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False Beliefs, Partial Truths: Personal Myths and Ethical Blind Spots

crina archer, *Northwestern University*
laura hartman, *DePaul University*

Crina Archer
Ph.D Candidate, Department of Political Science, Northwestern University
Contact:
1401 W. Winona St., #3
Chicago, IL 60640
USA
(001) 773-593-1125
c-archer@northwestern.edu

Laura Pincus Hartman
Special Assistant to the President
Vincent de Paul Professor of Business Ethics,
Department of Management, DePaul University
Contact:
1 East Jackson Boulevard Suite 7000
Chicago, IL 60604
USA

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ABSTRACT: While unethical actions may arise from conscious, deliberate and reflective choices to do 'wrong,' many unethical decisions emerge instead from an absence of awareness of ethical responsibility.   The metaphor of 'blind spots' has been deployed productively to describe mental obstacles that impede ethical responsibility at the individual level, but do not rise to the level of conscious awareness. Blind spots prevent us from attending to relevant data, different points of view, alternative solutions, and foreseeable consequences crucial to forging an ethical response.   We identify three common myths that tend to foster ethical blind spots at the individual level by rendering the limited and vulnerable character of our ethical awareness unavailable to conscious consideration: the myth of moral self-image, the myth of self-sufficiency, and the myth of the bystander. Finally, we highlight practices that incorporate dissent and critical inquiry into organizational norms. Such practices, we argue, offer an important way of challenging the myths that support ethical blind spots.

<u>Introduction</u>

We can point to examples where intentional unethical and illegal behavior has been the source of a portion of corporate malfeasance. Unethical actions are sometimes the outcome of a conscious, deliberate and reflective choice to do 'wrong.' Bernard Madoff stated to the court, 'As I engaged in my fraud, I knew what I was doing was wrong, indeed criminal' (Jones, 2009). Madoff's admission of guilt to securities fraud, investment adviser fraud, mail fraud, wire fraud, three counts of money laundering, false statements, perjury, false filings with the United States Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC), and theft from an employee benefit plan offers an egregious example of such a deliberate moral failure (Department of Justice, 2009). However, many unethical decisions are not the culmination of intentionally unethical choices, such as those made by Madoff, but result from an absence of awareness of ethical responsibility. There is no evidence that the many Madoff's investors who enjoyed an abnormally consistent and high rate of return, or the regulatory agencies that failed to discover the fraud, were parties to Madoff's scheme, or indeed were motivated by corrupt or predatory desires for personal profit at all costs. Yet, when these same investors neglected to question how Madoff was able to produce such returns or when the SEC did not pursue warnings about the Ponzi scheme, they too became implicated in the ethical failure (SEC, 2009).

The metaphor of 'blind spots' has been productively deployed (Moberg, 2006; Bazerman & Tenbrunsel, 2010) to describe mental obstacles that impede ethical responsibility at the individual level, without rising to the level of conscious awareness. When we act under the umbrella of ethics, we acknowledge our responsibility for the implications of what we say and do, which gives rise to a duty to 'evaluate the implications

of our decisions, to monitor and learn from the outcomes, and to modify our actions accordingly when faced with similar challenges in the future' (Hartman & Desjardins, 2009, p. 56-7). However, this ethical responsibility cannot be acknowledged at the outset if we are unable or unwilling to look beyond our blind spots. If left uninterrogated or concealed, ethical blind spots operate as perceptual distortions, encouraging us to believe that we have a full view of our situation when, in fact, our perception—like that of Madoff's investors, or the regulatory agencies that overlooked evidence of his crimes—is partial and incomplete.[ii]

By definition, ethical blind spots make us doubly blind; we not only fail to perceive the ethical dimension of problems and situations, but we remain unaware of this failure. However, though a significant hurdle when unacknowledged, Moberg (2006, p. 414) explains optimistically that they can be overcome, parallel to the metaphor on which they are based. Drivers who are aware of their visual blind spots are not, by dint of this awareness, granted a full and complete access to their perceptual field; rather, such drivers recognize that their visual range is inherently bounded, and take these limits into consideration when making a decision to, say, change lanes or make a turn. Bringing this notion to practical ethics, Bazerman and Moore (2008) have coined the phrase 'bounded ethicality.' Like our vision, our capacity for ethical deliberation and action has inherent limits. Human ethicality is vulnerable to a wide range of factors, including cognitive biases, situational pressures, physical constraints, and cultural norms. When employees are physically tired or highly stressed, for example, ethical failures are more likely to occur (Dembe, 2009; Landrigan et al., 2004). If we are asked by a recognized authority figure, like a university scientist, to perform an unethical act, we are more likely to do so (Milgram,

1974). Just as we may be unaware of the essential limits to our perceptual field that prevent us from seeing another vehicle in our visual blind spot, we may also fail to attend to factors that limit our perception of the ethical dimension of our choices; we may make bad decisions, decisions that violate our consciously-held values, without realizing that we have done so.

In the following analysis, we identify three common myths that tend to foster ethical blind spots at the individual level by rendering the limited and vulnerable character of our ethical awareness unavailable to conscious consideration: the myth of moral self-image, the myth of self-sufficiency, and the myth of the bystander.[iii] Due to an important ambiguity at the heart of the term, we suggest that the concept of myth is particularly valuable to the project of analyzing ethical blind spots. In the next section, before turning to an analysis of these three problematic myths, we examine the concept of myth more closely, and the role of myths relating to business that is predominant in the business ethics literature.

Myths are often considered to be false depictions of reality, which can be refuted definitively once and for all by exposing the existence of compelling counter-evidence. However, we suggest that the myths that foster ethical blindness are more precisely approached as expressions of efforts to make sense of experiences that are quite real; in this sense, myths may express important truths even while preventing other truths from coming to view. For examples, the belief that one is firmly independent and highly moral can provide a strong sense of empowerment that provides real benefits and expresses important desires, notwithstanding whether this belief also serves to blind the adherent to experiences and information that contradicts this self-image. Similarly, adopting the role of

a bystander or presuming that one's actions are inconsequential may serve important self-preservation functions or may reflect the lessons of past experiences, even while preventing the actor from perceiving alternative responses. These beliefs have a distorting effect to the extent that we do not acknowledge that the picture of reality that they produce is bounded; that is, the reality they create is partial and contestable, subjective. To refer to these beliefs as myths emphasizes this distorting effect, but also highlights the need to investigate the realities, experiences, and truths that they express. In the concluding section, we briefly point to strategies that decision-makers can adopt in overcoming problematic myths, which impede ethical awareness. Rather than focus on strategies that work to expose or debunk popular beliefs that pose a threat to ethical awareness, a strategy that focuses upon exposing myths as 'false,' we highlight practices that incorporate dissent and critical inquiry into organizational norms. These latter strategies are focused upon revealing the bounded character of myths, and exposing the partiality of the realities they describe.

Myths and Ethical Blind Spots

In common parlance, myth can be considered is a pejorative manner, connoting a belief that is demonstrably false but is nonetheless held to be true by many people (Leeming, 2005; Graf, 1996). It is a myth, in this sense of the term, 'that crime never pays, that George Washington never told a lie, that all women are intuitive, or that walking under a ladder brings bad lack' (Leeming, 2005, p. xi). However, our contemporary word also has another sense, which can be traced to the ancient Greek word *mythos*, 'meaning "story" or "word," in the narrative sense' (ibid., p. 127). *Mythos* was not considered superstition or false

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belief, but instead referred to the narrative communication of the great deeds of men and gods through generations by storytellers (*mythologos*).[iv] This original conception survives to some degree in the scholarly treatment of myths as significant cultural phenomena encompassing the 'traditional tales' that a society shares about the meaning of experience. Myth, in this sense, 'makes a valid statement about the origins of the world, of society and its institutions, about the gods and their relationship with mortals, in short, about everything on which human existence depends' (Graf, 1996, p. 3). The validity that Graf speaks of is culturally bound—what is a 'valid statement' in one culture may be held to be a false belief in another—but the claim that myth makes upon truth is significant. Speaking of this claim, and underscoring its complexity, Csapo (2005, p. 3) notes that 'most experts will say that in the society for which the myth is a myth, its quality as a myth usually depends upon its being received as true.'

The notion of myth, then, contains the ordinary language concept of false beliefs and, as well, the concept of significant cultural stories with a claim to express meaningful truths about human experience. However, the ambiguity within the definition of myth— false beliefs or stories that contain significant truths—need not be understood as a contradiction. As Leeming (2005, p. xii) writes, 'Surely both definitions of myth, as illusory stories and as containers of eternal truth, are valid simultaneously.' Can a similar claim be made of the sources of ethical blind spots? Consider, for example, the Asch conformity experiments performed in the early 1950s, which demonstrated the vulnerability of human cognition and decision-making processes to peer pressure through what subjects perceived was a vision test. When asked a number of questions about the length of three lines, three confederates in the experiment offered incorrect answers. The lone subject participant,

questioning her or his (in fact, correct) perception, tended to conform and affirm the clearly wrong answers provided by the confederates (Asch, 1951).

What is most striking about the behavior of the Asch subjects is their unconscious shift in what they saw as the 'correct' answer. Later, when asked to explain the shift during debriefing sessions with the researchers, the subjects saw their move from their original (correct) choice to that identified by the confederates as motivated by a self-preserving fear of being exposed as different from their peers, or deficient in some way (Asch, 1955). However, Asch's conforming subjects were clearly unaware of this fear during the experiment. While their choice was being influenced unconsciously by the answers of the confederates, the subjects consciously believed that they had decided that the conforming answer was the right one *on their own accord*. The subjects adjusted their perception of the available answers, reducing the choice structure to include only that answer provided by the others and eliminating the option of selecting the answer that may have initially seemed more plausible. In other words, at the time of their decision, they did not believe that they were simply caving in to peer pressure, they actually questioned their own judgment and adjusted that judgment so they believed the final decision was now the correct one, and their own. The Asch subjects illustrate how we create our own myths, both as explanatory stories as well as descriptive truths, and separating them into blind spots in our perception versus our own instinctual (and often preserving) processes is a human challenge.

The ethical stakes of the vulnerability of human cognition to peer pressure specific to organizational settings can be seen in the example of Elizabeth Doty, an organizational consultant who studies the negotiation of the tension between personal values and the

demands of the workplace. She writes of her own experience navigating this tension while working for a luxury hotel chain. At one point, she was asked to provide attractive female staff and low-cut costumes for an all-male corporate event. After complaining to her boss privately, the request was retracted; but it left Doty with 'lingering concerns:'

> I wasn't naive. I told myself that ethical bumps in the road were part of the game of business. Our hotel managers sometimes secretly canceled guests' discount-rate reservations on oversold nights. I myself had concocted the 'right' numbers on sales forecasts, and then convinced my boss in his staff meeting that I really believed them. For four years I'd been able to persuade myself that one had to expect such practices even in first-class operations. And it almost worked this time, too; by the final night of the annual meeting, I'd nearly stopped fuming over the costume incident. I even allowed myself to feel some pride in how well the event had come off. (Doty, 2007, para. 3)

In Doty's case, the shift from her initial perception of her workplace, to a perception that conformed with the expectations of her organization, was gradual. Doty describes the trade-off between her personal unease regarding the unethical behavior in which she had participated and the pride that she felt about achieving her workplace tasks with competence as a 'devil's bargain.'

The view that this shift in perception was the result of a 'bargain' is retrospective. As Doty traveled the slippery slope from her initial feelings of unease to her later feelings of pride, she did not experience this shift as a series of conscious decisions to engage in unethical behavior. Using the well-known metaphor of the ostrich that sticks its head in the sand to avoid confronting danger, we might say that Doty - and in a parallel vein, the

Asch subjects – could see her shift in perception as a 'devil's bargain' in which she was complicit only *after* she took her head out of the sand. As the U.S. legal system has long held, the 'ostrich defense' is not a valid argument to excuse bad behavior. We are responsible, legally and ethically, whether we are aware or *should have been aware* (whether our eyes are open or our head is in the sand). Yet, it is also true that, when our head is in the proverbial sand, we are unable to see what goes on above. If we are not aware that we have developed a blind spot, we are liable to believe that our new perspective is, indeed, a complete view of reality.

Using the common understanding of myth, we could seek to account for the behavior of the subjects in Asch's experiments, or of the business practitioners who succumb to Doty's 'devil's bargain,' by pointing to the inaccuracy of the beliefs, or myths, that support the perspective shift.   While it is true that the convergent view of many people is often more accurate than the divergent view of one person, it is demonstrably false that one's own judgment is less trustworthy in *all* cases than the judgment of one's peers. Similarly, though many businesses do make ethical compromises, it can be shown that Doty was incorrect in presuming that *all* businesses engage in some degree of unethical practice. Yet, these beliefs also work to make sense of real experiences that are quite unsettling, and do so by appealing to verifiable truths. The belief that one's peers are always right, even in the face of clear contradictory evidence, is false in its totality; but it also captures an important truth about the dangers and difficulties of standing up for one's values and perceptions against the crowd. Being ostracized—ignored and excluded—is painful and distressing. It severs one's sense of belonging and feelings of connection with others; it makes one believe that they are not valued and consequently lowers their own self-esteem;

it takes away a sense of control that one think they have in their social interaction with others; and at perhaps a deeper level, it challenges one's sense of who they are as independent decision-makers (Van Beest & Williams, 2006). As many corporate whistleblowers will testify, choosing to act in accordance with one's personal values, when such action violates the norms and expectations of the organization, may alienate the decision-maker from her or his friends and colleagues, and put the decision-maker's financial security in jeopardy. In an extreme example, Jeffrey Wigand claimed that, in addition to losing his job and coping with media campaigns maligning his character, his family received death threats as the result of his decision to blow the whistle on his former employer, the Brown & Williamson Tobacco Company (Brenner, 1996). Concerns for belonging and security are not inherently unethical nor are they necessarily driven by mistaken perceptions. Yet, these become deeply troubling for business ethics when they work to motivate a 'devil's bargain' that pushes ethical considerations below the register of conscious awareness, generating ethical blind spots. The stories that one tells oneself to justify such bargains can productively be called myths, in both senses of the term. They are illusory stories when taken to express a complete view of reality; yet simultaneously, they express important, albeit partial, truths to the extent that they make sense of actual experience.

The ambiguous status of myth, which may refer to illusory stories or to significant cultural truths, is often overlooked in the study of business myths. Geva (2001, p. 576) notes, 'business ethics literature is replete with myths about business' that are modeled upon the ordinary language understanding of myths as false beliefs. De George (2010), for example, points to the 'myth of amoral business' in order to argue that commerce is not

essentially devoid of a moral dimension. Trevino and Brown (2004) identify five 'myths' common in business ethics—such as the belief that ethical failures are due to 'bad apples,' and the claim that people are less ethical today than in the past—in order to debunk them each in turn. In a similar vein, Doane (2005) calls the widely-held view that corporate social responsibility (CSR) inherently produces ethical practice a 'myth,' with the aim of demonstrating a disjunct between the business behaviors that can be justified by an appeal to CSR, and truly ethical business. In each case, the myth in question emerges as a façade, or false picture of reality, that hides the ethically-relevant feature of reality from view. To expose the business myth as erroneous, by this approach, is to simultaneously raise a hidden dimension of reality—a dimension conducive to responsible ethical consideration—to conscious awareness.

The problem with this approach to myth, as Geva (2001, p. 577) argues, is that 'reality lends support to both aspects: the mythical and the ethical.' To the extent that myth makes sense of real experiences, such as the conflict between consciously-held values and fears of the loss of belonging or threats to security, they *also* have a claim to reality. One consequence of this problem is that pointing to counter-evidence to debunk popular myths in business ethics has limited success as a strategy for reducing their power to blind us to ethical concerns (ibid.). This strategy presumes that the problem is ignorance of the truth that is hidden behind the façade of the myth's illusory story. Recall, however, the opening example of the investors and regulatory agencies that failed to catch Bernard Madoff's criminal activity. In retrospect, the factual evidence of Madoff's Ponzi scheme was readily available: whistleblowers had repeatedly attempted to expose the Ponzi scheme to the SEC, and many investors were well aware that the consistently high rate of return they were

enjoying was unusual (SEC, 2009). Similarly, the subjects in Asch's conformity experiments—like the participants in other well-known studies of the effects of authority and peer pressure on human behavior, such as Milgram's (1974) obedience research and the Stanford Prison Experiment (Haney et al., 1973)[v]—had all of the information necessary to come to a decision that better reflected their consciously-held values. Yet, in each of these cases, the relevant information was ignored with little evidence that this neglect was the result of conscious, deliberate choice. The counter evidence was not blocked from view by ignorance, but by what we have been calling ethical blind spots: mental obstacles to ethical consideration, which may be false or illusory stories, but are not therefore devoid of important truths.

Doty, like the participants in the Asch experiments, did not consciously choose merely to conform to the expectations of those around her, nor does it make sense to depict her trade-off as an error or mistake. Rather, her very perception of reality shifted in response to her unacknowledged desire to escape the unsettling cognitive dissonance between her own values and the pressures of her workplace, allowing her to avoid making a conscious choice that would require her to confront her own participation in and therefore implication in unethical activity. Neurologists have studied the alterations of brain activity in volunteers as they underwent a modified form of the Asch experiment (Berns et al., 2005). They discovered that the areas in the prefrontal cortex associated with conscious decision-making were inactive as subjects adopted the answers provided by their peers, while the regions of the brain responsible for perception were activated. When we conform to the views of others, evidently we are quite literally ceding our decision-making capacity to others; in effect, we are not *deciding* at all.

In the following sections, we examine three myths that work to make sense of experience in such a way that the need for deliberate choice about ethical matters is occluded from view, and the responsibility of ethical decision-making is avoided. Rather than debunk these myths, we investigate the cognitive biases, situational factors, and cultural norms that make the partial and limited truths expressed through these myths appear instead to decision-makers in the illusory form of a full and complete picture of reality.

The Myth of Moral Self-Image

Research demonstrates that most people believe themselves to be moral - even where evidence proves them to be fraudulent or convicted felons (Baumeister, 1998; Allison et al., 1989). In maintaining this belief structure, this *personal myth*, we construe our experience in a manner that serves to strengthen this self-perception, and remain blind to evidence that might serve to disprove it. We develop blind spots that prevent us from assessing our experience from an ethical perspective that is guided by the values that we consciously hold dear. Often, these blind spots are supported by societal norms and expectations. For example, when Stanley Milgram (1974) asked audiences to predict the percentage of subjects in his experiments that obeyed instructions to give painful electric shocks to a stranger, the predictions were invariable in the single digits. Of course, Milgram's surprising – indeed, unsettling – discovery was that more than sixty percent of subjects obeyed. We want to believe that we would refuse to follow an unjust order, even if given by a figure of authority, and that our loved ones, neighbors, and colleagues would exercise their conscience under such circumstance as well; unfortunately, the evidence

does not favor this view. Yet, when it is in our interest of self-preservation to avoid recognizing our own or another's unethical behavior, we tend to overlook those flaws (Gino et al., 2009; Moberg, 2006). This willful or motivated blindness is not so different from concluding that our own contributions to a group effort are more significant or burdensome than those of another's. Studies that show a high propensity to overclaim credit when assessing one's own role in group endeavors (Bazerman & Moore, 2008), for example, reveal that we are more aware of the sacrifice we have made or time we have taken in our efforts than the contributions of others.

Lack of information can account for poor ethical choices; however, ignorance can rise to the level of ethical blindness when it is motivated by an unacknowledged desire to deny available evidence that could put a high moral self-assessment into question. We allow ourselves to believe that 'no one will know,' ''no one will be hurt,' or that 'it was someone else's fault;' we say that 'everyone else is doing it.' Chance and Norton (2009) explain that we engage in these explanations to ourselves and to others because we do not want to be perceived as – or feel like – unethical or immoral individuals. Their research indicates that subjects routinely opt for these conclusions:

- 'I read *Playboy* for the articles.'
- 'I'm not selfish, I just prefer not to play the Dictator game.'
- 'I'll pick the fat-free yogurt tomorrow.'

We become skilled at such rationalizations of behavior, coming to actually believe that we have not violated our consciously-held values, even when we have done so, because the positive self-perceptions they enable have benefits. As Chance and Norton point out, psychologists link a strong moral self-assessment with a higher sense of self-worth, which,

in turn, is correlated with lower levels of depression. In short, self-deceiving justifications allow us to do what we want, while protecting us from the 'psychological cost' (2009, p. 17) that acknowledging that behavior might impose on self-assessments of moral character. However, the myth of moral self-image fostered by such self-deceptive evasion carries other, less desirable costs. The motivation to preserve a moral self-image encourages a reliance on distorted mindsets that impede ethical considerations from view. If we become habituated to believing that we are moral, regardless of what we do (or fail to do), this self-image allows us to bypass ethical decision-making.

The Jayson Blair reporting scandal at the *New York Times* offers an example of the distorted effects of this myth at the level of corporate culture. Over a six-month period in 2003, Blair fabricated or plagiarized more than thirty news stories (Mnookin, 2004). An internal inquiry later found that 'various editors and reporters [had] expressed misgivings about Mr. Blair's reporting skills, maturity and behavior during his five-year journey from raw intern to reporter on national news events' (Barry et al., 2003, para. 7). Despite its reputation for a strong commitment to journalistic excellence, these misgivings went unheeded, and many of the paper's editors and Blair's colleagues were caught unaware by the exposure of his fraudulent reporting. Werhane and Moriarty (2009) attribute this moral failure to the widespread belief within the corporation that 'couldn't happen here.' As Editor-in-Chief Howell Raines noted, though the paper had earned its role as the standard-bearer for ethical journalism, the *Times* also suffered from a 'defining myth of effortless superiority' (Bianco et al., 2005, cited in Werhane & Moriaty, 2009, p. 14). Acculturation to a high moral self-perception—a sense that 'we are the *New York Times,*

after all'—generated a distorted view, an ethical blind spot that hid Blair's dishonest behavior from view.

The failure of those in leadership positions at the *New York Times* to detect Blair's fraud highlights the combination of truth and illusion that characterizes the myth of moral self-image. High moral self-assessment may represent a reflective and considered interpretation of the sum of one's past actions, or the past actions of one's organization, as it did at the *Times*. The problem of ethical blind spots arises when this interpretation is no longer understood as contingent and partial, but instead, is viewed as complete description of reality that dispenses with the need for further judgment on the basis of new evidence.

Myth of Self-Sufficiency

Admitting that our view of the world is not only partial and subject to bias, but is deeply dependent upon the views of those around us—from peers and colleagues, to authority figures and even advertisers—is not only difficult but it contradicts our sense of personal autonomy and independent thought. Although this admission is fundamental to the ethical decision-making process, it can also leave decision-makers with a sense of disempowerment. In his seminal study of American democracy in the early 19th-century, Alexis de Tocqueville (2000, p. 508) observed that democratic citizens 'form the habit of thinking of themselves in isolation and imagine that their destiny is in their own hands.' In contemporary Western society, self-sufficiency remains an exceptionally prized social value (Markus & Kitayama, 1999). The myth of self-sufficiency encourages us to believe that we are the masters of our own circumstances, fully in control of our thoughts and actions. Acknowledging that cognitive biases and situational factors impact our decision-

making to some extent—even any extent—can put our capacity for self-directed agency into question, raising the concern that we may be victims of forces beyond our control. Nevertheless, holding fast to the myth of self-sufficiency can be deeply ineffective and unproductive; not only do we remain vulnerable to unconscious bias and social cues, but we become complicit in our own vulnerability.

John Gaventa (1982) identified self-sufficiency preferences as an explanatory factor in his study of quiescence among certain groups of unionized coal miners in Appalachia. Despite mounting evidence that key members of the union's leadership were guilty of corruption, bribery, intimidation, the dissemination of misinformation and even murder, a few small regions continued to support the leadership against reform advocates. In fact, support of demonstrably corrupt union leaders among rank-and-file miners *increased* in these regions, while declining among much of the rest of the Appalachian mining community. Why did some miners maintain and deepen their support for union leaders as these same leaders were increasingly revealed to be acting against the miners' professed interests? Gaventa's study of the power relationships between the union elites and the rank-and-file miners led him to theorize that the 'sense of powerlessness' generated by the historical and present-day conditions of the mine workers had led 'to a greater susceptibility to the internalization of the values, beliefs, or rules of the game of the powerful as a further adaptive responses—i.e. as a means of escaping the subjective condition of powerlessness, if not its objective condition' (p. 17). Without the resources to resist or to exit a situation in which they had little opportunity for effective agency, the miners adapted by supporting the oppressive regime and subjectively internalizing its

values, an adaptive strategy that allowed them to deny that they were victims of a campaign of manipulation and coercion.

Beliefs in individual self-sufficiency that discourage us from considering whether and how we might be dependent upon others can pose a particular danger in commerce, as studies have shown that profit-centric thinking strengthens the self-sufficiency model. Vohs, Mead and Goode (2006) conducted experiments to test the psychological effects of economic motivation. They found that, when subjects were prompted to think about money, they were more likely to prefer 'to play alone, work alone and put more physical distance between themselves and a new acquaintance' (p. 1154). After playing games in which some participants were led to profit considerations and others were not, those who had been thinking about money were less likely to provide help to student confederate, donate to a charity, assist a stranger or select a leisure activity that involved other people. Vohs et al. term this effect a 'self-sufficiency pattern,' which suggests that 'money evokes a view that everyone fends for him- or herself' (p. 1156). The relationship between profit-thinking and the myth of self-sufficiency need not lead us to conclude that profit motivation inherently leads to unethical decisions. However, if we allow ourselves to be blind to the bias toward self-sufficiency and against interdependence, which is exacerbated by considerations of profit, this bias may take on the status of a problematic myth.

The Myth of the Bystander

Ethical blind spots are significantly affected by how others behave. Studies in social psychology repeatedly have demonstrated that we are less likely to act if we are surrounded by other non-actors (Hudson & Bruckman, 2004; Latané & Nina, 1981; Darley

& Latané, 1968).   Analyzing their seminal investigations into bystander inaction, Latané and Darley (1969) proposed that, when there are multiple non-interveners observing a critical situation, individual inaction typically does not betray apathy.   Rather, each observer looks around at the reaction of others for assistance or confirmation in constructing his or her interpretation of the situation. 'Until someone acts,' they explain, 'each person sees only other non-responding bystanders, and is likely to be influenced not to act himself.' As a result, 'all members may be led (or misled) by each other to define the situation as less critical than they would if alone' (p. 249). It is easy to mistake bystander effects for apathy, since it appears as if the bystander does not care about the crisis. However, Darley and Latané show us that the problem is not that bystanders do not care about the crisis at hand; rather, the problem is that they are misled by social cues to fail to see the crisis *as* a crisis. This thesis is supported by variants of the study in which the crisis posed a threat to the subject (such as a gradually increased odor of smoke in the room). By contrast with the hypothesis that explains bystander inaction by self-interest or apathy toward the plight of others, the bystander effect was as strong in those variants that tested the subjects' response to crises affecting themselves, as in those variants that tested their response to others (Latané and Darley 1969). Group behavior affects individual action because we look to the behavior of others for cues to tell us which mental models to engage in a particular context. In organizational settings, this 'bystander effect' serves as a deterrent to potential whistle-blowers (Dozier & Miceli, 1985). When one's colleagues and managers do not appear to notice wrongdoing, or identify unethical behavior as such, it may be difficult to perceive ethical problems as existing at all.

Like all of the myths that foster ethical blind spots, the bystander model has benefits as well as costs, and references actually existing reality in its interpretation of events. Further, adopting the role of the bystander does not inherently impede responsible decision-making. Making the choice to intervene in order to prevent wrongdoing or harm can be dangerous, whether in a corporate setting or elsewhere, especially when that action is taken alone. In many urban neighborhoods with high rates of gang violence, for example, police and prosecutors face high barriers in seeking cooperative witnesses due to fear of retaliation. The National Alliance of Gang Investigators Associations reports 'the mere presence of gangs in a community . . . creat[es] a generalized fear of intimidation that hinders witness cooperation' (Anderson, 2007, p. 1). This generalized fear is reasonable; in Los Angeles alone, 778 cases of witness intimidation were documented over a five-year period (ibid.). Typically, corporate whistleblowers are not faced with threats of physical intimidation, as Jeffrey Wigand was, but harassment, intimidation and job loss are real concerns. Reviewing a random sample of 200 complaints, the National Whistleblower Center found that more than half of those who chose to speak up were fired, while most of the remaining employees reported being subject to unfair disciplinary action or other forms of harassment (Brickey, 2003). Another watchdog group, the Government Accountability Project, discovered that ninety percent of whistleblowers are subject to some form of retaliation in the workplace (ibid.).

In addition to reasonable concerns for self-preservation, the determination that others who are qualified or better situated can be trusted to intervene effectively might be a conscientious choice in a particular context. Trust in the others is a social value; indeed, trust is a necessary component of all social activity, and mutual trust is especially

important to economic relationships (Werhane et al., 2011; Fukuyama, 1995). It would be arrogant, not to mention impossible, for each of us to claim full responsibility for all of the problems in the world, or even the workplace. Often, however, taking up the role of a bystander in a crisis is not the result of a deliberate and reasoned choice to protect oneself or trust in others, nor from an apathetic disinterest in the moral dimensions of the situation, but from a failure to perceive the situation as a crisis that calls for responsible, ethical decision-making.

Conclusion: Overcoming Myths, Pluralizing Perspectives

The preceding analysis of common myths suggests that we face significant temptations to interpret our experience in a way that enables the avoidance or neglect of the responsibility to make consciously-formed ethical judgments. Corporate cultures that do not emphasize accountability within their organizational structures and penalize debate and dissent risk creating an environment in which managers and employees may be committed to personal values that provide resources for forging ethical decisions, but find the barriers to enacting those decisions too high.   Under such circumstances, many will find it more attractive to adopt myths that blind them to their own poor decisions, and those of their colleagues, than to accept that they have violated their core value commitments. By way of conclusion, we highlight two examples of corporate practice that worked to reduce the barriers to ethical decision-making by pluralizing the perspectives and voices available in the workplace. The incorporation of dissent and accountability to key stakeholders into the daily practice of organizations offer strategies by which

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individual decision-making that might otherwise take place below the register of conscious awareness is brought into view.

Paul Birch was a frustrated employee of British Airways until his boss encouraged him to write up a description of the job that he would like to be performing for the company. Inspired by the character of the Fool in King Lear, Birch invented the position of the 'corporate jester' who would 'draw attention to things that are going wrong' and 'stir things up' (Sittenfeld, 1998). Then-CEO of British Airways Colin Marshal appointed Birch the official corporate fool of British Airway in 1994, and Birch now travels to companies to teach the benefits of his approach. Heffernan (2011) cites Birch's corporate fool as an example of 'institutionalizing dissent,' that is, bringing dissent into the normal practice of an organization in order to discourage groupthink and create an environment in which debate is welcome. Birch describes his role at British Airways as a platform to push other employees to speak up as well. 'When things go wrong,' Birch says, 'employees usually have a good idea of how to fix them. You need to create a state in which they've got the courage to do something. You want to build organizations where everyone sees provocation as one of their essential roles (Heffernan, 2011, p. 225). If speaking up in a provocative manner and giving voice to a dissenting view is perceived as a commonplace activity that is not penalized by management, employees are less likely to shy away from ethical conclusions at variance with the status quo and more likely to view themselves as agents who are capable of affecting their environment through their efficacy as ethical actors.

The role of the public editor at the *New York Times* shares significant features with Birch's corporate fool. Introduced in 2003 in direct response to the Jayson Blair reporting

scandal, the public editor position institutionalized the responsibility of the paper to maintain accountability to its readers by providing space in its pages to an official ombudsman charged with representing the interest of the public. In the past, the *Times* had resisted establishing an ombudsman position, 'citing the presumed obligation of the paper's editors to represent the public' (Okrent, 2007, p. 2). Acknowledging the need for an external perspective to correct the blind spots of the editorial staff was not easy; it involved the admission that the editors' perspective was itself partial and in need of challenge and supplementation. However, as Werhane and Moriarty (2009, p. 16) point out, this courageous decision to give 'one's critics a voice—and a very public soapbox—helped to break the enchantment of the *Times*'s myth of invincible superiority.' Overcoming the myth of moral self-image, and accepting that they were more likely to avoid ethical failures by admitting to the limits of the editorial staff's self-sufficiency, the *Times* increased the likelihood that it would be responsive to evidence of fraudulent reporting in the future.

It is difficult to maintain a fidelity to one's deeply-held convictions, when pressured by personal desires and situational factors to violate them. This difficulty is eased by telling ourselves that we are moral, regardless of our actual behavior; that we are the masters of our minds and environs, regardless of evidence that we are dependent upon others; or that we are mere bystanders, rather than responsible agents. Courage is needed to resist the temptation to accept one's personal myths as accurate descriptions of reality, rather than partial and incomplete interpretations that are need of continual interrogation.

Recognizing the pressure on decision-makers to perceive reality in such a way as to avoid taking responsibility, and acknowledging that these perceptions are not easily

dismissed as false or mistaken, is not a means by which to excuse the possibility of a resulting unethical decision. To the contrary, by accepting that human ethicality is vulnerable to external factors, such as the pressure to conform or the absence of witnesses to our behavior, and internal biases, such as the desire to be seen by oneself and others as moral or self-sufficient, we become more likely to recognize the partiality of our perceptions. Exposing the boundaries of our ethical awareness and the partiality of our interpretive stories to critical examination does not guarantee the harmony of our choices and actions with our value commitments; however, when we remain blind to the bounded character of human ethical capacities, and presume our interpretative myths to be complete pictures of reality, we all but guarantee ethical failure. If organizations are to foster ethical cultures, rather than increase the attractiveness of myths that exacerbate ethical blind spots, they must reward managers and employees for asking critical questions, seeking out additional information and—particularly when this process of critical inquiry challenges norms and organizational habits.

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[ii] The SEC's own report into its investigation admitted that '[d]uring the course of both these examinations, the examination teams discovered suspicious information and evidence and caught Madoff in contradictions and inconsistencies. However, they either disregarded these concerns or simply asked Madoff about them. Even when Madoff's answers were seemingly implausible, the SEC examiners accepted them at face value' (2009, p. 23)

[iii] The myths, and the ethical blind spots they foster, that are described in this paper primarily are drawn from North American-focused research. These myths may or may not predominate in other cultural contexts; assessing the cross-cultural presence of these myths is a matter for empirical discovery. The authors encourage the response of this journal's readers in extending or correcting these myth descriptions in light of their knowledge of other regions.

[iv] Graf (1996) demonstrates that the term started to gain its negative connotation only when the traditional stories of Greek culture began to come under attack during the 4th- and 5th-centuries. Thucydides 'set his new project of historical writing apart from earlier chroniclers by distinguishing it from the practice of "mere storytelling"; Plato set his philosophical endeavors apart from the art of storytelling (pitting "logoi" against "mythoi" as truth against lies]' (Graf 1996, pp. 1-2).

[v] In the basic version of Stanley Milgram's (1974) study of obedience at Yale in the early 1960s, the volunteer subject was given the role of of 'Teacher,' and another participant—who, unknown to the subject, was an actor—assigned to the role of 'Learner' and placed in an adjoining room. The Teacher was told to administer electric shocks to the Learner when incorrect answers were given to the questions provided. Unaware that the shocks were staged, the Teacher was prompted by the experimenter to continue administering the punishment, despite the increasingly vigorous protests of the Learner, until the shock levels reached 450 volts. Though a portion of the subjects resisted, more than 60% obeyed the experimenter's instructions in full. In the Stanford prison experiment (Haney et al., 1973), Zimbardo and his colleagues randomly assigned student participants to the role of 'Guard' or 'Prisoner' and placed them into a prison-like setting that allowed them to engage in these assigned roles. Students quickly came to identify with their roles as guards or prisoners, with the guard-subjects harassing and abusing prisoner-subjects, and with prisoner-subjects internalizing their roles to the extent that they later reported feeling helpless and depressed during the experience. Half of the prisoner-subjects suffered such acute emotional trauma during the experiment that it had to be halted prior to its anticipated stop time. The Stanford study, like Milgram's obedience experiments before it, has become famous for its demonstration of the apparent ease with which otherwise moral actors can come to commit highly unethical acts under certain conditions.