On the Distinction between Unethical and Selfish Behavior

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Abstract

The majority of studies in moral psychology have confounded unethical behavior with selfish behavior. The present analysis distinguishes between unethical and selfish behavior by analyzing the four distinct categories of behavior that these two constructs produce: selfish/unethical, selfish/ethical, unselfish/ethical, and unselfish/unethical.

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?" While Kohlberg was interested in how people reasoned through this moral dilemma, we were struck by the fact Heinz stole, not to help himself, but to assist another person. To put it another way, Heinz might have acted unethically, but did he act selfishly?

Or consider the more contemporary case of Aaron Swartz. As a computer programmer, Swartz downloaded 4.8 million articles from the journal database JSTOR and made them publically available. While his hack 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).

To act unethically is often to act selfishly. Indeed, the bulk of ancient Greek philosophy and modern moral psychology has studied how individuals resolve moral dilemmas where "doing the right thing" and acting in one's self-interest are in conflict (Bazerman & Gino, 2012; Kish-Gephart, Harrison, & Trevino, 2010). In fact, Plato (360 B.C./1997) believed that self-interest is the root of all unethical behaviors: "the cause of each and every crime we commit is precisely this excessive love of ourselves, a love which … makes us bad judges of goodness and beauty and justice, because we believe we should honor our own ego rather than the truth."

Since 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 (Cohn, Fehr, & Maréchal, 2014;

Gino, Ayal, & Ariely, 2009; Greenberg, 2002; Treviño, den Nieuwenboer, & Kish-Gephart, 2014). To examine how frequently unethical behavior was also selfish 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 behaviors without any consideration of *unselfish* unethical behaviors.[1] In other words, the majority of studies in moral psychology may have confounded unethical behavior with selfish behavior.

Despite their frequent co-occurrence, unethical behavior and selfish behavior are conceptually orthogonal. In social sciences, unethical behavior is commonly defined as behavior that is "illegal or morally unacceptable to the large community" (Jones, 1991, p. 367). In contrast, selfish behavior is defined as behavior that prioritizes one's own interests and benefits over others' (Palmer, 2000). Critically, these definitions reveal that selfish intentions are not a prerequisite for unethical behaviors, and that unethical behaviors need not arise out of selfishness. For example, unethical behaviors can originate from the desire to help others (as in the cases of Heinz and Swartz). In a similar vein, selfishness can promote *ethical* behavior, particularly in contexts where others' interests are aligned with one's own.

In the following sections, we further 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 1 for an overview). Thereafter, we

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[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 key terms: 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 first author.

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.

Insert Table 1 about here

Selfish and Unethical Behavior

Numerous studies find that individuals resort to unethical behaviors out of self-interest (Barsky, 2008; Bersoff, 1999). Most commonly, selfish motives can increase individuals' propensity to behave unethically to gain financial rewards or social status, or to avoid losing them (Edelman & Larkin, 2015; Kern & Chugh, 2009).

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, in press), thereby increasing selfish behaviors that are unethical. In firms, employees who compete for status are more likely to fabricate their performance and sabotage competitors' work (Charness, Masclet, & Villeval, 2013). In sports, players adopt unsportsmanlike behaviors in order to get ahead of their rivals (Kilduff et al., in press). 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).

Similar to competition, goals can "go wild" (Ordóñez, Schweitzer, Galinsky, & Bazerman, 2009). By narrowing people's 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 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). At work, the use of production or sales goals can encourage employees to cheat and lie (Jensen, 2003). For example, Sears's goal-oriented commission has been identified as the culprit for its employees' systematic defrauding of customers (Santoro & Paine, 1993). Moreover, individuals are particularly likely to resort to unethical means when they are about to fall short of their goals (Schweitzer et al., 2004). For example, authors are 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 code, 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 are more lenient towards their own unethical behavior than the same behavior performed by others (Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2007, 2008).

Selfish and Ethical Behavior

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

Selfishly, people refrain from behaving unethically when the risk and cost of being caught are high (Brass, Butterfield, & Skaggs, 1998). Even without formal punishment, individuals are still driven to protect their moral identity as a "good person" (Bryan, Adams, Monin, 2013; Nisan & Kurtines, 1991). As a result, they often adopt behaviors that present themselves as "moral" in the eyes of others and themselves (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-esteem and identity (Bryan et al., 2013).

Self-interest can also guide individuals to take action against others' unethical behaviors. For instance, whistleblowing, or "disclosing illegal, immoral or illegitimate practices…to persons or organizations who may be able to effect action" (Near & Miceli, 1985, p. 6), is often motivated by self-interest. By reporting on a cheater in an academic competition, a student upholds the academic honor code, but also gains an edge in the competition. Similarly, when whistle-blowers reveal behavior that has defrauded the federal government, they can be entitled to a percentage of the financial recovery. For example, "the IRS Whistleblower Office pays money to people who blow the whistle on person who fail to pay the tax that they owe" (Internal Revenue Service). Socially, the larger community may even hail whistleblowers as heroes (Johnson, 2003).

Selfish motives can also foster prosocial behaviors, or "voluntary behaviors that result in benefits for another (Eisenberg & Miller, 1987). In the United States, many individuals donate to charitable organizations both to receive tax deductions (Feldstein, 1975) and to publically signal their wealth, status, or moral character (Ariely, Bracha, & Meier, 2009; Rege & Telle, 2004; Soetevent, 2005). 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 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, 1776, pp. 26-27). In essence, the study of free-market economics—which Adam Smith viewed as a branch of moral philosophy (Griswold, 1999)—rests on the premise that human beings are self-interested (Smith, 1776) 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.

Most commonly, research has explored conditions where altruistic intentions produce ethical outcomes (Batson & Shaw, 1991; Penner, Dovidio, Piliavin, & Schroeder, 2005). People help others (e.g., anonymous donations, community service) even when no clear and direct benefit to them exists 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 plan is unpopular amongst employees) has the potential to benefit others (e.g., 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 whistleblowing and altruistic punishment. While whistleblowing 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 whistleblowing is especially likely to occur when people are focused on justice and fairness. Sometimes whistleblowers are not only unselfish, but also vulnerable to both social revenge from members of their own community (Dyck, Adair, & Zingales, 2010) and psychological distress that shares features of posttraumatic stress disorder (e.g., anxiety, nightmares, flashbacks; Peters et al., 2011).

Altruistic punishment, where "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 jump queues or who sneak into music festivals) because "it is the right thing to do." Altruistic punishment facilitates cooperation in groups, organizations, and societies; indeed, 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; Palmer, 2012). For example, many

moral dilemmas that lead individuals towards 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, 1785), care prioritizes the utilitarian consideration to help and protect others (Bentham, 1843; 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 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 solely to protect their child. Similarly, with no apparent self-serving motive, doctors may lie to patients about bleak prognoses to give them hope and comfort (Iezzoni, Rao, DesRoches, Vogeli, & Campbell, 2012).

Like Aaron Swartz, some individuals are willing to engage in unethical behaviors that potentially benefit the larger community (Gino, Ayal, & Ariely, 2013; Gino & Pierce, 2009), even at the cost of sacrificing themselves. The 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 to "defend the of freedom of speech and media publishing,"

"improve transparency," and "create a better society for all people" (WikiLeaks, 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 vs. Unselfish Unethical Behavior

As illustrated in the previous sections, drawing a distinction between unethical and

selfish behavior is critical to the study of moral psychology. Given that both ethical and unethical

behaviors can result from 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 apart unethical behaviors driven by

selfish versus unselfish motives.

Social Class

Prior research found a positive relationship between social class and unethical behavior

(Piff, Stancato, Côté, Mendoza-Denton, & Keltner, 2012). Upper-class individuals have more

favorable attitudes towards greed, which partially account for their higher tendency to engage in

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[2] We describe the behaviors of WikiLeaks and Aaron Swartz as prosocial based on the assumption that they were intended to serve the larger community. However, it remains possible they were motivated by more selfish motives of fame and notoriety. As with whistleblowing, the key factor for ultimately determining whether a behavior is selfish or altruistic is the intention underlying the behavior.

unethical behaviors such as lying and cheating (Piff et al., 2012). Closer examination of this effect reveals that 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 (Rucker, Galinsky, & Dubois, 2012). As a result, although both upper- and lower-class individuals can behave unethically, upper-class individuals are more likely to do so for themselves whereas lower-class individuals are more likely to do so for others. These findings demonstrate that disentangling selfishness and unethicality provides a more complete understanding of the antecedents of unethical behavior.

Organizational Identification

The distinction between unethicality 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). People's organizational identification significantly affects the extent to which they engage in selfish versus unselfish unethical behaviors (Vadera & Pratt, 2013). Individuals who strongly identify (or "over-identify"; Dukerich, Kramer, & Parks, 1998) with their organization are more apt to behave unethically to benefit their organization at their own cost (Ashforth & Anand, 2003; Umphress, Bingham, & Mitchell, 2010). For example, tragic anecdotes of terrorism reveal that suicide bombers were often over-identified members emboldened to "do justice" on behalf of

their group (Sageman, 2004). Moreover, 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 (or "under-identify"; Dukerich et al., 1998) with their organization are more likely to engage in selfish unethical acts. They tend to ignore organizational rules and feel unconstrained 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 (or "over-disidentify"; Dukerich et al., 1998) may even purposefully harm their organization to serve their self-interest (Vadera & Pratt, 2013), such as stealing office supplies and fabricating receipts for reimbursement (Sprouse & Illustrator-Cox, 1992).

Loyalty

Beyond organizational identification, the distinction between unethicality and selfishness also elucidates the role of loyalty as an antecedent to unethical behaviors (Hildreth, Gino, & Bazerman, 2016). Although common wisdom and evidence suggests that loyalty to an individual or group is often tied to corruption (Skolnick, 2002), research separating the effect of loyalty from the interests of the organization demonstrates a more nuanced relationship. Loyalty, unlike organizational identification, is a moral principle that entails acting in the best interest of another person or group (Hildreth et al., 2016). As a result of this link to moral principle, broad feelings of loyalty decrease an individual's propensity to engage in selfish unethical behavior because acting unethically, for example, could tarnish the long-term reputation of the group. However, when the unethical behavior serves the interests of the group (e.g., improves the group's standing in a competition), loyalty can increase individuals' propensity to act unethically.

Future Directions

In light of the distinction between unethicality and selfishness, we re-examine some of the previously documented antecedents of unethical behavior. Based on prior research, we outline specific and nuanced predictions that could be tested in the future.

Money vs. 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 self. If the unethical behavior benefitted others rather than the self, the "money versus time effect" might reverse. 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) find that money produces a self-sufficient orientation. Hence, activating the concept of money might very well lower an individual's willingness to behave unethically to benefit others at the cost of oneself. Conversely, although activating time can curb selfish unethical behavior (Gino & Mogilner, 2014), it may actually increase unselfish unethical behavior by making people more focused on others. 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 people differ systematically in their social learning strategies (van den Berg, Molleman, & Weissing, 2015): while some people attempt to imitate the most successful individuals of the group, others attend to the most normative members of the group.

Importantly, success-oriented learners behave more selfishly and cooperate less compared to norm-oriented 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. Future research could examine the relationship between learning orientation on unethical versus selfish behavior.

Individualism vs. Collectivism

Culture also serves as an important driver of 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) argue 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 the self versus others.

<div align="center">**Conclusion**</div>

Unethical behavior and selfish intentions are logical companions. Indeed, examples of where unethical behavior and selfish behavior co-occur abound in the literature. However, such a perspective inaccurately represents 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 carving apart the constructs of ethicality and selfishness, we acquire a more complete understanding of moral psychology and set a promising research agenda for the future.

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Table 1. Distinguishing between ethical/unethical and selfish/unselfish behaviors.

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