

CHAPTER 47



On the Distinction between Unethical and Selfish Behavior

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Is unethical behavior always selfish, and is selfish behavior always unethical?

We conceptually distinguish between unethicality and selfishness by analyzing the four distinct categories of behavior that these two constructs combine to produce: selfish/unethical, selfish/ethical, unselfish/ethical, and unselfish/unethical behavior.

Does unethical behavior always represent selfish behavior? Consider the seminal dilemma that serves as the foundation for modern moral psychology: The wife of a man named Heinz was near death and desperate for a medicine that he could not afford (Kohlberg, 1963). To save her life, Heinz broke into a drugstore to steal the medicine. Kohlberg asked his subjects, “Should Heinz have stolen for his dying wife? Why or why not?” Whereas Kohlberg was interested in how people reasoned through this moral dilemma, we were instead struck by the fact that Heinz stole not to help himself, but to assist another person. Heinz might have acted unethically, but did he act selfishly?

Or consider the contemporary case of Aaron Swartz. As a computer programmer,

Swartz downloaded 4.8 million articles from the journal database JSTOR and made them publicly available. Although his action clearly violated computer and copyright laws, his alleged intention was “to place the material on the Internet so that it could be freely distributed around the entire globe” (Abelson, Diamond, Grosso, & Pfeiffer, 2013, p. 31).

Oftentimes, to act unethically is to act selfishly. Indeed, the bulk of ancient Greek philosophy and modern moral psychology has studied how individuals resolve moral dilemmas in which “doing the right thing” and acting in one’s self-interest are in conflict (Bazerman & Gino, 2012). In fact, Plato (trans. 1997) himself believed that self-interest lies at the root of all unethical behaviors: “the cause of each and every crime

we commit is precisely this excessive love of ourselves . . .” (p. 1414).

Because unethical behaviors often coincide with selfish intentions, most empirical studies focus on the antecedents and consequences of unethical behaviors that benefit the perpetrators at the expense of other individuals, groups, and organizations (e.g., Cohn, Fehr, & Maréchal, 2014; Gino, Ayal, & Ariely, 2009; Lu, Brockner, Vardi, & Weitz, 2017; Lu, Lee, Gino, & Galinsky, in press; Lu et al., 2017). To examine how frequently unethical behavior overlaps with selfish behavior in empirical studies, we conducted a bibliometric analysis of morality-related articles published in elite psychology and management journals between 2000 and 2015. We found that 83% of the articles (72 articles out of a total of 87 published) studied *selfish* unethical behavior without any consideration of *unselfish* unethical behavior.¹ In other words, the majority of studies in behavioral ethics appear to have confounded unethical behavior with selfish behavior.

Despite their frequent co-occurrence, unethical behavior and selfish behavior are conceptually orthogonal. In the social sciences, unethical behavior is commonly defined as behavior that is “illegal or morally unacceptable to the large community” (Jones, 1991, p. 367). By contrast, selfish behavior is defined as behavior that prioritizes one’s own interests and benefits over those of others. Critically, these definitions reveal that, on the one hand, selfish intentions are not a prerequisite for unethical behaviors and, on the other hand, unethical behaviors

need not arise out of selfishness. As we saw in the examples of Heinz and Swartz, unethical behaviors can originate from the desire to help others. In a similar vein, selfishness can promote *ethical* behaviors, particularly in contexts in which others’ interests are aligned with one’s own.

In the following sections, we decouple unethical and selfish behaviors by illustrating how unethical behaviors can be either selfish or unselfish and how selfish behaviors can be either ethical or unethical. For each category of behavior, we offer real-world examples that distinguish between these two constructs (see Table 47.1 for an overview). Thereafter, we discuss cases in which differentiating unethicality from selfishness offers a more comprehensive understanding of the antecedents of unethical behavior. Finally, we close the chapter by proposing future directions in the study of unethicality and selfishness.

Selfish and Unethical Behavior

Numerous studies have found that individuals resort to unethical behaviors out of self-interest. Researchers studying selfish unethical behaviors have examined conditions that trigger individuals to cheat, lie, and steal for themselves. For instance, competitive environments often promote a “whatever it takes to win” mindset (Hegarty & Sims, 1978; Kilduff, Galinsky, Gallo, & Reade, 2016), thereby increasing selfish behaviors that are unethical. In firms, employees who compete for status are more likely to fabricate their

TABLE 47.1. Distinguishing between Ethical/Unethical and Selfish/Unselfish Behaviors

Motive	Behavior	
	Ethical	Unethical
Selfish	<p><i>Definition:</i> Behaviors driven by self-beneficial motives that do not violate legal laws or moral codes of conduct.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> Charitable donations to receive tax deductions</p>	<p><i>Definition:</i> Behaviors driven by self-beneficial motives that violate legal laws or moral codes of conduct.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> Cheating on an exam</p>
Unselfish	<p><i>Definition:</i> Behaviors driven by other-beneficial motives that do not violate legal laws or moral codes of conduct.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> Community service</p>	<p><i>Definition:</i> Behaviors driven by other-beneficial motives that violate legal laws or moral codes of conduct.</p> <p><i>Example:</i> Stealing to help the poor</p>

performance and sabotage competitors' work (Charness, Masclet, & Villeval, 2014). In sports, players adopt unsportsmanlike behaviors in order to get ahead of their rivals (Kilduff et al., 2016). In academia, to compete with their peers, scholars inflate their papers' download counts from leading working paper repositories such as the Social Science Research Network (SSRN; Edelman & Larkin, 2015).

Similarly, goals can "go wild" (Ordóñez, Schweitzer, Galinsky, & Bazerman, 2009): By narrowing individuals' focus on the outcome, goals may motivate them to take selfish actions, including unethical ones (Schweitzer, Ordóñez, & Douma, 2004). Barsky (2008) formulated two psychological mechanisms through which goal setting can facilitate unethical behavior: moral disengagement and lack of ethical recognition. When individuals are highly focused on their goals, they may disengage their internal moral controls to rationalize their unethical behaviors (i.e., moral disengagement) or even fail to recognize the unethicality of such behaviors (i.e., lack of ethical recognition; Barsky, 2008). In workplace settings, the use of production or sales goals can encourage employees to cheat and lie (Jensen, 2003). For example, Sears's goal-oriented commission system has been identified as the culprit for its employees' systematic defrauding of customers (Paine & Santoro, 1993). Moreover, individuals are likely to resort to unethical means when they are about to fall short of their goals (Schweitzer et al., 2004). For example, authors are particularly apt to inflate their papers' download counts in order to prevent their papers from falling off the "top-10" list of the SSRN (Edelman & Larkin, 2015).

The influence of selfish motives on unethicality also extends to the dimension of moral judgment. Instead of adhering to a stable set of moral codes, individuals apply their beliefs and judgments strategically to maximize their personal outcomes (DeScioli, Massenkoff, Shaw, Petersen, & Kurzban, 2014). For example, people judge the unethical behavior of others more leniently when that behavior serves their own interests (Bocian & Wojciszke, 2014). Likewise, self-interest motivates "moral hypocrisy," whereby people evaluate themselves less harshly

than others for the same unethical behavior (Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2007, 2008).

Selfish and Ethical Behavior

Although self-interest often breeds unethical behaviors, it can also foster *ethical* behaviors, particularly in situations in which self-interest is aligned with the interest of others. In what follows, we highlight how self-interest can lead individuals to avoid temptations to cheat, to rectify others' unethical acts, and to engage in prosocial behaviors.

In society, the presence of legal punishment speaks directly to how self-interest discourages unethical behaviors. Selfishly, people often refrain from behaving unethically when the risk and cost of being caught are high (Brass, Butterfield, & Skaggs, 1998). Even in the absence of formal punishment, individuals are still driven to protect their moral identity as a "good person" (Bryan, Adams, & Monin, 2013). As a result, they often adopt behaviors that serve to present themselves as "moral" in their own eyes and the eyes of others (Frimer, Schaefer, & Oakes, 2014). For example, individuals were less likely to cheat when told "don't be a cheater" than when told "don't cheat," because being labeled a cheater is threatening to one's self-image (Bryan et al., 2013).

Self-interest can also guide individuals to take action against others' unethical behaviors. For instance, whistle-blowing, defined as the disclosure of "illegal, immoral or illegitimate practices . . . to persons or organizations who may be able to effect action" (Near & Miceli, 1985, p. 4), is often motivated by self-interest. In reporting on a cheater in an academic competition, a student not only upholds the academic honor code but also gains an edge over the competition by eliminating a contender. Similarly, when whistle-blowers reveal fraudulent behavior, they may be entitled to a percentage of the financial recovery. For example, "the IRS Whistleblower Office pays money to people who blow the whistle on persons who fail to pay the tax that they owe" (U.S. Department of the Treasury, Internal Revenue Service, 2017). Socially, the larger community may even hail whistle-blowers as heroes (Johnson, 2003).

Selfish motives can also foster prosocial behaviors, or voluntary, intentional behaviors that result in benefits for others (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987). In the United States, many individuals donate to charitable organizations, both to receive tax deductions (Feldstein, 1975) and to publicly signal their wealth, status, or moral character (Ariely, Bracha, & Meier, 2009; Rege & Telle, 2004). Similarly, parents make substantial donations to universities to increase their children's chances of admission (Golden, 2003). In China, many citizens donate "just enough" blood (i.e., 800 milliliters) to qualify as recipients in future blood transfusions (Shi et al., 2014). Likewise, in countries such as Israel and Singapore, individuals register as organ donors so that they are prioritized if they should be in need of organs in the future (Lavee, Ashkenazi, Gurman, & Steinberg, 2010).

Prominent philosophers and economists have argued that selfishness and ethicality are closely linked. Adam Smith, the founding father of economics, famously wrote, "it is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own self-interest" (Smith, 1937, p. 16). In essence, the study of free-market economics—which Smith viewed as a branch of moral philosophy (Griswold, 1999)—rests on the premise that human beings are self-interested (Smith, 1937) and that, when each individual seeks to maximize his or her own utility, the collective will prosper. Milton Friedman, a Nobel Prize laureate in economics, called this Invisible Hand (of selfishness) "the possibility of cooperation without coercion" (Friedman, 1999).

Unselfish and Ethical Behavior

Just as selfishness can foster both unethical and ethical behaviors, unselfishness—the willingness to put the needs of others before one's own—can also lead to both ethical and unethical behaviors.

Much research has explored conditions under which altruistic intentions produce ethical outcomes (Batson & Shaw, 1991; Penner, Dovidio, Piliavin, & Schroeder,

2005). People help others (e.g., anonymous donations, community service) even when there is no clear or direct benefit to themselves other than the "warm glow" of giving (Harbaugh, Mayr, & Burghart, 2007; Piliavin, 2003).

Individuals also engage in risky and self-sacrificing behaviors in order to benefit others. Raising sensitive issues within an organization (e.g., telling a manager that his new policy is unpopular among employees) has the potential to benefit others (e.g., the manager enacts favorable changes) but may also pose risks for the actor (e.g., dismissal from job; Burris, Detert, & Romney, 2013).

Two other areas that highlight the role of unselfish ethical behavior are whistle-blowing and altruistic punishment. Although whistle-blowing can be motivated by selfish reasons (as highlighted earlier), it can also be driven by moral principles. For example, Waytz, Dungan, and Young (2013) provide evidence that whistle-blowing is especially likely to occur when people are focused on justice and fairness. Sometimes whistle-blowers are not only unselfish but also vulnerable to both psychological distress (e.g., anxiety, nightmares, flashbacks; Peters et al., 2011) and social backlash from members of their own community (Dyck, Morse, & Zingales, 2010).

Altruistic punishment, in which "individuals punish, although the punishment is costly for them and yields no material gain" (Fehr & Gächter, 2002, p. 137), is another case of unselfish ethical behavior. People often go out of their way (incurring effort and time cost) to punish perpetrators (e.g., individuals who cut into lines or who sneak into music festivals) because "it is the right thing to do." Altruistic punishment facilitates cooperation in groups, organizations, and societies; without it, cooperation would often break down (Fehr & Gächter, 2002).

Unselfish and Unethical Behavior

Although unselfishness can lead to ethical behaviors, it can also result in unethical behaviors. Unselfish yet unethical behaviors typically arise when there is a conflict between two competing moral principles

(Levine & Schweitzer, 2014). For example, many moral dilemmas that lead individuals toward unselfish and unethical actions often feature a contention between two foundational pillars of moral psychology: *justice* and *care* (Levine & Schweitzer, 2014, 2015). Whereas justice reflects deontological moral imperatives (e.g., thou shalt not lie; Kant, 1959), care prioritizes the utilitarian consideration of helping and protecting others (Bentham, 1948; Walker & Hennig, 2004). Heinz's dilemma (Kohlberg, 1963) epitomizes this moral tension: Stealing would breach the law of justice, whereas watching one's wife die without intervening would violate the principle of caring for others.

When individuals are faced with this tension in moral judgment, care can supersede justice and lead individuals to take unselfish yet unethical actions. Many of us engage in altruistic lying, defined as "false statements that are costly for the liar and are made with the intention of misleading and benefitting a target" (Levine & Schweitzer, 2014, p. 108). Since early childhood, we are taught that it is polite to tell prosocial lies (Broomfield, Robinson, & Robinson, 2002; Talwar, Murphy, & Lee, 2007), particularly when these lies provide others with interpersonal support (Brown & Levinson, 1987) and psychological protection (DePaulo & Kashy, 1998). For example, parents may lie about their divorce to protect their child. Similarly, with no apparent self-serving motive, doctors may lie to patients about bleak prognoses to provide them hope and comfort (Iezzoni, Rao, DesRoches, Vogeli, & Campbell, 2012).

Like Aaron Swartz, some individuals are willing to engage in unethical behaviors that have the potential to benefit a larger community—even at the cost of sacrificing themselves. Members of WikiLeaks, for example, exposed classified information to the public—an illegal activity that antagonized the U.S. government—in order to serve its altruistic mission of "defense of freedom of speech and media publishing" and ultimately "to create a better society for all people" (<https://wikileaks.org/About.html>, 2011).²

Finally, motives that are linked to altruism can produce behaviors that violate moral rules. For example, empathy—a psychological process that generally leads to prosocial

behaviors—can also lead individuals to violate moral rules by according "favored" status and preferential treatment to the target of empathy (Batson, Klein, Highberger, & Shaw, 1995). Individuals induced to feel empathy for a particular individual are more likely to violate the principle of justice by allocating resources preferentially to that person (Batson, Klein, et al., 1995), even at the cost of reducing the collective good (Batson, Batson, et al., 1995).

Antecedents of Selfish versus Unselfish Unethical Behavior

As illustrated in the previous sections, drawing a distinction between unethical behavior and selfish behavior is critical to the study of moral psychology. Given that both ethical and unethical behaviors can result from both selfish *and* unselfish intentions, merely focusing on situations in which unethicality and selfishness co-occur creates an incomplete and inaccurate representation of the drivers of unethical behavior. We next discuss three specific cases (social class, organizational identification, and loyalty) that demonstrate the need to parse unethical behaviors driven by selfish versus unselfish motives.

Social Class

Prior research has found a positive relationship between social class and unethical behavior (Piff, Stancato, Côté, Mendoza-Denton, & Keltner, 2012). Upper-class individuals have more favorable attitudes toward greed, which partially account for their higher tendency to engage in unethical behaviors such as lying and cheating (Piff et al., 2012). However, a closer examination of this effect reveals that the identity of the beneficiary of an unethical behavior is a critical moderator of the relationship between social class and unethical behavior (Dubois, Rucker, & Galinsky, 2015). Upper-class individuals, relative to lower-class individuals, are more prone to commit unethical acts that benefit *themselves*; in contrast, lower-class individuals, relative to upper-class individuals, are more prone to commit unethical acts that benefit *others*. In explaining these

findings, Dubois and colleagues (2015) contend that higher social class tends to foster an agentic, self-serving orientation, whereas lower social class tends to nurture a communal, altruistic orientation. As a result, although both upper- and lower-class individuals can behave unethically, upper-class individuals are more likely to do so for their own sake, whereas lower-class individuals are more likely to do so for others' sake. These findings demonstrate that disentangling selfishness and unethicity serves to provide a more complete understanding of the antecedents of unethical behavior.

Organizational Identification

The distinction between unethicity and selfishness also helps unpack the relationship between organizational identification and ethicality. Organizational identification refers to an individual's feeling of "oneness" with his or her organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Individuals' organizational identification significantly affects the extent to which they engage in selfish versus unselfish unethical behaviors (Vadera & Pratt, 2013). Individuals who strongly identify with their organizations are more apt to behave unethically to benefit their organizations at a cost to themselves (Umphress, Bingham, & Mitchell, 2010). To take an extreme example, tragic stories of terrorism reveal that suicide bombers are often overidentified members emboldened to "do justice" on behalf of their groups (Sageman, 2004). Similarly, although less violently, a strong organizational identification can lead employees to turn a blind eye to illegal activities in order to serve the interests of their organization (Dukerich et al., 1998).

In contrast, individuals who do not identify with their organizations are more likely to engage in selfish unethical acts. They tend to ignore organizational rules and feel free to act selfishly (e.g., arriving late to work and leaving early; Vadera & Pratt, 2013). In more extreme cases, individuals who have disengaged from their organization may even purposefully harm their organization to serve their self-interest, such as stealing office supplies and fabricating receipts for reimbursement (Vadera & Pratt, 2013).

Future Directions

In light of the distinction between unethicity and selfishness, we re-examine some of the previously documented antecedents of unethical behavior, and offer several nuanced predictions that could be tested in the future.

Money versus Time

Empirical studies have found that activating the concept of money increases unethical intentions and behaviors (Cohn et al., 2014; Gino & Mogilner, 2014; Kouchaki, Smith-Crowe, Brief, & Sousa, 2013), whereas shifting the focus onto time may offset these effects (Gino & Mogilner, 2014). However, in these experiments the beneficiary of the unethical behavior was always the participant him- or herself. If the unethical behavior were instead to benefit others rather than the agent of the behavior, we might see a reversal of the "money versus time effect." That is, although money might increase *selfish* unethical behavior, money may actually decrease *unselfish* unethical behavior. Consistent with this proposition, across nine studies Vohs, Mead, and Goode (2006) found that money produces a self-sufficient orientation. Hence, activating the concept of money might lower an individual's willingness to behave unethically to benefit others. Conversely, although activating time can curb selfish unethical behavior (Gino & Mogilner, 2014), it may actually increase unselfish unethical behavior by making people more other-focused. In support of this possibility, Mogilner (2010) found that priming time motivates individuals to invest more effort in social relationships (i.e., friends and family) and less time in their own instrumental work.

Social Learning Strategy

Prior research shows that individuals differ systematically in their social learning strategies (van den Berg, Molleman, & Weissing, 2015): Whereas some individuals attempt to imitate the most successful members of the group, others attend to the most normative members. Importantly, success-oriented learners both cooperate less and behave more selfishly as compared with norm-ori-

ented learners (van den Berg et al., 2015). These findings suggest that success-oriented individuals may be prone to engage in selfish unethical behavior, whereas norm-oriented individuals may be prone to engage in unselfish unethical behavior. This possibility awaits further research.

Individualism versus Collectivism

Culture may also influence whether unethical behaviors are selfish or unselfish. For example, cultural values appear to serve as one predictor of bribery. Based on cross-national and laboratory data, Mazar and Aggarwal (2011) argued that collectivist cultures are the breeding ground for bribery. In light of the distinction between unethicality and selfishness, we predict a more nuanced relationship between individualism–collectivism and the type of unethical behavior enacted: Individualistic cultures may be more conducive to selfish unethical behaviors (e.g., bribing for one's personal gain), whereas collectivistic culture may be more conducive to unselfish unethical behaviors (e.g., bribing for one's organization, as in Mazar & Aggarwal, 2011). The logic for this prediction is consistent with the established notion that individualistic cultures foster more self-focused behaviors, whereas collectivistic cultures nurture more other-focused behaviors (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Future research could investigate how cultural orientations affect unethical behavior enacted for oneself versus others.

Conclusion

At first glance, unethical behavior and selfish intention are logical companions. Indeed, unethical behavior and selfish behavior typically co-occur in the behavioral ethics literature. However, such a perspective fails to reckon with their conceptual distinctions and unnecessarily limits our understanding of social behavior. Human beings can behave ethically or unethically, and behind those behaviors can lurk selfish or unselfish intentions. By teasing apart the constructs of ethicality and selfishness, we acquire a more complete understanding of moral psychol-

ogy and set a promising research agenda for the future.

NOTES

1. Results are based on a bibliometric analysis of articles published between 2000 and 2015 in *Academy of Management Journal*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, and *Psychological Science* that contain one or more of the following terms as keywords: *ethics*, *ethic*, *ethical*, *unethical*, *ethically*, *moral*, *morality*, *morals*, *immoral*, *amoral*, *dishonest*, *honest*, *deception*, *dishonesty*, *honesty*, *dishonestly*, *honestly*, *misconduct*, *wrongdoing*. Details of procedure and analyses can be requested from the authors.
2. We describe the behaviors of WikiLeaks and Aaron Swartz as prosocial based on the assumption that they intended to serve the larger community. However, it remains possible that they were motivated by selfish motives of fame and notoriety. As with whistle-blowing, the key factor for ultimately determining whether a behavior is selfish or altruistic is the intention underlying the behavior.

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