality in everyday life (both ethical and unethical).

When a positive backdrop is missing, when those around you are unethical and/or you find yourself in hard times, then what? Toward advancing the notion of resiliency as a primary element of driving success in very difficult times, the story of Mario Capecchi merits consideration. As described by Balaram (2008), Capecchi is known for his Nobel Prize-winning work in Physiology and Medicine in the field of gene targeting. At a speech he delivered in 1996, accepting the Kyoto Prize, he shared his beliefs that abrasive juxtaposition of unique sets of life experiences help produce a form of creative inner strength, far too complex to pre-orchestrate.

He noted that his success grew from the antithesis of a nurturing environment, which most of us want to believe is conducive toward fostering a thoughtful, creative, and successful adult. Born in 1937 in Italy, at a time when Fascism and Communism were looming, he was a child of a single mother. As an artist and member of a Nazi opposition group, she was arrested and sent to Dachau in early 1941. He was taken in and looked after by a peasant family, but when the money ran out, Capecchi, as a child of 4½, was left on his own. He states, "I headed south, sometimes living in the streets, sometimes joining gangs of other homeless children, sometimes living in orphanages and most of the time being hungry. My recollections of those 4 years are vivid but not continuous, rather like a series of snapshots. Some of them are brutal beyond description, others more palatable" (p. 1546). The Capecchi story included miracles beyond belief, with his mother surviving liberation and finding him on his ninth birthday. Emigration to America was a turning point for him. In Capecchi's words, "I was expecting to see roads paved with gold in America. I found much more: an opportunity." In looking back at his early years Capecchi says he marvels at the resiliency of a child. He goes on to add that the genetic and environmental factors contributing to talent are far too complex for us to predict. In the absence of such wisdom, we must provide children with ample opportunity to pursue their passions and dreams.

Our internal frameworks, how we make sense of our circumstances, are constantly helping us determine and navigate what is, and what can be. We rely and depend upon cognitive back-staging and feedback loops to shape the meaning of

our life experiences. But our ability to imagine, considering what principled performance might look like in the face of unethicity, is where we can arouse the creative energies to help make it so, at the very least in our own choices. Such willingness can continue to mold our perceptions of reality and the ethical elements we perceive. Because of the plasticity of the brain and the ability to select and direct our own thoughts, people can choose to alter how they see and shape their lives. But you need to be aware of this capacity and choose to use it. Calling back the rugged resiliency of our childhood and the strength found in goodness, we can all strive to edify a desire to do what is right, honest, and ethical. And we can do so at any moment, throughout our adult lives.

Choosing to Be Your Best

By becoming more aware of who you are in the world, thinking about how your ethical identity is reflected in thought, word and deed, you can begin to see if your inner and outer selves are congruent. You can learn where gaps might reside and if you have areas of ethical weakness or hypocrisy. Your extended self is who others see, perceive, and experience as you go about your day-to-day activities. Whether you make a deliberate effort to present yourself in a certain way or embrace the world without forethought, you will be perceived by others in varying ways. Do you make an effort to manage who you are in the world? Do you consider how you are perceived? Is being ethical something you value? This is a real choice that you will make; construed with deliberate care or by de facto i.e., ignoring the decision or being indifferent, a decision made through apathy.

Each person has the potential to be their best or worst—on any given day. Based on your temperament, experiences, and the situation or context, you may or may not choose to be ethical. The durability of your character can be strengthened or weakened over time. We can be detoured from being our best ethical self. But we are also capable of strengthening our capacity. As human beings, we are malleable. If you want to be ethical you have to put your mind to it and, with focused intent, recommit to this goal on regular basis. Much like a good marriage, being ethical takes work and involves a daily renewal, recommitting to the shared goal. It is not just a one-time “I do” and you’re good to go. Rather, it is a goal that one works to achieve on a daily basis.

Over time, you can build paths for effectiveness and avoid the areas known to impose ethical risk. You build precedents for ethical action by being ethical. Positive anticipatory views can be an amazing resource for garnering confidence and resolve. Mustering the courage to act, believing you are of good character, can give rise to self-efficacy and optimism that can support your ability to proceed with right action. Rather than creating false projections of your ethicality, you can own your space on the planet honestly. As Helen Keller once said, “The world is moved not only by the mighty shoves of the heroes, but also by the aggregate of the tiny pushes of each honest worker.” The tiny pushes you make include observation of and critical reflection on your own behavior (Fig. 2.7).

Fig. 2.7 Helen Keller in 1904 at the age of 24. Image in the public domain



We spend a lot of time judging others, which leaves the practice of personal critical introspection wanting. It takes effort to allocate resources toward personal growth. But learning to take a time out as a regular practice has value. Considering the importance of incorporating a reflective pause in their day, a business student reading about moral competencies commented, “Be it an ethical situation, a tragedy or a thought-provoking experience, time simply enables the pieces of what can seem like shattered glass to come together and ensure an adequate reflection.” When you wake up each morning as a person with character strengths and weaknesses, you have the opportunity to leverage your strong suits, like gratitude, curiosity, and determination. You can choose to develop your areas that lack strength, such as patience and compassion. You might also remind yourself where your areas of ethical weakness reside, identifying places or circumstances where you become tempted to engage in unethical behaviors, and choose to address them proactively (e.g., if you have a propensity to speed on the highway, you leave earlier and allow yourself more time).

Teaching yourself to be mindful means paying attention to where you are vulnerable; situations where you tend to give way to temptation. Observing who you are now, based on your past actions, is important. But it is also essential to recognize that you are never done with the process of becoming. Each day presents a new opportunity to engage in life ethically, to be more effective at your ability to engage in moral action. Given the dynamics of human development, we are never done with the process of becoming more ethical. Evolutionarily speaking, our perceptual biases enable us to overcome our fears and to participate in cooperative activities.

By definition, all reflection, learning about the self, is a retrospective effort. Self-awareness is an internal process constantly in the mode of playing catch-up.

Fig. 2.8 Obama Awards Nobel Prize to Kahneman.
Image credited to Rena Schild/Shutterstock.com



And, as described by Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman, the way we remember things is not particularly accurate (Fig. 2.8). We recall bits and pieces, and assign positivity or negativity to the experience based on what we consider “highlights” of the event or experience. We cast these peaks and endings in a particular way, which goes on to influence our future experiential perceptions. Our personal memories about the self and others serve as reference points for interpreting new experiences. Because the process of memory is skewed and not particularly accurate, our knowledge remains fluid and relatively illusive.

Dr. Jacob Bronowski, a Polish-born British mathematician who wrote a number of highly-regarded books on science, insisted that human error is inextricably bound up with pursuit of new knowledge. He claimed this requires not just calculation but thoughtful insight, an interpretation and a personal act of judgment, for which we are all responsible. The emphasis on the moral responsibility of knowledge was an essential message in all of his works, and an underlying point shared on his acclaimed television program “The Ascent of Man” (BBC 1973). As described by Critchley (2014), Bronowski explained that the acquisition of understanding entails a responsibility for the integrity of who we are as ethical beings. Knowledge and information that passes between us can only be exchanged “within a play of tolerance.”

In working to explain Werner Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle,² Bronowski insisted that the idea was a misnomer, giving the impression that we are always uncertain. He believed this was incorrect, claiming that knowledge is, in fact,

²Heisenberg described an electron as a particle that yields limited information; its speed and position are confined by the tolerance of Max Planck’s quantum, the basic element of matter.

precise. But he went on to say that precision itself is confined within a certain *toleration* of uncertainty. Bronowski thought the uncertainty principle should therefore be called the *principle of tolerance*. Pursuing knowledge means accepting this rampant uncertainty. Heisenberg’s principle has the consequence that no physical events can ultimately be described with absolute certainty or with zero tolerance. As such, the nagging paradox is that the more we know, the less certain we can be.

Similarly, your own truth, who you are, is but a snapshot. It is a picture of you in a particular circumstance, time, and place—a moment. We must embrace one another’s truths with tolerance. Perceptions are going to be different based on a host of factors, including experience, what you recall, what is happening, and how you are feeling in that moment. The malleability of our perceptions is a gift that comes with a duty to be morally responsible. Because human character, individually and collectively, is consistently in the making, it is essential that we regard our moral development as an ongoing task. If this mission is undertaken with rigorous honesty, self-awareness and empathy, it can continue to be worthwhile, productive, and fulfilling (Fig. 2.9).

Using your innate reflective capacity in concert with feedback from others can help you strengthen your character. Metaphorically, you are a fragment of a larger symmetry, shaped in the context of others, while also influencing those around you. To consider your strengths and weaknesses, it is important to understand who and what you are. This is an effort in sustained mindfulness. The very act of imposing ongoing self-awareness toward ethical awareness, growth and achievement, is a choice to work at being your best self. When broaching business ethics as a platform for human aspiration, a vision of seeing a more ethical world can become realized in a manageable and steadfast manner. A society where people, commerce, and the natural environment effectively co-exist without harm, and continue to evolve in a cooperative way, assumes we each take responsibility for ethics on a personal level. In a democracy we have a right to choose to be a part of co-creating a shared future, one that is just and strives to build individual and collective moral strength. Are we expecting others to do this for us, or are we shouldering our share of the chores, acting as adults to help ensure an ethical social structure for our children’s children?

Fig. 2.9 Getting honest with yourself. Image credited to Niels Hariot/[Shutterstock.com](https://www.shutterstock.com)



If we hope to achieve cohesive connections, cooperation, and trust in organizational life, we must begin by looking at and understanding ourselves. Do you care about being ethical? Do you want to build your moral strength? What do you want to achieve in life? What are your motives for accomplishing your goals? How do your actions reflect your values? Are you willing to work at strengthening your character as a realizable area for personal growth? Continue to think about these questions as we consider how being more attentive will help you answer them more honestly.

Takeaway Points

1. The ethical character of our organizations and communities is forged in the context of others. We are a prism, reflecting what we truly care about by what we do each day.
2. Consider how your perceptions and reactions shape your reality.
3. Motivations can impose competing values, which may conflict or vie for priority.
4. Being ethical takes personal commitment, fortitude and endurance. Reflect on how you strive to use your personal abilities to become successful in business, ethically.

Reflection Questions

How do you exercise taking responsibility for ethics in your workplace? Do you raise ideas about how to be more proactive in how you go about achieving your organization's goals with moral strength? Do you identify areas of ethical risk, bringing them forward prior to problematic circumstances?

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