Compromises of integrity

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In part, Comey affirms the central role played by akrasia or weakness of will. But, like Rangell, he also describes the corrupting influence of charismatic leaders and how they give permission to vulnerable individuals to do what they otherwise and on their own would never do.

Batson offers yet another way to think about this. In his research on moral hypocrisy, he and his coinvestigators found that between 85-90 percent of individuals will violate norms (in this case, cheat to advantage themselves) when they do fear detection, regardless of their standing on measures of moral responsibility. Yes, 85-90 percent! In other words, even individual regarded as possessing exceptional moral integrity are not immune to transgression. Why? Sadly, Batson data suggested it is because conflicts between self-interest and moral standards frequently are resolved in favor of the former. It is moral standards rather than responsibility that are likely to change in order to circumvent cognitive dissonance. In other words, individuals are more likely to rationalize their transgressions and minimize their impact than to refrain from bad behavior. Whether by commission or omission, bad behavior is thus reinforced and perpetuated.

Given Batson’s findings, it is most important to consider his recommendations: First, for most people, oversight and accountability are only structures that consistently encourage more responsible behavior, even in otherwise moral people. Oversight makes moral values salient; it keeps the idea of doing the right thing very much in mind. Put another way, transparency among our leaders promotes a culture in which behaving morally is the “least costly way to appear moral”.

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Conflicts of interest

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