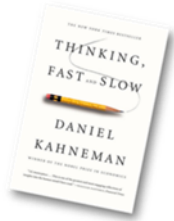# THE SCIENCE OF MAKING DECISIONS

50 years of empirical research show that we tend to make decisions, including important ethical ones, in ways that surprise and, perhaps, disappoint us.

Instead of carefully gathering evidence and slowly following logical arguments, we act quickly and intuitively—then we rationalize and justify our intuitive judgments.

Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking Fast and Slow* (2011), provides empirical evidence to show that our brain uses two systems to make decisions. The first and most frequently used – System I – operates quickly and intuitively. System I relies upon shortcuts in thinking (i.e., heuristics) and suffers from the limited knowledge of our prior experience – biases. The tendency to respond to questions quickly, even when we don't know the answer, for example, is an operation of System I. System II, on the other hand, is *sometimes* called in for more careful, deliberative, executive functions.


Dan Ariely, a behavioral economist, *Predictably Irrational* (2008), demonstrates how our intuitions are often wrong – but they operate, nonetheless, to lead us to predictably irrational choices. Some of the most interesting findings in Ariely's research suggest that there are factors that affect our willingness or not to cheat. For example, the outcome, or reward, for us cheating is not as critical as generally thought. We typically have a "personal fudge factor" that is influenced by components such as being reminded of morality (reduces cheating) and observing others in our in-group (increases cheating).
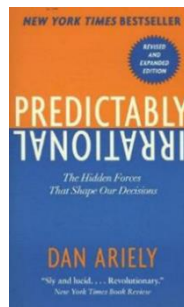

Jonathan Haidt, a NYU social psychologist, convincingly argues in "The Emotional Dog and its Rational Tail" (2001) that the typical use of ethical reasoning is not to guide our decisions. Rather, we use moral reasoning after the fact to rationalize the decisions we have already made.

Max Bazerman and Anne Tenbrunsel, wrote *Blind Spots: Why We Fail to do What's Right and What to do About It* (2011). Using the well-known selective attention task of counting basketball passes, Bazerman and Tenbrunsel call attention to moral blind spots. We must grapple with the reality that our decisions are often made with *inattentional blindness* in which we miss important moral considerations.
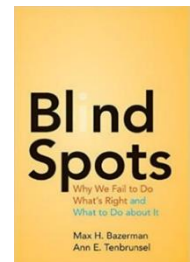

Eugene Soltes, *Why They Do It* (2016), interviewed 48 white collar prisoners (15 Harvard graduates). How do highly educated, powerful, wealthy men explain what landed them in prison? They can't. "I guess I wasn't thinking" is their typical response. Soltes identified conditions leading to their choices: these men failed to recognize decisions had ethical and legal implications, they failed to view decisions from multiple perspectives, and they acted without a careful deliberative process.
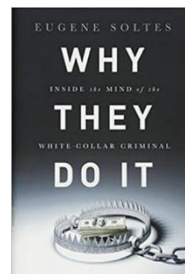
THE EIGHT KEY QUESTION STRATEGY

Designed to disrupt and interrogate quick "biased" intuitions through questions, reflection, and critical thinking at the decision point. The 8KQ curiosity-driven strategy enables agents to ask open questions that invite more information when making ethical choices. Best done in groups containing multiple perspectives, the process prompts conscious and primes non-conscious deliberation.

Fairness - how can I (we) act justly, equitably, and balance all legitimate interests?

Outcomes - what are the short-term and long-term outcomes of possible actions for everyone?

Responsibilities - what duties and obligations apply?

Character - what actions will help me become my ideal self? Us become our ideal?

Liberty - what issues of freedom and personal autonomy (consent) apply?

Empathy - how would I respond if I cared deeply about everyone involved?

Authority - what do legitimate authorities (e.g., experts, law, my religion or god) expect?

Rights - what rights (e.g., innate, legal, social) apply?

In August 2013, James Madison University, a Virginia university with 20,000+ students, began its Quality Enhancement Plan, *The Madison Collaborative: Ethical Reasoning in Action*. Ethical Reasoning in Action is a university-wide project developing ethical reasoning skills framed by key considerations. These key questions can be asked by everyone who faces a personal, professional, or civic moral issue. Cognizant of legitimate skepticism about the effectiveness of teaching ethics, yet aware of the need for an ethically literate citizenry, JMU operationalized ethical reasoning as a curiosity-based Eight Key Question framework. The strategy is being implemented across the student affairs and academic divisions to develop ethical reasoning as a critical thinking skill to guide decision making. From its inception, learning outcomes and corresponding assessment measures were created to provide data regarding improvement.

Ethical Reasoning in Action
JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY.

www.jmu.edu/ethicalreasoning