

***Moral Disengagement: How People Do Harm and Live with Themselves*, by Albert Bandura. New York: Macmillan, 2016. 544 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4641-6005-9**

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Albert Bandura is the doyen of the psychology profession. He is well known for his theory of social learning and self-efficacy. His new book on moral disengagement can be considered a breakthrough in moral psychology and ethics. It shows how the psychological mechanisms of moral disengagement work in business, politics and social life, and how these practices have implications for ethical conduct.

Corporate moral transgressions are well known in today's business world. Some corporations are involved in violations of law and moral rules that produce organizational practices and products that take a toll on the public. Social cognitive theory of moral agency, developed by Bandura, provides a conceptual framework for analyzing how otherwise pro-social managers adopt socially injurious corporate practices. This is achieved through a type of selective moral disengagement that is seen in many cases of corporate misconduct. Examples range from the Bhopal industrial accident of Union Carbide, to the Ford Pinto case, the Nestlé infant formula controversy, the Three Mile Island nuclear power plant case, the Enron and WorldCom scandals of the 2000s and, the wrongdoing witnessed during the most recent financial crisis.

Bandura's social cognitive theory offers a robust model of moral agency. In his model, moral thought and self-evaluative reactions, moral conduct, and environmental influences operate as interacting determinants of each other. Within this triadic model of reciprocal causation, moral agency is exercised through self-regulatory mechanisms. Transgressive conduct is regulated by two sets of sanctions, social and personal. Social sanctions are rooted in the fear of external punishment; self-sanctions operate through self-condemning reactions to one's misconduct.

Bandura discovered a number of psycho-social mechanisms by which moral control can be selectively disengaged from detrimental conduct. These mechanisms of moral disengagement enable otherwise considerate people to commit transgressive acts without experiencing personal distress and guilt. Using the words of evolutionary psychologist Robert Trivers (2011), people "fool themselves" in order to "fool others."

The eight moral disengagement mechanisms identified by Bandura include the following:

Moral justification. People do not ordinarily engage in reprehensible conduct until they have justified to themselves the rightness of their actions. In the process of moral justification, detrimental conduct is made personally and socially acceptable by portraying it in the service of valued social or moral purposes.

Euphemistic labeling. Activities can take on markedly different appearances depending on what they are called. Euphemistic labeling provides a tool for masking reprehensible activities or even conferring a respectable status upon them. Through sanitized and convoluted language, destructive conduct is made benign or at least acceptable.

Advantageous comparison. Behavior can assume different qualities depending on what it is contrasted with. By exploiting advantageous comparisons, injurious conduct can be rendered benign or made to appear to be of little consequence. The more extreme the contrasted activities, the more likely it is that one's own injurious conduct will appear trifling or even benevolent.

Displacement of responsibility. Under displacement of responsibility people view their actions as springing from the social pressures or dictates of others rather than as something for which they are personally responsible. Because they are not the actual agents of their actions, they are spared self-censuring reactions. Hence, they are willing to behave in ways they normally repudiate if a legitimate authority accepts responsibility for the effects of their actions.

Diffusion of responsibility. The exercise of moral control is weakened when personal agency is obscured by diffusion of responsibility for detrimental conduct. Any harm done by a group can be attributed largely to the behavior of others. People behave more cruelly under group responsibility than when they hold themselves personally accountable for their actions.

Disregarding or distorting the consequences. When people pursue activities harmful to others for personal gain, or because of social inducements, they avoid facing the harm they cause. In addition to selective inattention and cognitive distortion of effects, the misrepresentation may involve active efforts to discredit evidence of the harm that is caused.

Dehumanization. Self-censure for injurious conduct can be disengaged or blunted by dehumanization that divests people of human qualities or attributes bestial qualities to them. Once dehumanized, they are no longer viewed as persons with feelings, hopes, and concerns but as subhuman objects.

Attribution of blame. Blaming one's adversaries or circumstances is another expedient that can serve self-exonerating purposes. By fixing the blame on others or on circumstances, not only are one's own injurious actions excusable but also one can even feel self-righteous in the process.

In this book, Bandura extensively documents how these mechanisms are at work in major spheres of life in the USA and beyond: gun manufacturers, the entertainment industry, tobacco companies, finance and banking, terrorism, climate science and more. The large body of evidence presented by Bandura has important implications for the naive belief that the market will provide sufficient incentives to encourage morally responsible conduct.

Robert A. Baron, Hao Zhao and Qing Miao (2015) demonstrated in their study that entrepreneurs' motivation for financial gains is positively related to moral disengagement, which is positively related to the tendency to make unethical decisions.

The overwhelming forces of market and the corresponding self-enhancement goals of actors conjointly lead to morally disengaged behavior. In their recent book, “Phishing for Phools,” Nobel-prize winning economists George Akerlof and Robert Shiller (2015) describe many phishing strategies where economic players manipulate and deceive their customers for profit without regarding the loss of the customers’ welfare. If economic agents employ moral disengagement mechanisms, then their self-exonerating maneuvers will do *harm to others*.

What is not investigated in Bandura’s book is the recent trends of *globalization*, *marketization* and *financialization* and their role in making moral disengagement easier than ever before (Boda and Zsolnai 2016). In one experimental study, Armin Falk and Nora Szech (2013) demonstrate that using the market as a frame of reference in decision-making provides a good excuse for people to morally disengage from considerations of doing harm and damage for third parties. Such insights underscore how the level and type of moral disengagement that occurs in business is uniquely problematic.

Conventional business ethics tools such as ethical codes, ethics officers, ethical training programs and the like, seem to be ineffective in counteracting the strong moral disengagement of today’s business, political and intellectual leaders. Bandura’s book calls for a more critical and enlightened approach to business ethics.

One task is to monitor and publicize organizational practices and policies that have detrimental human effects. The more visible the consequences on the affected parties for the decision makers, the less likely that they can be disregarded, distorted or minimized for long. Another task is to increase transparency of the discourse by which the deliberation of organizational policies and practices are born. The more public the discourse about decisions and policies, the less likely are leaders to justify the reprehensible conduct of their organizations.

Diffused and ambiguous responsibility structures make it easy to discount personal contribution to harmful effects. *Instituting* clear lines of *accountability* curtail moral disengagement. Exposing *sanitizing language* that masks reprehensible practices is still another corrective. The affected parties need to be *personalized* and their concerns *publicized* and addressed.

Bandura ends his book with dramatic words, saying “To function humanely, societies must establish social systems that uphold compassion and curb cruelty. Regardless of whether social practices are carried out individually, organizationally, or institutionally, it should be made difficult for people to delete humanity from their actions.” We must agree with this. The final resource of ethics is to appeal for and capitalize on people’s own humanity.

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