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Ethics of Fallibility

Teacher A has a particular responsibility at her school for a group of pupils, aged fifteen, who are struggling either socially or with the school subjects, or both. One afternoon she has scheduled individual meetings with the parents of these pupils. In front of her now is the mother of Max, a pupil that has recently made considerable progress at school, both in the subjects where he has had difficulties, and in the social relations with other pupils. Max has become more integrated with the rest of his class and has stopped bullying other pupils. Teacher A expects him to continue on this positive path, and has great belief in him, based on his recent development in the classroom. When teacher A conveys the concrete steps forward that Max has made, and the expectations she has for him, the mother gets visibly proud of what she hears about her own son. She is probably not used to hearing positive things about his behavior. The meeting ends and the two women shake hands. Max's mother starts to walk down the corridor. It is at this moment teacher A realizes that she has made a serious mistake. The woman walking away from her is not Max's mother, but rather the mother of another pupil in her group, Alex. The papers about both pupils were on her desk when the mother turned up for the meeting, and she grabbed the wrong set

of papers. In teacher A's mind, the person she greeted at the door was Max's mother, but now she has to admit to herself that it was not. Alex is a pupil steeped in trouble at school, a bully who is far behind the rest of the class in most subjects. The words teacher A has used to describe Max's progress in no way fits with the development Alex has had.

What should teacher A do now? She can either pursue the mother to acknowledge the mistake, or not. The previous chapter launched the principle of immediate acknowledgement: When you realize that your decision or behavior has caused harm, admit it and take responsibility immediately. The principle is not directly applicable in teacher A's situation. Her mistake has not yet caused harm, and may not do so later either. Immediate acknowledgment is nevertheless a viable option, and may be the right and proper thing to do. It depends in part on the foreseeable outcomes of telling and not telling. Alex's mother is on her way home, where she will probably tell her son that teacher A has high expectations for him. That may actually give him a positive and energizing experience, the opposite of harm. Even so, teacher A has to consider the ethical dimensions of the situation and to what extent she owes it to Alex and her mother, and to the school, to be open about the mistake she has made.

This chapter explores the normative and descriptive dimensions of an ethics of fallibility. The normative dimension is discussed from teacher A's mistaken identity case, in light of alternative justifications for acknowledging the mistake and not. The normative traditions of consequentialism and duty ethics provide conflicting advice about what teacher A and people in similar situations ought to do. Moral risk and the balance between prescriptive (do good) and proscriptive (avoid harm) considerations are at the heart of a normative ethics of fallibility, as noted in the chapter about events at Søbakken nursing home. This chapter outlines some theoretical resources available to formulate a normative platform for coping with fallibility, both with regard to what from a moral point of view should happen ahead of critical events where people are likely to make mistakes, in the midst of such events, and in their aftermath.

The descriptive dimension of an ethics of fallibility addresses alternative explanations to why people become involved in moral misbehavior,

and often continue to be so once they have habituated a certain behavioral pattern. In an organizational context, it is particularly relevant to explore a phenomenon we can call moral fallibility, the instances where people act contrary to their moral convictions and values, first hesitantly and with some distress, later out of habit. One kind of explanation builds of virtue ethics, and sees moral wrongdoing at work as an indication of character defects and weakness of will, while another kind of explanation points to circumstantial influences on decision-making and behavior. Both belong under the heading of descriptive ethics, where the aim is to explain rather than to justify what people do. The main example under discussion will be from a turnaround process in Norsk Gjenvinning, a Norwegian waste management company, where work has been done to address instances of moral misbehavior. Material for the discussion will come from a Harvard Business School Case Study of the company (Serafeim & Gombos, 2015) and from an interview with the CEO Erik Osmundsen (2017).

The ethics of fallibility proposed here takes into account both normative and descriptive dimensions of human behavior. In the final section of the chapter, the two are combined in a stance on forgiveness. Considerations of whether a person who has made a moral mistake ought to be forgiven (a normative issue) can be informed by knowledge about why people make such mistakes (a descriptive issue).

1   The Good and the Right

Alex's mother is disappearing down the corridor and teacher A needs to decide whether to go after her to admit her mistake, or not. She can also postpone the decision about disclosure until tomorrow, or later.

If teacher A thinks solely in terms of self-interest in this situation, it is likely that she will keep the knowledge about the mistaken identity to herself. She is the only person in the world who knows about the mistake, and it is hard to see how anybody else will ever find out if she remains silent. The mistake will reflect badly on her professionalism, and she may come on the receiving end of repercussions or reprimands from her leader. Colleagues will most likely think badly of her. From a

self-interest perspective, then, it appears that the best thing is to keep the knowledge about the mistake to herself.

From a perspective of professional ethics, teacher A should prioritize the pupil's interest over her own. As noted in the previous chapter, conflicts of interest are at the core of ethics in profession (Nanda, 2002). The professional more or less explicitly says to the client, patient, or pupil: "Trust me; although my self-interest may dictate other actions, I undertake to serve in your best interest." In teacher A's case, then, the professionally right thing to do in the aftermath of a mistake is to ask what would be in the pupil's best interest. Is it in Alex's best interest that he and his mother gets to know that the positive words about progress were actually about another pupil, and not about him? Is it in his best interest to get the truth, or to remain under the illusion that his teacher has seen progress in his development, and thinks he will continue to take social and subject related strides forward?

The discussion of moral risk in chapter three is also relevant with regard to the situation teacher A faces, and in the more general context of establishing a normative ethics of fallibility. Teacher A may wonder whether her leader and her colleagues will stand by her if she admits to the mistake, or whether she will be isolated and must defend herself alone. She has committed an active mistake, in doing something she should not have done. Keeping quiet about it might be viewed as a passive mistake, not being open about a mistake she should admit to the affected persons. There is also an element of balancing between a proscriptive (do no harm) and a prescriptive (do good) stance towards the pupil and his mother, but interpretations of facts and research indicating the probable effects of the alternatives can differ, and so also the perceptions of which of them are likely to be the more hurtful or beneficial.

The two main traditions in normative ethics are consequentialism and duty ethics. They offer different input to the situation teacher A faces, and what she should do. One way to describe the difference between them is to say that consequentialism gives priority to outcome (the good) over the quality of the conduct (the right), while duty ethics does the opposite, claiming that conduct (the right) is more important than the outcome (the good) (Kvalnes, 2015). Utilitarianism is the most common version of the former theory, and builds on the

moral philosophies of John Stuart Mill (2002/1859/1863) and Jeremy Bentham (1970/1789). It claims that the decision-maker should always seek to maximize the overall sum of utility for all those affected by the choice at hand, and thus base the decision on a kind of cost-benefit analysis on behalf of all stakeholders. Duty ethics, based on Immanuel Kant's moral philosophy, holds that there are moral values that should never be sacrificed in the name of a good outcome. Human dignity, fairness, honesty, and respect, should always have priority over considerations about common utility, according to this line of thinking (Kant, 1998/1785).

Teacher A can seek advice from these two ethical traditions. Duty ethics will claim that she should choose the honest and truthful option and be open about the mistake towards Alex and his mother. Considerations about whether their lives will be better or worse depending on the disclosure or not are irrelevant from this theoretical perspective. In the here and now, we should be open with each other and not hide the truth, no matter what might happen next, because that is in line with core values of human dignity. Consequentialism, on the other hand, will claim that teacher A should consider the probable outcomes of her alternatives. Will it be harmful to Alex and his mother to continue their lives under the illusion that teacher A has seen great progress in his behavior at school, and is optimistic about his future, or will it be more harmful to them to have the truth about the mistake revealed? Answers to these kinds of questions will determine the consequentialist advice to teacher A.

At the moment in time when teacher A has to make her decision, there is no concrete way of knowing or predicting future outcomes for Alex and her mother. However, studies of the so-called Pygmalion effect indicate that teacher expectations about performances from pupils can become self-fulfilling. In one study, teachers at an elementary school were told that some pupils could be expected to be "intellectual bloomers" in a particular school year. Tests at the end of that year showed that the pupils identified in that manner actually had enhanced performances, compared to other pupils, even though they from the outset were singled out randomly. Positive expectations from the teachers, then, appeared to have a concrete, positive effect on how the students

performed (Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968). The effect has been documented in a later study (Boser, Wilhelm, & Hanna, 2014; Chadha & Narula, 2016), and also beyond the classroom. Pygmalion effects also occur in organizations, when leaders and colleagues express high expectations to their coworkers (Chandrashekar, 2016; Eden, 1990; Livingston, 2003).

With knowledge about the Pygmalion effect in mind, teacher A could choose to remain silent about the mistake, in the hope that Alex would respond positively to news about the high expectations from his teacher. Her mistake could then transform into a positive push for Alex. From a duty ethics perspective, this line of thinking misrepresents morality, in that it fails to give weight to non-negotiable moral values of honesty and truthfulness.

We can imagine a continuation of the story about teacher A, where she decides not to tell Alex's mother about the mistake. The mother goes home to her son, and tells him about the glowing positive appraisal from the teacher. In line with research on the Pygmalion effect, we can assume that what occurs next is a positive upturn in Alex's life at school. He starts to take schoolwork more seriously, and makes considerable progress both in the subjects where he has struggled previously and socially among the other pupils. Exposure to the teacher's positive regard and high expectations gives him a strong motivation to strengthen his efforts at school.

Such a positive outcome for Alex would not suffice to convince a duty ethics representative that teacher A was right in keeping the mistake to herself. From this theoretical perspective, moral luck (Nagel, 1979; Williams, 1981) can at most function as a label for the mistaken judgements people sometimes make, when they allow actual outcomes to overshadow the principled dimensions of a decision. According to duty ethics, we should always act in accordance with a maxim or rule of conduct that we can, to be universally applicable to these kinds of situations. Teacher A, then, should have asked herself whether she could will that every other person facing a similar situation applied the maxim of keeping quiet about the kind of mistake she has made. This Kantian line of thinking is similar to the one found in the Golden Rule, to treat others the way you want to be treated yourself. If teacher A had been

the mother who had been mistaken for another, would she have wanted the teacher to reveal the mistake, or would she have accepted to be kept in the dark about it? Duty ethics in the Kantian tradition assumes that any consistent and rational person will end up prioritizing honesty over potentially positive outcomes in such situations.

In support of teacher A's decision, it can be noted that it was more than wishful thinking to assume that Alex could benefit from high expectations and praise, since research on the Pygmalion effect indicates that to be an expected outcome. She may even apply the Kantian maxim or the Golden Rule and conclude that she would accept similar treatment if she had been in the mother's position. During autumn 2016, the case was presented to special advisors in pedagogy, people who work closely with professionals like teacher A, They were asked to give an intuitive response to it. Around half the participants indicated that the right thing to do would be to explain the mistake to the mother, while the other half believed that teacher A should withhold that information. The case was used in three seminars with around one hundred professional participants each time, and there was an even split between a duty ethics answer and a consequentialist answer in all of them.

A normative ethics of fallibility can address a range of issues were people have made or are about to make mistakes. Questions of moral responsibility and right conduct can be raised at different moments in time about what one ought to do (Table 1).

The temporal structure can also illustrate the priorities within the two normative traditions. Consequentialism will seek information about likely outcomes in order to determine what the right thing to do is, and so is future oriented. Duty ethics, on the other hand, is primarily oriented towards the present, and on how moral values like human dignity, honesty, autonomy, and respect dictates what a person ought to do under the given circumstances, here and now. It can also to some extent be oriented towards the past, in taking into account what the decision-maker owe to the people affected by his or her conduct, based on previous promises and commitments. Even without a scholarly introduction to the two traditions, people tend to have strong intuitions about right and wrong, belonging to these theoretical categories. However, people

Table 1 Ethics of fallibility time frame

Before	Critical event	After
What are the morally right ways to prepare people (children, colleagues, professionals, etc.) for situations where they or others may make a mistake?	What are the morally right ways to intervene a course of events when a person is about to make or has made a mistake?	What are the morally right ways to cope with the aftermath of our own and other people's mistakes?

Woften do not remain consistent duty ethicists or consequentialists, but rather alternate between them when figuring out what the morally proper response to a situation would be. Only theorists in this area appear to be faithful to one particular ethical tradition over time. The rest of us tend to alternate, and be drawn towards outcomes one day and towards honesty and respect the next day, shopping around among ethical theories.

2   Moral Fallibility

"At some of our locations, we suspected hazardous waste was mixed with non-hazardous waste. We interviewed some employees about this practice, and they appeared not to see anything morally problematic with it, since competitors were also doing it, and it was a common thing to do. Our company also profited from it. Some said that they were only following orders from their bosses" (Osmundsen, 2017).

One aspect of an ethics of fallibility is what we ought to do in the face of possible and real failure and error, another aspect is what it is that makes us prone to commit moral mistakes. The quote above is from an interview with Erik Osmundsen, CEO of Norsk Gjenvinning (NG), Norway's largest waste management company whose owners and top management took the initiative to scrutinize and clean up the company's behavior with the aim to make it more sustainable. In that process, they came across examples of moral misbehavior among employees, and needed to find countermeasures to it (Serafeim & Gombos, 2015).

NG has around 25% of the Norwegian waste management industry's revenue. In 2012, the company handled about 1.8 million tons of waste, and had 40.000 customers. Since the introduction of new owners in 2011, the company has gone through a dramatic turnaround, where the aim has been both to become more cost-efficient, and to clean up activities and make them more sustainable. The new CEO Erik Osmundsen introduced a compliance program to systematize this effort. Nationally, NG has taken the industry lead in a development to see waste as a resource for recycling, rather than a problem to get

rid of, and to make the industry itself more transparent. The company has activities all over the country, and had for a long time been structured in a way that made it difficult for upper management to evaluate local activities. Internal investigations exposed local practices of corruption. NG employees paid cash for hauls of mixed metal received at their waste drop-off sites, often not reporting the transactions properly. There were reports of thefts of metals from local industry sites, a practice that was incentivized by the industry wide practice of paying cash for metals at the sites (Serafeim & Gombos, 2015).

The most serious instance of morally questionable behavior detected in NG was the treatment and disposal of hazardous waste:

> At times, hazardous chemicals would be unwittingly mixed in with the non-hazardous waste supply. In other cases, NG employees would incorrectly code hazardous products for export. (Non-hazardous waste costs to ship were exceptionally lower than hazardous waste costs.) In the most egregious cases, some customers were unwilling to pay a higher price for the proper treatment of waste even after it was discovered that their waste included hazardous materials. Because their contract was already signed, the customers would refuse to pay the additional fees. This led some managers to ignore the issue and continue business as usual. (Serafeim & Gombos, 2015, p. 8)

One of the most difficult tasks for Osmundsen and upper management was to challenge and change the local practices regarding the treatment of hazardous waste. What they found during interviews with NG employees who had partaken in the practice was that they did not consider it to be morally problematic. On a personal level, it did not necessarily benefit them financially to let industry dump hazardous materials among the non-hazardous waste. It had become a habit to do so, and a standard justification was that everybody else was doing it. Changing the practice also appeared to make little sense to the employees, since the company was making a lot of money that way (Serafeim & Gombos, 2015, p. 9).

When studying this case from a vantage point outside the waste management industry, it is striking that the employees involved apparently

did not see the questionable aspects of the practices. We can interpret this as another example of inattentional blindness, discussed in chapter two, illustrated with the gorilla experiment (Simons & Chabris, 1999). Even here, the individuals involved seem to be blind to important aspects of what they are doing, and blind to that blindness.

Moral fallibility is the name we can use for the phenomenon of acting contrary to one's moral convictions and beliefs. An individual may believe that adultery, tax avoidance, and nepotism somehow is morally wrong, but still engage in those activities, due to the weakness of will or some other explanation. Moral fallibility in organizations occurs when leaders or other employees make decisions and act in manners that appear to contradict what they generally take to be morally acceptable and right. A financial advisor may believe that he or she should put the clients' interest first, but still try to sell dubious products to them, to bolster personal bonuses. An athlete may consider doping to be morally wrong, but nevertheless take up an offer to use illegal substances to enhance performance. A waste management employee may be concerned about sustainability, and be a proponent of safe treatment of waste, but still let industry clients dump hazardous waste among the safe and recyclable waste.

If there are real cases that fit these descriptions, they illustrate that people can actually go against their moral convictions, and be morally fallible. However, one widespread assumption in the field of moral psychology is that when we come up against alternatives that conflict with our moral beliefs, we will dismiss them unless we manage to convince ourselves that those alternatives are morally acceptable, after all (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996). The main idea is that "people do not ordinarily engage in reprehensible conduct until they have justified to themselves the rightness of their actions" (Bandura et al., 1996, p. 365). When facing an option to act against our moral convictions, then, we will either dismiss the option or revise those convictions to be able to proceed with the option, without conflict.

Rawls has described how individuals and groups seek "reflective equilibrium", a situation where there is coherence among our beliefs (Rawls, 1971). In that state of affairs, the beliefs we have about particular cases

are consistent with our more general beliefs about right and wrong, and they provide mutual support to each other. Whenever there is a conflict with particular beliefs about what we ought to do and more principled beliefs, we tend to seek coherence by working back and forth to revise the beliefs, either the general ones or the ones about the particular case, until they are in equilibrium. Once we face an option do something that goes against our current principled beliefs, and are tempted or ordered to choose it, we can engage in a reflective activity to create coherence. Something has to give way, and that can either be the alternative of acting in that manner, or the general belief that it is wrong to do so.

Moral psychology offers conceptual tools to describe and analyze the tensions that can occur in such situations, and how we tend to deal with them. On one interpretation, what we have called moral fallibility never occurs, since we have the tendency to seek reflective equilibrium, and will revise either our particular or general moral beliefs, before we either dismiss the option or go ahead to act in a way that initially appeared to be wrong. According to this view, the financial advisor, the athlete, and the waste management employee mentioned above do not really act against their moral convictions or beliefs, since their actions indicate that they have managed to justify to themselves the rightness of those choices. They have been able to reshape their moral beliefs in manners that remove the initial conflicts.

Bandura et al., in the quote above, do acknowledge that people might act against their moral convictions, even though they do not "ordinarily" do so. It is reasonable to assume that some rest of the initial moral belief that it is wrong to prioritize self-interest over client interest, to use doping to enhance athletic performance, and to let clients dump hazardous waste in unsafe areas, remains, even after a process of convincing oneself that it is not. If so, the phenomenon of organizational moral fallibility is real and worthy of theoretical and practical attention. It can be important to understand the processes through which ordinary employees become involved in moral misbehavior, and act contrary to what they initially have taken to be morally acceptable and right.

Traditional virtue ethics would explain both inabilities to see morally problematic aspects of one's own practices, and the actual partaking in

them, in terms of character defects and weaknesses. A person of firm and strong character would not become involved in such activities, and would not fail to see the immoral aspect of assisting industry in getting rid of hazardous waste in unsustainable ways. Recent empirical studies in social and moral psychology provide reasons to be skeptical of this character explanation, pointing instead to circumstance as a more reliable predictor of moral misbehavior (Ariely, 2012; Doris, 2002). Any person appears to be vulnerable to being blind to significant moral aspects of the practices he or she engages in. Once you come into a habit of doing things in a certain way, morally questionable aspects gradually become invisible. The idea that a person of firm character could never experience a development of this kind can create a false sense of strength and immunity among those who believe that they are in possession of stable dispositions always to do the right thing.

Theoretical contributions to moral psychology offer a vocabulary to give a more detailed account of the processes that can lead individuals and groups to adopt morally questionable practices. The next section will highlight how the concept of moral neutralization, developed by criminologists Sykes and Matza (1957) can be used to explain how decision-makers end up deviating from what they initially take to be morally acceptable behavior. This theoretical framework makes it possible to identify and categorize attempts to justify deviations from shared moral convictions and beliefs, and as such, it can be useful in organizational settings where the aim is to halt such developments and strengthen the barrier against moral misbehavior at work.

3 Moral Neutralization

The theory of neutralization challenges the dominant assumption that juvenile delinquents typically belong to a sub-culture whose members adhere to a set of moral values contradicting those held in regard by respectable, law-abiding citizens. Sykes and Matza (1957) described the young criminals as individuals who shared the moral convictions of the rest of society, but had been able to justify to themselves that they could not be blamed for those instances where they had broken the law. They

introduced neutralization as the term for the justification processes that "precede deviant behavior and make deviant behavior possible" (Sykes and Matza, p. 666). Their theoretical framework has been adapted in different settings, to explain tax evasion (Thurman, John, & Riggs, 1984), normalization of corruption (Anand & Ashforth, 2003), insurance customer dishonesty (Brinkmann, 2005), software piracy (Bhal & Leekha, 2008; Siponen, Vance, & Willison, 2012), consumption of counterfeit luxury goods (Bian, Wang, Smith, & Yannopoulou, 2016), misconduct in marketing (Vitell & Grove, 1987), and unethical behavior intended to benefit one's own organization (Umphress, Bingham, & Mitchell, 2010). All of these studies focus to some extent on moral fallibility, and attempt to explain it as an outcome of a process of moral neutralization.

A person or group who engages in moral neutralization, first experiences some form of moral dissonance (Kelman & Baron, 1974; Kvalnes, 2015), a conflict between an option to act in a particular manner, and his/her/their moral convictions. In music, dissonance is the simultaneous emission of two or more sounds that are disharmonious. It is usually painful to the ear. The more general term of cognitive dissonance applies to the discomfort of holding conflicting cognitions. It was first used to describe the cognitive struggles of a UFO cult who believed in the impending apocalypse and faced a reality where that did not occur (Festinger, Riecken, & Schachter, 1956). The concept of moral dissonance describes a situation where somebody faces a situation where the person has the option to act against his or her moral convictions, and is tempted or ordered to do so. The situation can also be described as one where there is a lack of reflective equilibrium, and something has to give way to restore harmony among the person's beliefs.

A decision-maker has three main alternatives in overcoming moral dissonance. It is possible either (i) to dismiss the option and stay loyal to his or her existing moral beliefs, (ii) to revise and change the moral beliefs so that the described option no longer conflicts with them, or (iii) to reinterpret the situation to be different from the initial view that created the dissonance. The latter process can be categorized as moral neutralization.

Sykes and Matza identified five techniques of neutralization. The first is *denial of responsibility*, where the decision-maker sees himself as a victim of forces beyond his control, "helplessly propelled into new situations" and "more acted upon than acting" (Sykes and Matza, p. 667). The distinction between agent and pawn (Nygård, 2007), discussed in chapter one, is also relevant here. The decision-maker can deny responsibility by staging him—or herself as a pawn rather than as an agent. The second technique is *denial of injury*, where the decision-maker raises doubt about whether anybody will actually be hurt by his or her conduct. Delinquents may claim that the rich people they rob can afford it. Leaders can defend acts of lying as a reference person for an employee who is not functioning well in their own organization, claiming that the other organization is better equipped to motivate this person to do good work (Kvalnes, 2014). The third technique is that of *denial of victim*, where the argument can be that the part who might suffer due to this deviance from ordinary moral considerations, deserve it. It is a form of "rightful retaliation or punishment" (Sykes and Matza, p. 668). In a study of honesty in reference situations, leaders justified lying with claims to the effect that the other organization would have done the same to them, and probably already have, and so do not deserve moral protection against similar treatment (Kvalnes, 2014). Fourth, *condemnation of condemners* consists in pointing the finger at those who might criticize the act under consideration, and raising doubt about their motivation. From the perspective of the delinquent, "by attacking others, the wrongfulness of his own behavior is more easily repressed or lost to view" (Sykes and Matza, p. 668). Finally, the fifth technique of neutralization is *appeal to higher loyalties*, in which the decision-maker claims that other moral considerations or beliefs are more important than the one about to be sacrificed. In business, it can take the form of an appeal to the survival of the company. We had to cheat the customer a little bit, in order to save the workplace from bankruptcy.

The framework of moral neutralization has also been used to analyze the conduct of bankers and financial advisors ahead of the financial crisis in Iceland (Kvalnes & Nordal, 2017). Some of these decision-makers

have gone to jail for misbehavior against their customers and the financial markets, taking risks that initially led to the collapse of all national banks, and to huge personal and collective financial losses. All five neutralization techniques appear to have been in use to justify the hazardous decisions, but also one kind of justification not captured by the original theoretical framework. The decision-makers frequently told themselves and others that none of their actions were in conflict with the code of conduct or regulations for financial activities. This sixth technique can be called *denial of rule violation*. The underlying assumption is that anything the codes and regulations are silent about is acceptable. The phenomenon can also be seen as a form of loophole ethics (Kvalnes, 2015), a strategy to identify and exploit loopholes in an ethical framework, claiming to be loyal to the letter of the code, and ignoring what may be called the underlying spirit of the code.

One analysis of the ethical roots of the financial crisis describes what can come after neutralization (Donaldson, 2012), where "bad practices can become institutionalized, and initial queasiness gives way to industry-wide acceptance" (p. 6). It thus identifies the period that may follow in the aftermath of a process where moral misgivings about a particular kind of behavior evaporates through neutralization. We can distinguish between three stages:

1. Moral dissonance
2. Moral neutralization
3. Normalization of morally questionable behavior

In organizations where the stakeholders are concerned about not getting to stage 3 in this process, it is possible to be aware of signs of moral dissonance, and to challenge neutralization attempts. It can be a part of the communication climate to bring attention to these phenomena, and to encourage people to speak up when they sense that colleagues or leaders are beginning to use neutralization techniques.

The idea that moral dissonance can give way to normalization of morally questionable behavior, through processes of moral neutralization, can be illustrated more or less anecdotally by pointing to concrete processes in organizations where that appears to be a reasonable

explanation of known phenomena. It can also find support in neuroscience. One study has addresses how small acts of dishonesty can escalate into larger transgressions. Participants in an experiment that opened up for self-serving dishonesty became gradually more comfortable with lying. The researchers explain this in terms of brain adaptation. Initially, the lie registers as a dramatic deviation from the baseline, but with each new lie, the baseline changes, and the act of lying becomes normalized. The brain ceases to respond to the dishonest act as a shocking or unusual event (Garrett, Lazzaro, Ariely, & Sharot, 2016). In honesty research, the phenomenon has been called a "what-the-hell-effect" (Ariely, 2012; Mazar & Ariely, 2010), in an adoption of a concept originally used in research about eating, to describe people who succumb to temptations to violate a particular diet (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996; Polivy & Herman, 1985). One violation opens up for further ones, as it changes the baseline for what you can do.

Even the moral fallibility of the NG employees who allowed industry clients to dump hazardous chemicals among the non-hazardous materials can be studied through the lens of moral neutralization. Viewed from a distance, this practice appears to be a clear example of serious moral misbehavior, in that it contributes to unrepairable environmental damage. When interviewed about it, the employees failed to see anything wrong with the practice, and argued that (i) everybody else in the industry was doing it, (ii) they were only following orders from bosses, and (iii) it gave the company a considerable profit (Osmundsen, 2017; Serafeim & Gombos, 2015). We can place arguments (i) under the heading of denial of responsibility, since the fact that it is common practice to do something appears to place it beyond decision-making and responsibility. Heath has suggested that the justification based on what everybody else is doing is not sufficiently captured in the original theory, and has introduced it as a separate, extra category of neutralization techniques (Heath, 2008). Argument (ii) is also to deny of responsibility, pushing it on to the bosses instead. Argument (iii) is an example of appeal to higher loyalties, placing the company's interest ahead of environmental interest. It is also an argument that places the activity in the category of organizational misbehavior that benefits the organization (Umphress et al., 2010; Vardi & Weitz, 2016), typically

performed by employees who strongly identify with their organization, and are willing to break the law to protect its interests. Further studies of the actual justifications offered by NG employees is needed to document the extent to which moral neutralization has occurred in the processes leading up to habitual acceptance of unsustainable dumping of hazardous waste.

Studies in a range of disciplines show that our cognitive capacities are flexible, and that we can gradually come to accept and adopt behavior that initially appeared to be morally questionable. Organizational life can place us at the top of slippery slopes, where the first small steps into dishonesty and cheating can lead to major moral deviances later. One final example is from athletics. Tyler Hamilton was one of the cyclists in Lance Armstrong's team, and for a long period, he was in the midst of the lies and deceptions designed to make systematic doping to take place without detection. When asked about the cheating aspect of the team's activities, he responds:

> I've always said that you could have hooked us up to the best lie detectors on the planet and asked us if we were cheating, and we'd have passed. Not because we were delusional – we knew we were breaking the rules - but because we didn't think of it as cheating. It felt fair to break the rules, because we knew others were too. (Hamilton & Coyle, 2012, p. 95)

It is hard to say whether Hamilton and the others ever experienced significant moral dissonance before engaging in doping, but here at least any traces of moral misgiving about competing under the influence of performance-enhancing drugs have disappeared. Similar processes can take place in other organizations and work environments. It is likely that these are the main causes of moral misbehavior in organizations, rather than a weakness of individual character.

4   Forgiveness

During a visit to Iceland in the autumn of 2016, the author of this book asked a group of local citizens whether they would consider giving the bankers who had contributed to the financial crisis in 2008, and

who had now served jail sentences for their involvement, the chance to start anew, with blank pages. Would they be willing to forgive these people, and let them put their past misbehavior behind them? The initial response from the group was that the thought had never occurred to them. It seemed so farfetched to imagine that those bankers could ever return in any kind of capacity of trust in the Icelandic society.

On the spot, the people around the table could provide a list of ten names of people who to their minds had severed ties with civic society forever. They were individuals who in their roles within the financial sector had pursued personal wealth at the expense of naïve customers and regulators. The gradual exposure of their dealings evoked responses of public rage. In this small society, everybody knows who the bankers are, and they have trouble walking the streets of the capital Reykjavik without experiencing negative interferences. Even though they have now served prison sentences, they have never admitted any mistakes. It is also a widespread assumption that they have hidden considerable assets abroad, giving them financial security for the rest of their lives. Forgiveness is therefore out of the question, according to the people I talked to. The start of any process of that kind would have to include a confession and a willingness to give up assets built up at the expense of ordinary Icelanders who had lost all their saving during the crisis. There was also a consensus in this group that the bankers had exposed their characters during their active years at the head of the financial sector, and revealed themselves as untrustworthy. To the bankers' defense, it can be noted that they were never invited to a reconciliation process, but faced criminal charges and were advised by lawyers to deny involvement in any of wrongdoing, in order to avoid or reduce prison time. The legally induced path of denial led them away from of a process that could have included at least partial acceptance of responsibility and blame.

Forgiveness has also been a topic in NG. At one point, the company issued an amnesty to the employees. If they came forward with information about misbehavior within a four-week period, they would not be penalized, even if they had been involved in these transactions themselves. CEO Osmundsen explained: "We had recently established a vision for the company, a set of values, and a code of conduct that every employee had to sign. The next step was to announce a period where

people could come forward with information about misbehavior they knew about. Throughout December 2012, employees had the opportunity to tell us about previous and current practices that went against the code of conduct. If they were involved in it themselves, we would forgive them and let them continue in the company. If they decided not to inform us, and we detected wrongdoing after the amnesty period, there would be no mercy" (Osmundsen, 2017).

Top management in NG was soon tested on their ability to live by their words regarding the code of conduct and the promise of intolerance to code violations after the amnesty period. "We found out that one employee had allowed hazardous waste that should have been put in a landfill, isolated from the surrounding environment, to be used by a client at a construction site. This was a very serious breach of the code of conduct. He was a very competent person, and a good earner for the company, but we had to terminate his employment. This was a test of our resolve to walk the talk in connection with our recently defined values and code of conduct. The amnesty period gave everybody an equal and fair chance, and this person had not taken it. We had to show a commitment to the shared vision for the company" (Osmundsen, 2017).

The dismissal of an employee who has violated a newly introduced code of conduct does not hinge on the contested idea that character is the main explanation of misconduct. It can rather be seen as a move to strengthen the cultural foundation for responsible behavior. Approaches to moral fallibility in organizations can follow paths similar to those suggested for fallibility at work in general. We can assume that leaders and employees are prone to make small and large moral mistakes, more or less consciously taking shortcuts that go against their moral convictions. They depend upon a well-functioning barrier system in those situations, primarily in the shape of colleagues who intervene and bring their attention to the facts about what they are actually about to do. Even here, the communication climate affects whether the mistake leads to an unwanted outcome, or not. An effective barrier can break off the causal chain, and prevent the negative outcome from happening. Individuals who speak up and voice their concerns can influence the extent to which habits of overcharging clients, selling dubious products, allowing the industry to dump hazardous waste in unsafe environments,

are formed or not. The more people who are witness to a slippery slope occurrence at work, the less likely it is that anybody will take action and protest against it, as we know from studies of the bystander effect. Even here, responsibility to take action is likely to be split into tiny parts, and other people's inaction is seen as evidence that there is nothing to be alarmed about. When the person who initiates misconduct at work is someone who usually behaves in morally exemplary ways, the colleagues witnessing it are likely to be slow or unable to pick it up, as suggested by studies of the confirmation fallacy. They expect more of the same from that colleague, and interpret his or her behavior in a favorable light, due to a more or less clean moral record up to now.

This chapter has outlined an ethics of fallibility consisting of a normative and a descriptive part. The former builds on duty ethics and consequentialist ethics as alternative approaches to how one should deal with situations where people make mistakes. Teacher A spoke glowingly to the wrong mother about her son, and later had to consider her next moves. She could listen to duty ethics, and do the honest thing of admitting the mistake, or take a lead from consequentialism, remaining silent in order to bring about the potentially energizing experience her mistake could create for the pupil in question. Further work is needed in order to provide a richer normative ethics of fallibility, and the two main traditions of ethics may provide conflicting advice even in other cases.

The descriptive part of an ethics of fallibility addresses why and how moral mistakes occur. We have seen that a person who experiences moral dissonance can engage in moral neutralization and attempt to justify to him or herself that the option in question is acceptable after all. The process can lead to a breakthrough, where moral misbehavior becomes the new norm. We are all vulnerable to becoming involved in processes of this kind, and depend upon colleagues, friends, family, and others to intervene to stop it from happening.

The normative and descriptive parts of this ethics come together in considerations about how organizations can counter and reduce moral misbehavior. The phenomenon of moral fallibility, or that people sometimes act against their moral beliefs and convictions, can be dealt with through the use of knowledge about its causes. Organizations can encourage their leaders and employees to have their eyes open for

instances of moral neutralization, and to speak up when they notice them. A further challenge for researchers and practitioners is how to respond to people with a history of involvement in moral misbehavior. An initial response can be to claim that they have exposed their moral weaknesses once and for all, and cannot be trusted to change. Another is to look for realistic ways for people to reset their moral compasses, and re-experience moral dissonance in encounters with dubious alternatives, with the aim of giving people a new chance. The studies referenced in this chapter indicate that it is possible to incentivize people to refrain from organizational moral misbehavior, but they are unclear about the extent to which those who have transgressed can return to a state where they again experience moral dissonance at the thought of behaving in that manner. Icelandic bankers, Norwegian waste management employees, and others who have evoked moral criticism through their actions can be invited into a process where the aim is to forgive them. Such initiatives can gain momentum from an empirically informed descriptive ethics of fallibility that explains moral misbehavior in situational terms rather than by appeal to personal characteristics. We are morally fallible beings. Under unfortunate circumstances, anybody is capable of overstepping the boundaries for respectful engagement with others. This knowledge provides us with a platform for forgiveness, and for handing people a chance to be reinstated in our communities and start with a blank page.

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