

**Max H. Bazerman and Ann E. Tenbrunsel**

*Blindspots: Why We Fail to Do What's Right and What to Do About It.*

Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press 2011.

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This is a book that aims to accomplish quite a bit. Its authors, Max H. Bazerman and Ann E. Tenbrunsel, characterize their work as ‘behavioral ethics’, and claim that insights within this field will, at least potentially, ‘alert you to your ethical blind spots so that you are aware of...the gap between who you want to be and the person you actually are. In addition...you will be able to close the gap between the organization you actually belong to and your ideal organization’ (1). Bazerman and Tenbrunsel are both housed in business schools (Bazerman at Harvard, and Tenbrunsel at Notre Dame). This is worth mentioning only because it helps to clarify what these authors are interested in, and what we should expect them to accomplish.

If one expects to find a work of advanced ethical theory in *Blindspots*, one will surely be disappointed. If one expects to find ground-breaking findings in moral psychology, one will also be disappointed. In this respect—and I write from the point of view of an ethicist securely ensconced in philosophy—this is not really a *scholarly* book. Many interesting studies in moral psychology are *collected* here, and presented with clarity; ethical theories are mentioned here (admittedly sometimes in rather slap-dash fashion), but no advances in those theories are even attempted.

But it is unfair to judge a book from one discipline (business) on the basis of criteria from another (philosophy). Moreover, Bazerman and Tenbrunsel do not in fact claim to be doing ground-breaking ethical theory, or even ground-breaking moral psychology. What they claim to do, as the previously quoted passage emphasizes, is offer a kind of corporate self-help book. To some ears, this characterization might sound like a slur. I do not intend it as such. Bazerman and Tenbrunsel, I think, do offer a great deal of useful and intelligent advice to their readers regarding our ethical blind spots—particularly when such blind spots are encouraged or reinforced by institutional structures. They also introduce some useful concepts for describing some of the processes involved. For example, the authors discuss what they dub ‘bounded ethicality’ and ‘bounded awareness’—a tendency to try to isolate ethical issues from business issues that results in failing to see that *there is* an ethical issue at all.

Bazerman and Tenbrunsel are also very good at emphasizing the way we fail to see the significance (ethical and otherwise) of our own actions—and they offer meaningful recommendations for avoiding this in institutional settings. Obviously, saying something like ‘Pay attention to yourself!’ does not count as meaningful advice—and the authors are mercifully brief in offering such truisms. Rather, the authors point out (for example) how simple shifts in the language of a policy can affect how we respond to that policy; they likewise offer guidance for preventing ethical slippage (what the authors call

‘ethical fading’) within organizational settings.

*Blindspots*, I think, goes some distance in meeting its central goal. This is a book that *could* be useful in business settings. I also think the book could be useful as a text in a course on business ethics, as it successfully works to disabuse us of the idea that simply having a set of ethical principles will be sufficient to making ethical choices. I will surely consider using the text in the classroom in the future. But, to reiterate what I said at the outset, this is not the place to look for advances in ethical theory or moral psychology if one is already well versed in those fields. If one is not well versed—and particularly if one is trying to establish organizational policy that encourages ethical behavior—there is a good deal here that will be of interest.

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