Banksy’s Unethical Success

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ABSTRACT

In ethics there are always good and bad decisions. We know where lying, stealing, and cheating are on the scale of ethics. And we know how practicing good ethics in today’s society can bring success, positive reputation, and respect. But what about this grey area in ethics we keep hearing about. Do we place Robin Hood on a pedestal for his selfless acts of charity? Or humbling the rich through theft and law breaking? Do we call people that break rules of good ethics for the greater good extremists, or revolutionists? Or does it all come down to the outcome of what they’ve accomplished. This paper gives an example of an artist that displays his artwork in unethical ways to portray a message that both educates and creates awareness.
“Our perceptions of whether we do "what's right" depend on such things as the situation, the time frame, the expectations of others, and whether we are face-to-face with the object of our actions. And we are much poorer judges of whether we are doing what's right than those observing us.”

-Jim Heskett

Two wrongs do not make a right. How about one wrong? Can doing one thing wrong, lead to a good thing? Are there grey areas in the behaviour of ethics? Is a white lie unethical behaviour?
The business world requires us to take risks, to know how hard we can push back, and also tactfully push our boundaries. In the spirit of Guy Fox day coming upon us, I’ve turned to another British activist who inadvertently has become one of the most recognized graffiti artists in the world today. His street name is Banksy.

Banksy is an infamous graffiti artist in Europe and has managed to be very unanimous throughout his career. Banksy fuses his graffiti with a stencilling technique to create his work and to cut the creation process of his pieces in half. His work ranges from satirical to anti-war and government pieces to more personal cultural topics. Not only does he do street art but freehand drawing and painting as well. Many of his art can be viewed while walking through the streets of London.

“Despite what they say graffiti is not the lowest form of art. Although you might have to creep about at night and lie to your mum it’s actually one of the more honest art forms available. There is no elitism or hype, it exhibits on the best walls a town has to offer and nobody is put off by the price of admission.”

- Banksy
His witty and humorous style intrigues the people who care enough to look at it. Banksy is well known around the world thanks to such celebrities such as Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie who spend hundreds of thousands of dollars buying his paintings. But his celebrity status only goes so far. He rarely interviews and never shows his face to the public. Concealing himself so well, that no one truly knows his actual name. Now to a street artist, this constant elusiveness really enhances his works by only giving the audience his art to examine him by. The great mystery behind his motives will not be answered but only speculated. The question that comes to mind is whether or not Banksy is a great artist with a cause or merely a criminal who vandalises London to mock the government.

A self-proclaimed art terrorist; Banksy also has fun with his ideas. He once placed a replica of Guantanamo Bay detainee in Disneyland sparking outrage around the globe. What a great way to inform people about a serious topic; placing it in a wonderland for children.

Another notable prank by the artist took place in August of 2004 when he produced hundreds of fake 10 pound notes that replaced the queen’s head with Princess Diana’s and had the currency say “Banksy of England” instead of “Bank of England”. These notes were then dropped in a large crowd of a carnival. You can imagine the chaos immediately afterward when people then tried to spend the money. Pulling off stunts like these causes for ingenuity and a bit of bravery. They also give off more reason for him to be more secretive in his actions. They are very illegal. His art and his public acts give off strong reactions making the risk of getting caught well worth the reward. All he looks for is for people to see a different more extreme perspective then they are used to. And hopefully gain a crowd doing so
“It takes a lot of guts to stand up anonymously in a western democracy and call for things no-one else believes in – like peace and justice and freedom”

–Banksy.

One of Banksy's anti-establishment paintings is a recreation of Claude Monet’s Bridge over a pool of water lilies. He adjusts the painting to include a traffic cone and shopping carts floating down the stream. He turns this beautiful painting into a filthy waste carrying river. Banksy has stated that he touches up these paintings to insert modern life into them carrying a new look of lost and neglect. The message of this painting is clear, that we are messing up the future.

Some of Banksy's most recognized street art graffiti are the guard paintings. These publicly displayed pieces portray members of the guard participating in questionable activities and demining behavior. Now to some these blatantly disrespect the queen and her followers but of course Banksy doesn’t mind the criticism. These show corrupt individuals who are supposed to be helping and protecting the country and now hindering it.

Of course Banksy cannot miss out on controversy without adding a little for himself. What better place to add controversy than the west bank barrier in Israel. This barrier is created by the Israeli government to separate Palestine from Israel to prevent palatine suicide bombers from attacking. Banksy took a trip down to Palestine to tag the wall with his stencils. All of the works on the walls symbolise freedom and escape. One Palestine man commented on the beauty of his works.

“You paint the wall, you make it look beautiful. We don’t want it to be beautiful, we hate this wall, go home.”

-Old Palestine man
During his trip down there he was threatened many times having guns pointed at him. But he got the job done. After seeing all these political drawings and anti-war graffiti I believe that Banksy is a man on a mission. He has a goal. And that goal is to enlighten people on the issues of today that people easily look over. He wants people to think differently than they usually do on war, society, and government. This new information can be used to find faults in today’s world. Even with all the fame he has. He chooses to keep quiet. Making his actions the only thing that can define him and this is why his influence has spread throughout Europe.

Can we be ethical in one environment and unethical in another? This example tells us that yes, it is possible. And it happens more times than we think. Unethical decisions come with a price. By keeping his identity a secret, Banksy has the freedom to portray his art wherever he pleases. But only on the basis that he continues to keep it a secret. This doesn’t seem to bother him too much. His displays in several galleries and other venues have increased the surrounding areas economic growth. Council insiders claim there would have been a rise in Council Tax without Banksy millions. Banksy earns 15 million and saves three jobs at the cash-starved museum when the show hits town. At least 30-part-time jobs are created at the museum as agency workers are brought in, local hotels and cafes also see record takings. It’s hard to determine now whether or not Banksy would be arrested or not if he reveals himself to the public. His art pieces are preserved and protect. They even add value to the buildings they are portrayed on. Drawing crowds and attracting tourists.

We don’t encourage this kind of unethical behavior, but we tend to embrace it when it suits our needs. It’s difficult to educate people on good ethical behavior when we have success stories such as this. And how we put such people on a pedestal. Perhaps we favor them because they are the minority. And the story is more extreme and catches our attention. The whole rebel concept will
always be appealing to any generation. Media has continually skewed our perspective and fails to show the entire story on unethical practises. Banksy himself has expressed concern of his growing popularity. That with all the hype and demand for his art work;, he himself is turning into a commercial artist. Banksy continues his travels to cities that favor the street art scene. He is now currently in New York city where his are is embraced.

None of us find criminals amusing. But it’s only because of their failures that we call them criminals in the first place. Those who have success and increase in fortune are not called criminals. This is not an ethical problem. This is more of a class distinction.

Henry R. Kravis is an American businessman. He is the co-founder of Kohlberg Kravis Roberts & Co., a private equity firm with over $62 billion in assets as of 2011. He says “If you don't have integrity, you have nothing. You can't buy it. You can have all the money in the world, but if you are not a moral and ethical person, you really have nothing.” How we cure this this trend of successful adolescences is by blowing the whistle. Identifying unethical practises and even boycotting. When we give these people prays. We fuel their ambitions and desire to continue in unethical behavior. Sure it’s entertaining and it’s easy to get caught up in the trend. But voicing our opinion and leading by example will help dissolve these practises and improve our standard of living. What we do when no one is looking is a true measure of our integrity. This applies to everything that we do. Just like chivalry, righteous ethics is not dead. It’s just not as glamorous as it us to be.
“I wouldn’t want to be remembered as the guy who contaminated a perfectly legitimate form of protest art with money and celebrities. I do sometimes question whether I’m part of the problem… There’s obviously nothing wrong with selling your art – only an idiot with a trust fund would tell you otherwise. But it’s confusing to know how far you should take it.”

-Banksy
References


