Chapter 3

Selective Exercise of Moral Agency

Albert Bandura

In a recent book titled *Everybody Does It!*, Gabor (1995) documents the pervasiveness of disengagement of moral self-sanctions from harmful conduct by people of all statuses in all walks of life. A full understanding of human morality must explain not only how people come to behave morally but also how they selectively disengage moral self-sanctions in the transactions of their everyday lives.

In the development of a moral self, individuals adopt standards of right and wrong that serve as guides and deterrents for conduct. In this self-regulatory process, people monitor their conduct and the conditions under which it occurs, judge it in relation to their moral standards and perceived circumstances, and regulate their actions by the consequences they apply to themselves. They do things that give them satisfaction and a sense of self-worth, and they refrain from behaving in ways that violate their moral standards because such conduct will bring self-condemnation. Thus, moral agency is exercised through the constraint of negative self-sanctions for conduct that violates one's moral standards and the support of positive self-sanctions for conduct faithful to personal moral standards. In the face of situational inducements to behave in inhumane ways, people can choose to behave otherwise by exerting self-influence. Self-sanctions keep conduct in line with internal standards. Moral conduct is motivated and regulated through the ongoing exercise of evaluative self-influence.

Dual Nature of Moral Agency

The exercise of moral agency has dual aspects, *inhibitive* and *proactive* (Bandura, 1999). The inhibitive form is manifested in the power to refrain from behaving inhumanely, and the proactive form is expressed in the power to behave humanely. In the latter form of morality, people do good things as well as refrain from doing bad things. This chapter examines how an individual can shift rapidly from a moral disengager to a moral engager through the transformative power of humanization.

Social psychology emphasizes the power of environmental forces over individuals. In the case of proactive moral courage, individuals triumph as moral agents over compelling environmental pressures to behave otherwise. Such moral heroism is most tellingly documented in Holocaust rescuers who saved persecuted Jews from the death camps at great risks to themselves and their families with a heavy burden of extended protective care. The rescuers had no prior acquaintance with those they sheltered and had nothing material or social to gain by doing so. Such moral commitments involve courageous humanness amid overwhelming evil.

Humanization can rouse empathic sentiments and a strong sense of social obligation. This enlists self-evaluative reactions that motivate humane actions on others' behalf at sacrifice of one's self-interest or even at one's own peril (Oliner & Oliner, 1988). The rescuers viewed their behavior as a human duty rather than as extraordinary acts of heroism. After the protective relationship was established, the development of social bonds heightened the force of empathic concern and moral obligation.

Researchers extensively analyze the inhibitive form of morality. Adults are studied for their power to refrain from behaving injuriously under conditions highly conducive to inhumane conduct, and children are studied for the power to resist instigation to transgressive conduct. But the proactive form of morality, in which people behave humanely, often at personal costs, receives relatively little attention.

Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement

The acquisition of moral standards is only half the story in the exercise of moral agency. Moral standards, whether characterized as conscience or moral principles, do not function as unceasing internal regulators of conduct. Self-regulatory mechanisms do not operate unless they are activated. Many psychosocial maneuvers can be used to disengage moral self-sanctions from inhumane conduct. Selective activation and disengagement of self-sanctions permits different types of conduct by persons

| Moral justification
Palliative comparison
Euphemistic labeling | Minimizing, ignoring,
or misconstruing the
consequences | Dehumanization
Attribution of blame |

Reprehensible ⟶ Detrimental ⟶ Victim
conduct   effects

Displacement of responsibility
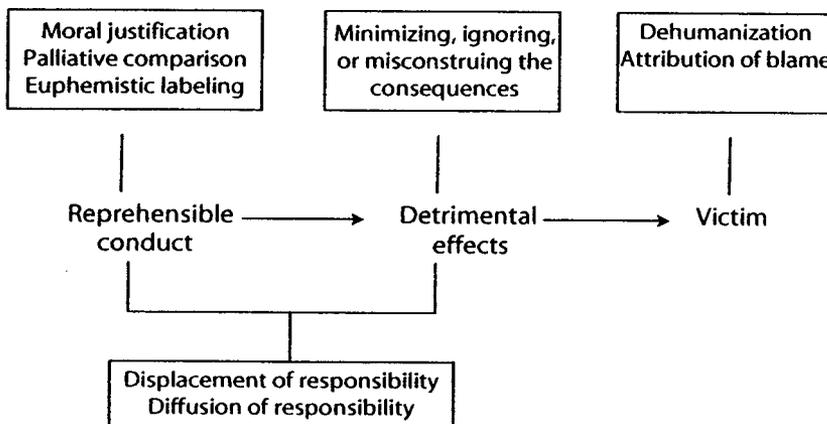Diffusion of responsibility

Figure 3.1. Mechanisms through which moral self-sanctions are selectively disengaged from detrimental conduct at different points in the self-regulatory process (Bandura, 1986).

with the same moral standards. Indeed, large-scale inhumanities are typically perpetrated by people who, in other areas of their lives, can be quite considerate and compassionate. They can even be ruthless and humane simultaneously toward different individuals. This selectivity of moral engagement is strikingly illustrated by Amon Goeth, a Nazi labor commandant. While dictating a letter replete with empathy and compassion for his ailing father, he sees a captive on the grounds who he thinks in not working hard enough. He takes out his revolver and callously shoots the captive. The commandant is both overcome with compassion and is savagely cruel at the same time.

Figure 3.1 shows the points in the process of moral control at which moral self-censure can be disengaged from reprehensible conduct. The disengagement may center on sanctifying harmful conduct by moral justification, exonerating social comparison, and sanitizing language. It may focus on obscuring personal agency by diffusion and displacement of responsibility so that perpetrators do not hold themselves accountable for the harm they cause. It may involve minimizing, distorting, or even disputing the harm that flows from detrimental actions. And the disengagement may include dehumanizing, demonizing, and blaming the victims of the maltreatment.

Selective engagement and disengagement of moral self-sanctions is central to a full understanding of moral conduct. The present analysis addresses this focal aspect of the moral self within the conceptual framework of social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1991). The sections that follow analyze how each of these types of moral disengagement function in the

perpetration of inhumanities, how the mechanisms of moral disengagement operate developmentally, and how knowledge of the selective exercise of moral agency provides guides on nurturing morality.

Moral Justification

One set of disengagement practices operates by changing the meaning of injurious behavior. People do not usually engage in harmful conduct until they have justified, to themselves, the morality of their actions. In this process of moral justification, worthy ends are used to sanctify pernicious means. People can then act on a moral imperative and preserve a favorable view of themselves as moral agents while inflicting harm on others.

Rapid radical shifts in destructive behavior through moral justification are most strikingly revealed in military pursuits. The conversion of socialized people into dedicated fighters is achieved not by altering their personality structures, aggressive drives, or moral standards. Rather, it is accomplished by cognitively redefining the morality of killing so that it can be done free from self-censure. Through moral justification of violent means, people see themselves as fighting ruthless oppressors, protecting their cherished values, preserving world peace, saving humanity from subjugation, or honoring their country's commitments. Moral justifications sanctify the violent means. Killing becomes an act of heroism. Voltaire put it well when he said, "Those who can make you believe absurdities, can make you commit atrocities."

Over the centuries, much destructive conduct has been perpetrated by ordinary, decent people in the name of righteous ideologies, religious principles, and nationalistic imperatives. The politicization of religion has produced a long bloody history of holy terror. Pope Urban (who launched the Crusades), Osama bin Laden (who mounted a jihad), Rabin's assassin, and the Presbyterian minister who shot a doctor and his assistant at an abortion clinic all saw themselves as serving a holy imperative. In holy terror, perpetrators twist theology and see themselves as courageously doing God's will. Adversaries sanctify their militant actions but condemn those of their antagonists as barbarity masquerading under a mask of outrageous moral reasoning. Each side feels morally superior to the other.

Euphemistic Labeling

Language shapes thought patterns on which people base their behavior. Activities can take on different appearances, depending on what they are called. Euphemistic language is widely used to make harmful conduct

respectable and to reduce personal responsibility for it. Euphemizing is an injurious weapon. People behave much more cruelly when assaultive actions are given sanitized labels than when they are called aggression.

Different varieties of language of nonresponsibility exist. One form relies on sanitizing language. Through the power of sanitized language, even killing a human being loses much of its repugnancy. Soldiers "waste" people rather than kill them. Bombing missions are described as "servicing the target," in the likeness of a public utility. The attacks become "clean, surgical strikes," arousing imagery of curative activities. The civilians the bombs kill are linguistically converted to "collateral damage."

Sanitizing euphemisms are also used extensively in unpleasant activities that people do from time to time. In the language of some government agencies, people are not fired; rather, they are given a "career alternative enhancement" as though they were receiving a promotion. Proposals are not rejected; they are "selected down." In the Watergate hearings, lies became "a different version of the facts." An "involuntary conversion of a 727" is a plain old airplane crash. The television industry produces and markets some of the most brutal forms of human cruelty under the sanitized labels of "action and adventure" programming. The nuclear power industry has created its own specialized set of euphemisms for the injurious effects of nuclear mishaps. An explosion is an "energetic disassembly," and a reactor accident is a "normal aberration."

The agentless passive voice serves as another self-exonerative tool. It creates the appearance that reprehensible acts are the work of nameless forces rather than people. It is as though people are moved mechanically but are not really the agents of their own acts. Even inanimate objects are sometimes turned into agents. Here is a driver explaining to police how he managed to demolish a telephone pole: "The telephone pole was approaching. I was attempting to swerve out of its way, when it struck my front end."

The specialized jargon of a legitimate enterprise is also misused to lend respectability to illegitimate enterprises. In the vocabulary of the Watergate transgressions, criminal conspiracy became a "game plan," and the conspirators were "team players," like the best of sportsmen. The conspirators elevated word corruption to new heights in the service of criminal conduct.

Advantageous Comparison

How behavior is viewed is colored by what it is compared against. By exploiting the contrast principle, reprehensible acts can be made righteous. Terrorists see their behavior as acts of selfless martyrdom by comparing

them with widespread cruelties inflicted on the people with whom they identify (Bandura, 2003). The more flagrant the contrasting inhumanities, the more likely it is that one's own destructive conduct will appear benevolent. Expedient historical comparison also serves self-exonerating purposes. Apologists for the lawlessness of political figures they support point to transgressions by rival administrations as vindications. Adapters of violent means for social change are quick to point out that democracies, such as those of France and the United States, were gained through violence against oppressive rule.

Exonerating comparison relies heavily on moral justification by utilitarian standards. The task of making violence morally acceptable from a utilitarian perspective is facilitated by two sets of judgments. First, nonviolent options are judged to be ineffective to achieve desired changes. This removes them from consideration. Second, utilitarian analyses affirm that injurious actions will prevent more human suffering than they cause.

The utilitarian calculus is quite slippery in specific applications, however. The future contains many uncertainties, and human judgment is subject to a lot of biases. As a result, calculations of long-term human costs and benefits are often suspect. There is much subjectivity in estimating the gravity of potential threats. Judgment of gravity justifies choice of aggressive options, but preference for aggressive options often biases judgment of gravity.

Sanctifying pernicious conduct through moral justifications, sanitizing language, and favorable comparisons is the most effective set of psychological mechanisms for disengaging moral self-sanctions. Investing harmful conduct with high moral purpose not only eliminates self-censure but also engages self-approval in the service of destructive exploits. What was once morally condemnable becomes a source of self-valuation. Functionaries work hard to become proficient in the destructive means and take pride in their accomplishments.

Displacement of Responsibility

Moral control operates most strongly when people acknowledge that they are contributors to harmful outcomes. The second set of disengagement practices operates by obscuring or minimizing the agentive role in the harm one causes. People behave in ways they normally repudiate if a legitimate authority accepts responsibility for the effects of their injurious conduct (Milgram, 1974). Under displaced responsibility, they view their actions as stemming from the dictates of authorities rather than being personally responsible for them. Because they are not the actual agents of their actions, they are spared self-condemning reactions.

Self-exemption from gross inhumanities by displacement of responsibility is most gruesomely revealed in socially sanctioned mass executions. Nazi prison commandants and their staffs divested themselves of personal responsibility for their unprecedented inhumanities. They claimed they were simply carrying out orders.

In the sanctioning of pernicious conduct in contemporary life, responsibility is rarely assumed openly. Only obtuse authorities would leave themselves accusable of authorizing destructive acts. They usually invite and support harmful conduct in insidious ways by surreptitious sanctioning systems for personal and social protection. Sanctioning by indirection shields them from social condemnation in case things go awry. It also enables them to protect against loss of self-respect for authorizing human cruelty that leaves blood on their hands.

Authorities often act in ways that keep them intentionally uninformed. They do not search for evidence of wrongdoing. Obvious questions that would reveal incriminating information remain unasked, so that officials do not find out what they do not want to know. Implicit agreements and insulating social arrangements are created that leave the higher echelons free from blame.

When harmful practices are publicized, they are officially dismissed as merely isolated incidents arising from misunderstanding of what had been authorized. Efforts are made to limit any blame to subordinates, who are portrayed as misguided or overzealous. Investigators who look for incriminating records of authorization display naiveté about the insidious ways that pernicious practices are sanctioned and carried out. One finds arrangements of nonresponsibility rather than traces of smoking guns.

But obedient functionaries do not cast off all responsibility for their behavior as if they were mindless extensions of others. If they disowned all responsibility, they would be quite unreliable, performing their duties only when commanded to do so. It requires a strong sense of responsibility to be a good functionary. One must, therefore, distinguish between two levels of responsibility—a strong sense of duty to one's superiors and accountability for the effects of one's actions. The best functionaries are those who honor their obligations to authorities but feel no personal responsibility for the harm they cause.

Diffusion of Responsibility

The exercise of moral control is also weakened when personal agency is obscured by diffusing responsibility for detrimental behavior. Kelman and Hamilton (1989) document the different ways that personal agency gets obscured by social diffusion of responsibility. Responsibility can be

diffused by division of labor in which the subdivided tasks seem harmless in themselves. People shift their attention from the meaning of what they are doing to the details of their specific jobs.

Group decision making is another common practice that enables otherwise considerate people to behave inhumanely. Napoleon noted that "collective crimes incriminate no one." When everyone is responsible, no one really feels responsible. Collective action, which provides anonymity, is yet another expedient for weakening moral control. Any harm done by a group can always be attributed largely to the behavior of others. People act more cruelly under group responsibility than when they hold themselves personally accountable for their actions.

Disregard or Distortion of Consequences

To be able to perpetrate inhumanities requires more than absolving personal responsibility. Other ways of weakening moral control operate by minimizing, disregarding, or even disputing the harmful effects of one's action. When people pursue activities that harm others, they avoid facing the harm they cause, or they minimize it. If minimization does not work, the evidence of harm can be discredited. As long as the harmful results of one's conduct are ignored, minimized, or disbelieved, there is little reason for self-censure to be activated.

It is easier to harm others when their suffering is not visible and when destructive actions are physically and temporally remote from their injurious effects. Death technologies have become highly lethal and depersonalized. We are now in the era of faceless electronic warfare, in which mass destruction is delivered remotely with deadly accuracy by computer- and laser-controlled systems.

When people can see and hear the suffering they cause, vicariously aroused distress and self-censure serve as self-restrainers. In studies of obedient aggression, people are less compliant to the injurious commands of authorities as the victims' pain becomes more evident and personalized. Even a high sense of personal responsibility for the effects of one's actions is a weak restrainer of injurious conduct when aggressors do not see the harm they inflict on their victims.

Most social systems involve hierarchical chains of command in which superiors formulate plans and intermediaries transmit them to functionaries, who then carry them out. The further removed individuals are from the destructive end results, the weaker the restraining power of injurious effects. Disengagement of moral control is easiest for the intermediaries in a hierarchical system—they neither bear responsibility for the decisions nor do they carry them out and face the harm being inflicted.

Attribution of Blame

Blaming one's adversaries or circumstances is another expedient that serves self-exonerating purposes. People view themselves as faultless victims driven to injurious conduct by forcible provocation. Violent conduct becomes a justifiable defensive reaction to belligerent provocations. Victims get blamed for bringing suffering on themselves. Self-exoneration is also achievable by viewing one's harmful conduct as forced by compelling circumstances rather than as a personal decision. By fixing the blame on others or on compelling circumstances, not only are one's injurious actions excusable, but one can even feel self-righteous in the process.

Justified abuse can have more devastating human consequences than acknowledged cruelty. Mistreatment that is not clothed in righteousness makes the perpetrator rather than the victim blameworthy. But when victims are convincingly blamed for their plight, they may eventually come to believe the degrading characterizations of themselves. Exonerated inhumanity is, thus, more likely to instill self-contempt in victims than inhumanity that does not attempt to justify itself. Seeing victims suffer maltreatment for which they are held partially responsible leads observers to derogate them. The devaluation and indignation aroused by ascribed culpability provide further moral justification for even greater maltreatment.

Dehumanization

The final set of disengagement practices operates on the recipients of detrimental acts. The strength of moral self-censure depends on how the perpetrators regard the people they mistreat. To perceive another as human activates empathetic reactions through a sense of common humanity. The joys and suffering of those with whom one identifies are more vicariously arousing than are those of strangers or those divested of human qualities. It is difficult to mistreat humanized persons without risking personal distress and self-condemnation.

Self-censure for cruel conduct can be disengaged or blunted by stripping people of human qualities. After they are dehumanized, they are no longer viewed as persons with feelings, hopes, and concerns but as subhuman objects. They are portrayed as mindless "savages," "gooks," and other despicable wretches. If dispossessing one's foes of humanness does not weaken self-censure, it can be eliminated by attributing demonic or bestial qualities to them. They become "satanic fiends," "degenerates," and other bestial creatures. It is easier to brutalize people when they are viewed as low animal forms. During wartime, nations often cast their enemies in the most dehumanized, demonic, and bestial images to make it easier to kill them.

In studies of the perniciousness of dehumanization, people who are given punitive power treat dehumanized individuals more ruthlessly than those who have been invested with human qualities. Combining diffused responsibility with dehumanization greatly escalates the level of punitiveness. By contrast, personalizing responsibility and humanizing others together has a powerful self-restraining effect.

The findings from research on moral disengagement are in accord with the historical chronicle of human atrocities: It requires conducive social conditions rather than monstrous people to produce atrocious deeds. Given appropriate social conditions, decent, ordinary people can do extraordinarily cruel things.

It should be noted that moral disengagement involves social machinations, not just personal, intrapsychic ones. In moral justification, for example, people may be misled by those they trust into believing that injurious means will prevent more harm than they cause. The perils and benefits that are socially declared may be exaggerated or simply pious rhetoric masking less honorable purposes. Cultural prejudices shape which human beings get grouped and dehumanized as well as the types of depraved attributes ascribed to them. Social systems are structured in ways that make it easy for functionaries to absolve themselves of responsibility for the effects of their actions. Media modes and content can be institutionally managed in ways that keep people uninformed or misinformed about the harm caused by the collective action. In short, moral disengagement is a product of the interplay of both personal and social maneuvers.

Many conditions of contemporary life are conducive to impersonalization and dehumanization. Bureaucratization, automation, urbanization, and high mobility lead people to relate to each other in anonymous, impersonal ways. Strangers can be more easily dehumanized than can acquaintances. In addition, social and political practices that divide people into ingroup and outgroup members create human estrangement that fosters dehumanization. Perpetrators group, divide, devalue, and dehumanize those they disfavor.

Conjoint experiences play a central role in creating not only empathetic responsiveness but counter-empathy as well (Bandura, 1992). Past congruent experiences in which a model's pleasure signals reward for oneself and a model's distress signals personal pain heighten observers' empathetic reactions to the model's emotional expression alone. Observers who have undergone discordant experiences (e.g., the model's joy brings suffering to oneself) respond indifferently or counter-empathetically to the model's joy and suffering. Vicarious activation relies heavily on a cognitive conveyance. Thus, when observers are merely led to expect cooperative interactions, the joy and distress of a cooperative model elicit

corresponding reactions from observers. By contrast, displays of joy by an alleged competitive model distress observers, and displays of distress calm them.

Similarly, observers respond empathically to the emotional experiences of models simply depicted as in-group members and counter-empathetically to those portrayed as outgroup members, in the absence of having shared any experiences with them. If a sense of mutuality has been created, so that the joys and distresses of an outgroup member foretell similar experiences for the observers, correlative outcomes transform disempathy to empathy. The findings of these experimental studies underscore the centrality of a sense of common humanity in human empathy.

Human transactions are increasingly conducted in the cyberworld. The electronic technologies that subserve these functions provide a ready vehicle for moral disengagement. Online behavior differs from face-to-face behavior. Anonymity and pseudonymity in interchanges in the cyberworld remove communication restraints and beget freer expressions of personal views. The cyberworld self is clearly less restrained. Concealment and depersonalization can bring out the worst in people by removing personal and social sanctions for pernicious conduct.

Certain characteristics of electronic technologies increase enlistment of the various forms of moral disengagement. Transgressive acts can be performed in privacy and anonymity toward depersonalized or faceless victims located thousands of miles away. Unlike breaking into offices to steal files, which is difficult to execute and escape detection, one can steal files electronically with little effort without apparent tracks, and the theft leaves the owner's property still in place. The moral disconnect makes it easy to behave transgressively.

The Internet is a highly decentralized system that defies regulation. Because anyone can get into the act and nobody is in charge, Internet users can use this unfettered vehicle for destructive purposes. Several unique features of electronic information technologies make them perilous if used for harmful purposes: They are readily accessible, portable, easily implementable remotely by pushbutton, connected worldwide for far-reaching consequence, and exceedingly difficult to control. Societal vulnerabilities are enormously magnified because virtually all of the systems on which people depend in their everyday lives are interdependently run by computer network systems. These can be easily knocked out, as shown by the computer student in the Philippines who wreaked havoc worldwide by crippling e-mail systems, costing billions of dollars. Smart hackers can do much more serious damage. Cybercrime and cyberterrorism, enacted through the Internet, is a dark side of the cyberworld that will increasingly command societal attention.

Power of Humanization

Psychological research tends to emphasize how easy it is to bring out the worst in people through dehumanization and other self-exonerating means. The sensational negative findings receive the greatest attention. For example, Milgram's (1974) research on obedient aggression is widely cited as evidence that good people can be talked into performing cruel deeds. What is rarely noted, however, is the equally striking evidence that most people refuse to behave cruelly, even with strong authoritarian commands, toward humanized others, and when they have to inflict pain directly rather than remotely (Bandura, 1999).

The emphasis on obedient aggression is understandable considering the prevalence of people's inhumanities toward one another. But the power of humanization to counteract cruel conduct also has important social implications. The affirmation of common humanity can bring out the best in others. The paramount role of humanization in the nurturing of morality is analyzed later in this chapter in greater detail.

Developmental Changes in Moral Disengagement

We are beginning to gain some understanding into children's development of moral disengagement and the processes through which it shapes their life courses. In studying moral disengagement developmentally, the various mechanisms are assessed in terms of the concrete forms they take in childhood. Thus, for example, children's moral justifications absolve fighting and lying as a social obligation to protect their friends and to preserve the respect of their peer group or family. In displacement of responsibility, children should not be blamed for transgressions if they were pressured by others or bad circumstances. In diffusion of responsibility, a given child should not be faulted for the trouble a group causes if decisions are made and carried out collectively. In minimization and distortion of consequences, physical provocation, lies, insults, and teasing among children do not really do any harm or are just ways of joking and showing interest in them. Advantageous comparisons absolve thefts, assaults, and property destruction through contrast with much worse offenses in the society at large. Maltreatments are sanitized euphemistically as simply providing "a lesson." In attribution of blame, victims bring maltreatment on themselves by their carelessness and untoward behavior. In dehumanization, some people must be treated roughly because they lack the usual sensitivities or deserve to be treated like animals.

Children learn at an early age how to disengage self-censure from transgressive conduct. Although the various disengagement mechanisms operate in concert in the self-regulatory process, they vary somewhat in the degree to which children enlist them. Construing injurious behavior as serving a worthy purpose, disowning responsibility for harmful effects by fixing the blame on others, and devaluing those who are maltreated are the most widely used modes of self-exoneration. Masquerading censurable activities in palliative language or rendering them benign by favorable comparison with worse conduct, both of which require dexterous cognitive skills, are used less often. Gender differences in moral disengagement do not exist in the earlier years, but before long, boys become more facile moral disengagers than do girls.

Moral development has typically been studied in terms of abstract principles of morality. Adolescents who differ in delinquent conduct do not differ in abstract moral values; almost everyone is virtuous in the abstract. However, the differences lie in the ease of moral disengagement under the conditionals of life. Facile moral disengagers display higher levels of violence than those who bring moral self-reactions to bear on their conduct. This is true regardless of age, gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic level, or religious affiliation.

Moral disengagement contributes to social discordance in ways likely to lead down dissocial paths. High moral disengagers experience low guilt over injurious conduct and are less prosocial. They dwell on vengeful rumination and are quick to resort to aggression and transgressive conduct.

Promotion of Humaneness Through Moral Engagement

The preceding analyses document how disengagement of moral self-sanctions from conduct enables otherwise considerate people to do cruel things. The investment of common humanity at each locus of moral self-regulation tends to foster humaneness. In the exercise of proactive morality, people act in the name of humane principles when social circumstances dictate expedient, transgressive, and detrimental conduct. They disavow use of worthy social ends to justify destructive means, are willing to sacrifice their well-being rather than accede to unjust social practices, take personal responsibility for the consequences of their actions, remain sensitive to the suffering of others, and see human commonalities rather than distance themselves from others or divest others of human qualities.

The transformative power of humanization is graphically illustrated in the midst of a military massacre (Zganjar, 1998). An American platoon, led by Lt. William Calley, had massacred 500 Vietnamese women, children,

and elderly men. Detailed analyses of this massacre have documented how moral self-sanctions were disengaged from the brutal collective conduct (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989). A ceremony, 30 years later, was held at the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial honoring the extraordinary heroism of prosocial morality. Hugh Thompson, a young helicopter pilot, had swooped down over the village of My Lai on a search-and-destroy mission as the massacre was occurring. He spotted an injured girl, marked the spot with a smoke signal, and radioed for help. Much to his horror, he saw a soldier flip her over and spray her with a round of fire. Upon seeing the human carnage in an irrigation ditch and soldiers firing into the bodies, he realized that he was in the midst of a massacre.

He was moved to moral action by the sight of a terrified woman with a baby in her arms and a frightened child clinging to her leg. He explained his sense of common humanity: "These people were looking at me for help and there is no way I could turn my back on them." He told a platoon officer to help him remove the remaining villagers. The officer replied, "The only help they'll get, is a hand grenade." Thompson moved his helicopter in the line of fire and commanded his gunner to fire on his approaching countrymen if they tried to harm the family. He radioed the accompanying gunships for help, and together they airlifted the remaining dozen villagers to safety. He flew back to the irrigation ditch, where they found and rescued a 2-year-old boy still clinging to his dead mother. Thompson described his empathetic human linkage: "I had a son at home about the same age."

The transforming effect of perceiving common humanity is further illustrated in a daughter's mission of vengeance (Blumenfeld, 2002). Her father, a New York rabbi, was shot and wounded in Jerusalem by Omar Khatib, a Palestinian militant. Twelve years later, the daughter set out to gain revenge by forcing Khatib to confront his victim's humanity. In the course of exchanging letters under a concealed identity with the jailed gunman, the parental victim, militant gunman, and filial avenger were humanized in the process. In a dramatic courtroom parole hearing, the daughter identified herself to Khatib as she pleaded for his release from prison, vowing he would never hurt anyone again. He wrote to her father, likening his daughter to "the mirror that made me see your face as a human person deserved to be admired and respected." In this case, hatred that breeds escalative cycles of violence instead turned into mutual compassion. At the national level, Nelson Mandela singularly displaced hatred of apartheid with reconciliation by affirming people's common humanity.

Research comparing the early familial management practices of adjudicated delinquents with those of prosocial adolescents in the same milieu sheds some light on the development of empathy and its role as a restrainer of aggression (Bandura & Walters, 1959). In their early socialization

practices, parents of sons who adopted aggressive styles of behavior relied heavily on fear-based control. They sought to discourage their sons' aggressive conduct by emphasizing the external punishment it would bring upon them. In contrast, the parents of prosocial sons cultivated empathic-based control, portraying the consequences of aggressive conduct in terms of the injury and suffering it brings to others. In handling problems of misconduct, parental socialization practices that direct attention to the suffering inflicted on others foster development of empathic perspective taking and prosocial behavior (Bandura & Walters, 1959; Hoffman, 2001; Mussen & Eisenberg, 2001). A sense of empathic self-efficacy to involve oneself in the plight of others both promotes prosocialness in the form of helpfulness, sharing, consoling, and supportiveness and curbs socially injurious forms of conduct (Bandura, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Gerbino, & Pastorelli, 2003).

Moral disengagement nullifies behavioral control by self-sanctions. Morality can be nurtured by restoring humanity to conduct so that people live in accordance with their moral standards. McAlister and his colleagues fostered moral reengagement against resort to violent means by peer modeling of prosocial solutions to conflicts and exposure to communications that unmasked the various self-exonerative maneuvers (McAlister, 2001; McAlister, Ama, Barroso, Peters, & Kelder, 2000). Whereas moral engagement reduced support of violent means, boosting self-exonerative vindications raised endorsement of violent means.

Interplay of Personal and Social Influences

The self-regulation of morality is not entirely an intrapsychic matter. People do not operate as autonomous moral agents, impervious to the social realities in which they are enmeshed. Morality is socially grounded. Social cognitive theory adopts an interactionist perspective to morality. In this view, moral actions are the product of the reciprocal interplay of cognitive, affective, and social influences.

After self-regulatory capabilities are developed, behavior usually produces two sets of consequences: self-evaluative reactions and external outcomes. These effects may operate as complementary or opposing influences on behavior (Bandura, 1986). Self-regulation of moral conduct creates the fewest strains when social influences are compatible with self-evaluative ones. This condition exists when socially rewardable conduct is a source of self-satisfaction and self-pride and socially punishable conduct brings self-censure. Behavior is also highly susceptible to external influences in the absence of countervailing internal standards. People with a

weak commitment to personal standards tailor their behavior to fit whatever the situation seems to call for or is most expedient.

People commonly experience conflicts of outcomes when they are rewarded socially or materially for behavior they personally devalue. When self-devaluative consequences outweigh the force of external rewards, the rewards have little sway. There is no more devastating consequence than self-contempt. But if the allure of rewards outweighs self-censure, the result can be cheerless compliance. However, as already noted, people are skilled at reconciling perturbing disparities between personal standards and conduct by selectively disengaging their moral standards.

Another type of conflict of outcomes arises when individuals are punished for activities they value highly. Principled dissenters and nonconformists often find themselves in such predicaments. The relative strength of self-approval and external censure determine whether the courses of action will be pursued or abandoned. However, some individuals' sense of self-worth is so strongly invested in certain convictions that they submit to prolonged maltreatment rather than accede to what they regard as unjust or immoral. It is common for people to endure hardships for unyielding adherence to ideological and moral principles.

Collective Moral Disengagement at the Social Systems Level

Selective moral disengagement operates at a social systems level, not just individually (Bandura, 1973; 1999). For example, it requires a lot of collective disengagement of moral concerns to operate a tobacco industry whose products kill about 450,000 people annually and requires continuous recruitment of youngsters to pick up the smoking habit. Those who trade in merchandising deadly wares depend heavily on the moral disengagement of a large network of otherwise considerate people. For years, the tobacco industry disputed the view that nicotine is addictive and that smoking is a major contributor to lung cancer.

The vast supporting cast contributing to the promotion of this deadly product includes talented chemists who discovered ammonia as a means to increase the nicotine "kick" by speeding the body's absorption of nicotine; inventive biotech researchers who genetically engineered a tobacco seed that doubles the addictive nicotine content of tobacco plants; creative advertisers who target young people with merchandising and advertising schemes depicting smoking as a sign of youthful hipness, modernity, freedom, and women's liberation; ingenious officials in a subsidiary of a major tobacco company who engage in an elaborate international cigarette smuggling operation to evade excise taxes; popular movie actors who agree to

smoke in their movies for a hefty fee; legislators with bountiful tobacco campaign contributions who have exempted nicotine from drug legislation even though it is the most addictive substance and who have passed preemption laws that block states from regulating tobacco products and their advertising; U.S. trade representatives who have threatened sanctions against countries that erect barriers against the importation of U.S. cigarettes; and even a U.S. president who fired his head of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare for refusing to back off on the regulation of tobacco products.

The gun industry provides another example of moral disengagement in the business arena. With the shrinkage of rural populations, guns are used mainly by urban people to hunt people rather than deer. As sales for low-caliber guns stagnated, the gun industry shifted its production to weapons of increasing lethality (Diaz, 1999). The new generation of pistols is faster firing semiautomatic weapons with larger magazines to hold more bullets of higher caliber that magnify their killing power. To protect themselves against being outgunned, the police, in turn, are switching from revolvers to semiautomatic pistols using more lethal ammunition in a deadly escalation.

An executive of a shooting trade organization justifies the production change through advantageous comparison with normal business practices that trivialize the lethality of the product: "Just like the fashion industry, the firearms industry likes to encourage new products to get people to buy its products." Through social justification, he invests the more deadly weapons with worthy self-protective purposes: "If the gun has more stopping power, it is a more effective weapon." Another exonerative device absolves the gun industry of responsibility for the criminal use of the lethal semiautomatic pistols they design and market: "We design weapons, not for the bad guys, but for the good guys. If criminals happen to get their hands on a gun, it is not the manufacturer's fault. The problem is, you can't design a product and ensure who is going to get it." A lawsuit for negligent marketing and distribution practices won by New York City against gun manufacturers charged that they oversupply stores in Southern states with lax gun laws, knowing that the weapons will be bought and resold to juveniles and criminals in cities with tough gun laws.

The television industry markets some of the most brutal forms of human cruelty under the sanitized labels of "action and adventure" programming. Heavy exposure to televised violence has at least four different effects on viewers: It teaches aggressive styles of conduct; weakens restraints over aggressive behavior because the productions legitimize, glamorize, and trivialize human violence; desensitizes and habituates viewers to human cruelty; and shapes viewers' images of reality, making them more

distrustful of others and more fearful of being victims of crime. Network memos presented at congressional hearings and interviews with media personnel document the heavy use of moral disengagement in the commercialization of violence (Baldwin & Lewis, 1972).

High moral purposes are assigned to the taking of human life, in the likeness of a national character-building service. "The government wants kids to think that there are values worth fighting for, and that's basically what the leads on our show are doing." "If people who break the society's code resist the law, we have to use violence to suppress them. In doing so, we are in the mainstream of American morality." Modeling violent solutions to problems allegedly builds character and affirms society's legal imperative.

Producers often excuse commercialization of violence by contrasting it with outrageous inhumanities, as though one form of human cruelty exonerates other forms. Why pick on television, the scapegoat disclaimer goes, when societies fight wars? "To examine violence where the end result is a dead body on television glosses over the point. This evades the culpability of a whole society that permits wars."

Another variant in the comparative exoneration is to sanctify brutalizing excesses on television by pointing to revered masterpieces containing some violent episodes. "There is violence in *Oedipus, Hamlet*, and it permeates the Bible." But gratuitous televised violence ain't Shakespeare. Here are some examples of television practices masquerading behind Hamlet's cloak: "I wish we could come up with a different device than running the man down with the car as we have done this now in three different shows. I like the idea of the sadism, but I hope we can come up with another approach for it." "Last week you killed three men; what are you going to do this week?" When the television programs are exported to other countries, much of the gratuitous violence is deleted. But we overdose our own children on it.

Producers of violent fare are quick to displace responsibility for violent events to other sources. "Television and motion pictures are fall guys for a sick society." "Are kids from unstable environments triggered by television violence? Their not having parents is a more serious problem." Producers disclaim using gratuitous violence by attributing evident excesses to the characters they create. Ruthless individuals, or even peaceful folks, confronted with mortal jeopardy demand acts of violence. One of the more candid scriptwriters discounted the asserted dramatic requirement for violence as analogous to saying, "I never put cotton in a wagon that's not prepared for cotton—but I never use anything but a cotton wagon."

Personal responsibility for gratuitous violence is also obscured by diffusing responsibilities for the product. Rewriters alter writers' scripts, directors fill in the details of the scenarios, and editors shape how the filmed

events are depicted by what they select from the lengthy footage. Diffusion of the production process reduces a sense of personal responsibility for the final product.

Another way of escaping self-censure is to misrepresent, deny, or ignore harmful effects. Modeling violent solutions is purported to serve a public therapeutic function of draining viewers' aggressive drives (e.g., "Violence is a catharsis for kids." "Exposure to properly presented conflict that results in violence acts as a therapeutic release for anger and self-hatred"). The claimed catharsis effect has long been discredited empirically. Although producers tout the refuted therapeutic effects, they contend that adverse effects of televised violence can never be clearly demonstrated. "Nobody has been able to make a definitive statement about the effects of televised violence."

Viewers are divested of human sensitivities or invested with base qualities that justify serving them gory offerings (e.g., "Man's mind is connected to his stomach, his groin, and his fists. It doesn't float five feet above his body. Violence, therefore, cannot be eradicated." "Not as much action as some, but sufficient to keep the average bloodthirsty viewer fairly happy"). The prevalence of violent content is attributed to the aggressive nature and desire of its viewers.

In fact, there is no relationship between the level of program violence and the Nielson index of program popularity. Situational comedies and variety shows are the big draws. The answer to the prevalence of violent scenarios on TV lies in production costs and other structural factors, not in a human craving for cruelty.

Whenever a violent event occurs that stirs the public, the television networks run a predictable scenario: They assemble the cast of spokespersons for the major suspected sources of violence. The spokespersons promptly divert attention from their possible contributory influence by invoking and repudiating a single-cause theory of violent conduct that no one really propounds. They portray themselves as convenient scapegoats and shift the blame to other contributors. They proclaim that it is not the easy access to automatic weapons that is at fault, but lax enforcement of existing gun laws. It is not television or interactive media that promote assaultive styles of conduct, but detached or deficient parenting that is to blame. It is not parental failings, but a cultural moral decay spawned by secular humanists and an entertainment industry that glamorizes, trains, and rewards proficient assaultiveness.

These self-exonerative sermonettes also provide opportunities for political operatives and social advocates to lobby for their pet remedies—prayer in the schools, school vouchers, boosting self-esteem, and enlarging law enforcement and prison systems. Because no one is singularly at fault, they are all absolved of blame with diversionary damage control.

The television networks would do well to stop restaging the blame game. Instead, they should confront the various contributors to violence as to what they are willing to do in the enterprises they run to reduce violence in our society.

I have analyzed elsewhere the moral disengagement of international weapons merchants who merchandize deathly wares and the latest in terrorist technology (Bandura, 1999). The merchandising of terrorism is not accomplished by a few unsavory individuals. Rather, it requires a worldwide network of reputable, high-level members of society who contribute to the deathly enterprise by insulating fractionation of the operations and displacement and diffusion of responsibility. One group manufactures the tools of destruction. Others amass the arsenals for legitimate sale. Others operate storage centers for them. Others procure export and import licenses to move the deathly wares among different countries. Others obtain spurious end-user certificates that get the weaponry to embargoed nations through circuitous routes. And still others ship the lethal wares. Intermediaries and banks handle the money. The cogs in this worldwide network include weapons manufacturers; former government officials with political ties; ex-diplomatic, -military and -intelligence officers who provide valuable diplomatic skills and contacts; weapons merchants; and shippers and bankers operating legitimate businesses. By fragmenting and dispersing subfunctions of the enterprise, the various contributors see themselves as decent, legitimate practitioners of their trades rather than as parties to deathly operations.

Edmund Burke's aphorism that "the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing," needs a companion adage: The triumph of evil requires a lot of good people doing a bit of it in a morally disengaged way with indifference to the human suffering they collectively cause. Given the many psychological devices for disengaging moral self-sanctions, societies cannot rely solely on individuals, however righteous their standards. Humane life requires, in addition to ethical personal standards, effective safeguards built into social systems that uphold compassionate behavior and curb human cruelty. Regardless of whether inhumane practices are executed institutionally, organizationally, or individually, it should be made difficult for people to remove humanity from their conduct.

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