Conscience in Individual Functioning: Self-Deception and Moral Self-Biases

How do you get an honest man to lose his ethical compass? You get him to take one step at a time, and self-justification will do the rest.
Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson

Bright Lines are important anchors for morality, triggers for instant reactions that lead us to try to avoid certain thoughts and behaviors. Bright Lines are “third rails” powering our sense of self. Just like touching the electrified third rail of a mass transit system leads to unpleasant feelings (to say the least), so does crossing a Bright Line. For some people, the negative feelings can occur if they even consider crossing a Bright Line. Thus, Bright Lines carry with them an inherent justification for not being crossed.

To this point, Bright Lines have been treated as if they are all equivalent and consistent across situations. Certainly, this is true for some things, such as incest taboos. If incest is wrong, it is wrong in any situation. Yet, some Bright Lines become “electrified” only in certain situations. It is wrong to cheat on an exam, or lie to a judge, but many people who draw these Bright Lines “exaggerate” on their taxes or illegally download music and feel no remorse. The corresponding abstract, ideal Bright Light (be truthful and honest) can become overridden in some circumstances, meaning that the behavior does not trigger an aversive Bright Line reaction.

Crossing an important Bright Line feels terrible and is something we try to avoid. We might feel mildly ashamed if we forgot a friend’s birthday.
or got caught speeding, and these aversive reactions motivate us to try to do the opposite. But, unless we have staked our identity and reputation on always remembering birthdays or being a law-abiding driver, such violations likely will not damage our core sense of self. If we forget a date or get a ticket, we will perhaps rub up against a Bright Line but the pain will not linger too long and is easily deflected from damaging a core sense of ourselves as a good person. Convincing justifications are readily available, for others and ourselves. However, some violations are stronger, crossing fundamental Bright Lines that define who we are, who we are not, and what people in our group or social position should never do. Crossing those lines leads to powerful third-rail shocks through triggering previously discussed negative moral emotions.

“IT’S OK IF I DO IT …”

If it were possible to ask people to list out all of their Bright Lines—difficult, since many of the lines operate outside of consciousness—only a rare person could objectively say they have never crossed even one. Most of us have crossed lines that are important to us and our social groups, some more significant than others. Consider curfews, speed limits, or pedestrian crossings: for some people these are Bright Lines, while for others they are simply norms or suggestions, but most people violate them at some point. An objective self-accounting for most people should uncover a list of such legal—if-not-immoral-transgressions next to times they were selfish, thoughtless, or otherwise, failed to live up to their ideals. Yet, most people believe they are morally worthwhile beings; the occasional violation does not change this belief. A theory of conscience needs to account for this. The typical view people (Westerners) have of themselves is rather positive, and rarely do people see themselves as immoral, fundamentally unworthy participants in community or social life. This suggests that our self-appraisals are not so objective. Rather, we see ourselves through biased lenses, often dismissing or downplaying our Bright Line violations in self-serving ways that help maintain a positive sense of ourselves. While we offer ourselves favorable interpretations for our violations, we do not as often extend these charitable interpretations to others, especially to members of out-groups.

One way to avoid the pain of crossing a Bright Line is to refrain from doing so, the strategy we teach children or other newcomers to a group or society. Yet, there are other approaches, and it is typically easier to change our beliefs and perceptions than our actual behavior. Earlier, I introduced the notion of Lawyer Logic; people reason like lawyers, not scientists, when examining their own actions, thoughts, and feelings. One way to refrain from the painful experience of crossing a Bright Line is to reason for ourselves