

A 'Chance' Study in Moral Reasoning and Moral Development □ A Case for Self-Awareness

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Abstract

Individuals cannot morally reason if they are not morally aware, and they will not be morally aware if they are not self-aware. Self-awareness is the conscious ability to habitually monitor one's thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Practicing self-awareness is an intentional and conscious process—it does not just happen. Therefore, character development programs need to first focus on self-awareness and meta-cognition to improve the ability of students to morally reason.

As a member of the faculty at a leading ethical and leader development college in the United States, I had the opportunity to mentor five students (all male, ages ranging from 19 to 24) who had been caught violating the school's honor code or had been disciplined for gross misconduct. Two of the students had each been caught copying another student's paper or lab report, one had been caught lying to cover up misconduct, and two were disciplined for misconduct in terms of gross disrespect for others. Each of the five had been remanded to the college's honor/respect mentorship program. The results and outcomes from these mentorship experiences provide valuable insights and lessons for ethical and leader developers and programs; the most important being that initial focus must be on self-awareness.

For the purpose of this study, self-awareness is defined as intentionally and habitually monitoring one's thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Meta-cognition (thinking about what you are thinking about and why you are thinking that way) is the thinking part of self-awareness, as opposed to the affective and emotional aspects of self-awareness. Also, for the purpose of this study, if an individual is being "cognitively aware," they are practicing the thinking part of self-awareness.

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Background

In the mid-1990s, this college, which over the past few years has been ranked as one of the top schools in America by *U.S. News and World Report* and *Forbes*, instituted a developmental mentor program to remediate students who have committed ethical transgressions (as defined by the institution). The remedial program is a four- to six-month immersion experience, requires one-on-one mentoring with a faculty member, and mandates that the student complete several written and/or oral requirements requiring reflection and service as they relate to the student's transgression (i.e., integrity, respect, drugs/alcohol). This program has been quite successful, with 80% of the students participating reporting a higher level of understanding of the importance of ethics, ethical reasoning, and a commitment to act ethically (Office of Institutional Research, 2010). Additionally and anecdotally, the mentors reported qualitative developmental changes in the students in personal conversations from 2007-2010.

Besides approaching my mentorship responsibilities from a solely rehabilitative standpoint, I decided to approach my duty from an educational and learning perspective to better understand the why and how in each student's case: why they did what they did, what they were thinking, and what their decision-making process was. Interestingly, three of the five students were seniors (and a freshman and a sophomore) and therefore had been exposed to and experienced the institution's ethical leadership development program for at least three years. Of note, when considering disciplinary consequences for ethical transgressions, in most cases the college's administration is harder

on seniors than on freshmen because the seniors are expected to have matured, learned, developed, and internalized the values of the institution more holistically than have freshmen or sophomores. However, each case is adjudicated on its own merits, and students from all years can be, and often are, dismissed from the college.

The goal from these five mentorship experiences was to understand for each student "*What were you thinking (or what was your reasoning) when your actions resulted in unethical behavior?*"—the research question.

After several months, challenging, reflective, and emotional sessions with each student revealed that the surprising answer in each of the five cases was the same—"I was not thinking, I was just doing." This is a powerful statement (result) and one that those interested in character and leader development should not take lightly. An analysis of this reflective statement, which, interestingly, came from all five students, provides important insights for research in character and leader development and moral reasoning.

Methodology

The methodology used to analyze each case included

1. Initially, get to know the students on a personal level and slowly develop trust. Non-attribution was the key to developing trust and the initial goal of each mentoring session. Complete trust was accomplished by creating a non-threatening, almost "peer-to-peer" relationship with each mentee. Each session was a conversation rather than a dialogue or lecture. At times the language and topics were raw, but they were real, emotional, and significant in

the lives of the students. Additionally, I shared my own weaknesses and vulnerabilities with the students to help develop a trusting and collaborative environment. Each session was a “we” session, not an “I” (superior) and “you” (subordinate) session. It was important that the student and mentor were learning from each other, which we were.

2. At times, long bouts of silence were okay. Quiet reflections are invaluable and often successful for development and learning (Schön, 1983).
3. After establishing a high level of trust—I knew I had it when the students started sharing things with me that they clearly would not share with other faculty members—I methodically had each student go back in time and visualize the who, what, where, and (most importantly) why of their ethical failure. This included having each student create on a white-board a decision flow-chart to visualize exactly what they were thinking and when they were thinking it. In each case, I also had the students go back and talk to any students who were with them at the time of the incident to help them re-create and re-live what they were thinking, feeling, and doing.

In all five cases, the result was the same: “I was not thinking about it, I was just doing it.” The rightness and/or wrongness of what they were doing was never an issue because a conscious and cognitive decision-making process did not occur. They simply were not thinking in those terms. In each case, there was a complete lack of moral awareness. Arguably, the students did not make unethical decisions because, in their minds, they were not making any decisions; they were just doing (or as

one of the five said, “It is simply what we do”). Their behaviors were unethical, and yet accountability and responsibility for those behaviors was totally ignored or not considered. Each student showed deep remorse for their actions subsequent to being caught and throughout the mentoring sessions. A common saying among them was “How could I have been so stupid? I just wasn’t thinking.”

The conclusion in each of the five cases from the perspective of the students was “I [the student] was not thinking there was a moral component to what I was doing because I was not thinking about what I was doing. I was just doing it.”

Many at this point may say this conclusion (“I wasn’t thinking”) is really just a “cop-out” or an avoidance response by each student. Or perhaps each student did not want to admit they intentionally and consciously made the wrong choice because it would cast a negative light on their character. Perhaps. This appears to be a case of one of the following:

- “I wasn’t thinking,”
- “I simply can’t remember,”
- “I don’t want to remember,”
- “I don’t want you to think about how bad my actions were” (it is too embarrassing),
- “I don’t want to own this decision or the process I used to make it,” or
- The students were simply lying to me during the mentoring sessions.

In four of the five cases it is possible that the students simply could not remember what they were thinking at that time. It is not possible in one of the cases because this incident had literally just ended and had been going on for a few months. However, if it were really true that they could not remember what they were thinking at the time of the transgression, then that is an argument for the conclusion that they were not thinking about it at the time. A person cannot remember something that did not happen (if I did not go to the store yesterday, then I cannot remember going).

This analysis of students' thought processes may not be as dichotomous as it appears to be—either the students were completely morally aware of what they were doing or completely unaware morally. The reality is probably somewhere between these two extremes. However, in all five cases, the students did not remember any thoughts (being morally aware) or even being conscious of ethical decision-making or consequences of their decisions (they were not practicing self-awareness or being self-aware). They simply did not remember thinking about what they were doing when they were doing it.

Another plausible hypothesis to explain these students' lack of thinking (or remembering what they were thinking) is that they have placed this painful and emotional event in the deep recesses of their memory or have selectively forgotten. The experience is too painful to remember, so they have removed it from their consciousness. While this explanation is certainly possible, it is doubtful (in all five cases) because of the trust and non-attribution climate established between each student and me. As noted earlier, all five of the students shared

vignettes and experiences (some ethical, some unethical) with me that they clearly would not have shared with other faculty members who they could not completely trust.

When and how do individuals operate in moral vacuums?

Are these five students simply outliers, and should the results of this study be discarded? That would not be wise. After working with these five young adults and reflecting over the past few years, it appears that character and leadership education programs need to focus more on teaching and developing self-awareness and meta-cognition. People cannot be morally aware or morally reason if they are not self-aware or cognitively aware.

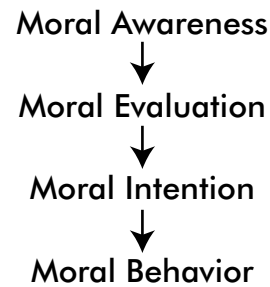
Literature Review and Analysis in relation to this Study

Much of the literature in this area focuses on moral reasoning, moral development, ethical/moral decision-making, and the moral self. Psychological constructs such as moral efficacy, moral identity, moral agency, and moral ownership help to describe the cognitive and affective processes that lead to and influence moral reasoning and moral behavior (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Avolio, 2005; Bandura, 1997; Butterfield, Trevino, & Weaver, 2000; Zhu, 2008). For example, moral ownership and moral identity are linked to moral behavior because individuals own their behaviors and own who they are (Kohlberg & Candee, 1984). If individuals have a high sense of their moral being and take ownership of their moral self, they are more likely to behave morally. When individuals possess and/or use these psychological processes,

it is hypothesized that they have some level of habitual consciousness of their moral selves. However, using these cognitive moral resources and constructs presupposes that individuals have a certain level of self-awareness and are conscious of and think about their moral self and moral decision-making. In some cases that may be true; in others it may not be (Godwin, 2008; Jordan, 2005, 2009; Langer, 1978). Most people are not born being self-aware.

The research on moral awareness is informed by social cognition theory (Bandura, 1986; Fiske & Taylor, 1991), which suggests that individuals encode and process stimuli and information based on what they pay attention to and are consciously aware of. Individuals may or may not use (process) incoming information based on its contextual relevance, novelty, accessibility, and understanding. For example, if I were thinking about how to plagiarize portions of a term paper (a moral/ethical decision) and heard on the radio that it was going to snow tomorrow or that Spain won the World Cup, I would not pay attention to that information because it is not relevant to my plan. However, if I found out from my teammate (whose paper I plan to copy) that he received a failing grade on his paper, that information would be relevant to my decision.

James Rest's model (Rest, 1986; Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma; 2000), which begins with moral awareness, appears to be applicable, due to what appears to be a complete lack of moral awareness in each of these students.



Rest's Four-Component Model of Moral Action addresses the decision-making process involved in moral actions. His components are processes, not traits, and his model serves as a way to analyze how a course of action was produced:

- Interpretation (moral sensitivity): analyze courses of action and the outcomes,
- Judgment (moral reasoning/judgment): formulation of a moral course of action,
- Choice (moral motivation): situational influences and cost–benefit analysis, and
- Implementation (character): the choice in action.

Rest's work on moral awareness and moral sensitivity describe an individual's ability to detect whether a decision involves moral stimuli (Bebeau, 1994; Clarkburn, 2002). However, here I argue that many more decisions have a moral component (thus priming or requiring moral stimuli) than most people realize—even when we do not think they do. *For the purpose of this paper, moral and ethical situations include both universally accepted and appropriate behaviors and values/virtues, as well as cultural norms as to what is "the right or wrong thing to do."* Am I courteous to a waiter? How attentively do I listen to others? Do I say "thank you" when someone helps me? Is it okay to cheat in a friendly

card game or board game? How do I respond to road rage? How do I respond if someone cuts me off in the grocery checkout line? Is trash-talking okay in a sporting context? How one responds to any of these decisions (and many others) is not black-and-white or necessarily right or wrong. If one takes a more holistic view of the moral components that can be associated with many seemingly mundane decisions and tasks, they can and will find some moral components to them.

Being cognizant of moral aspects in day-to-day life requires a level of consciousness and cognition leading to moral complexity, moral imagination (Pardales, 2002; Werhane, 1999), and moral sensitivity (Bebeau, 1994; Sparks & Hunt, 1998). These constructs describe the ability to analyze or see events from many different perspectives or lenses (e.g. rules, outcomes, and values). Butterfield, Trevino, and Weaver (2000) examined “whether an individual in an organization would recognize the moral nature of an ethically ambiguous situation” (p. 982). This was an attempt to measure moral complexity, moral imagination, or moral sensitivity, with the hypothesis being that individuals would think differently if they recognized the moral components in different vignettes. They found that when *ethically primed*, individuals have an increased level of moral awareness. Conversely, Jordan’s (2009) results showed that often when individuals are immersed in the day-to-day reality of work, they have a decreased level of moral awareness. Additionally, the moral intensity (issue framing, magnitude of consequences, competitive context, temporal immediacy, proximity, probability of effect, and concentration of effect) of an event has been found to increase one’s moral awareness (Jones,

1991)—assuming the individual is conscious of and attends to the components of moral intensity.

The key point is that people, old and young, often do not realize (are not consciously aware) that there is a moral component to many of the more mundane aspects of life, as opposed to the clearly unethical behaviors of these students (cheating on exams, plagiarism, and gross disrespect to others). Therefore, to increase moral sensitivity and moral awareness, we must first increase self-awareness. To accomplish this, individuals must be taught how to develop habits to consciously think about what they are thinking about and reflectively reason about what they are doing. *Individuals cannot be morally aware if they are not cognizant of what they are thinking and doing (they are simply “going through the motions”)—they are not self-aware.* However, individuals can be self-aware (cognizant of what they are thinking and doing) and *not* be morally aware (stage one of the Rest model). It appears that a step (self-awareness) may be missing from Rest’s model:



Figure 1

Rest’s Model with Self-Awareness as an Antecedent to Moral Awareness

Other research has challenged ethical decision-making models and assumptions and acknowledged that people often do not recognize a moral issue when faced with one (Reynolds, 2006). Even driving a car has a moral component to it because of the dangers associated with car accidents both for oneself and for others. We certainly want drivers to be thinking about what they are doing (e.g. monitoring their speed and monitoring what is to their front and sides and behind them) and not thinking about something other than driving (e.g. day dreaming, thinking about their weekend plans, or thinking about problems at work). Again, simply being self-aware is necessary but not sufficient for having moral awareness. As the Rest model suggests, being morally aware is necessary but not sufficient to behaving morally.

From a developmental perspective, the historical works of Piaget, Kohlberg, and Kegan inform the research on moral reasoning. Piaget (1965) concluded that children go through a step-by-step process of subconscious and cognitive progression in their moral development. They pass through different hierarchical stages of moral reasoning/development, each building on previous knowledge and experiences and thereby becoming more morally complex.

Kohlberg's (1981) cognitive developmental approach to moral reasoning built on the work of Piaget. Kohlberg also described individuals as passing from one developmental stage to the next and viewed children as little developing philosophers who constructed meaning in their own world based on their knowledge and experiences. As with Piaget, Kohlberg saw moral behavior in terms of justice, or

attempting to discover what was most fair.

The starting point for Kohlberg's and Rest's research (Rest's was primarily with the Defining Issues Test) was cognition (Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma, 2000). In reality, all research on moral reasoning starts with cognition. To reason (morally or otherwise) requires thought. The depth, complexity, and completeness of the thought determine the quality of the reasoning process.

Kegan, (1982) as did Piaget and Kohlberg, saw individuals moving from one stage to another but also moving in and out of stages. As individuals develop, they become more sophisticated in their cognitive processes and can challenge their own perspectives and assumptions. Developmentally, their focus can shift from themselves to others (relationships), and eventually to some level of self-authoring who they really are. Kegan's theory operates on the basis of what he describes as a "subject-object distinction." He uses this term to describe one's increasing ability to take more sophisticated and holistic perspectives on *one's own thinking*.

Piaget's, Kohlberg's, and Kegan's work focused on development from a cognitive perspective. As individuals move through stages of development, they can become more objective and sophisticated about perceptions, assumptions (challenging mental models), feelings, or attitudes—they are becoming wiser. It is important for this study, however, when, how, and *even if* an individual is using this newly developed wisdom. For example, an individual can *possess* the cognitive resources to morally analyze a situation, but if they are not self-aware (or morally aware), they may never use the

capacity. In the case of these five students, this may have been the case.

Bandura's (1999, 1997, 1986) work is also applicable to this study, as he purports that individuals who view themselves as strong moral actors will then behave accordingly. But what if individuals do not view themselves this way or, more simplistically, do not even think about such things? Scholars and educators often assume that other people are as sophisticated in their thinking as they are ("mirror imaging"). Again, this may not be the case.

Bandura's construct of moral disengagement (Bandura, 1999) may inform and help explain the "non-thinking" of these students. Moral disengagement describes how an individual disengages from moral reasoning (stops thinking about it) and can act immorally without hurting their self-image—a classic case of self-deception. Moral disengagement is often a by-product of a person being physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausted. High performing and competitive students in highly competitive colleges (for example, Ivy League colleges) could fall into this category. These five students, all very competitive, appear to be classic cases, as described by Bandura, of having a complete lack of psychological ownership. But the question remains whether they consciously and intentionally disengaged (or self-deceived) or simply lacked self-awareness and thus moral awareness.

The self-deception or self-distraction (Bandura, 1997) literature indicates that individuals may use different strategies to rationalize their unethical behavior while still seeing themselves as upholding moral principles (Tenbrunsel, Diekmann, Wade-

Benzoni, & Bazerman, 2010; Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004). Some of these strategies include

- "This is just a short-term issue/problem I need to solve,"
- "There is no other way,"
- "The ends justify the means,"
- "I am not the main player in this situation," and
- Misremembering.

The self-deception literature is also informed by research on moral hypocrisy (Batson, Thompson, & Chen, 2002; Naso, 2007). Moral hypocrisy is a form of rationalization where individuals explain to themselves (through self-talk) why they are doing something unethical (or wrong). This explanation makes them feel good about themselves and often suppresses feelings of guilt or shame. "In hypocrisy, discrepancies are disavowed and rationalized, and beliefs altered to accommodate immoral action" (Naso, 2007, p. 123). The individual's positive self-image remains intact as a result of the self-deception or their "memory revision" (Tenbrunsel et al., 2010, p. 163). Again, each of these self-deception strategies *assumes* the actor is making a conscious decision.

Research also suggests that individuals may disassociate themselves from their behaviors by cognitively comparing what they are going to do with what would happen if they did not do it—a cost/benefit analysis (Aquino & Reed, 2002; Aquino, Reed, Thau, & Freeman, 2007). This research shows that if an individual has a high moral concept, or if their moral self is cognitively

primed, they are less likely to morally disengage. However, as mentioned earlier, priming a subject's moral awareness for research or assuming an individual has, or even thinks about having, a high moral concept is much different than expecting a 24-year-old college student to *think about their moral self* while stressing about a term paper due in four hours or trying not to succumb to peer pressure about unethical behavior at 3:00 AM while at a fraternity party. A student can see himself or herself as a morally sound person (possessing moral identity and moral efficacy), but if he or she does not *think before acting (by being self-aware)*, he or she may act in an unethical way.

Haidt's (2001) social intuition approach to moral decision making challenges cognitive and conscious approaches by purporting that individuals often just go with their "gut feeling" on whether something is right or wrong and then try to explain or rationalize why they had that feeling. Haidt believes that "moral intuition is a kind of cognition but not a kind of reasoning" (p. 814) and that reasoning and explanation take place after the behavior, rather than influencing the behavior. Seiler, Fischer, and Ooi (2010) concur with Haidt and present a moral decision-making model that starts with "once a moral conflict is perceived" (p. 493); this appears to be synonymous with moral awareness. The model includes moral perception, intuition, and reason. One's moral intuition results from a combination of cultural and social developmental experiences that inform the moral self, moral identity, and moral framework. Important for this study is that the cognitive, conscious or unconscious, and intentional aspects of intuition require some level of self-awareness.

The construct of routinization may also help to explain the "non-thinking." If certain behaviors become routine (habitual), like a professional athlete taking performance-enhancing drugs, young people "sexting," or teenagers sneaking into four movies at the theater after paying for only one, then one's thoughts of the ethicality of the behaviors are no longer conscious thoughts. "It is just what we do," as some students have said. Additionally, if a person has already decided he or she is going to do something, the thought simply matches the deed.

Langer and colleagues (1978) described a lack of conscious awareness as "mindlessness": not using all available information in decision making. They argue that some behaviors become so routine that they are "performed automatically" (p. 36). Individuals may cognitively *possess* the capability for moral awareness but may not use this capability in a current (and perhaps stressful) situation. Or as summarized by Bargh (1984), "when people exert little conscious effort in examining their environment, they are at the mercy of automatically produced interpretations" (p. 35). This "mindlessness" and automaticity of behaviors is the most probable explanation for these students' lack of consciousness and behaviors.

Discussion, Limitations, and Recommendations

If students have not been taught how to be self-aware, can they be expected to be self-aware? The same point applies to self-control, self-management, and self-regulation. People cannot effectively and habitually manage their emotions if they are not taught how to do it (what it "feels" like) and given the time to practice. These are learned skills; in most cases, they do not just happen.

More research and pedagogy needs to focus on the gap between thinking, knowing, and doing—which centers on the constructs of self-awareness, meta-cognition, self-regulation, moral awareness, moral intention, moral courage, moral agency, moral ownership, and moral behavior. One recommendation for future research is to focus *less* on the psychological *moral* constructs and more on generic cognition (“What are/were you thinking?”), as this will more effectively inform leader/character development programs in terms of self-awareness. For example:

- Ask students in a fast food or grocery checkout line what they are thinking about and why they are thinking that way,
- Ask an athlete sitting on the sidelines during a game what they are thinking about and why,
- Ask students at fraternity/sorority parties what they are thinking about and why,
- Ask a student walking (not staggering) out of a pub at 3:00 AM what they are thinking about and why, or
- Ask a student who their favorite sports team is and then ask them to explain why.

All these examples seem mundane because they *are purposefully mundane*. However, the answers to these questions, especially the “why” portion, will result in a deeper thought process (thinking about what one is thinking about), which can inform the individual’s self-awareness. Of course, it is not as simple as this. Much more time, practice, and guided reflection are required with a goal of making the monitoring of one’s thoughts, feelings, and

emotions habitual and intentional (self-awareness). A pattern of practicing reflective thinking will be a starting point for building curriculum and pedagogy in self-awareness, which can then help to inform moral awareness and moral development pedagogy. Additionally, and depending on the research question, *any* kind of moral priming in moral/ethical research should be considered a limitation to the research.

Another recommendation of how to develop or enhance self-awareness is based on the ongoing Comprehensive Soldier Fitness (CSF) project between the University of Pennsylvania and the U.S. Army (Casey, 2011; Cornum, Matthews, & Seligman, 2011). These two organizations have synergized to build a program to enhance resilience in soldiers and their families. A significant portion of the project stems from UPENN’s positive psychology department and attempts to teach emotion regulation, impulse control, and causal analysis. These three skills are classic examples of self-awareness and self-regulation. For example, the “ABC” (activation event, belief, and consequences), “avoid thinking traps” (errors in thinking), and “detect icebergs” (deep seeded mental models) skills literally teach a student how to practice self-awareness and self-regulation (Reivich & Shatte, 2002).

Recently, some colleges have initiated programs to help students think about and develop their “spirit”—who they are as a person and what they truly value (Chickering, Dalton, & Stamm, 2006; Pargament & Sweeney, 2011). Programs such as these encourage students to keep daily journals and to think and write about constructs (sense of agency,

self-awareness, social awareness, self-regulation, self-motivation, values, beliefs, and vision) that they purport to develop their “spirit” (Sweeney, Hannah, Snider, 2008). For example:

- What is your purpose in life?
- What provides your life with purpose and meaning?
- What are your priorities in life?

Answering questions such as these is a step in the right direction in teaching and developing self-awareness. Again, the goal must be for these practices to be *intentional and habitual*.

The exploratory methodology used with these five students presents limitations and challenges. Firstly, a sample size of five presents issues of reliability and whether the results (“non-thinking”) can be generalized across other age groups and populations. What is unique about the sample size is that the result was *not* hypothesized—it was discovered. As noted earlier, this surprising result (all five students recalling that they were not thinking about what they were doing, they were just “doing it”) materialized during the process. *Numerous* alternative possibilities and explanations were available, as discussed in the review of literature section, but none surfaced. Additionally, the potential for selective perception, inferences, and assumptions, resulting in researcher bias, was present—although arguably, there was little bias, as each mentoring session was “discovery learning” (I did not know what I did not know, and I did not have an educated guess as to what the answers to my research questions were).

Although the five students in this study may (if asked) view themselves as moral people, clearly their moral codes or senses of moral selves did not guide them at the time they were doing wrong. If these students had taken a “moral identity test” asking them to rate themselves, they surely would have rated themselves highly because most students, especially at this college, view themselves as having high moral character. In fact, the college’s office of institutional research annually conducts studies, which show that the vast majority of its students consider themselves to be of high character and morally sound (Office of Institutional Research, 2010).

Conclusion

The research (Bandura, 1999, 1997; Batson, Thompson, & Chen; 2002; Naso, 2007; Tenbrunsel et al., 2010) suggests that individuals often psychologically and morally disassociate themselves from their behaviors or are simply not morally aware (Bargh, 1984; Godwin, 2008; Jordan, 2009, 2005; Langer, Blank, & Chanowitz, 1978). Therefore, how can those who help develop character and ethical leadership use this research to inform their curriculum, pedagogy, and programs? The results from this study suggest that those involved in character development programs (especially for young adults) may need to initially emphasize *self-awareness and meta-cognition before moral reasoning, moral education, and moral decision making*.

Perhaps in this age of incredible opportunities to multi-task—Facebook, Instant Messaging, texting, tweeting, YouTube, iPods, iPads, homework, cell phones, etc.—our young people are being socialized to not be cognizant of what they are

doing (lacking in self-awareness). As purported by William Deresiewicz in October 2009 in a speech at the United States Military Academy, “multitasking, in short, is not only not thinking, it impairs your ability to think.” Some young adults may be acting unethically without consequences and without thinking for extended periods of time, and therefore, the habit of acting without thinking just continues (Seiler, Fisher, & Ooi, 2010). *They are not thinking they are doing something wrong because they are not thinking.*

Clearly, there are many levels of moral awareness and/or moral complexity, ranging from a complete lack of moral awareness to hypersensitivity and complex understanding of issues of rightness and wrongness. Moral awareness and moral complexity can be taught and improved, especially with a focus on understanding and internalization of the moral self, moral identity, moral courage, and moral efficacy. All of these constructs build on the starting point of self-awareness and meta-cognition. Put more simply,

One can only be conscious of their moral self if they are first conscious of their self.

Those who help develop leaders cannot assume or take for granted where people (young and old) are in terms of their self-awareness. There are

numerous high-profile examples of adults acting as if they lack holistic self-awareness (such as Tiger Woods, Mel Gibson, former Governors Eliot Spitzer and Mark Sanford, and former Senator John Edwards), which may have resulted in a lack of or flawed moral reasoning.

Arguably, from a pedagogical perspective and as recommended earlier, the starting point for teaching moral reasoning should be to identify where students are in terms of self-awareness and meta-cognition. Many leader development programs are primarily focused on the *importance* of self-awareness or *having* self-awareness, *but not what it is; nor do they actually teach it, develop it, or practice it.* This same point applies to meta-cognition. As Avolio (2005) notes, development begins with the self.

To improve their ability to morally reason, students must first understand and be *taught how* to habitually be self-aware and to meta-cognate, not only taught what it is. Practicing self-awareness is an intentional and conscious process; it does not just happen. Both self-awareness and meta-cognition are habitual practices that can be taught and learned and should be the starting point to becoming more morally aware and improving moral reasoning.

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