

MORAL EXEMPLARS IN BUSINESS AND PROFESSIONAL ETHICS*

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Abstract

This module has been designed to build the foundation for a practical approach to virtue ethics. Student are provided with the names of several moral exemplars in business and professional ethics. They are then asked to identify the traits, attitudes, emotions, and skills that make these individuals moral exemplars. Textboxes acquaint students with moral exemplar studies that have been carried out. The links included in this module help students identify online and offline sources that describe moral exemplars and outline moral exemplar studies. This module is being developed as a part of an NSF-funded project, "Collaborative Development of Ethics Across the Curriculum Resources and Sharing of Best Practices," NSF SES 0551779.

1 Module Introduction

Through the activities of this module you will learn to balance cautionary tales in business and professional ethics with new stories about those who consistently act in a morally exemplary way. While cautionary tales teach us what to avoid, narratives from the lives of moral exemplars show us how to be good. A study of moral best practices in business and professional ethics shows that moral exemplars exhibit positive and learnable skills. This module, then, looks at moral exemplars in business and the professions, outlines their outstanding accomplishments, and helps you to unpack the strategies they use to overcome obstacles to doing good.

You will begin by identifying outstanding individuals in business and associated practices who have developed moral "best practices." Your task is look at these individuals, retell their stories, identify the skills that help them do good, and build a foundation for a more comprehensive study of virtue in occupational and professional ethics.

2 Exercise 1: Choose a moral exemplar

- Identify a moral exemplar and provide a narrative description of his or her life story.
- To get this process started, look at the list of moral exemplars provided in this module. The links in the upper left hand corner of this module will help you to explore their accomplishments in detail. Feel free to choose your own exemplar. Make sure you identify someone in the occupational and professional

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areas such as business and engineering. These areas have more than their share of exemplars, but they tend to escape publicity because their actions avoid publicity generating disasters rather than bring them about.

3 Moral Exemplars

- 1. William LeMesseur. LeMesseur designed the Citicorp Building in New York. When a student identified a critical design flaw in the building during a routine class exercise, LeMesseur responded, not by shooting the messenger, but by developing an intricate and effective plan for correcting the problem before it issued in drastic real world consequences. Check out LeMesseur's profile at [onlineethics](#) and see how he turned a potential disaster into a good deed.
- 2. Fred Cuny, starting in 1969 with Biafra, carried out a series of increasingly effective interventions in international disasters. He brought effective methods to disaster relief such as engineering know-how, political savvy, good business sense, and aggressive advocacy. His timely interventions saved thousands of Kurdish refugees in the aftermath of the Persian Gulf War in 1991. He also helped design and implement an innovative water filtration system in Sarajevo during the Bosnia-Serb conflict in 1993. For more details, consult the biographical sketch at [onlineethics](#).
- 3. Roger Boisjoly worked on a team responsible for developing o-ring seals for fuel tanks used in the Challenger Shuttle. When his team noticed evidence of gas leaks he made an emergency presentation before officials of Morton Thiokol and NASA recommending postponing the launch scheduled for the next day. When decision makers refused to change the launch date, Boisjoly watched in horror the next day as the Challenger exploded seconds into its flight. Find out about the courageous stand Boisjoly took in the aftermath of the Challenger explosion by reading the biographical sketch at [onlineethics](#).
- 4. Muhammad Yunus won the Nobel Prize for Peace in 2006. His effort in setting up "micro-businesses" funded through "micro-lending" has completely changed the paradigm on how to extend business practices to individuals at the bottom of the pyramid. Learn about his strategies for creating micro-businesses and how those strategies have been extended throughout the world, including Latin America, by listening to an interview with him broadcast by the Online News Hour. (See link included in this module.)
- 5. Bill Gates has often been portrayed as a villain, especially during the anti-trust suit against Microsoft in the mid 1990's. Certainly his aggressive and often ruthless business practices need to be evaluated openly and critically. But recently Gates stopped participating in the day-to-day management of his company, Microsoft, and has set up a charitable foundation to oversee international good works projects. Click on the link included in this module to listen to and read an interview recently conducted with him and his wife, Melinda, on their charitable efforts.
- 6. Jeffrey Skilling, former CEO of Enron, can hardly be called a moral exemplar. Yet when Enron was at its peak, its CEO, Jeffrey Skilling, was considered among the most innovative, creative, and brilliant of contemporary corporate CEOs. View the documentary, *The Smartest Guys in the Room*, read the book of the same title, and learn about the configuration of character traits that led to Skilling's initial successes and ultimate failure. A link included in this module will lead you to an interview with Skilling conducted on March 28, 2001.
- Inez Austin worked to prevent contamination from nuclear wastes produced by a plutonium production facility. Visit [Online Ethics](#) by clicking on the link above to find out more about her heroic stand.
- Rachael Carson's book, *The Silent Spring*, was one of the key events inaugurating the environmental movement in the United States. For more on the content of her life and her own personal act of courage, visit the biographical profile at [Online Ethics](#). You can click on the Supplemental Link provided above.

4 Exercise Two: Moral Exemplar Profiles

- What are the positive and negative influences you can identify for your moral exemplar?

- What good deeds did your exemplar carry out?
- What obstacles did your moral exemplar face and how did he or she overcome them?
- What skills, attitudes, beliefs, and emotions helped to orient and motivate your moral exemplar.?

5 Exercise Three

Prepare a short dramatization of a key moment in the life of your group's moral exemplar.

6 Textbox: Two different Types of Moral Exemplar

- Studies carried out by Chuck Huff into moral exemplars in computing suggest that moral exemplars can operate as craftspersons or reformers. (Sometimes they can combine both these modes.)
- Craftspersons (1) draw on pre-existing values in computing, (2) focus on users or customers who have needs, (3) take on the role of providers of a service/product, (4) view barriers as inert obstacles or puzzles to be solved, and (5) believe they are effective in their role.
- Reformers (1) attempt to change organizations and their values, (2) take on the role of moral crusaders, (3) view barriers as active opposition, and (4) believe in the necessity of systemic reform
- These descriptions of moral exemplars have been taken from a presentation by Huff at the STS colloquium at the University of Virginia on October 2006. Huff's presentation can be found at the link provided in the upper left hand corner of this module.

7 What Makes a Moral Exemplar? PRIMES Explained

General Comments on Exemplars

- Moral exemplars have succeeded in integrating moral and professional attitudes and beliefs into their core identity. Going against these considerations for moral exemplars is tantamount to acting against self. Acting in accordance with them becomes second nature.
- Moral exemplars often achieve their aims with the support of "support groups." In fact, moral exemplars are often particularly adept at drawing support from surrounding individuals, groups and communities. This goes against the notion that exemplars are isolated individuals who push against the current. (Not all exemplars need fit as heroes into Ayn Rand novels.)
- Moral exemplars often do not go through periods of intensive and prolonged deliberation in order to hit upon the correct action. If we want a literary example, we need to replace the tortured deliberations of a Hamlet with the quick and intuitive insight of an Esther Summerson. (Summerson is a character in Charles Dickens' novel, Bleak House. See both William Shakespeare and Charles Dickens for more examples of villains and exemplars.) Some have situated moral exemplars within virtue ethics. They have cultivated moral habits that allow them to do good as second nature. They have also found ways to integrate moral reasoning with emotion (as motive), perception (which helps them zero in on moral relevance), and skill (which helps implement moral value). In this sense, moral expertise functions much as athletic or technical expertise; all are difficult to acquire but once acquired lead to highly skilled actions performed almost effortlessly.

PRIMES

Primes stands for Personality, Integrating value into self-system, Moral Ecology, and Moral Skills Sets. These are the elements composing moral expertise that have been identified by Huff and Rogerson based on interviews they conducted with exemplars in the areas of computing.

Personality

- Moral exemplars exhibit different configurations of personality traits based on the big five. Locate the moral exemplar you have chosen in terms of the following five continuums (or continua):

- Neuroticism to Lack of Neuroticism (Stability?)
- Agreeableness to Disagreeableness
- Extraversion to Introversion
- Openness to Closedness
- Conscientiousness to Lack of Conscientiousness
- Examine your exemplar on each of these scales. In and of themselves, these qualities are neither good nor bad. They can be integrated to form bad characters or good characters. In many cases, moral exemplars stand out through how they have put their personality characteristics to "good use." (They have used them as vehicles or channels to excellence.)

Integrating Moral Value into Self-System

- As said above, moral exemplars stand out by the way in which (and the extent to which) they have integrated moral value into their self-system. Because of this, they are strongly motivated to do good and avoid doing bad. Both (doing good and refraining from doing bad) express who they are. If they slip into bad deeds, this motivational system pushes them to improve to avoid repeating bad deeds.
- One way of integrating moral value into self-system is by looking at stories and narratives of those who have displayed moral excellence. Many of the individuals portrayed above (Carson, Boisjoly, LeMesseur, Cuny, Austin, and Yunus) provide concrete models of outstanding moral careers.
- Literature also provides its models of moral exemplars. Charles Dickens paints especially powerful portraits of both moral heroes (Esther Summerson and "Little Dorritt") and villains (Heep and Skimpole).
- Other vehicles for integrating moral value centrally into the self-system lie in affiliations, relationships, and friendships. Aristotle shows the importance of good friendships in developing virtues. Moral exemplars most often can point to others who have served as mentors or strong positive influences. For example, Roger Boisjoly tells of how he once went to a senior colleague for advice on whether to sign off on a design that was less than optimal. His colleague's advice: would you be comfortable with your wife or child using a product based on this design?
- The ethicist, Bernard Williams, has argued forcefully for the importance of personal projects in establishing and maintaining integrity. Personal projects, roles, and life tasks all convey value; when these hold positive moral value and become central unifying factors in one's character, then they also serve to integrate moral value into the self system.
- Augusto Blasi, a well known moral psychologist, gives a particularly powerful account (backed by research) of the integration of moral value into self-system and its motivational effect.

Moral Ecology

- Moral Ecologies: "The term moral ecology encourages us to consider the complex web of relationships and influences, the long persistence of some factors and the rapid evolution of others, the variations in strength and composition over time, the micro-ecologies that can exist within larger ones, and the multidirectional nature of causality in an ecology." From Huff et. al.
- Moral ecologies refer to social surrounds, that is, the different groups, organizations, and societies that surround us and to which we are continually responding.
- We interact with these social surrounds as organisms interact with their surrounding ecosystems. In fact, moral ecologies offer us roles (like ecological niches) and envelop us in complex organizational systems (the way ecosystems are composed of interacting and interrelated parts). We inhabit and act within several moral ecologies; these moral ecologies, themselves, interact. Finally, moral ecologies, like natural ecosystems, seek internal and external harmony and balance. Internally, it is important to coordinate different the constituent individuals and the roles they play. Externally, it is difficult but equally important to coordinate and balance the conflicting aims and activities of different moral ecologies.

- Moral ecologies shape who we are and what we do. This is not to say that they determine us. But they do channel and constrain us. For example, your parents have not determined who you are. But much of what you do responds to how you have experienced them; you agree with them, refuse to question their authority, disagree with them, and rebel against them. The range of possible responses is considerable but these are all shaped by what you experienced from your parents in the past.
- The moral ecologies module (see the link provided above) describes three different moral ecologies that are important in business: quality-, customer-, and finance-driven companies. (More "kinds" could be generated by combining these in different ways: for example, one could characterize a company as customer-driven but transforming into a quality-driven company.) Roles, strategies for dissent, assessment of blame and praise, and other modes of conduct are shaped and constrained by the overall character of the moral ecology.
- Moral ecologies, like selves, can also be characterized in terms of the "centrality" of moral value. Some support the expression of moral value or certain kinds of moral value (like loyalty) while undermining or suppressing the expression of others (like courage or autonomy).
- Finally, think in terms of how personality traits integrated around moral value interact with different types of moral ecology. If a moral ecology undermines virtuous conduct, what strategies are available for changing it? Or resisting it? If there are different kinds of moral exemplar, which pair best with which moral ecology? (How would a helper or craftsman prevail in a finance-driven moral ecology like those characterized by Robert Jackall in **Moral Mazes**?)

Moral Skills Sets

- Moral expertise is not reducible to knowing what constitutes good conduct and doing your best to bring it about. Realizing good conduct, being an effective moral agent, bringing value into the work, all require skills in addition to a "good will." PRIMES studies have uncovered four skill sets that play a decisive role in the exercise of moral expertise.
- **Moral Imagination:** The ability to project into the standpoint of others and view the situation at hand through their lenses. Moral imagination achieves a balance between becoming lost in the perspectives of others and failing to leave one's own perspective. Adam Smith terms this balance "proportionality" which we can achieve in empathy when we feel with them but do not become lost in their feelings. Empathy consists of feeling with others but limiting the intensity of that feeling to what is proper and proportionate for moral judgment.
- **Moral Creativity:** Moral Creativity is close to moral imagination and, in fact, overlaps with it. But it centers in the ability to frame a situation in different ways. Patricia Werhane draws attention to a lack of moral creativity in the Ford Pinto case. Key Ford directors framed the problem with the gas tank from an economical perspective. Had they considered other framings they might have appreciated the callousness of refusing to recall Pintos because the costs of doing so (and retrofitting the gas tanks) were greater than the benefits (saving lives). They did not see the tragic implications of their comparison because they only looked at the economic aspects. Multiple framings open up new perspectives that make possible the design of non-obvious solutions.
- **Reasonableness:** Reasonableness balances openness to the views of others (one listens and impartially weighs their arguments and evidence) with commitment to moral values and other important goals. One is open but not to the extent of believing anything and failing to keep fundamental commitments. The Ethics of Team Work module (see link above) discusses strategies for reaching consensus that are employed by those with the skill set of reasonableness. These help avoid the pitfalls of group-based deliberation and action.
- **Perseverance:** Finally, perseverance is the "ability to plan moral action and continue on that course by responding to circumstances and obstacles while keeping ethical goals intact." Huff et. al.

8 Presentation on Moral Exemplars

[MEDIA OBJECT]¹

9 Bibliography

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