Think of ways in the past (especially recently) that you have exhibited, to some degree, these same behaviors, thoughts, emotions, and motivations.

To some degree I have recently experienced similar behaviours, thoughts and emotions.

A month ago, I took a trip to Germany with a friend of mine. While we were there, we went shopping. At some point I asked her for her opinion on buying a sweater and also mentioned to her that in order to buy that sweater I would probably return another piece of clothing that I had actually already worn. She displayed shock at my statement that I would return something already worn. I initially felt defensive and couldn't understand why she was shocked. Isn't everyone else doing this also?

But seeing her reaction made me reflect on my actions.

I wore most pieces of clothing at least once in order to decide whether I really wanted them or not. I usually kept the tag attached and made sure it was not visible as I wore it. This behaviour was so normalized for me, that I had never considered whether my actions were ethical.

I think I started to do this many years ago. Initially I was immediately discarding the tag as soon as buying the item, and definitely before wearing it. At some point, I found some defect on an item I had just bought, but could not return it, since the tag was not attached anymore. From that point onwards I started to apply this rule of keeping the tag at least for the first wear (if possible). Progressively I must have started to justify to myself that I was not doing anything wrong by returning items which I had already worn. I never questioned my behaviour until the Germany shocked friend episode.

I think my motivation in doing this behaviour was to not spend money on things that I did not really want. And it seems it was difficult for me to decide if I want something without wearing it once. Or at least that's the justification I was giving to myself. I was motivated to get my way, even if that meant that others might be affected as a result: as someone would eventually buy that item which I had returned, they would have to live with the reality that the item was not truly new: it had already been worn once by someone else before they got it. They probably did not know that, but just because someone doesn't know that we do something unethical, that doesn't make the action ethical. My behaviour was impacting the rights of others.

Another way to justify it to myself was to put the responsibility on the retailer. I was thinking that if they wanted to make sure people don't wear things and then return them, they should just attach tags which are impossible to hide when wearing. But this reasoning implies that we cannot trust people and that everyone needs to be monitored to prevent dishonesty. It assumes that without deterrents, people will naturally take advantage of the system. But is that really fair? If trust cannot exist without enforcement, that would be quite cynical.

So where does that leave me? If I justify my actions by saying the system should prevent me from doing something wrong, am I really being honest with myself? Or am I just looking for a loophole to avoid confronting my own responsibility, while completely ignoring the point of view and rights of the others? Like the person described in the previous exercise, I also was not exhibiting sincere concern for the thoughts and feelings of others. It's interesting how my mind easily finds justifications to excuse these egocentric actions.

Recognizing this behaviour and why it is wrong makes me quite uncomfortable. A part of me will rationalize unethical actions, without another part- a more conscious part being aware this is happening.

I am starting to become more aware of the idea that many or most of our actions have an ethical dimension.

Identify the Impact of Group Influence

Make a list of the groups you believe have had the strongest impact on your thinking.

Complete these statements for each group:

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1. This group has influenced my thinking in the following ways...  
2. The following ideas within this group seem incompatible with one another...  
3. I would now question the following beliefs I “received” from this group ...  
After answering these questions for each group, write out whether and to what extent the beliefs of each group are “compatible” with one another.

The two groups that I believe have had the strongest impact on my thinking are family and the corporation ("corporation" as a generic concept comprising the companies I worked for along the years, but even more broadly the capitalist system itself).

1. This group has influenced my thinking in the following ways...

Family beliefs:

- family is the most important thing in a person's life

- a person should have a stable job to be successful

- a person should marry and have children in order to be happy

- we should never fight in a family

- elders should be respected and their opinions are the most important ones

- women should raise the children and do all housework

- men should provide for the family financially

- a person should be a good Christian

Corporation beliefs:

- it's perfectly fine for a corporation to save cost by firing entire teams from one country and moving those jobs to lower cost countries

- the most important thing in a person's life is having a well-paid job, even if that means working long hours and sacrificing personal life

- it's ok to do whatever it takes to advance on the corporate ladder, even if that means prioritizing competition over collaboration and personal success over ethical considerations

- it's ok for the corporation to be a dictatorial system with personal autonomy submitted to company's objectives

2. The following ideas within this group seem incompatible with one another...

Family

"Family is the most important thing in a person's life." seems incompatible with "Men should provide for the family financially." and "A person should have a stable job to be successful."

If family is the most important thing, why prioritize work over time spent with loved ones?

"A person should have a stable job to be successful." seems incompatible with " "Women should raise the children and do all housework.". If women are expected to raise the children and take care of the home, then they will not have time to pursue any career interest. But even if they somehow manage to do both, they will likely be overwhelmed and exhausted. This contradiction highlights the double standards in society regarding how success is defined.

"We should never fight in a family." is incompatible with "Elders should be respected and their opinions are the most important ones."

If elders' opinions always dominate, disagreements will probably arise. Ignoring disagreements doesn’t make them disappear. Also, just because people keep quiet, it doesn't mean that there is harmony.

Corporation

The beliefs within the corporation group do not seem incompatible with one another, but some of them are incompatible with the beliefs within the family group.

For example, the family belief about religion encourages a personal belief system that may not always align with the corporate belief about personal autonomy. If the corporation demands loyalty, this may conflict with personal values, including religious ones, especially if those values include ethical or moral principles that don't align with corporate priorities of following the profits even when human lives have to suffer as a result. The inner conflict between individual pursuit of morality and ethics and corporate demands cannot be avoided.

3. I would now question the following beliefs I “received” from this group ...

I would probably now question all beliefs that I listed above and which I received from these groups.

Family

Family is the most important thing in a person's life

I would be more inclined to state that each person should decide for themselves what is the most important thing in their lives: for some it will be their career, their passions, perhaps a life of charity. Others will indeed choose family, but I think we should all make the choice consciously, not adopt it as an unexamined rule. Furthermore, some families are dysfunctional and toxic- in such circumstances the individuals might benefit more from distancing themselves. Either way, I believe that "the most important thing in a person's life" is such a complex and personal concept that I don't think we can set a rule for what that should be.

A person should have a stable job to be successful.

Here, similarly to the discussion above, I believe that each person owes it to themselves to define success according to their own values. I don't think we should let society or family define this for us.

A person should marry and have children in order to be happy.

Happiness is also subjective. Being all quite different from each other means that we cannot all define happiness in the same ways. Also, some people who want to have children might not be able to have children. Does that mean that they are condemned to a life of unhappiness? Similarly, some same sex couples may not be allowed to marry or allowed to adopt. And what is marriage after all? Just signing a piece of paper and wearing a ring should dictate that now we're happy? This seems to be an antiquated, unexamined belief- if we choose to follow it blindly.

We should never fight in a family.

Choosing to follow this belief can create communication problems and lack of genuine connection. It's almost impossible that in a family everyone will have the same views about everything. Stopping people from expressing their opposing views could probably create deeper problems in the family down the line.

Elders should be respected and their opinions are the most important ones.

This raises the issue of whether respect is something granted automatically or something earned. It also places more importance on hierarchy instead of truth or evidence. This makes it similar to a dictatorial system where age can outweigh reason.

Women should raise the children and do all housework.

All women should not be expected to follow the same path. Such choices, just as above should be made consciously.

Society, and by extension family, declares that success means having a fulfilling career, but simultaneously expects women to adhere to the traditional role of housewife. This leaves women struggling with inequality. Women can:

- Choose to "do it all"—balance both a career and children

- Choose to go against family values and remain child-free, while pursuing a career

- Submit to family values by having children but give up their career

- Or redefine their own values and pursue a more egalitarian model, where both parents share work, raising children and housework, or agree on what works best for them depending on what they both value (which might include none of these options).

Men should provide for the family financially.

This reinforces antiquated gender roles and gender inequality.

A person should be a good Christian.

There are probably several problems with this belief, but I see two. Firstly, just as with many other beliefs, each person should search, reflect and decide for themselves what they should believe in. Secondly, I think morality can exist without religion. How we decide to think and act can be moral and ethical regardless of whether we are part of a religious group. And conversely, it's perfectly possible to be part of a religious group and act immorally and unethically.

Corporation

When I examine them, these beliefs within the corporation group seem to be incompatible with living ethically, which is something that I have started to be more concerned with, in the past few years.

It's perfectly fine for a corporation to save cost by firing entire teams from one country and moving those jobs to lower cost countries.

This belief requires us to ignore the unfairness of people losing jobs for the sake of higher profit which only benefits a small number of people. We might argue that this could seem ok, since those people are far away, in a different country and we may never meet them, but just because we cannot see this unfairness for ourselves, it does not mean it doesn't exist. The corporation chooses to prioritize profit at the expense of economic impact on families and maybe even communities. While it's true that it creates jobs in low-cost countries, this could be short-lived as living standards go up and the corporation will decide to move to yet another even "cheaper" location. An entire change in the capitalist system is needed, with human values and rights needing to be placed at the heart of all our endeavours.

The most important thing in a person's life is having a well-paid job, even if that means working long hours and sacrificing personal life.

This belief is problematic because it implies that having a high salary is the most important indicator of someone's worth, ignoring many other elements: health, human relations, having a meaningful impact in the world.

It's ok to do whatever it takes to advance on the corporate ladder, even if that means prioritizing competition over collaboration and personal success over ethical considerations.

Competing ruthlessly to climb the corporate ladder, even at the expense of collaboration or ethics, creates an environment where winning at all costs becomes more important than fairness or integrity.

It's ok for the corporation to be a dictatorial system with personal autonomy submitted to company's objectives.

Free thought and personal autonomy are almost non-existent in a corporate environment. We are forced to accept this since we need to survive, the only choice being between which dictatorial units to choose from- which company to submit to.

To sum up, I am questioning many of these beliefs, but I am also wondering how the conflict between personal values and corporate interests can be mitigated in the reality where the individual does have to work in order to survive.

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