

Does moral action depend on reasoning?

Thirteen views on the question

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Online at www.templeton.org/reason

The John Templeton Foundation serves as a philanthropic catalyst for research and discoveries relating to the Big Questions of human purpose and ultimate reality. We support work at the world's top universities in such fields as theoretical physics, cosmology, evolutionary biology, cognitive science, and social science relating to love, forgiveness, creativity, purpose, and the nature and origin of religious belief. We encourage informed, open-minded dialogue among scientists, philosophers, and theologians as they apply themselves to the Big Questions in their own fields. And we seek to stimulate new thinking about freedom and free enterprise, character development, and exceptional cognitive talent and genius.

2 The Big Question discussed in the following pages has both an ancient lineage and striking contemporary relevance. We have asked our essayists to consider the role that reason plays—or does *not* play—in helping human beings to discern what is morally appropriate and right. In most of the world's philosophical and religious traditions, reason has long been considered a key element in guiding our moral behavior. But reason can be clouded by passion and self-interest, and from a religious point of view, its role can be problematic, since it suggests that we have an ability to lead moral lives without divine guidance.

In recent years, moreover, a number of researchers in psychology, neuroscience, and philosophy have made the case that reason does not function in the way that most of us suppose. Some researchers argue, for example, that our moral intuitions and ideas are prerational or nonrational. Others see moral decision-making primarily as a result of particular environmental or social contexts. Still others hold that moral belief and action spring from deep-seated emotional and psychological dispositions about which we have limited or no self-awareness.

Where and how are the crucial lines to be drawn in this discussion? To what extent are people capable of consciously controlling their moral behavior? Is our capacity for reasoned moral decision-making real or illusory? Are we as free as we like to think?

This booklet neatly embodies the approach that we take to the Big Questions across all of the Foundation's areas of interest. The contributors are distinguished scientists and scholars, they address a perennial and much-disputed subject, and they bring to bear—in civil, elegant prose—a range of different perspectives. By assembling this “conversation” and inviting the public to join in, we intend to spark a discussion that transcends the familiar positions usually found in such debates. We aim to turn discourse on the Big Questions in a more thoughtful, considered direction. It is our hope that this booklet will be a lasting resource for students, teachers, parents, public officials, scientists, clergy, and anyone else engaged with the great issues of human nature and purpose. Additional copies of the booklet can be ordered by writing to bigquestions@templeton.org.

Five previous conversations on Big Questions at the core of the Foundation's mandate may also be of interest to readers. They can be found online at the following addresses:

Does the universe have a purpose?

www.templeton.org/purpose

Will money solve Africa's development problems?

www.templeton.org/africa

Does science make belief in God obsolete?

www.templeton.org/belief

Does the free market corrode moral character?

www.templeton.org/market

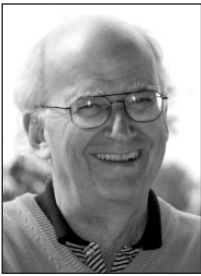
Does evolution explain human nature?

www.templeton.org/evolution

Michael Gazzaniga

Not really.

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What if most humans, regardless of their culture or religious beliefs or age or sex, chose the same option when faced with a moral conflict? What if those same people gave wildly different reasons for why they made their particular choices?

This, in fact, is the state of affairs for much of our moral behavior. Recent research in human brain science and ancillary fields has shown that multiple factors feed into the largely automatic and deterministic processes that drive our moral decisions. Some theorists think that our brains possess a finite number of moral modules that have certain response biases. These unconscious biases explain the reliability and predictability of our moral behavior, even though experimental subjects, when queried, will make up various stories about why they did one thing over another. These inherent moral modules are thought to be the product of evolution and to represent optimal responses, from the point of view of natural selection, to matters dealing with purity, cheating, killing, and the like.

Other theorists argue that it is through experience and culture that we learn how to play by the rules of our social group. As we accumulate this

conscious knowledge, the decision networks in our brains learn the various costs and benefits of different actions, and our moral behavior emerges through a traditional learning pattern. Adherents to this view see our social environment as the dominant factor in the development of our moral behavior.

Still others, opting for the classic view of morality (in the work of, say, Aristotle or Kant), maintain that our morals are all derived from reason. As they see it, there is an inherent schema in our minds, and how to do the right thing becomes clear if we properly think through a problem. Some rationalists thus claim that, if one thinks about punishment, one will see that governments should punish criminals in proportion to their crimes or their just deserts. Needless to say, the history of these rival ideas is rich and complex, and their advocates often discuss them with passionate belief and mutual disdain.

In recent years, researchers in brain science have attempted to test these competing claims by examining such concepts as reciprocity, justice, and morality. Starting with the simple observation that humans do react largely the same to many moral challenges, and fail to react the same in other situations, how does the human brain sort this all out? How do moral behavior and thought actually work? The aim of this effort has been, in a sense, to start fresh, unburdened by eons of thought based on *ad hoc* assertions about the nature of human moral behavior. Thanks to a number of new methodologies to measure what is going on in the brain during a variety of carefully crafted tasks, we have made headway in our understanding of which moral behavior is natural and universal and which is not.

The largely unquestioned modern scientific view is that the brain enables the mind — that is, the physical organ gives rise to the hard-to-define collection of mental mechanisms governing our cognitive existence. On this view, the brain is widely believed to be a deterministic system, with millions of interacting parts that produce reliable and automatic responses to environmental challenges. Moral judgments and choices are mental phenomena that fit this general pattern. Armed with new brain-imaging technologies, we have been able to gain what seem to be

four fundamental insights about the nature of moral judgments and what guides them.

First, most scientific research shows that morality is largely universal, which is to say, cross-cultural. It is also easily revealed to be present in young infants. It has a fixed sequence of development and is not flexible or subject to exceptions like social rules. Indeed, recent brain-imaging

6 Knowing that the brain carries out its work before we are consciously aware of an action does not and should not lead one to conclude that we are not to be held personally responsible for our behavior.

studies have found that a host of moral judgments seem to be more or less universally held and reflect identifiable underlying brain networks. From deciding on fairness in a monetary exchange to rendering levels of punishment to wrongdoers, the repertoire of common responses for all members of our species is growing into a rich list.

Second, there are many moral judgments that are widely believed not to fall into a universal category. These appear to be highly influenced by local culture and learning.

Third (and perhaps most surprising to everyday experience), all decision processes resulting in behaviors, no matter what their category, are carried out *before* one becomes consciously aware of them. Whether driven by internally

determined and evolved structures or by learning and experience, these behaviors are executed by the brain in an orderly and automatic way.

Given this uniformity in moral choices and in brain processes, why, then, do experimental subjects supply such a diverse set of reasons for their behavior?

This question is answered by the fourth discovery. There is a special device, usually in the brain's left hemisphere, which seeks to understand the rationale behind the pattern of behavior observed in others and/or oneself. It is called the "interpreter" and concocts a story that appears to fit the variable behaviors in question. It follows from this that, since

everyone has widely different experiences upon which to draw, the interpretation one comes up with will vary widely as well.

Knowing that the brain carries out its work before we are consciously aware of an action does not and should not lead one to conclude that we are not to be held personally responsible for our behavior. The very concept of personal responsibility implies that one is participating in a social group whose rules can be learned. When our brains integrate the myriad information that goes into a decision to act, prior learned rules of behavior are part of that information flow. In the vast number of decisions that a brain makes, playing by the rules usually pays off.

These recent advances in understanding how the brain works in producing moral behavior do not challenge or make obsolete the value of holding people in a society accountable for their actions. Though it does suggest that the endless historical discussion of free will and the like has little or no meaning, it does not suggest in any way that we, as mental agents, are merely accessory to our brain activity. Indeed, in beginning to understand how the mind emerges from the brain, we are also realizing how the mind constrains the brain.

Rebecca Newberger Goldstein

Yes and no, happily.



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Evolution has endowed us with certain emotions, without which morality could have no purchase on us. But these emotions, though necessary to develop a moral sense, are not sufficient, and it is our capacity for reason that carries us forth into the moral life.

Morality paradigmatically concerns our obligations toward others, and moral struggles typically demand that we resist favoring ourselves to the exclusion of others. It is easy to see why we have evolved a preferential attitude toward our own lives. The bulk of our emotions can be understood as the affective concomitants of our lifelong project of persisting on this earth as long and as well as we can.

Among these emotions is the sentiment of outrage, particularly outrage on our own behalf. Even outrage of this self-regarding sort is a proto-moral emotion. It refers to how one person (someone other than myself) ought to behave toward another person (myself). Making reference to the *ought* of a situation is a distinguishing mark of morality, and in self-regarding outrage we have the rudiments of morality.

Imagine that I am lying on a beach, blissfully soaking up the rays. A man approaches, his trajectory taking him to the small territory occupied by my supine form. He sees me but does not change his course, and places

the full weight of his step upon my belly. The emotion that I direct toward him will go beyond a mere howl of displeasure. It will contain the following accusatory thought (stripped here of the necessary expletives): “How *could* you? It would have cost you nothing to go around me, but you chose not to, as if avoiding my agony did not merit the slightest effort on your part. What is *wrong* with you that you did not see a reason to behave differently?” This expression of outrage contains within itself the claim that at least one person’s welfare (my own) provides reasons for how others ought to behave.

Outrage comes naturally to us. It is an expression of the evolutionarily endowed certitude that we matter. If nothing else, we matter to ourselves and never need to be convinced of the fact. What does require convincing—and here reason enters—is that others matter, too. Reason is our capacity for teasing out implications and testing inconsistencies, and an emotion like personal outrage has implications for how we ought to think of others.

Suppose a person who is no stranger to outrage on his own behalf but fails to acknowledge any obligations to others. Reason asks: What makes you so special? Is there something about you, specifically, in virtue of which others ought to show regard for your well-being but you are not obliged to reciprocate? Reason presents such a person with three options: (a) give up, if you can, the self-regarding proto-moral emotions, (b) justify the claim that you inhabit an exclusive moral position in the cosmos, entitling you alone to feel, in your outrage, that others have obligations toward you, or (c) recognize that the obligations you perceive in regard to yourself apply to others as well.

What reason adds to the proto-morality of personal outrage is a sense of perspective about the significance that each person attaches to his own life, just because it is his. Reason prompts us to recognize that if I think I matter, then everyone else must matter, too, unless I can defend the position that I am unique in all the world—a stance frankly suggestive of lunacy.

The reasoning that takes us beyond the self-regard of the proto-moral emotions is not particularly fancy, although in the history of moral philosophy it has been given some fancy formulations. Kant’s categorical

imperative, for example, advises us that a moral action is one that we would be prepared to universalize: “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.” The gist of Kant’s insight is that a failure to be able to universalize your action reveals that you think it permissible only because it is yours. You are giving undue significance, in the general scheme of things, to your own life precisely because it is yours, which is an unreasonable position.

Reason must work to widen the sphere of sympathetic regard, convincing me that what makes the members of my own group worthy of sympathy applies to members of other groups as well. Reason works in the direction of universality.

But reason’s grip can be feeble when set against a person’s visceral attachment to his own life. Fortunately, there are other proto-moral emotions that supplement and fortify reason’s prodding. There are sympathy and empathy, which move us to participate in the emotions of others, to be bothered by their pains and sorrows and cheered by their well-being. Here, too, evolution offers an explanation. We are primates who found security in cooperating with others. If my own well-being depends on how fellow members of my species treat me, and vice-versa, then my ability to feel sympathy with others conduces to my own well-being.

The sympathy that comes most naturally is the sympathy directed to members of the group with which I identify—my kin, my clan, my tribe. In the face of these attachments, reason must work to widen the sphere of

sympathetic regard, convincing me that what makes the members of my own group worthy of sympathy applies to members of other groups as well. As with self-regarding outrage, so here, too, reason works in the direction of universality, extending sympathy to all of humankind and minimizing the undue weight I place on my own identity and situation.

Kant offered an elegant summary of his theory of knowledge: Concepts without percepts are empty, percepts without concepts are blind.

Morality can be summarized with a paraphrase: Reason without moral emotions is empty, moral emotions without reason are blind.

Aref Ali Nayed

No, it does not!



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Rather, moral action depends on compassion. Parents need no reasoning to nourish their children in loving-kindness. Children need no reasoning to lovingly care for their aging parents. Neighbors need no reasoning to warmly welcome strangers to the neighborhood. Human beings need no reasoning to help other needy humans and creatures. All we truly need, for moral action to arise, is compassion. Compassion is the necessary and sufficient condition on which moral action depends.

Yes, compassion often gives rise to, and involves, a kind of compassionate discernment, especially when difficult choices have to be made in a complex world teeming with conflicting demands. But such discernment is fundamentally a spiritual movement of the heart rather than a calculative choice. In such cases, we weigh matters in our hearts, and we exercise our actions in the directions to which our hearts happen to tilt.

Of course, if challenged about the particular ways our hearts happen to tilt, or if we are trying to convince others to tilt the way we tilt, we may be clever enough to come up with reasons for tilting this or that way. Such reasons often appeal to utility, cost/benefit analysis, or considerations of reciprocity. Sometimes the appeal is made to the imperatives of rights, duties (categorical and specific), and values.

But the actual tilting happens mostly through prerational and precalculative *spiritual* moves that spring from the very depths of our compassionate humanity. Our compassion seems to be endowed not only with an inner intentionality that always gives it *directedness*, but also with an inner sensibility that gives it *selectiveness*, in cases of competing demands, so that the right compassionate choices are made.

True moral action fails to make much sense if judged on purely utilitarian, practical, or reasonable grounds. Actions are most truly moral when they spring from so deep in our compassionate humanity that they defy merely calculative logic. Just as we are capable of exercising moral action, we are also capable of detecting moral action exercised by others. The most prevalent and impressive characteristic of such actions is compassion.

Calculative and deliberative reasoning can pretend to make sense of moral actions, but in their very roots, such actions take place before we sense. They are not exactly senseless, or nonsensical, since much sense can be made of them after the fact. In their foundation, however, moral actions precede sense itself.

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Moral actions impress us the most, and we cherish them the most, when they are clearly selfless, generous, and gratuitous (that is, done without expecting compensation or return). Actions that do not focus on benefiting oneself and one's interests, but that clearly manifest compassion toward others, are truly moral.

Striving to understand moral action entails striving to understand the compassion that is so deeply ingrained in our humanity. What is this compassion? From where does it spring? How does it work? How can we nourish it? How can we live it? How can we teach it? Ethics, moral philosophy, and moral theology must address such questions once again.

The analysis of moral and ethical language, with its typologies of rights, duties, and values, is indeed important. And so too is the task of addressing the practical issues that arise because of new technologies and new ways of life. But more important than all of that, and in order to ground such work, we must come to appreciate the font from which all moral action springs: compassion.

The world's great religions have systematically and emphatically reminded humanity that compassion is the foundation of moral action and noble living.

The two great teachers of compassion are God and our mothers. If there is one fundamental teaching regarding action in all true religions, it is compassion. From the Buddhist "seeing with the eye of compassion," to the Hindu *kripa*, to the Jewish *rachamim*, to the Christian *agape*, to the Muslim *rahma*, the world's great religions have systematically and emphatically reminded humanity that compassion is the foundation of moral action and noble living.

Mothers are the best teachers of compassion. A mother's love for her child is the paradigm of compassion. It is utterly pure and selfless.

When the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) wanted to explain how compassionate God is, he resorted to saying that God's loving compassion is more than a mother's loving compassion for her child! He thus pointed to the clearest example of compassion known to humanity, and then pointed out that God's compassion is even more profound.

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If one is challenged to define compassion, therefore, one better not try to provide a rational definition. The best strategy is to say, "Compassion is what you felt in your mother's arms!" We literally drink compassion in our mothers' milk. It grows in our hearts as we grow in our mothers' nourishing love. That is the creaturely source of our compassion, and the source of our deep pre-understanding of it.

This deep pre-understanding is often reinforced and broadened through the many spiritual "mothers" or "teachers" we encounter along the way to our ultimate destiny. Prophets (peace be upon them), saints, guides, and teachers all partake in motherly compassion and manifest it with varying intensities. For me, as a Muslim, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the most intense and perfect human manifestation of compassion as such.

There is also a metaphysical source of our compassion and our pre-understanding of it. After all, there is no fundamental, intrinsic reason for us to exist rather than not to exist. There is no intrinsic tilting principle in the

cosmos that tilts it, and tilts us with it, from non-being to being. Such tilting can happen only through a principle beyond being and more fundamental than being itself. Such a principle is divine compassion, manifested in all that is, as cosmic compassion.

Moral action consists in tapping into this cosmic compassion, the spring at the center of our being. The ultimate expression of gratitude for the divine compassion that grounds our being is the sincere exercise of compassion. Ultimately, truly moral living is living in mutual compassion, with all of God's creation. Moral action depends on compassion, comes from compassion, consists in compassion, and manifests itself as compassion.

God, the Compassionate, knows best!

Alfred Mele

Only if we're free.



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In my view, we are morally responsible for a substantial share of our actions, and this would not be true if we never reasoned about them. Of course, not everyone who studies these questions agrees with me. Many philosophers, psychologists, and neuroscientists would insist that moral responsibility depends on free will and that, over the past several decades, modern science has demonstrated that free will is an illusion.

The supposed evidence against the existence of free will has received a lot of press. In one much-reported finding, an experiment showed that certain patterns of brain activity can predict people's decisions up to ten seconds before they themselves are aware that they have made a choice. The study suggested that "the unconscious brain calls the shots" (as one news account put it). Another journalist, surveying recent research in neuroscience, concluded that free will, far from being "the defining feature of humanness," is "an illusion that endures only because biochemical complexity conceals the mechanisms of decision-making."

In the study that I cited above, the subjects were asked repeatedly to choose which of two buttons to press, one with their left hand or another with their right. Nothing hinged on the choice of buttons; the researchers just wanted to see what went on in their brains before they made their choices. Assuming that the subjects had no special bias for either button,

we would be able to predict their choices accurately about half the time, on average, based only on coin tosses (heads for the left hand, tails for the right). In the actual study, the predictions based on unconscious, before-the-fact brain activity were right only about 60 percent of the time. That is an improvement, to be sure, over our coin-toss method, but does it really undermine the possibility of free will? Only if you think that free choices cannot be influenced in any way by preceding brain activity.

One strategy for arguing that something does not exist is to set the bar for its existence extremely high. You could claim, for instance, that there have never been any great basketball players — that the existence of great basketball players is an illusion — because to be a great basketball player an athlete has to average at least 100 points and 40 rebounds per game over at least 20 consecutive seasons. No one, of course, has ever come close to this standard. But most of us who are interested in basketball set the bar for greatness much lower, and we are not at all embarrassed to speak in superlatives about Michael Jordan and Shaquille O’Neal.

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Where should we set the bar for free will? Philosophers, theologians, and others have argued about this for a very long time. The higher one sets the bar, the more likely one is to deny the existence of free will. There is good scientific evidence that our conscious choices are never entirely independent of preceding brain activity or absolutely unconstrained by genetic factors and environmental circumstances. But does a defense of free will require a complete rejection of these limits? I don’t think so. That would be like keeping Jordan and Shaq out of the Basketball Hall of Fame because they failed to meet my hypothetical standard for basketball greatness.

Last summer, at the World Science Festival in New York City, I took part in a discussion of free will with the neuroscientist Patrick Haggard of University College London and the Harvard psychologist Daniel Wegner. An online *New York Times* article about the session inspired many bloggers to comment on the question of free will. Some said they believed in free will; others took the opposite position, citing scientific studies as support. Almost all of them sounded very confident. What struck me was the variety of different ways in which the bloggers seemed

to understand free will. To some, it had to be utterly magical or absolutely unconstrained. Others thought of free will in a very practical, down-to-earth way. As you might expect, these premises about how to define free will correlated strongly with whether the bloggers affirmed or denied its existence.

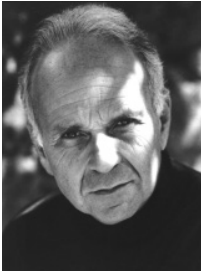
So are we free enough to reason about many of our moral actions? Certainly. A good way to anchor our thinking about free will to the real world is to view free will as a precondition for assigning moral responsibility. To the extent that we find it plausible to say that people sometimes deserve moral credit or blame for what they do, we should also find it plausible to see them as exercising free will. Thinking about free will in terms of our real-world assessment of moral responsibility tends to curb enthusiasm for setting the bar for its existence at dizzying heights.

18 There is evidence that discouraging people from believing in free will tends to promote bad behavior. In one study, subjects who read passages in which scientists asserted that free will is an illusion cheated significantly more often than others did on a subsequent task. (Those who read passages endorsing the idea of free will did about the same as those who read neutral passages.) In another study, subjects who read passages arguing against the existence of free will behaved more aggressively than a control group that read neutral passages: They served significantly larger amounts of spicy salsa to people who supposedly disliked spicy food, despite being told that these people had to eat everything on their plates!

If it were discovered that free will really is an illusion, we would have to learn to live with that news and its consequences. But I doubt that we will make any such discovery. Belief in free will has the attractive quality of being both true and morally beneficial.

Stanley Fish

It depends...



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on what is meant by “depends” and “reasoning.” If the question is “Do those who make moral decisions have reasons at the ready when asked to justify them?,” the answer is “sometimes yes, sometimes no.” Many people report that they come to a decision without engaging in any self-conscious reasoning; they just feel instinctively that a certain action is the right one. One might reply that behind what they experience as instinct is a web of reasons that could be brought to the surface by the kinds of questions Socrates poses in Plato’s dialogues. It could be said that a resolve to do this rather than that because it is the right thing to do always rests on a base of reasons, even when those who are prompted by them could not rehearse them on demand.

Let us, for the sake of argument, assume that this is so and grant that moral action depends on the having and/or giving of reasons. But this does not, I think, get us very far, for there is another question waiting for us, and it is the crucial one: Where do the reasons moral action depends on come from? And the answer to that question is that they do not come from something called Reason, which can be identified independently of the situations in which it is invoked (as in “Why won’t you listen to Reason?”).

What is or is not a reason—what will be heard as a reason and not as something flying in from left field—will be a function of an ongoing

conversation or tradition of inquiry in which certain propositions, but not others, count as weighty arguments in the process of decision-making.

There is no *a priori* list of reasons that count in this way, and there is no master formula or algorithm that will allow you to identify the reasons that should count in this or that context. Nor is there any need for such a list or algorithm. If you inhabit a situation or practice and have internalized its goals, norms, and rules of thumb, you don't have to think self-consciously about what those goals, norms, and rules of thumb are (although it would be possible for you to do so should the occasion call for it). You just operate within them, not unconsciously but with a consciousness formed by the very system of thought and action upon which it reflects.

20 The legal and social theorist Gunther Teubner (following Niklas Luhmann and others) calls this “autopoiesis,” the admittedly “circular relationship between purpose and norm.” On this view, purposes are not imported from the outside; they are presupposed and structure the environment in which purposeful agents live and move and have their being in response to norms given by those same purposes.

There are two obvious objections to this picture. One is that it seems to leave no room for change. The other is that it leaves no room for outside correction by a norm independent of the system.

The first objection can be met by pointing out that an autopoietic system is not static. Though its purposes—to establish the fact of a matter, to do justice, to achieve equality—are given, they take shape within and are altered by the circumstances they order. When new circumstances emerge (like technological developments that no one could have anticipated), the purposive project will extend itself in an effort to deal with them; and when that happens, the project will have changed. The change will not have been provoked by external norms, by norms foreign to the enterprise, but by enterprise-specific norms that are in the act of reconfiguring themselves in the face of unanticipated particulars.

This does not mean that those particulars are driving change from the outside, for they only become particulars worth taking note of when they

are identified as such by the norms that now stretch themselves in the act of accommodating them. (Even when the system interacts with the world, the world it interacts with is configured by the system's purposes and imperatives.) Rather than being a problem for autopoietic systems, change is a feature of them, because they are at once self-contained and self-transforming.

On this view, purposes are not imported from the outside; they are presupposed and structure the environment in which purposeful agents live and move and have their being.

The second objection—that the invocation of internal norms as a moral justification of action leaves no room for correction by a higher, independent norm—cannot be met. There are no independent norms (that is, norms that yield reasons that apply in any and all circumstances), and therefore the reasons that count in local practices cannot be trumped by more general, universal reasons. In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas Kuhn draws the (for many, unhappy) moral. The “circular argument” characteristic of systems (he calls them “paradigms”) “cannot be made logically or even probabilistically compelling for those who refuse to step into the circle. . . . As in political revolutions, so in paradigm choice—there is no standard higher than the assent of the relevant community.”

This does not mean, Kuhn hastens to say, “that there are no good reasons,” only that the reasons will be good only for those who already “honor” them, those who work inside the paradigm that marks them as relevant and even obvious. It follows that someone who remains on the outside cannot be convinced by inside reasons. Conviction, however, is assured once the former outsider becomes an insider and the reasons become his and are, in his eyes, good.

How does this happen? Not by recourse to a universal epistemological/moral logic (there isn't any) or by recourse to force (that's not the way minds change). Kuhn's (necessarily) weak answer is that it happens through a “conversion experience” that might be “likened to a gestalt switch.”

Conversion is, of course, a theological term, denoting the sudden, unprepared-for movement from one set of beliefs to another, a movement that brings along with it new imperatives, purposes, canons of evidence, and reasons for taking this action rather than that.

It is often said that religious reasons are defective because they refuse judgment by norms that are not nominated by, and already included in, the faith. But the same is true, if Kuhn is right, of all reasons—political, scientific, medical, educational, etc. They are good reasons, reasons for right or moral action, only within the faith that gives them life and to which they return a continual homage.

So does moral action depend on reasoning? Yes. Does knowing that help you make moral decisions? No. You are at once on your own and always already owned.

Christine M. Korsgaard

Yes, if...



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that means that moral action depends on *reason*. I prefer to put it this way because we do not have to go through a process of reason-*ing* in order to arrive at a view of what morality requires on every occasion. Often, we simply know. But moral action does not merely *depend* on reason. Moral action is rational action, because the moral law is a law of reason.

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Two distinctions will help to clarify this claim. The first is between intelligence and reason. Intelligence is a power that looks outward, to the world around the intelligent animal. Speaking roughly, an intelligent animal is one who learns from his experiences, displays some awareness of what causes what, and can use that awareness to solve problems. Reason, by contrast, looks inward, to what is going on in the animal's own mind. A rational animal is aware of the grounds of her beliefs and actions, of the way in which perception tends to influence her beliefs or desire tends to influence her actions. She is able to ask herself whether the forces that incline her to believe or to do certain things amount to good reasons to believe or do those things, and then to determine what she believes and does accordingly.

Because we can make these assessments, rational animals can exert a kind of control over our beliefs and actions that other animals, even very intelligent ones, cannot. It is because of this control that human beings,

probably alone among the animals, are responsible for what we do. Ultimately, reason is expressed in two activities that are probably uniquely human: the self-conscious construction of systems of belief, employing consciously held standards of the adequacy of evidence and the validity of arguments; and the self-conscious determination of our actions, employing consciously held standards of the goodness of ends and of what it is right or wrong to do.

What are those standards? This brings me to a second distinction: between “rationality” as the term is commonly used in the social sciences and “rationality” as the term is sometimes used by philosophers. Social scientists associate “practical rationality” with the idea of maximizing the satisfaction of your own interests or those of some larger group. This introduces a puzzling disanalogy between practical rationality and “theoretical rationality,” which refers to thinking logically and consistently.

24 In contrast with social scientists, many philosophers believe that there are standards of practical reason that govern the determination of our actions in the way that standards of logic and evidence govern the determination of our beliefs. And many philosophers believe that among these standards is a principle of reason that resembles the Golden Rule. Various formulations, reason requires that you act only on principles that would be acceptable if anyone acted on them, or that you act only on principles that you could use to justify your actions to others, or that you act only on principles that take into account the recognition that you are just one person among others whose concerns are just as important as your own. This kind of principle directs us to act in ways that are intuitively recognizable as moral, but it does so based on a view about what counts as a good reason for action — one that takes the analogous reasons of others into account.

I see no reason to believe that we have to possess free will in some impossible sense in order to be motivated by such a principle; that our actions must be uncaused, for instance. Rather, the special sort of freedom that human beings have is the *result* of the fact that we can be motivated by such principles. The other animals, I suppose, normally can resist an impulse to act only under the influence of a stronger impulse.

Reason requires that you act only on principles that would be acceptable if anyone acted on them, or that you act only on principles that you could use to justify your actions to others.

But rational animals can resist the impulse to act under the influence of the thought that the action is wrong. That is still a causal influence, but it does not threaten our freedom. After all, why do we care about freedom if it is not because we wish to believe that we can be governed by our own conceptions of what we ought to do?

When I say that moral action is rational, then, I mean that it is action in which this extra level of conscious control, the deliberate regulation by rational principles, is exercised. To put it more simply, moral action is not mere behavior that is altruistic, cooperative, or fair. It is

action governed by a conception of the way that you ought to act. To be a moral being is to be capable of being motivated to do what you ought to do because you believe you ought to do it. And that requires reason.

On this view, morality is a high standard, one that human beings are capable of meeting but that we often fail to meet. Does it follow from this that human beings are not really rational? Or that morality is grounded not in reason but in emotional and psychological forces beyond our control? It is also true that human beings *believe* many absurd, irrational, superstitious, and essentially magical things. Anyone who studies the history of science knows how, even in the midst of careful scientific practice, irrational forces can skew belief. Scientists of the past found firm “evidence” of the superiority of certain races over others, or of men over women. Scientists before Darwin and Wallace ignored the plainest evidence that different species are literally related to each other. Human beings also believe many things that are in fact true on grounds that are inadequate or irrelevant. But we do not conclude from this that our beliefs are never really the result of putting the standards of evidence and argument to work, or that science is not really a product of reasoning and emerges instead from emotional and psychological forces beyond our control. Instead we simply try to do better.

There is no more reason to doubt that human beings can take control of our actions with the aid of practical reason than there is to doubt that we can take control of our beliefs with the aid of theoretical reason. What there *is* every reason to believe, however, is that acting in a way that is practically rational or moral, like believing in a way that is theoretically rational or scientific, is something that it is very difficult to do.

Joshua D. Greene

Less than it should.



Joshua D. Greene is an assistant professor of psychology at Harvard University and the director of the Moral Cognition Lab. He uses neuroscientific and behavioral methods to study moral judgment and decision-making, as well as other traditionally philosophical topics.

My camera has a set of handy, point-and-shoot settings (“portrait,” “action,” “landscape”) that enable a bumbler like me to take decent pictures most of the time. It also has a manual mode that allows me to adjust everything myself, which is great for those rare occasions when I want to try something fancy. A camera with both automatic settings and a manual mode exemplifies an elegant solution to an ubiquitous design problem, namely the trade-off between *efficiency* and *flexibility*. The automatic settings are highly efficient, but not very flexible, and the reverse is true of the manual mode. Put them together, however, and you get the best of both worlds, provided that you know when to manually adjust your settings and when to point and shoot.

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The human brain employs a similar hybrid design. Our brains have “automatic settings” known as emotions. A fear response, for example, is the activation of an automatic program that recognizes dangerous things and tells us, quickly and forcefully, to back away. Our brains also have a “manual mode,” an integrated set of neural systems that support conscious reasoning, enabling us to respond to life’s challenges in a more flexible way, drawing on situation-specific knowledge: “That’s a deadly snake alright, but it’s in a glass cage. Nothing to fear.” Our automatic settings sometimes get things wrong, but we would be lost without them. Likewise, we need

conscious reasoning to solve problems that are too new or nuanced to solve with gut reactions.

Recent research has shown that moral judgment depends critically on both automatic settings and manual mode. What's more, we have begun to understand how these distinct cognitive processes operate in the brain. Take, for example, the classic "trolley problem": A runaway trolley is about to run over and kill five people, but you can save them by hitting a switch that will turn the trolley onto a sidetrack. Unfortunately, there is a person on the sidetrack who will be killed if you do this. Is it morally acceptable to divert the trolley away from the five and toward the one? Most people say "yes."

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Pushing an innocent person in front of a trolley *feels* wrong regardless of whether this is done for no good reason, to save five lives, or to save a million lives.

Next case: A trolley once again threatens five people, but this time the only way to save them is to push someone into the trolley's path, killing that person and saving the five. Is it morally acceptable to push this person into the trolley's path in order to save the five? (Yes, this will definitely work, and, no, you cannot sacrifice yourself.) Here, most people say "no." Why the difference?

Emotion appears to be the critical factor, as illustrated by neurological patients with damage to the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, a brain region involved in emotion-based decision-making. These patients are about twice as likely as healthy people to say "yes" to pushing one person into the trolley's path to save five others. The emotional responses that most of us have, and that these patients lack, are surprisingly fickle. For example, ordinary people are about twice as likely to approve of using someone as a trolley-stopper when this is accomplished not by pushing him onto the tracks but by dropping him through a switch-operated trap door.

Emotional reactions clearly play a big role in moral judgment, but they are not the only game in town. The aforementioned patients with

emotion-related brain damage do not answer moral questions randomly. Instead, they are unusually “utilitarian,” consistently favoring the “greater good” over “individual rights.” This tendency can also be traced to divisions in the brain.

One experiment that I have conducted shows that a different part of the prefrontal cortex becomes more active when ordinary people make utilitarian judgments, favoring harmful actions that further the greater good. This brain region, the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, is the seat of cognitive control and remains intact in patients with emotion-related brain damage. It enables us to guide our thoughts and actions in accordance with over-arching goals, as when a dieter forgoes the immediate joys of chocolate cake in favor of the long-term goal of slenderness. Giving people an attention-demanding task (such as remembering a phone number) occupies the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex and consequently makes people more likely to choose chocolate cake over fruit salad. And, for the same reason, similar distractions selectively interfere with people’s ability to make utilitarian moral judgments.

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This research tells us that there is no unified “moral faculty” in the brain. Instead, different moral judgments are driven by different neural systems, which may compete with one another. If I’m right, we have different ways of making moral judgments for the same reason that my camera has different ways of taking photos. Our moral-emotional “gut reactions” are highly *efficient*, giving us clear and forceful advice that is (presumably) good advice most of the time. (“Don’t be violent!”) These emotions, however, are not very *flexible*. For example, they may fixate on the inessential features of a situation (pushing someone versus hitting a switch) and may be blind to the broader consequences of our actions. Pushing an innocent person in front of a trolley *feels* wrong regardless of whether this is done for no good reason, to save five lives, or to save a million lives.

Photographers facing novel photographic challenges can’t rely on their camera’s factory-installed automatic settings. I worry that we often make equivalent mistakes in our moral thinking. For example, as the philosopher Peter Singer observed forty years ago, we are remarkably insensitive to the needs of distant others. You wouldn’t let a child drown before your

eyes because you were worried about muddying up your designer clothes. Yet we allow millions of children in the developing world to die because we prefer to spend our disposable incomes on trivial luxuries rather than on international aid. This may just be point-and-shoot morality. We evolved in an environment in which we could help nearby desperate people but not distant strangers. Thus, evolution may have given us heartstrings that are tuggable, but not from afar.

Given the novelty and complexity of our most pressing moral problems — devising policies to prevent global warming, finding a path to peace in the Middle East, providing people with adequate healthcare — it should be no surprise if our “automatic settings” are not up to the job. Fortunately, we are not slavishly bound to rely on them. Perhaps over the next few centuries we will learn to distrust our point-and-shoot morality and to rely more on good, new-fashioned moral reasoning.

Jonathan Sacks

Reason isn't enough.



Jonathan Sacks became Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the British Commonwealth in 1991. A recipient of the Jerusalem Prize and a life peer in the House of Lords, he has written more than a dozen books.

Would that reason were enough to keep us moral. But it isn't, and we know it isn't, and people have known this for a very long time. Aristotle pointed this out in his critique of Socrates' view that knowledge leads to virtue. What, he asked, about *akrasia*, weakness of the will? Knowing what is good and doing it are two very different things.

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In his Epistle to the Romans, Paul was eloquent on the subject: "What I want to do," he said, "I do not do, but what I hate I do." Our will seems to have a will of its own, only tangentially connected to the mind. The Hebrew Bible tells us that after the early failures of humanity, "The Lord saw how great man's wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time. The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth, and his heart was filled with pain." I know of no more searing passage in the whole of religious literature.

The subject was given its characteristically modern form by Charles Darwin, who approached it from the opposite perspective. Darwin was puzzled by the question of why people are moral at all. If natural selection is true, it should surely sift out the altruists so that only the ruthless survive. Those who risk their lives for the sake of others are more likely to die without passing their genes on to the next generation. Evolution

should favor those who put their own interests first. Hence Richard Dawkins's resonant phrase, "the selfish gene."

The paradox is that selfish genes get together to produce selfless people. That seems to make no sense at all. Darwin's answer, surely correct, is that though we pass on our genes as individuals, we survive by living in groups, and the same is true for all social animals, be they primates, dolphins, or fruit bats. Without the shared protection of the group, no individual is likely to survive for very long.

So we are divided beings. One part of us is bent on personal advantage. The other part is geared to the interests of the group. Being rational, we rationalize this fact, though it has its roots far deeper, in the feelings of empathy, sympathy, and kinship that are the basis of what we call the moral sense.

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Neuroscience has helped us to flesh out the details of how this works in the brain. On the one hand, there is the amygdala, which generates highly charged emotional reactions. On the other, in *Homo sapiens*, is the prefrontal cortex, more rational and deliberative, capable of thinking beyond the immediacy of me, here, now. The second system is significantly slower in kicking in, so it is always at risk of being overridden under stress or the pressure of fear and perceived threat. That is part of why people commit crimes and why whole societies, apparently civilized, can give way to acts of barbarism.

It was one of the great errors of the Enlightenment to underestimate the power of those irrational forces that are part of our genetic heritage, ignoring what Judaism calls the evil inclination and Christianity calls original sin. The rediscovery of emotion's reach has been one of the intellectual achievements of our time.

Daniel Kahneman won a Nobel Prize for demonstrating how irrational our economic choices often are. Famous experiments by Stanley Milgram and Philip Zimbardo showed how easily authority figures or group divisions can lead us into acts of inhumanity. Antonio Damasio exposed "Descartes' error" by disclosing how emotion is essential to decision-making, even to rationality itself. On a positive note, Frans de Waal's

It was one of the great errors of the Enlightenment to underestimate the power of those irrational forces that are part of our genetic heritage, ignoring what Judaism calls the evil inclination and Christianity calls original sin.

adventures among the primates have taught us how deep-seated and widely distributed is empathy, the basis of sociality.

Rather than reason guiding action, it seems that we often act first and use reason to rationalize after the event. And there is no limit, for good or evil, to what reason can rationalize. There was even, one historian has argued, a phenomenon of “the Nazi conscience.” No one does evil without redefining it as good.

Philosophers since the dawn of civilization have asked where morality comes from: reason or emotion, intuition or a sense of duty, rules or the cultivation of virtue, human insight or Divine command. But this is the wrong, or at least a secondary, question. The primary question is a practical one: How

do we get people to act on the basis of what, in moments of reflective calm, they know to be right, just, and humane?

Morality, like language, is a social practice, born in families, nurtured in communities, told in narratives and canonical texts, practiced in ritual, evoked in acts of worship, embodied in role models, and sustained by a culture that still has faith in high ideals. Morality is learned by living, just as leadership is learned by leading, and no abstract rationality can substitute for lives lived in communion, structured by the choreography of love, forgiveness, and grace.

And precisely because morality is the logic of the group, it needs to be supplemented by the hardest imaginative exercise of them all: role reversal. Every civilization contains the Golden Rule: Act toward others as you would like others to act to you. Yet none has succeeded in living this truth when it comes to strangers, outsiders, the infidel, the antichrist, the one-not-like-us. That is why the deepest moral imperative of the

Bible is not “Love your neighbor as yourself,” which is relatively easy. It is “You shall love the stranger, for you know what it feels like to be a stranger.”

God (or conscience), says the Bible, is not in the whirlwind, the earthquake, or the fire but in the still small voice, which I define as the voice we can only hear if we are listening. We have focused too much on reason, too little on what keeps its voice audible against the whirlwind of passion, the earthquake of fear, and the fire of hate. In coping with the human heart, “deceitful above all things,” morality needs all the help it can get.

John F. Kiblstrom

Yes, within limits.



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Freedom of the will is real, but that does not mean that we are totally free. Human experience, thought, and action are constrained by a variety of factors, including our evolutionary heritage, law and custom, overt social influences, and a range of more subtle social cues. But within those limits, we are free to do what we want, and especially to think what we want, and we are able to reason our way to moral judgments and action.

Many evolutionary psychologists assert that reasoning in general and moral reasoning in particular are constrained by cognitive modules that evolved when we were hunter-gatherers on the East African savannah during the Pleistocene era. There is no question that patterns of behavior, just like body morphology, are subject to evolution by natural selection, and it is certainly possible that some aspects of our mental life have evolved in this way.

But perhaps the more important legacy of evolution is not a “mental toolkit” specifically geared to some “environment of early adaptation” but rather our general intelligence—an ability to learn and to solve problems that has enabled our species not just to adapt to new environments but to adapt our environments to us. Evolution has also given us a capacity for language, which permits us to conjure, reflect on, and communicate ideas that have never been thought before. These distinctive traits allowed us to move out of our primeval environment and to cover the planet, including

permanent human settlements at the Amundson-Scott South Pole Station (“the last place on earth”) and the International Space Station, orbiting some 200 miles in the sky.

Some social psychologists argue that human experience, thought, and action are overwhelmingly controlled by the situations in which they take place, and that therefore personal agency has little or no role in explaining behavior, including moral behavior. On this view, there are no rotten apples, only rotten barrels. This “doctrine of situationism” has descended to us from the stimulus-response behaviorism of John B. Watson and B.F. Skinner, and it is just as wrongheaded.

36 People control their objective situation through their choices and overt behavior, and they control their subjective situation through their mental activity—how they perceive and categorize the situation, what relevant knowledge they retrieve from memory, and how they solve the problem of what to do. According to this alternative “doctrine of interactionism,” the person and the situation are interdependent, and the situation is at least as much a function of the person as the person’s behavior is a function of the situation. The bulk of causal agency remains with the person.

Some theorists acknowledge that cognitive processes mediate between the situations that we face and our responses to them, but they assert that our thoughts are themselves automatically elicited by features of the situation, in an almost reflexive manner. Because our thoughts and actions occur automatically, they argue, there is little room for conscious, deliberate reflection. We are on automatic pilot most of the time, and conscious will is an illusion.

Such claims for “the automaticity of everyday life” run like a juggernaut through contemporary social psychology, but upon close examination, the evidence supporting them is not very good. There is no question that some aspects of cognition occur automatically. You would never finish reading this essay, for instance, if you had to deliberately piece together every word from its letters and every sentence from its words. But in most everyday situations, once we get beyond the first instant, our experience, thought, and action are largely the product of conscious rather than unconscious processes.

In most everyday situations, once we get beyond the first instant, our experience, thought, and action are largely the product of conscious rather than unconscious processes.

A variant on the automaticity argument is that moral judgment is driven by emotional “gut feelings” and other intuitions, and that the reasons we give for our actions are largely after-the-fact rationalizations. But it is a mistake to conflate the intuitive with the emotional. Intuition can be purely cognitive, and relying on intuition has its own rational justification. It would be surprising if emotion did not play a role in moral judgment and behavior, but it remains an open question whether that role is central or peripheral. When there is no reason to make one choice over another, it is rational to let emotion be our guide. At least we can feel good about the choice we have made.

It is easy to contrive thought experiments in which moral reasoning seems to fail us. Most people agree that it is acceptable to divert a trolley that threatens to kill five people onto a track where it will kill just one person instead. On the other hand, most people agree that it is *not* acceptable to throw someone off a footbridge, in the path of that same trolley, to save those same five lives. From a strictly utilitarian perspective, the two outcomes are the same: five lives saved versus one life lost.

When, in (thankfully) rare circumstances, moral reasoning fails us, we must rely on our intuitions, emotional responses, or some other basis for action. But that does not mean that we do not reason about the moral dilemmas that we face in the ordinary course of everyday living—or that we reason poorly, or that we rely excessively on heuristic shortcuts, or that reasoning is infected by a host of biases and errors. It only means that moral reasoning is more complex and nuanced than a simple calculation of comparative utilities. Moral reasoning typically occurs under conditions of uncertainty (another constraint, which comes with human existence), where there are no easy algorithms to follow. If a judgment takes place under conditions of certainty, where

the application of a straightforward algorithm will do the job, it is probably not a *moral* judgment to begin with.

If you believe in God, then human rationality is a gift from God, and it would be a sin not to use it as the basis for moral judgment and behavior. If you do not believe in God, then human rationality is a gift of evolution, and not to use it would be a crime against nature.

Jonah Lehrer

Not so much.



Jonah Lehrer is the author of How We Decide and Proust Was a Neuroscientist. A contributing editor at Wired, he has also written for the New Yorker, Nature, Seed, the Washington Post, and the Boston Globe.

Psychopaths can teach us a lot about the nature of morality. At first glance, they seem to have perfectly functioning minds. Their working memory isn't impaired, they have excellent language skills, and they don't have reduced attention spans. In fact, a few studies have found that psychopaths have above-average IQs and reasoning abilities; their logic is impeccable. But the disorder is associated with a severe moral deficit.

So what's gone wrong? Why are psychopaths so much more likely to use violence to achieve their goals? Why are they so overrepresented in our prisons? The answer turns us to the anatomy of morality in the mind. That's because the intact intelligence of psychopaths conceals a devastating problem: The emotional parts of their brains are damaged, and this is what makes them dangerous.

When normal people are shown staged videos of strangers being subjected to a powerful electrical shock or other painful stimulus, they automatically generate a visceral emotional reaction. Their hands start to sweat, and their blood pressure surges. But psychopaths feel nothing. It's as if they were watching a blank screen. Most people react differently to emotionally charged verbs like *kill* or *rape* than to neutral words like *sit* or *walk*, but not psychopaths. The words all seem equivalent. When crimi-

nologists looked at the most violent wife batterers, they discovered that, as the men became more and more aggressive, their blood pressure and pulse actually *dropped*. The acts of violence had a calming effect.

When you peer inside the psychopathic brain, you can literally see this absence of emotion. After being exposed to fearful facial expressions, the emotional parts of the normal human brain show increased levels of activation. So do the cortical areas responsible for recognizing faces. As a result, a frightened face becomes a frightening sight; we naturally internalize the feelings of others. The brains of psychopaths, however, respond to these fearful faces with utter disinterest. Their emotional areas are unperturbed, and their facial recognition system is even *less* interested in fearful faces than in perfectly blank stares. Their brains are bored by expressions of terror.

40 Neuroscientists are beginning to identify the specific deficits that define the psychopathic brain. The main problem seems to be a broken amygdala, a brain area responsible for secreting aversive emotions, like fear and anxiety. As a result, psychopaths never feel bad when they make other people feel bad. Aggression doesn't make them nervous. Terror isn't terrifying. (Brain imaging studies have demonstrated that the amygdala is activated when most people even *think* about committing a "moral transgression.")

This emotional void means that psychopaths never learn from their adverse experiences: They are four times as likely as other prisoners to commit another crime after being released. For a psychopath on parole, there is nothing inherently wrong with violence. Hurting someone else is just another way of getting what they want, a perfectly reasonable way to satisfy their desires. In other words, it is the absence of emotion—and not a lack of rationality—that makes the most basic moral concepts incomprehensible to them.

Immanuel Kant wouldn't be too pleased with this research. He famously believed that our morality was based on objective, universal values; moral judgments described moral facts. "The oftener and more steadily we reflect" on our moral decisions, Kant suggested, the more moral those decisions become. The modern legal system still subscribes to these

assumptions and pardons anybody who demonstrates a “defect in rationality” (such people are declared “legally insane”), since the rational brain is supposedly responsible for distinguishing between right and wrong. If you can’t reason, then you shouldn’t be punished.

But the data on psychopaths demonstrate that our moral decisions often depend on a strong emotional response. Because we can contemplate the pain of others, we’re less likely to inflict pain. Consider the behavior of soldiers during war. On the battlefield, men are explicitly encouraged to kill each other; the crime of murder is turned into an act of heroism. And yet, even in such violent situations, soldiers often struggle to get past their moral instincts.

During World War II, U.S. Army Brigadier General S.L.A. Marshall undertook a survey of thousands of American troops right after they’d been in combat. His shocking (and still controversial) conclusion was that less than 20 percent of soldiers actually shot at the enemy, even when under attack. “It is fear of killing,” Marshall wrote, “rather than fear of being killed, that is the most common cause of battle failure in the individual.” When soldiers were forced to confront the possibility of directly harming another human being, they were literally incapacitated by their emotions. “At the most vital point of battle,” Marshall wrote, “the soldier becomes a conscientious objector.”

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Though stories of Darwinian evolution often stress the amorality of natural selection—we are all supposedly Hobbesian brutes, driven to survive by selfish genes—our psychological reality is much less bleak. We aren’t fallen angels, but we also aren’t depraved hominids. We can’t explain or defend these moral emotions—they are beyond the reach of reason—but they often guide our behavior, so that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us. G.K. Chesterton was right: “The madman is not the man who has lost his reason. The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason.”

Jean Bethke Elshtain

Not entirely.



42

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No monocausal account of moral reasoning and its relation to moral action suffices. This is especially true of the overly rigid explanations that often prevail today. From the side of “external” determinism, we are told that moral action depends *entirely* on the social, economic, and political worlds that we inhabit. We reason and act the way that we do strictly in response to the environment in which we find ourselves. How so? Because most of the time, given our socialization into a particular cultural matrix, certain situations prompt us to act in anticipated and predictable ways. Culture sets norms for how we behave as members of families, tribes, workplaces, and polities.

Those who instead advocate what we might call “internal” determinism take a different view. They emphasize that human beings are complex, embodied organisms; that much of what goes on within us is outside our conscious power; and that many mysteries remain as to how hormones, brain patterns, and deeply buried, primordial psychic mechanisms affect us. Moral reasoning (to the extent that we can even call it that) is not something that we control but rather the end point of internal processes (whether neurological, physiological, or psychological) of which we are unaware.

There are important insights in both of these deterministic explanations, but they fail as exhaustive accounts. If moral action were indeed completely context-dependent, we would have no way to account for those who, over the centuries, have defied the oppressive contexts in which they found themselves, like the dissidents and rescuers who confronted the totalitarian regimes of the 20th century. And if moral action flows more or less automatically from internal processes of which we are largely or wholly unaware, it is difficult to explain why human beings have struggled for so long to create complex philosophical and theological accounts of moral action and moral failing.

What, then, is missing from these deterministic explanations? In response to the limits that they describe, how are we to preserve space for rational moral agency and to explain moral continuity and moral change?

First, any plausible account of moral reason and its relation to moral action must never forget that we are embodied creatures, not blithe spirits floating above it all. We are born helpless and entirely dependent. We inevitably suffer, and we die. Our finitude is a constitutive feature of who and what we are as moral beings. We are embodied creatures who think—and who ponder our own existences.

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Second, any plausible account of moral reason and its relation to moral action must emphasize the fact that our moral lives are an intricate compound of “conscious” and “preconscious” factors. One might even call some of this “pre-moral.” Our evidence comes from observations of children and the fact that one appeals to their moral senses initially through strong feelings: “It hurts the puppy to twist its tail.” The child identifies with other creatures who feel pain and comes to understand a kind of Golden Rule: Even as I would not have pain inflicted on me, so I should not inflict it on others.

There is no doubt in my mind that much of this capacity is part of our genetic and evolutionary inheritance as creatures that are not only embodied but intrinsically social. No social beings could long survive if they behaved in asocial or unsocial ways. We are “programmed,” in a sense, for forms of reason and action that recognize and reinforce our relations with others.

Third, any account of the relationship between moral reasoning and moral action must be clear about the nature of that reasoning. Too often, accounts of the moral life leap very quickly to abstract universals and insist that the moral life must take a certain form or it is no moral life at all. Here I think of Kantian and neo-Kantian accounts that downplay or even reject our moral intuitions concerning strong particular relationships, relationships that weigh more heavily upon us, and should, than an entirely abstract account of our moral duties toward all persons without

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If a culture has been dependent on a particular religious and moral tradition, the abandonment or hollowing out of that heritage necessarily depletes the resources available for moral reasoning and action.

distinction. In fact, the evidence strongly suggests that we can identify with persons unknown to us, and care about what is happening to them, only because of our primary, deep relationships to particular others. It makes no sense, therefore, to reject “the particular” and its commitments as a barrier to the moral life.

The reasoning that prompts, shapes, and helps to determine moral action, then, is nuanced and fluid. It may begin from particular and concrete relations, but it is capable of moving into less familiar contexts and linking us to “brothers and sisters” in other places far away. It is here that the religious life and religious commitments are so central. I recall a hymn we sang in Sunday school: “Jesus loves the little children/All the children of the world/Red and yellow, black and white/They are

precious in his sight/Jesus loves the little children of the world.” What I learned from this is that, if Jesus loves all the little children, I should not be prejudiced against any other child no matter where he or she hails from or the color of his or her skin. To the extent that religious belief of this sort weakens, we can expect a diminution in the grounds for moral action in the world.

If a culture has been dependent on a particular religious and moral tradition, as the West has been dependent on its Jewish and Christian inheritance, the abandonment or hollowing out of that heritage necessarily depletes the resources available for moral reasoning and action. At that juncture, we fall into nihilism or cynicism; hard fundamentalisms that reject reasoning in favor of strict pietism; or, alternatively, a type of behavior we call “moral” but which demands nothing from us. I refer to those who believe that we can assimilate all forms of moral life simply by establishing public policies that are somehow “just.”

But this misconceives the moral life. Much as it might be desirable to establish policies that would, for instance, create more and better hospital care, there is no comparing such an abstract good to the ordinary mother who spends days and nights with a sick child and reckons that this is her primary moral duty. We must never lose sight of the fact that the realm of moral action has real consequences for particular people, not for all people in general. Moral reasoning must remain tethered to the concrete, or it loses its moral voice.

Antonio Damasio

Yes and no.



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My answer is a strong “yes” because the actions we can truly call moral depend on the work of reason at some stage in the process leading to their execution. But my answer is also “no” because the moment-to-moment execution of actions, moral or otherwise, is not necessarily under the control of reason, even if reason has a role in the deliberations behind the action and in strengthening the control system that executes it. My answer is an even stronger “no” if the question implies that moral actions are *invented* by reason, springing fully formed from the consorting of knowledge and logic.

Looming large over the question is the issue of the origins of morality. Does reason construct moral intuitions, beliefs, conventions, and rules? Or does morality emerge from prerational processes? On this issue there is growing evidence that many behaviors we designate as moral have forerunners in automated, unconscious, prerational processes, present not only in humans but in many other species. The evidence is quite robust in the case of mammals, especially primates and marine mammals whose brains share a lot with the human brain.

The mechanisms behind such behaviors can be traced to specific brain systems, neuromodulator molecules, and even genes. An illustrative set of examples pertains to behaviors associated with the neuropeptide oxytocin.

In one species of rodent (prairie voles), mating induces the pronounced release of oxytocin in affect-related brain regions. This, in turn, is associated with a life-long monogamous attachment between male and female; close bonding and attachment of the mother to her infants; and involvement of the male in the care of the progeny. Experimental suppression of the gene responsible for the production of oxytocin preempts the entire behavioral repertoire.

Obviously, no one will confuse the attachment and concern for others, as exhibited by these intriguing animals, with the moral actions that humans carry out in similar circumstances. And yet, the general resemblance is both undeniable and suggestive. The presence of such complex and sharply targeted animal behaviors serves notice that human behaviors occurring in comparable circumstances are not being created entirely *de novo* by human reason. They are probably complex variations on antecedents. These antecedents emerged in biological evolution without the guidance of reason, but they have resulted in an optimized regulation of life. Interestingly, the better regulation of life is precisely what reason-based moral systems are meant to achieve.

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But let us come closer to human behavior. Several of our emotions, in particular those that are commonly classified as social (compassion, admiration, shame, guilt, contempt, pride, gratitude) embody moral values. Take the deployment of admiration or compassion. Each includes specific behaviors aimed at others, which deliver rewards of varied kinds and grades for actions that those others have performed. The behaviors imply some level of moral judgment. Likewise for the deployment of shame or guilt, which imply judgments regarding oneself, as well as self-punishing actions and thoughts.

The deep-rooted mechanisms for the execution and experience of these emotions recruit human brain structures involved in life regulation. Taken together with the fact that there are forerunners to such emotions in non-human species, this suggests an early evolutionary vintage for the assembling of the necessary brain machinery. I am persuaded that these emotions were selected in evolution because of their contributions to the better management of life via their ability to solve social problems. In

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general, the behavioral programs that we call emotions prevailed in evolution because they improved the odds of survival prior to the emergence of conscious minds and reasoning. The “moral emotions” are not an exception.

To a first approximation, then, morality does emerge from prerational processes. But that is by no means incompatible with the notion that human creativity and reason make use of prerational emotive behaviors (and the intuitions and beliefs that accompany them) in order to construct moral conventions and rules. No matter how deeply inspired by ancient neurobiological processes, moral conventions and rules are human creations.

They are the result of shaping a few forerunner intuitions and beliefs to suit certain goals, and of rejecting some of those intuitions and beliefs.

In short, we should not reduce the edifice of ethics to naturally emerging emotional action programs, even in the thoughtful framework of moral emotions proposed by David Hume or Adam Smith. Nature is careless, unconscionable, and morally indifferent, and imitating nature is no way to create morality. But in the process of selecting behaviors that promoted the life of the organisms in charge of carrying genes over countless generations, nature did engender *some* valuable behaviors that can be incorporated in most moral systems. Kin altruism and reciprocal altruism are good examples.

Human creativity and reason have taken such natural discoveries to new heights. They have extended the reach of biological regulation to varied aspects of the social space, thus inventing what I like to call sociocultural homeostasis. The familiar homeostasis of the human body is automated and operates largely at a non-conscious level, ensuring our physiological health and equilibrium. Sociocultural homeostasis, by contrast, is deliberate and requires high-level consciousness. Morality (along with the laws and

jurisprudence that follow from it) is the centerpiece of sociocultural homeostasis.

Neuroscientists are being asked more and more frequently if humans are really capable of consciously controlling their moral behavior. The answer, as I see it, is largely affirmative. Moral behavior is a skill that can be honed to the point of becoming “a second nature,” in a process that begins in early childhood. Practice gradually makes perfect, and as it does, the execution of moral actions becomes more and more automatic, performed to a considerable degree under non-conscious control. But, of course, the decision to practice one’s moral skills is a very conscious, reasoned decision. Likewise, the moral choices one makes in advance of acting in one way or another are the result of conscious, reasoned deliberation.

Despite the ancient origins of some moral behaviors, despite the rampant social and environmental influences on our decisions, and despite the unconscious pressures that permeate our appetites, reason does have a say in moral actions. On occasion, reason even prevails.

Robert P. George

Yes, by nature.



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At the foundation of our moral thinking is our understanding that some things are worth doing or pursuing for their own sake. It makes sense to act on them even when we expect no further benefit from doing so. When we see the point of performing a friendly act, for example, or when we see the point of someone's studying Shakespeare or the structure of distant galaxies, we understand the intrinsic value of such activities. We grasp the worth of friendship and knowledge not merely as means to other ends but as ends in themselves. Unlike money or insurance coverage, these goods are not valuable only because they facilitate or protect other goods. They are themselves constitutive aspects of our own and others' fulfillment as human persons.

Of course, feelings and emotions can and do motivate our actions. But the point here is that certain intrinsically worthwhile ends or purposes appeal not merely to our emotions but also to our understanding (what Aristotle called our "practical reason"). A complete account of human action cannot leave out the motivating role of reasons provided by these ends or purposes, which are sometimes called "basic human goods."

It is this truth that the brilliant 18th-century philosopher David Hume spectacularly missed in proclaiming that "reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions, and may pretend to no office other than to serve

and obey them.” For Hume, our brute desires specify our ultimate goals (like survival), and the most that reason can do is to tell us how to achieve those goals (eat this, refrain from eating that). But human deliberation and action are a great deal more complex (and interesting) than Hume allows in his reduction of reason to the role of emotion’s ingenious servant.

If someone performs a friendly act just for the sake of friendship itself, and not solely for some ulterior motive, we are not left baffled by it, as we would be left baffled by, for example, someone who for no reason beyond the act itself spent time repeatedly opening and closing a closet door. Indeed, we grasp the intelligible point of an act of friendship even if we judge the particular act, though motivated by friendship, to be morally forbidden. (Consider, for example, someone’s telling a lie to protect the reputation of a friend who has done something disgraceful.) We understand friendship as an irreducible aspect of our own and other people’s well-being and fulfillment.

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But friendship and knowledge are just two aspects of our well-being and fulfillment. We human beings are complex creatures. We can flourish (or decline) in relation to various aspects of our nature: our physical health, our intellectual vigor, our character. Although we are individuals, relationships with others in a variety of forms are also intrinsic aspects of our flourishing and not merely means to the fuller or more efficient realization of common individual goals. The list could go on. My point is that there are many basic human goods, many irreducible (and irreducibly different) aspects of human well-being and fulfillment.

The variegated nature of human flourishing and the fact that basic human goods can be instantiated in an unlimited number of ways means that we must make choices. Of course, many of our choices, including some serious and even tragic ones, are choices between or among morally acceptable options. No moral norm narrows the possibilities to a single uniquely correct option. But moral norms often do exclude some possible options, sometimes even narrowing them to one. How can that be?

Among those who share the view that morality is, in a deep sense, about human flourishing, there are two main schools of thought. The first, known as utilitarianism (or, more broadly, as consequentialism), proposes

that people ought always to adopt whichever option offers the best proportion of benefit to harm overall and in the long run. There are many problems with this idea, but the most fundamental is that it presupposes, quite implausibly, that different human goods (this human life, that friendship, this part of someone's knowledge, those aesthetic or religious experiences) can be aggregated in such a way as to render the idea of "the net best proportion of benefit to harm" coherent and workable.

This is a mistake. To say, for example, that friendship and knowledge are both basic human goods is *not* to say that friendship and knowledge are constituted by the same substance ("goodness") manifested in different (but fully replaceable) ways or to different degrees. They are, rather, two different things, reducible neither to each other nor to some common factor. To say that friendship and knowledge are basic human goods is merely to say that they have this, and only this, in common: Each can provide us with a reason for acting whose intelligibility is dependent neither on some further or deeper reason nor on some subrational motivating factor to which it is a means.

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The alternative to utilitarianism, at least for those who believe that ethical thinking proceeds from a concern for human well-being and fulfillment, is what is sometimes called "natural law" ethics. Its first principle of moral judgment is that one ought to choose those options, and only those options, that are compatible with the human good considered integrally—that is to say, with an open-hearted love of the good of human persons considered in all of its variegated dimensions.

The specifications of this abstract master principle are the familiar moral precepts that most people, even today, seek to live by and to teach their children to respect, such as the Golden Rule ("do unto others as you would have them do unto you"), the Pauline Principle ("never do evil that good may come of it"), and Kant's categorical imperative (stated most vividly in the maxim that one ought to "treat humanity, whether in the person of yourself or others, always as an end, and never as a means only"). However one formulates these precepts and the more concrete norms of conduct that derive from them, they are alike in depending fundamentally, and decisively, on the work of reason.