

Does moral action depend on reasoning?



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Yes, within limits.

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.

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.

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.

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