

WHAT IS YOUR “ETHICS IQ”?

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“What would you do if you found \$43,000 in a piece of furniture you purchased from a thrift store?” This was the opening question in a recent news story about a man who found \$43,170 stuffed in an ottoman cushion. All cash. The man had purchased the ottoman at a second hand store located more than 30 miles from where he lived. He initially called an attorney who told the man he was under no legal obligation to return the money. The man was not wealthy. To the contrary, he desperately needed a new roof for his home, but had been unable to afford the repair. So, what did the man do? He contacted the thrift store and asked for help locating the donor of the ottoman. The store obliged the request. The man returned the money to the donor. Every single penny. As it turned out, the ottoman belonged to the donor’s late grandfather. The donor never knew the money was in the cushion, so it would have never been missed had it not been returned.

What would you have done? Admittedly, there is no easy way to answer this question. We all make decisions based on our “Ethics IQ” - - which can be summed up in 5 categories:

1. **I am always ethical.**
I do what’s right, no matter the circumstance.
2. **I am mostly ethical.**
I try to do what’s right in the moment, but there can be exceptions.
3. **I am somewhat ethical.**
I do what’s right if it is most convenient.
4. **I am seldom ethical.**
I do what’s right only if it helps me to win.
5. **I am never ethical.**
I do whatever benefits me regardless of whether or not it’s right.

For most people, their Ethics IQ ranks between 1 and 3 on the above scale. According to Harvard Business Psychologist professor and author Max Bazerman, “*most of us behave ethically most of the time.*” He explains however that, “*psychological processes can lead even good people to engage in ethically questionable behavior contrary to their own personal standards.*” In simpler terms, being human complicates things. The human brain can always find a way to rationalize whether we should do the right thing.

The man who found the ottoman told news reporters that he just “didn’t feel right keeping the money” so he took extraordinary steps to ensure that it was returned to the rightful owner. But he could have easily rationalized his way into reaching a different outcome. *After all, he did not steal the money, right? Whomever donated the ottoman should have been more careful in inspecting the cushion before giving it away, right? He purchased the ottoman honestly and in good faith, right? He could really use the money for a legitimate purpose, right? Maybe this whole thing was just an act of fate and he was supposed to have the money?*

These rationalizations waver between 1 and 3 on the Ethics IQ scale above. The questions demonstrate the psychological process described by Professor Bazerman in which a person faced with an ethical dilemma, works through a series of calculations in order to arrive at a decision based on “*their own personal standards.*” Ultimately, bounded only by his own sense of right and wrong, the man made the highest ethical choice and did the right thing, regardless of the existence of circumstances that may have permitted him to do otherwise.