Moral Bleaching

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"Out, damn spot! Out, I say." Lady Macbeth, mentally deranged by the final act of William Shakespeare's play The Tragedy of Macbeth, cannot scrub her hands clean of the imagined blood of King Duncan, whom she and her husband have offed. What she needs is moral bleach.

The term — or its equivalent, ethical fading — has a technical meaning in philosophy. It refers to moving a moral violation sideways into the legal context and then buying one's way out. Consent decrees are a classical example. Businesses that engage in morally repugnant practices agree to settlements for monetary compensation without admitting guilt. That accomplishes two objectives: The costs of litigation are reduced; and, in most cases, the record of the past action is expunged and may not be used as evidence in future trials. But the great pay-

Arthritis Patients May Be at Higher Risk for Gum Disease

Results of a study suggesting the risk for gum disease is higher for people with rheumatoid arthritis was recently published online in the Journal Annals of the Rheumatic Diseases.

The goal of the small study was "to find the strength of association between periodontal disease and rheumatoid arthritis (RA) in nonsmoking, disease-modifying antirheumatic drug naïve RA patients in a case-control design," the authors wrote.

The researchers compared 91 adults with RA to 93 health control subjects. All study participants were nonsmokers, since smoking is a known risk factor for RA, and had not been treated with arthritis drugs. Demographic data and disease-specific variables were recorded for both groups, the authors reported.

Disease activity was quantified using a specific score and by measuring levels of inflammatory markers. Nearly 65 percent of patients with RA had evidence of gum disease, compared with 28 percent of their healthy peers.

"Gum disease is more common and severe in rheumatoid arthritis patients than in healthy controls...and could be a potential environmental trigger in the development and also in the maintenance of systemic inflammation in [the disease]" the study authors concluded.

Although the study found an association between RA and the prevalence of gum disease, it did not prove a cause-and-effect relationship.

The great payoff is that one's conscience is wiped clean. The spot has been bleached away.

The rate and extent of delinquency increased dramatically under the new system. Parents figured that they were no longer responsible for their promises because they were purchasing the right to flout the rules. They had bleached their moral obligations. When the day care centers reverted to previous rules, the tardiness rate remained high. They had taught parents how to sidestep moral responsibility.

There is strong evidence in the psychology literature that extrinsic rewards push aside intrinsic ones.

About 30 years ago, I tested this idea in a dental school course. Students made health presentations at grade schools and submitted reports. All students received the same level of detailed objective feedback. Half of the reports were graded A through F (and the full range was evident), and half were simply told that their participation was sufficient. Students were later asked whether they had an interest in participating in such programs in the future and whether they intended to do this sort of thing as part of their practices. Results: Those who received an extrinsic reward in the form of a grade expressed significantly less interest in participating in this sort of public professional service. The grade bleached out a positive public attitude.

The Nub:
1. We have been given a conscience for a reason: It is unwise to pay to disable it.
2. Legal remedies are sometimes necessary, but they do not address moral failings.
3. Is the modern epidemic of giving prizes for the sake of sponsor PR actually eroding the very motivation it claims to honor?

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