

Frederick Bruce Bird Moral Muteness and Moral Blindness

Frederick Bruce Bird was a Professor of Comparative Ethics at Concordia University in Montreal. Many people hold moral convictions yet fail to verbalize them. They remain silent out of deference to the judgments of others, out of fear that their comments will be ignored, or out of an uncertainty that what they might have to say is really not that important. They are morally mute. This moral self-silencing occurs in all domains. Politicians may fail to articulate certain ideas forcefully because they suspect that speaking out may cost them votes. Religious leaders may hold some of their convictions about unpopular topics in reserve knowing full well that many of their congregants will find such statements offensive. Even friends sometimes fail to raise questions about behavior they find objectionable for fear of alienating one another. Although moral silence is not peculiar to the domain of complex organizations and business especially, it finds many expressions there with extensive consequences. People are morally mute when they fail to speak up about matters they know to be wrong. Many examples could be cited. In one company a number

of workers took expensive office equipment home, purportedly to facilitate work off premises. Over time a considerable amount of equipment “walked off” in such a way that no one could account for it. For the company this represented a measurable loss, and it was resented by other workers who had not been party to the practice. In spite of this fact no one was willing to speak up and identify who was involved, even though many knew what was going on. When businesses engage in questionable practices, such as price-fixing, bribery, or evading environmental standards, it can be assumed that

a number of people both know about these practices and personally object to them. However, many remain silent. People may be morally mute in other ways as well. They may fail to raise questions about activities that seem to call for further inquiry. For years certain industries such as textile manufacturing and asbestos production tolerated what seemed to be excessively high rates of sickness among employees before people began to seriously question the health consequences of specific production processes. In the maritime industry some ship crews treat fairly high rates for mishaps and incidents as normal without pausing to inquire what might be learned from these cases that could result in improved practices. Many people fail to dissent when they see colleagues engaged in activities they judge to be misguided. They may silently observe while they notice colleagues depleting the resources of a unit over the short term in order to advance their own careers within the organization. They may silently observe but not publicly object as their company appoints a few women to senior positions in what looks like a public relations ploy without dealing with the more systemic factors causing women to be underrepresented in senior management. People are morally mute when they fail to defend their ideals and when they cave in too easily and do not bargain vigorously for positions they judge to be right. They are morally silent as well when they do not provide candid and comprehensible appraisals about the discourteous or offensive habits of colleagues and subordinates. Employees are not only out of line but also morally mute when they respond to what they judge to be unfair wages and working conditions by not voicing their objections but rather seeking their own justice by pilfering supplies or by absenting themselves at higher than normal rates. Moral silence is correlated and reinforced by

the related practices of moral deafness and moral blindness. The morally deaf fail to take notice of moral issues and concerns raised by others. They are morally deaf and not just incorrigible when

their failures to listen arise not from ill will but from a kind of inattention or obscured attention that leaves them unable or unwilling to comprehend moral concerns and issues that call for their response. People can be morally deaf in several ways. They may dismiss the alarmed warnings of whistle-blowers as

Moral blindness complements, complicates, and

often occasions moral silence and deafness. To be morally blind is to fail to recognize moral issues and concerns. Many people argue quite forcefully that ethical concerns are irrelevant to business practices. Some have even gone so far as to assert that attempts to raise moral concerns with respect to business are not only bad for good business practices but morally questionable because the persons raising these concerns often do so to trumpet their own special causes. . . .

Several forms of moral talk often exacerbate

the self-serving cries of

overwrought colleagues bent on getting others in trouble. They may respond to critical questions and voiced dissent as expressions of disloyalty or incomprehension by persons who do not have a really full view of what is going on. They may not appreciate and learn from the critical appraisals of supervisors because they view these primarily as exercises in humiliation and power.

moral issues because they typically detract from organizational problem solving. In the process, they often serve to give moral talk itself a bad reputation. For example, many people use ethically weighted expressions largely to complain, voicing in the process their own vague sense that things are not going exactly the way they would like. Such moralistic carping is widespread. Envious of others' good luck, disappointed with their own lack of mobility, or disgruntled by contingent circumstances, people often reach for morally charged terms to voice their frustrations and sense of powerlessness. In the process, events that might best be described in morally neutral phrases receive a moral coloration that hints that things have turned out worse than they might have because of some-one else's wrongdoing. Moral language used in this fashion frequently obfuscates the issues at hand. Language of personal blame and praise often has the same effect when it is used to address moral issues in business. Rather than asking about the factors that give rise to the undesired condition and inquiring what might be realistically done to alter these conditions, discussions become diverted by questions of who is to blame or who should be praised.

Evaluations of the moral worth of individuals or organizations replace diagnoses of the problems at hand and hardheaded thinking and bargaining about what should be done. These expressions of moralistic talk probably re-inforce the existing tendencies toward moral silence. Because they are prevalent, they tend to give genuine moral talk a bad name. In order to avoid this kind of moralistic blathering, people often avoid moral expressions altogether except in relation to private concerns. . . .

. . . Moral silence (like hypocrisy but for opposite reasons) represents a discrepancy between the moral—or in the case of hypocrisy, amoral or immoral—convictions people hold and their corresponding speech. One of the best ways to understand moral silence is to compare and contrast it with hypocrisy. . . . To be morally mute is to be silent about one's

moral convictions in settings where it would be fitting to give voice to them. Moral silence represents a condition exactly opposite of hypocrisy. Hypocrites speak as if they possess strong ethical convictions but then deliberately act to circumvent the very standards they name. They are two-faced: What they say does not correspond to the commitments they hold. We might say to their credit that hypocrites at least act in keeping with their convictions, adding, of course, that their convictions differ markedly from what they say they believe. For example, an executive of a

large resource-extraction firm vociferously announced his company's commitment to government noninterference and free enterprise even while he was privately bragging about his successful efforts to lobby his country's government to raise tariff duties charged on a competitor's product coming from a different country. Another company proclaimed with great fanfare its commitment to green marketing even while it continued to sell a number of products that it knew failed to meet the standards it stated it was honoring. Hypocrisy occurs whenever people speak as if they both recognize and attempt to comply with ethical standards at the same time as they knowingly act to ignore or contravene the standards they overtly embrace. There may well be situations, especially in negotiations, when we may temporarily make overt statements that are not fully in line with our private commitments. These examples serve as a point of contrast for indicating the particular character of moral silence. When people are morally mute, just as when they are being hypocritical, they make statements about ethical concerns that do not reflect their personal convictions. In both cases there is a discrepancy between what people actually believe and what they say they believe. In one case people speak as if they strongly hold convictions that they do not; in the other case people speak as if they do not hold convictions that they actually do. When they are being morally mute, people speak as if they are primarily motivated by nonmoral considerations of power, practicality, and personal advantage even while ethical commitments measurably affect their judgments.