

Does moral action depend on reasoning?



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Yes and no, happily.

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.

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.

Rebecca Newberger Goldstein's most recent book is 36 Arguments for the Existence of God: A Work of Fiction. A MacArthur Foundation Fellow, she is also the author of the nonfiction works Betraying Spinoza and Incompleteness: The Proof and Paradox of Kurt Gödel.

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