

Does moral action depend on reasoning?



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Not entirely.

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.

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 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.

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