

## Lesson 4: Freedom for Excellence

### PURPOSE

To motivate students to take responsibility for their actions and to use their freedom to respect human dignity.

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of the lesson, students will be able to:

1. Distinguish between intentional and non-intentional actions and their distinctive traits.
2. Understand that people are responsible for intentional actions, regardless of their circumstances.
3. Recognize the difference between freedom of indifference and freedom for excellence and historical examples of both.

### MATERIALS & RESOURCES

- Qualities of Actions worksheet
- Adolf Eichmann's Final Plea
- Oskar Schindler's Speech May 1945
- [The Schindler's List Discussion Guide](#)

### VOCABULARY

- Intentional actions: actions knowingly and freely chosen, for which people are responsible
- Non-intentional actions: actions that happen without one knowingly and freely choosing them
- Responsibility: being accountable for one's actions
- Freedom for excellence: performing intentional actions in a way which respects one's dignity and that of others, leading to human excellence
- Freedom of indifference: performing intentional actions carelessly, failing to consider one's dignity or the dignity of others

**PROCEDURE**

**Step 1:** Review the previous lesson. Recall that using our power to think excellently, should reflect two conditions (it has to be based on true facts and it has to be logically consistent) and have students identify the five logical fallacies. Remind the students of how these fallacies were evident in [the speech by Joseph Goebbels](#), which students read in the last class.

**Step 2:** Divide the students into groups and hand them the [Qualities of Actions worksheet](#). Ask them to answer the following questions for each action:

Does one use the power to think to perform this action?

Is the action automatic or does one freely choose it?

Is a person responsible for this action?

Is this action good or bad, or do these categories not apply?

Is the action praiseworthy or blameworthy, or do these categories not apply?

After all groups finish the tasks, ask them to share their results and elaborate on some of their choices.

Explain that in the worksheet, there were two basic types of actions which we call intentional and non-intentional actions. Write on the board:

**Intentional actions:** actions knowingly and freely chosen, for which people are responsible

**Non-intentional actions:** actions happening without one knowingly and freely choosing them

Explain that intentional actions are actions which only humans can perform, since they involve using specifically human powers: the powers to think and to choose. Animals cannot apologize to each other or say "I love you".

On the other hand, non-intentional actions do not require people to use the powers to think and choose. That is why it is better to say that they are merely happening to someone or in someone, rather than saying that someone is actively performing them. Non-intentional actions are characteristic of plants and animals: for example, sleeping, breathing, feeling pain, etc.

Explain that intentional actions have important qualities that do not apply to non-intentional actions:

People are responsible for them.  
They can be excellent or non-excellent.  
They are worthy of praise or blame.

Highlight the definition of responsibility and write it on the board:

Responsibility: being accountable for one's actions

Intentional actions can be excellent or non-excellent. For this reason, they are worthy of praise or blame, which is not the case with non-intentional actions (for example, one does not praise someone for breathing or blame him for feeling pain).

Recall the distinction between freedom for excellence and freedom of indifference. Reiterate that people should always strive to perform intentional actions in an excellent way and write the two definitions of freedom on the board:

Freedom for excellence: performing intentional actions in a way which respects human dignity and the dignity of others, leading to human excellence  
Freedom of indifference: performing intentional actions carelessly; failing to consider one's dignity or the dignity of others

**Step 3:** Divide students into an even number of groups. Ask half of the groups to read [Adolf Eichmann's Final Plea](#) and the other half to read [The Speech by Oskar Schindler](#). Before the groups start reading, provide a short biographical introduction to both Adolf Eichmann and Oskar Schindler:

Adolf Eichmann (1906–1962) was one of the senior leaders of the SS (a paramilitary group of the German Nazi party) and one of the major organizers of the Holocaust. He facilitated and managed the logistics involved in the mass deportation of Jews to ghettos and extermination camps in Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe during World War II. Eichmann was captured by the Israeli intelligence agency Mossad in Argentina on 11 May 1960. He was tried in Jerusalem and found guilty of war crimes. He was executed by hanging in 1962.

Oskar Schindler (1908–1974) was a German industrialist and a member of the Nazi Party who is credited with saving the lives of 1,200 Jews during the Holocaust by employing them in his enamelware and ammunitions factories in occupied Poland and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. Numerous movies and novels were made to pay homage to Schindler, most famous being the 1993 Steven Spielberg movie *Schindler's List*.

Ask each group to discuss the provided questions at the end of the two texts. After the groups finish their discussions, have them share their conclusions with the rest of the class.

**Step 4:** After discussing the answers of each group, ask the following further questions to compare and contrast the behavior of Eichmann and of Schindler. Lead the class discussion by using the Answer Key on the next page.

#### QUESTIONS FOR A DISCUSSION:

How did Eichmann and Schindler approach the question of responsibility for their actions?

Should Eichmann be blamed for his actions even though he was only following orders?

Can Schindler's actions be praised as excellent, even though he tried to reverse or defy orders?

Everything Eichmann did was according to the law. Are all laws just? How can we know if a law is unjust? (Should we follow unjust laws?)

**Step 5:** Summarize. Recall the main differences between intentional and non-intentional actions. Highlight what is wrong with Eichmann's "I was just following orders" defense.

#### FOLLOW UP AND HOMEWORK

Propose the idea of organizing a movie night to watch the movie [The Schindler's List](#).

Provide them with the [The Schindler's List Discussion Guide](#), which they can use after watching the movie.

**Answer Key for the teacher**

**1. How did Eichmann and Schindler approach the question of responsibility for their actions?** Explain that Eichmann wanted to avoid responsibility by claiming that he was only following orders which were given to him by his superiors. He claimed that the guilt is solely on the political leaders, and that he did not wish for any of the atrocities to occur.

Nevertheless, since the facilitation, mass deportation, and execution of Jews were all intentional actions, it is clear that those actions carry responsibility, which makes the agent of those actions accountable. Intentional actions are always connected with the powers to think and to choose, and as such, Eichmann had the capability to think about whether his actions were right or wrong. He was free to choose a different course of action.

**2. Should Eichmann be blamed for his actions even though he was only following orders?** The Nuremberg Trials were trials in which Nazi leaders were persecuted for war crimes after World War II. Principle IV of the Nuremberg Principles states:

*“The fact that a person acted pursuant to order of his Government or of a superior does not relieve him from responsibility under international law, provided a moral choice was in fact possible to him.”*

Obviously, one can understand the difficulty for a person asked by their superiors to perform an action contrary to human dignity. Sometimes they do not wish to perform that action and find themselves in a very difficult situation. Although in these cases defying orders could be very dangerous, the person is nonetheless responsible and accountable for the intentional actions they perform.

On the other hand, Oskar Schindler decided to do more than was strictly his duty and take responsibility for the Jews displaced and hurt by the Nazi regime. He allowed many of them to work in his factory, saving many people from persecution and death. He did this even though it caused him to have personal difficulties and entailed a personal risk. Schindler ended up going a step further, working to provide food and clothing for his workers, trying to reverse orders of deportation, even going so far as to deal with the administrations of concentration camps.

**3. Can Schindler's actions be praised as excellent, even though he tried to reverse or defy orders?**

Schindler's intentional actions were certainly excellent, and merit praise even though he was trying to avoid and change the orders of government authority. On the other hand, Eichmann's actions were wrong and deserve blame regardless of the fact that he was following orders from government authority. No matter the circumstances, moral choice is always a possibility, as the Nuremberg Principles claim, and Eichmann should have tried to find ways to avoid performing the morally reprehensible acts of facilitating the mass deportation and extermination of Jews.

**4. Everything Eichmann did was according to the law. Are all laws just? How can we know if a law is unjust? (Should we follow unjust laws?)**

From the lives and examples of Schindler and Eichmann, it is clear that not all laws are just. The fact that something is legal is not necessarily a guarantee that it is morally right and just, although laws ought to reflect justice. To name a few examples, slavery was legal for many years, holocaust was legal, and racial segregation was legal. Laws are unjust if they violate human dignity (recall the subject-object table from the previous lesson). When a law violates human dignity, one is not morally obliged to follow it. Those who courageously try to change the law, reverse its orders, and save people who are unjustly treated by the law, do the noble and just thing. Oskar Schindler did this, and it will be clear in other lessons that others did as well, such as Sophie Scholl and the White Rose movement.

**QUALITIES OF ACTIONS WORKSHEET**

For each action in the table, put + for yes or – for no, in response to each question below:

- Does one use the power to think to perform this action?
- Is the action automatic or does one freely choose it?
- Is one responsible for this action?
- Is this action good or bad, or do these categories not apply?
- Is the action praiseworthy or blameworthy, or do these categories not apply?

Be ready to explain each answer.

Action	Think	Choose	Responsibility	Excellent	Non-excellent	N/A	Praise	Blame	N/A
Sneezing	-	-	-			-			-
Helping a friend in need	+	+	+	+			+		
Sleeping									
Making fun of someone									
Skipping class									
Breathing heavily									
Experience shock									
Feel angry									
Reacting out of anger									
Apologize									
Feel pain because someone hit me									
Hitting someone back									
Say "I love you" to someone									

**Qualities of Actions worksheet – Answer Key for the teacher**

Action	Think	Choose	Responsibility	Excellent	Non-excellent	N/A	Praise	Blame	N/A
Sneezing	-	-	-			-			-
Helping a friend in need	+	+	+	+			+		
Sleeping	-	-	-			-			-
Making fun of someone	+	+	+		+			+	
Skipping class	+	+	+		+			+	
Breathing heavily	-	-	-			-			-
Experience shock	-	-	-			-			-
Feel angry	-	-	-			-			-
Reacting out of anger	+	+	+		+			+	
Apologize	+	+	+	+			+		
Feel pain because someone hit me	-	-	-			-			-
Hitting someone back	+	+	+		+			+	
Say "I love you" to someone	+	+	+	+			+		



## Adolf Eichmann's Final Plea<sup>6</sup>

**Presiding Judge:** Adolf Eichmann, you have heard your Counsel's statement on the penalty. Do you wish to add anything concerning the penalty which the Court should impose on you for the crimes of which you have been found guilty?

**Accused:** I have heard the Court's severe verdict of guilty. I see myself disappointed in my hopes for justice. I cannot recognize the verdict of guilty. I understand the demand for atonement for the crimes which were perpetrated against the Jews. The witnesses' statements here in the Court made my limbs go numb once again, just as they went numb when once, acting on orders, I had to look at the atrocities. It was my misfortune to become entangled in these atrocities. But these misdeeds did not happen according to my wishes. It was not my wish to slay people. The guilt for the mass murder is solely that of the political leaders.

I did try to leave my position, to leave for the front, for honest battle. But I was held fast in those dark duties. Once again I would stress that I am guilty of having been obedient having subordinated myself to my official duties and the obligations of war service and my oath of allegiance and my oath of office, and in addition, once the war started, there was also martial law.

This obedience was not easy. And again, anyone who has to give orders and has to obey orders knows what one can demand of people. I did not persecute Jews with avidity and passion. That is what the government did.

Nor could the persecution be carried out other than by a government. But I never... I accuse the leaders of abusing my obedience. At that time obedience was demanded, just as in the future it will also be demanded of the subordinate. Obedience is commended as a virtue.

May I therefore ask that consideration be given to the fact that I obeyed, and not whom I obeyed.

I have already said that the top echelons, to which I did not belong, gave the orders, and they rightly, in my opinion, deserved punishment for the atrocities which were perpetrated on the victims on their orders. But the subordinates are now also victims. I am one of such victims. This cannot be ignored. It is said that I could and should have refused to be obedient. That is a consideration with hindsight. Under the circumstances then prevailing such an attitude was not possible. Nor did anyone behave in this fashion.

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<sup>6</sup> Adolf Eichmann's Final Plea, In His Own Words, *Remember.org*, available at <https://remember.org/eichmann/eichmann?amp=1> (last visited Nov 9, 2022).

From my experience I know that the possibility, which was alleged only after the War, of opposing orders is a self-protective fairy tale. An individual could secretly slip away. But I was not one of those who thought that permissible. [...]

I am not the monster that I am made out to be. I am the victim of an error of judgment. I was assaulted in Buenos Aires, tied to a bed for a week and then drugged by injections in my arms and brought to the airport in Buenos Aires; from there I was flown out of Argentina. This can quite obviously only be explained by the fact that I was considered to be the person who was responsible for everything. The reason for this lies in the fact that the National Socialists of the time and others have spread untruths about me. They wanted to exonerate themselves at my expense, or to create confusion for reasons unknown to me. Oddly enough, some of the press coverage also reproduced the same untrue descriptions in an extremely exaggerated fashion over fifteen years in a most suggestive manner. This is the cause of the false inference. This is the reason why I am here. I thank my Counsel, who has insisted on my rights. I am utterly convinced that I must suffer here for others. I must bear what fate imposes on me.

**Presiding Judge:** We shall announce the sentence on Friday, the day after tomorrow, at 9 o'clock.

Adolf Eichmann (1906–1962) was one of the senior leaders of the SS (a paramilitary group of the German Nazi party) and one of the major organizers of the Holocaust. He facilitated and managed the logistics involved in the mass deportation of Jews to ghettos and extermination camps in Nazi-occupied Eastern Europe during World War II. Eichmann was captured by the Israeli intelligence agency Mossad in Argentina on 11 May 1960. He was tried in Jerusalem and found guilty of war crimes. He was executed by hanging in 1962.

**QUESTIONS FOR A DISCUSSION:**

What is the main argument Eichmann provides to prove that he is not guilty?

Was he accused for performing intentional or non-intentional actions? Can he be held responsible for those actions?

Can his actions be considered praise or blameworthy? Why?

Did he perform freedom of indifference or freedom for excellence?

**Answer Key for the teacher**

- 1. What is the main argument Eichmann provides to prove that he is not guilty?** Eichmann argues that the misdeeds did not happen according to his wishes and that the guilt for the mass murder is solely that of the political leaders. He argues that he was simply obeying orders and that he does not carry responsibility for the actions he performed.
- 2. Was he accused for performing intentional or non-intentional actions? Can he be held responsible for those actions?** The actions that Eichmann was accused of include coordinating the mass extermination of Jews and other people. These are definitely intentional actions. Since human beings are responsible for their intentional actions, Eichmann was responsible for what he did, and, as a result, could be held accountable.
- 3. Can his actions be considered praise or blameworthy? Why?** Eichmann's actions were blameworthy since they were contrary to human dignity, even though the law and the orders of superiors commanded him to perform them.
- 4. Did he perform freedom of indifference or freedom for excellence?** Eichmann's actions are an example of freedom of indifference since he was indifferent to the suffering of Jewish people and did nothing to stop it.

## **The Speech delivered by Oskar Schindler to his Jewish workers in Brunnitz, May 1945, upon the proclamation of the German surrender<sup>7</sup>**

Many of you know the persecutions, harassment and obstacles that I had to overcome in order to keep my workers during these terrible years. Although it was already difficult to protect the limited rights of a Polish worker, to help him keep his business, protect him from being deported into the Reich, protect his property and preserve his modest belongings and assets – the difficulties of protecting Jewish laborers often seemed insurmountable. Those of you who have worked with me from the beginning, through all these years, know how I made innumerable personal interventions after the closure of the ghetto, how I worked with the camp administration on your behalf in order to save you from deportation and liquidation, or how I managed to reverse orders that had already been given. How many worries it caused me, how threatening the danger was, to think that I might lose my Jewish laborers, when you were kept away from the factory under various pretenses for days, in some cases even for weeks. Very few of the workers who were sent to me actually had experience as skilled laborers before the war, the kind of workers that I was looking for to do this work, and it is a miracle that we were able, thanks to your positive attitude, to overcome the greatest difficulties.

I have demanded some productive output from you, which must have seemed rather senseless to most of you, since you were shielded from seeing the overall situation, but it was always my will to demonstrate and defend humanity, to conduct my affairs humanely, the principle that guided all of my decisions. Continue to maintain your discipline and order. When, after a few days spent here, the gates of freedom are opened to you, think about what many of the people who live around this factory have done for you in terms of providing additional food and clothing.

I have tried and risked everything to acquire additional food for you in the past, and I pledge to continue putting everything on the line to protect you and provide you with your daily bread. I will continue to work around the clock to do everything for you that is within my power. Do not go into the houses around here to forage and steal. Show yourselves to be worthy of the sacrifice of millions from your ranks, avoid every act of revenge and terrorism. The Schindler Jews were off-limits in Brunnitz. I charge all of the capos and overseers to continue to uphold order and enforce good conduct. Tell this to all of your people, because it is in the interest of their security. Thank the Daubek Mill, whose energetic support improved your nutrition, often beyond the realm of the possible. I wish to express sincere thanks to Director Drabek on your behalf, who personally did everything I requested in order to get food for you. [...]

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<sup>7</sup> Yad Vashem, *The World Holocaust Remembrance Center*, available at <https://www.yadvashem.org/righteous/stories/schindler/schindler-speech.html> (last visited Nov 9, 2022).

This solemn hour reminds us of our obligation to remain alert and maintain order; as long as we remain here together, I ask you all, among yourselves, to decide upon courses of action that are humane and just. I thank my personal staff for their restless sacrifice for my work. To the SS guards and the marines who are assembled here, who were assigned to this duty without their consent, I thank you also; as heads of families themselves, they have long realized the capricious and senseless nature of their orders. They have behaved in an extraordinarily humane and proper manner.

In conclusion, I ask all of you for three minutes of silence, to remember the innumerable victims who have fallen from your ranks in these terrible times.

Oskar Schindler (1908–1974) was a German industrialist and a member of the Nazi Party who is credited with saving the lives of 1,200 Jews during the Holocaust by employing them in his enamelware and ammunitions factories in occupied Poland and the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. Numerous movies and novels were made to pay homage to Schindler, most famous being the 1993 Steven Spielberg movie *Schindler's List*.

**QUESTIONS FOR A DISCUSSION:**

Was Schindler's duty to save the Jews or he did more than he was asked? Why?

Why did he feel responsible for them? What was his reason for helping them?

How did he approach unjust orders?

Did he perform freedom of indifference or freedom for excellence?

**Answer Key for the teacher**

**1. Was Schindler's duty to save the Jews or he did more than he was asked? Why?** Schindler did not have the strict duty to help Jews as much as he did, but he did more than he was asked, putting himself in danger. Nevertheless, he says that it was always his will to demonstrate and defend humanity and to conduct his affairs humanely. Recognizing the human dignity of Jewish persons, he decided to help them in numerous ways.

**2. Why did he feel responsible for them?** He felt responsibility for them precisely because he recognized their humanity being threatened. When he saw that their dignity is under threat of being disrespected, he actively took responsibility to protect them.

**3. What was his reason for helping them? How did he approach unjust orders?** He did not blindly follow unjust orders, but he actively worked to change the orders. He made innumerable personal interventions after the closure of the ghetto, he worked with the camp administration on behalf of Jews in order to save them from deportation and death, and he managed to reverse orders that had already been given.

**4. Did he perform freedom of indifference or freedom for excellence?** Schindler performed freedom for excellence since he used his freedom to promote and protect the dignity of the Jewish people.