

The Instinct of Morality
Big Sky Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
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(Adapted from an article published in The New York Times Magazine on Jan. 13, 2008, by Dr. Steven Pinker, the Johnstone Professor of Psychology at Harvard University.)

I'm going to name two people, and I would like you to judge which of them in your mind is more admirable. They are Mother Teresa and Bill Gates.

For most people, it's not even a contest. Mother Teresa won the Nobel Peace Prize, is on a fast-track to sainthood, and was ranked in an American poll as the most admired person of the 20th century. Bill Gates gave us the blue screen of death and is a multi-billionaire who routinely crushes his competitors.

But wait. When Gates looked at his fortune and what to do with it, he crunched the numbers and decided he could do good by fighting scourges in the developing world such as malaria, diarrhea and parasites. His foundation already has spent more than \$14 billion on eradicating disease, illiteracy and poverty, with projections that he may donate more than \$100 billion during his lifetime.

And Mother Teresa? Certainly she ran missions that cared for the poor, but she also believed in the virtue of suffering. Patients at her clinics received lots of prayer, but only the most primitive in medical care -- and no strong pain killers, even for cancer patients. They were expected to grow closer to God through their pain. Some former clinic workers say Mother Teresa routinely refused to buy modern medical equipment for her clinics with donations, instead sending the money to the Vatican for general mission work.

This is not to say that Mother Teresa was evil and it is Gates who should be marked for sainthood. But it shows that our moral compass can be swayed by an aura of sanctity. We all may be vulnerable to moral illusions -- the ethical equivalent of the bending lines that trick the eye in psychology textbooks.

Today, a new field is looking behind the illusions. Moral intuitions are being drawn out of people in the lab, on Web sites and in brain scans. And the human moral sense turns out to be an organ of considerable complexity.

That complexity has implications for the human soul. Morality is close to our concept of the meaning of life. Moral goodness is what gives each of us the sense that we are worthy human beings. We seek it in our friends and mates, nurture it in our children, advance it in our politics and justify it with our religions. Disrespect for morality is blamed for everyday sins and for history's atrocities. So dissecting moral intuitions is no small matter. If morality is a mere trick of the brain, some fear, our very grounds for being moral could be eroded. Yet, the science of the moral sense can instead be seen as a way to strengthen those grounds, by clarifying what morality is and how it should steer our actions.

The starting point for appreciating that there *is* a distinctive part of our psychology for morality is seeing how moral judgments differ from other kinds of opinions we have on how people ought to behave.

The first hallmark of moralization is that its rules are felt to be universal. Prohibitions of rape and murder, for example, are not matters of local custom but to be universally and objectively warranted. One can easily say, "I don't like brussels sprouts, but I don't care if you eat them," but no one would say, "I don't like killing, but I don't care if you murder someone."

The other hallmark is that people feel that those who commit immoral acts deserve to be punished. Not only is it allowable to inflict pain on a person who has broken a moral rule; it is wrong *not* to, to "let them get away with it." People are thus untroubled by retribution against people they deem immoral.

Much of our recent social history, including the culture wars between liberals and conservatives, consists of the moralization or amoralization of particular kinds of behavior. Even when people agree that an outcome is desirable, they may disagree on whether it should be treated as a matter of preference or as a matter of morality. The psychologist Paul Rozin notes, for example, that with the discovery of the harmful effects of secondhand smoke, smoking moved from lifestyle preference to a moral issue. Smokers are ostracized; images of people smoking are censored; and tobacco companies have been slapped with staggering "punitive damages."

Dozens of things that past generations treated as practical matters now flip our moral switches, including disposable diapers, I.Q. tests, poultry farms and

Barbie dolls. Food alone has become a minefield, with critics sermonizing about the size of sodas, the chemistry of fat, the freedom of chickens, and the price of coffee beans.

At the same time, many behaviors have been amoralized, switched from moral failings to lifestyle choices. They include divorce, illegitimacy, being a working or single mother, marijuana use and homosexuality.

Whether an activity flips our mental switches isn't just a matter of how much harm it does. We don't show contempt to the man who fails to change the batteries in his smoke alarms, even though it multiplies the risk his family will die in an fire. Driving a gas-guzzling Hummer is reprehensible, but driving a gas-guzzling old Volvo is not; eating a Big Mac is unconscionable, eating imported brie is not. The reason for these double standards is obvious: People tend to align their moralization with their own lifestyles.

It's not just the content of our moral judgments that is often questionable, but the way we arrive at them. We like to think that when we have a conviction, we arrived at it for good reasons. But consider these thought experiments, originally devised by the psychologist Jonathan Haidt:

Number One. Julie is traveling in France on summer vacation from college with her brother Mark. One night they decide that it would be fun if they had sex. Julie was already taking birth-control pills, but Mark uses a condom, too, just to be safe. They both enjoy the sex but decide not to do it again. They keep the night as a special secret, and it makes them feel closer to each other. So, was it O.K. for them to have sex?

Number Two. A woman is cleaning out her closet and she finds an old American flag. She doesn't want the flag anymore, so she cuts it up into pieces and uses the rags to clean her bathroom.

Number Three. A family's dog is killed by a car in front of their house. They heard that dog meat was delicious, so they butcher the dog's body and cook it up for dinner.

Most people immediately declare that these acts are wrong and then grope to explain *why* they are wrong. It's not so easy.

In the case of Julie and Mark, people raise the possibility of children with birth defects, but they are reminded that the couple were diligent about contraception. They suggest that the siblings will be emotionally hurt, but the story makes it clear that they weren't. They submit that the act would offend the community, but then recall that it was kept a secret. Eventually people simply say, "I don't know, I can't explain it, I just know it's wrong." Haidt argues that people don't generally engage in moral reasoning, but in moral *rationalization*: they begin with the conclusion, coughed up by some unconscious emotion, and then work backward to a plausible justification.

The gap between people's convictions and their justifications is also on display in the favorite new sandbox for moral psychologists, a thought experiment called the Trolley Problem. Some of you have probably come across this before.

Out for a walk, you see a trolley car hurtling down the track, the conductor slumped over the controls. In the path of the trolley are five men working on the track, oblivious to the danger. You are standing at a fork in the track and can pull a lever that will divert the trolley onto a spur, saving the five men. Unfortunately, the trolley would then run over a single worker who is working on the spur. Is it permissible to throw the switch, killing one man to save five?

Now change the scene slightly. You are on a bridge overlooking the tracks and have spotted the runaway trolley bearing down on the five workers. The only way to stop the trolley this time is to throw a heavy object in its path. And the only heavy object within reach is a very large man standing next to you. Is it permissible to throw the man off the bridge?

Both situations would have you sacrifice one life to save five, and so, by one standard, they are morally equivalent. But most people don't see it that way. They would pull the switch in the first dilemma, but they would not heave the fat man in the second. When pressed for a reason for the difference, however, they can't come up with any coherent explanation.

And in this case, the phrase “most people” means most of the 200,000 people from a hundred countries who have participated in this experiment. The same response came from people from Europe, Asia and both Americas; from men and women, blacks and whites, young and old, Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Christians, Jews and atheists; people with elementary-school educations and people with Ph.D.’s.

The findings of complex, instinctive and worldwide moral intuitions suggest that morality is an innate part of human nature, and scientists have identified many universal moral standards. People everywhere, at least in some circumstances, think it’s bad to harm others and good to help them. They have a sense of fairness: that one should reciprocate favors, reward benefactors and punish cheaters. They value loyalty to a group, sharing and solidarity among its members, and conformity to its norms. They believe that it is right to defer to legitimate authorities and to respect people with high status. And they exalt purity, cleanliness and sanctity while loathing defilement, contamination and carnality.

The exact number of so-called moral spheres depends on whether you’re a lumper or a splitter, but Haidt counts five — harm, fairness, community, authority and purity — and suggests that they are the primary colors of our inherent moral sense. A violation of community led people to frown on using an old flag to clean a bathroom. Violations of purity repel moral vegetarians and nonsmokers. The virtue of purity leads people to venerate religious leaders who dress in white and affect an aura of sanctity.

While the five moral spheres are universal, how they are ranked in importance depends on the culture. Many of the flabbergasting practices in faraway places become more intelligible when you recognize that the same moralizing impulse that the West channels in one way is channeled in a different way elsewhere. The Japanese fear of nonconformity draws from the moral sphere of community; the dietary restrictions of Hindus and Orthodox Jews are rooted in the moral sphere of purity; the outrage at insulting the Prophet among Muslims comes from the moral sphere of authority. In the West, we believe that in business and government, fairness should trump community and we try to root

out nepotism. In other parts of the world, this is incomprehensible — what heartless creep would favor a perfect stranger over his own brother?

The ranking and placement of moral spheres also divides the cultures of liberals and conservatives in the United States. Many bones of contention, like homosexuality, atheism and single-parent families from the right, or racial imbalances, sweatshops and executive pay from the left, reflect different weightings of the spheres. In a large Web survey, Haidt found that liberals put a lopsided moral weight on harm and fairness while playing down group loyalty, authority and purity. Conservatives placed a moderately high weight on all five. So it's not surprising that each side thinks it is the one driven by lofty ethical values.

Modern institutions often fail to respect these moral spheres. Market economies tend to put everything up for sale. Science seeks to understand phenomena rather than pass judgment on them. Secular philosophy scrutinizes all beliefs, including those entrenched by authority and tradition. It's not surprising that these institutions are often seen to be morally corrosive.

And “morally corrosive” is exactly the term that some critics would apply to scientific research into the moral sense. The attempt to dissect our moral intuitions can look like an attempt to demote morality to a figment of neural circuitry.

Here is their fear. Science suggests that the qualitative difference between red and green, the tastiness of fruit, the scariness of heights and the beauty of flowers are design features of our common nervous system. If so, and if our species had evolved in a different ecosystem or if we were missing a few genes, our reactions could go the other way. Now, if the distinction between right and wrong is also a product of brain wiring, why is it any more real than the distinction between red and green? And if it is just a collective hallucination, how can we argue that evils like genocide and slavery are wrong for everyone, rather than just distasteful to us?

One answer is that we are born with a rudimentary moral sense, and as soon as we build on it with reasoning, the nature of reality forces us to some moral absolutes. Two features of reality point in this direction. And they could

provide a benchmark for determining when the judgments of our moral sense are aligned with morality itself.

One is the fact that in many arenas of life, two parties are objectively better off if they both act in a nonselfish way than if each of them acts selfishly. You and I are both better off if we share our surpluses, rescue each other's children in danger and refrain from shooting at each other. Granted, I might be a bit better off if I acted selfishly at your expense and you played the sucker, but the same is true for you with me. So if each of us tried for these advantages, we'd both end up worse off. Any neutral observer would have to conclude we should aim for a state in which we both are unselfish. This is not a quirk of brain wiring, nor is it dictated by a supernatural God; it is simply in the nature of things.

The other external support for morality is a feature of rationality itself: that it cannot depend on the egocentric vantage point of the reasoner. If I appeal to you to do anything that affects me — to get off my foot, or tell me the time or not run me over with your car — and if I want you to take me seriously, then I can't do it in a way that privileges my interests over yours. I can't act as if my interests are special just because I'm me and you're not.

Not coincidentally, the core of this idea — the interchangeability of perspectives — reappears in history's best-thought-through moral philosophies, including the Golden Rule; Spinoza's Viewpoint of Eternity; the Social Contract of Hobbes, Rousseau and Locke; Kant's Categorical Imperative and Rawls's Veil of Ignorance.

Morality, then, is still something larger than our inherent moral sense, and the science of morality does not make moral reasoning and conviction obsolete. Instead, it provides insight into how our moral reasoning can work.

At the very least, the science tells us that even when our adversaries' agenda is most baffling, they may simply be in the throes of a moral mind-set that appears to them to be every bit as mandatory and universal as ours does to us. And in any conflict in which a meeting of the minds is not completely hopeless, a recognition that the other guy is acting from moral rather than evil reasons can be a first patch of common ground. One side can acknowledge the other's concern for community or stability or fairness or dignity, even while arguing that some

other value should trump it in that instance. Liberals, for example, can ratify conservatives' concern with families while noting that gay marriage is perfectly consistent with that concern.

The science of the moral sense also can alert us to ways in which our psychological makeup can get in the way of reaching defensible moral conclusions. The moral sense, we are learning, is as vulnerable to illusion as the other senses. It is apt to confuse morality with purity, status and conformity. And it tends to reframe practical problems as moral crusades.

Though wise people have long reflected on how we can be blinded by our own sanctimony, it still crops up. In his influential essay "The Wisdom of Repugnance," Leon Kass, former chair of the President's Council on Bioethics, argued that we should disregard reason when it comes to cloning and other biomedical technologies and go with our gut. He concludes: "Repugnance may be the only voice left that speaks up to defend the central core of our humanity. Shallow are the souls that have forgotten how to shudder."

Of course, through the years people have shuddered at all kinds of morally irrelevant violations of purity in their culture: touching an untouchable, drinking from the same water fountain as a black man, allowing Jewish blood to mix with Aryan blood. And if the shudder test had carried the day, we never would have had autopsies, vaccinations, blood transfusions, artificial insemination, organ transplants and in vitro fertilization, all of which were denounced as immoral when they were new.

Moralization is rearing its head again today in climate change. In too many discussions, the cause of global warming is attributed to moral failings -- overindulgence (too many S-U-V's) and defilement (polluting the atmosphere) -- while the solution is cast as moral revival -- temperance (through conservation) and expiation (buying carbon offsets).

But casting the issue in moral terms can mislead. Even if every last American became conscientious about his or her carbon emissions, the effect on climate change would be minor, if for no other reason than that two billion Indians and Chinese are unlikely to copy our born-again virtue. While voluntary conservation is one step, other required actions will have to be morally boring --

like a carbon tax and new energy technologies -- or even taboo, like nuclear power and deliberate manipulation of the ocean and atmosphere. Our habit of moralizing problems, merging them with intuitions of purity and contamination, and resting content when we just **feel** right about what we've done and what we've forbidden, can get in the way of actually doing the right thing.

Thus, the science of the moral sense can advance morality, by helping us to see through the illusions that evolution and culture have saddled us with. It can allow us to appreciate the moral ambiguities of a saintly nun who deliberately allows suffering, and a cut-throat billionaire who uses his billions to save lives. And it allows us to focus on goals we can share and defend, that advance the common good. As Anton Chekhov wrote, "Man will become better when you show him what he is like."

Thank you, and shalom