

***Obstacles to Ethical Decision-Making: Mental Models, Milgram and the Problem of Obedience*, edited by Patricia Werhane, Laura Pincus Hartman, Crina Archer, Elaine E. Englehardt, and Michael S. Pritchard. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013. 260pp. ISBN: 978-1107000032**

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How can two-thirds of people continue following the instructions of a legitimate authority figure, even when those instructions involve inflicting electrical shocks of ostensibly 450 volts on a stranger? Close to half a century after they were first conducted, Stanley Milgram's experiments on obedience to authority continue to haunt and fascinate. They represent as close to bedrock as any finding in the social sciences. Yet in some ways Milgram's findings remain a mystery because they are so hard to square with any optimism about human nature. As a result, they make a compelling hook for a book on ethical decision making.

Patricia Werhane and four collaborators, including her frequent writing partner Laura Pincus Hartman, jointly offer a perspective on ethical decision making that provides a whistle-stop tour of seminal findings from the social sciences with relevance to business ethics (the Stanford Prison Experiments, Daniel Batson's experiments on moral hypocrisy), integrates them with fundamental ideas from moral philosophy (Plato's *Ring of Gyges*, Hume's "sensible knave," Rawls's veil of ignorance), and brings them to life through the use of voluminous and varied examples, both classic (the Ford Pinto, the Challenger Space Shuttle) and fresh (Lehman Brothers, Jerry Sandusky and Penn State football).

The book is organized in eight chapters, including the introduction and conclusion. Chapter 2 sets out what the authors term "mental models," defined as "mental representations, cognitive frames, or mental pictures through which all human beings interact with experience" (p. 18). The vagueness of the term, and the number of synonyms the authors use for it (mindsets, schemas, frames, perspectives, beliefs), represents a challenge for the book. Sometimes mental models refer to what is valued; for example, they can "valorize long working hours" (p. 87). At other times, mental models seem like arguments: they are "behind the push for deregulation" (p. 183). At still other times, they seem to preexist in our minds, passively defining a situation for us; other times they seem to be "employed" by us in a motivated way. Over time, I suspended my concern about the term and settled upon thinking about them as the building blocks of our socially constructed reality, which can either facilitate or impede ethical decision making.

Chapter 3 is dedicated exclusively to the Milgram experiments and their various commentaries, and it is the most novel and interesting part of the book. Typical interpretations of Milgram focus on how people will abdicate ownership of their own moral actions if a person in a position of authority asks them to comply with a morally suspect request. However, the most interesting avenues of the chapter

explore participants' inner conflicts as they obey. It turns out we do not become robotic automatons in the face of authority figures. Instead, the evidence suggests that try as we might to pass off our moral responsibility to others entirely, it seems we cannot. We still react to this experience of acquiescing to authority at a visceral level. We leak out feelings of ambivalence, empathy for those we are being asked to mistreat and resentment toward the authority figures requesting we do so. This more elaborated view opens up space for optimism in reconsidering the Milgram findings, a "thin edge" of a wedge that may be useful in encouraging more morally upstanding responses to authority relationships.

A large part of this thin edge is the discourse that occurs between the experimenter, participant, and actor (or learner) and how this discourse interacts with participants' mental models. The authors draw heavily here on an as-yet unpublished (but by the looks of it fascinating) dissertation by Parmar (2011), who reanalyzed all the original video and audio from the first iteration of Milgram's experiments. The largest proportion of participants who resisted the experimenter's requests did so at the "150 volt moment." This is when the learner first shouts "Get me out of here!" and the experimenter, if pressed, tells participants to continue because they have "no choice." Since language mediates our experience of the world, these words triggered some participants to disobey through articulating their moral agency: "If this were Russia maybe, but not in America," "I do have a choice," or "I came here of my own free will." The opportunity to perceive the situation as one where personal choices were being made seems to have reminded at least some participants of their moral responsibility within it. This attention to language, and how it can trigger mental models that obviate or amplify personal agency, offers some direction in terms of how to think about training others to be disobedient to authority figures that make morally illegitimate demands.

Chapters 4 and 5 provide an overview of some dominant obstacles to ethical decision making, using a conscious, deliberative stage-based process as an organizing framework. The discussion of many of these obstacles—bounded awareness, egocentric biases, confirmation heuristics—draws heavily on the perspectives and arguments of some other important recent books in this area, most heavily on Bazerman and Tenbrunsel's *Blind Spots* (2011), and Heffernan's *Willful Blindness* (2011). These chapters expose the authors as champions of conscious and rational processes as the ultimate route out of moral darkness. I have sympathy for this view. Indeed, it would be difficult for most philosophers to truly disown a belief that reasoning with full awareness and objectivity will improve our decisions. Certainly, Werhane and her colleagues go to much greater lengths than most rationalist-leaning theorists to understand the unconscious, affective, or intuitive processes that influence our ethical choices. However, nonrational processes are still understood as obstacles to our ethical decision making, a perspective that does not fit with current thinking about the multiple processing systems that underlie ethical choices (cf., Moore & Gino, 2015). If there is a way to better harness these nondeliberative processes for positive moral ends, it is left for other authors to tackle.

Chapters 6 and 7 then offer some strategies that we can use to overcome these obstacles to "thorough" ethical decision making; Chapter 6 focuses on overcoming

our blind spots, and Chapter 7 highlights the challenges and their potential solutions through a number of contemporary examples. It was interesting to think about organizational applications of strategies such as changing default positions, as has been used in the public policy domain to increase the availability of transplant organs. Similarly, we need to think more creatively about how to instigate new and imaginative perspectives on problem solving, such as creating an official role for a “corporate fool” whose job description is to “stir things up” (p. 194).

The book is at its best when it makes use of the unique strengths of this set of authors. Over the last two decades, ethics in business schools has shifted from being dominated by philosophers to being dominated by social scientists. *Obstacles to Ethical Decision Making* reminds us of the compelling uses of philosophy in understanding our moral world (full disclosure: I am not an objective observer in this regard, having an undergraduate degree in philosophy). For example, the discussion of Hume’s “sensible knave” (pp. 139–144)—essentially, a person who recognizes the importance of societal rules but desires to be an exception himself—would transplant well to an MBA classroom. It was also fascinating to witness a number of the connections that can be made between philosophical and psychological insights: Seyla Benhabib’s (2004) notion of “the other” relates directly to psychological notions of out-groups, and Martin Benjamin’s (2003) belief in the “democratic temperament” fits well with psychological evidence about the benefits of perspective-taking. The book is a useful reminder of how the humanities still have much to offer business ethics.

The most thought-provoking aspects of the book highlight tensions inherent in how we do (or might) manage ethical dilemmas. The fact that groups offer a multiplicity of perspectives means they may enhance the alternatives we imagine, but this potential is complicated by the fact that groups often arrive at polarized decisions. The idea that resistance to authority is enhanced in the company of peers contradicts what we know about numbers facilitating bystander apathy. There is also an interesting discussion about the potentially dysfunctional implications of new policy mechanisms that offer financial rewards for whistleblowers. These conundrums cannot be solved in a work in this length, but it is important that, as a field, we begin to wrestle with them.

Ultimately, *Obstacles to Ethical Decision Making* is really about ways of seeing the world and one’s choices within it. The work is probably best suited as a primer for newcomers to the study of ethical decision making. Experienced readers will already be familiar with examples such as the *Challenger* and Ford Pinto and be accustomed to the interpretations offered. In key Chapters 4 through 7, there is also some repetition and cycling back to the same ideas that might have been effectively edited down. However, this repetition also means that the chapters may be more successfully used as stand-alone readings, a pretty useful advantage.

Put most simply, the authors argue that we will overcome the obstacles we face in our ethical decision making when we see our options more clearly, more comprehensively, and in the absence of self-serving heuristics and biases. We need to create and embed “practices that... transform habits of mind” (p. 91), to be more

imaginative, less committed to our first conclusions, better able to see the implications of our actions for a wide set of stakeholders. In the uphill battle we face in creating a better world, every idea we can bring to bear helps.

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