Four Myths of Morality

Nicholas Epley

University of Chicago
Booth School of Business
“The whole of science is nothing more than the refinement of everyday thinking.”

—Albert Einstein
Four “Myths” About Morality

1. It’s the people: There are good guys and bad guys.
Characteristics of a Psychopath (Hare, 1998):
—Lack of remorse and empathy for others
—Impulsive and erratic behavior
—Average/above average intelligence but lack of focus
—Superficial charm
—Calm and at ease with deception and lying.
—Failure to learn from past mistakes
—A high sense of self-worth and narcissism
—Insincerity and unreliability
—Impersonal sex life and detachment

—Estimated at < 1 % of the general population
—Widely quoted myth: “10% of Wall Streeters are psychopaths”

—Robert Hare’s correction: www.hare.org/comments/comment2.html

—Probably not any of you, or the people working for you.
Background Survey:
Levenson’s Psychopathy Scale (1996)

Factor 1: Empathy
Higher numbers, less empathy

Factor 2: Antisocial Behavior
Higher numbers, more antisocial
Background Survey:
Levenson’s Psychopathy Scale (1996)

Factor 1: Empathy
Higher numbers, less empathy

Factor 2: Antisocial Behavior
Higher numbers, more antisocial

Average (27.81 vs. 29.00)

Average (18.93 vs. 20.00)
Background Survey:
Levenson’s Psychopathy Scale (1996)

Factor 1: Empathy
Higher numbers, less empathy

Factor 2: Antisocial Behavior
Higher numbers, more antisocial

Average (18.93 vs. 20.00)

Average (27.81 vs. 29.00)

2 SDs
The Banality of Evil...

Stanley Milgram (1974)
The Banality of Evil...

Stanley Milgram (1974)
The Banality of Evil…

Stanley Milgram (1974)

Recent replication w/ ABC News (Burger, 2009)
—70% obedience with voice feedback
—No gender difference.
—modestly predicted by empathic concern ($r = .26$)

% choosing highest shock level:

Exp. #1 (Baseline): 65%
Exp. #3 (Touch victim): 30%
Exp. #14 (Authority as victim): 0%
Exp. #15 (Contradictory Authority): 0%
Exp. #17 (Peer Rebels): 10%
Exp. #18 (Peer Obeys): 93%
The Banality of Evil…

Bystander nonintervention—e.g., Walter Vance on Black Friday

Black Friday: Target Shoppers Step Over Walter Vance As He Collapses, Dies

The Huffington Post  |  Tara Kelly
First Posted: 11/27/11 08:15 PM ET  |  Updated: 11/30/11 04:27 PM ET

Vance’s co-worker: "Where is the good Samaritan side of people? How could you not notice someone was in trouble? I just don't understand if people didn't help what their reason was, other than greed because of a sale."
Rogue Traders

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

This article is about the Australian band Rogue Traders. For the BBC television programme, see Rogue Traders.

Rogue Traders were an Australian electronic, pop rock band formed in 2002 by mainstav James.
In my book, … I angered some people by suggesting that
[the] Wall Street C.E.O.s involved in the run-up to the
financial crisis were “neither sociopaths nor idiots nor
felons. For the most part, they are bright, industrious, not
particularly imaginative Americans who worked their way
up, cultivated the right people, performed a bit better than
their colleagues, and found themselves occupying a corner
office during one of the great credit booms of all time.”

Four “Myths” About Morality

1. It’s the people: There are good guys and bad guys.

   Truth: *Mythical* figures are evil or good, black or white. Most people are gray. Good people can do bad things under predictable circumstances.
Four “Myths” About Morality

1. It’s the people: There are good guys and bad guys.

   Truth: Mythical figures are evil or good, black or white. Most people are gray. Good people can do bad things under predictable circumstances.

2. It’s all about motives: Bad acts are guided by bad intentions, Good acts act guided by good intentions.

   —The myth of pure evil (Baumeister, 1997). Evil actions caused by evil intent.

   “Well, you know what happens is, it starts out with you taking a little bit, maybe a few hundred, a few thousand. You get comfortable with that, and before you know it, it snowballs into something big.”
   
   Vanity Fair (2009)

   "Everybody on the outside kept claiming I was a sociopath.”
   
   About Ruth. “She feels sorry for me, because she knows I’m not a horrible person.”
   
   New York Magazine (2011)
Four “Myths” About Morality

1. It’s the people: There are good guys and bad guys.
   Truth: Mythical figures are evil or good, black or white. Most people are gray. Good people can do bad things under predictable circumstances.

2. It’s all about motives: Bad acts are guided by bad intentions, Good acts act guided by good intentions.
   —The fundamental attribution error (Ross, 1977)
     Overestimating the degree to which behavior is caused by consistent intentions, abilities, or dispositions, and underestimating the power of the context to weaken the relationship between actions and intentions.
   —Bad Apples and Rogue Traders instead of Bad Barrels and Rogue Culture
   —Overestimate the extent to which our own actions are guided by our good intentions. Think we are more ethical than we actually are.
     e.g., Daffodil Days… (Epley & Dunning, 2000)
Daffodil Days:

Epley & Dunning, 2000
Daffodil Days:

Epley & Dunning, 2000
Four “Myths” About Morality

1. It’s the people: There are good guys and bad guys.

   Truth: Mythical figures are evil or good, black or white. Most people are gray. Good people can do bad things under predictable circumstances.

2. It’s all about motives: Bad acts are guided by bad intentions, Good acts act guided by good intentions.

   —Truth: Context is surprisingly powerful. Bad can be done with good intentions, or when failing to consider ethical implications of action (Ethical Blindness).
Four “Myths” About Morality

1. It’s the people: There are good guys and bad guys.
   
   Truth: Mythical figures are evil or good, black or white. Most people are gray. Good people can do bad things under predictable circumstances.

2. It’s all about motives: Bad acts are guided by bad intentions, Good acts act guided by good intentions.

3. It’s about ethical principles: Ethical actions are guided by ethical reasoning.

Analogy of the mind as a Rider on an Elephant (Haidt)
   Elephant is emotional, impatient, myopic, social, and fast
   Rider is rational, analytical, reasonable, rule-based, and slow
Ethics without reasoning...

—Moral Dumbfounding (Haidt, Bjorklund, & Murphy, 2000)

—Jennifer the Cannibal: “Anything wrong with what she did?”

—Haidt’s method: ask why?, remove reason, still wrong?

Participants would report it was still wrong even when reasons were removed: moral dumbfounding.
Ethics without reasoning…
Four “Myths” About Morality

1. It’s the people: There are good guys and bad guys.
   
   Truth: Mythical figures are evil or good, black or white. Most people are gray. Good people can do bad things under predictable circumstances.

2. It’s all about motives: Bad acts are guided by bad intentions, Good acts act guided by good intentions.
   
   —Truth: Context is surprisingly powerful. “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.”

3. It’s about ethical principles: Ethical actions are guided by ethical reasoning.
   
   —Truth: Reasoning often follows action to justify, explain, or rationalize it.
Four “Myths” About Morality

1. It’s the people: There are good guys and bad guys.

   Truth: Mythical figures are evil or good, black or white. Most people are gray. Good people can do bad things under predictable circumstances.

2. It’s all about motives: Bad acts are guided by bad intentions, Good acts act guided by good intentions.
   —Truth: Context is surprisingly powerful. “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.”

3. It’s about ethical principles: Ethical actions are guided by ethical reasoning.
   —Truth: Reasoning often follows action to justify, explain, or rationalize it.

4. Everyone is different: Everything is relative.
   —Have to teach people your view of right and wrong.
Perception

Unethical

Ethical

Reality

Unethical

Ethical
The Moral Instinct: The Golden Rule, again and again…

“You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”
**Judaism**, Leviticus 19:18

“Whatsoever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them.”
**Christianity**, Matthew 7:12

“Not one of you is a believer until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself.
**Islam**, Forty Hadith of an-Nawawi, 13

“A man should wander about treating all creatures as he himself would be treated.”
**Jainism**, Sutrakritanga, 1:11.33

“Try your best to treat others as you would wish to be treated yourself.”
**Confucianism**, Mencius VII:A.4

“One should not behave towards others in a way which is disagreeable to oneself. This is the essence of morality.”
**Hinduism**, Mahabharata, Anusasana Parva 113:8

“Act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it become a universal law.”
**Immanuel Kant**, Categorical Imperative
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Moral Principle</th>
<th>How much would you need to be paid to:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Care</strong></td>
<td>1. Stick a sterile needle into your arm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Stick a sterile needle into a child’s arm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fairness</strong></td>
<td>1. Accept an errant TV from a friend.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Accept a stolen TV from a friend.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Community</strong></td>
<td>1. Say something bad about your nation that you don’t believe on a radio station in your own country.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Say something bad about your nation that you don’t believe on a radio station a foreign country.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Authority</strong></td>
<td>1. Slap a male friend in the face for a comedy sketch.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Slap your father in the face for a comedy sketch.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sanctity</strong></td>
<td>1. Attend avant-garde play where actors act like fools.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. ... actors act like animals for 30 minutes, crawling naked on the floor and grunting like chimpanzees.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Graham, Haidt, & Nosek (2009): $ (0-4 scale)
Graham, Haidt, & Nosek (2009):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Moral Principle</th>
<th>How much would you need to be paid to:</th>
<th>$ (0-4 scale)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Care</td>
<td>1. Stick a sterile needle into your arm.</td>
<td>1.55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Stick a sterile needle into a child’s arm.</td>
<td>3.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairness</td>
<td>1. Accept an errant TV from a friend.</td>
<td>.64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Accept a stolen TV from a friend.</td>
<td>2.93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>1. Say something bad about your nation that you don’t believe on a radio station in your own country.</td>
<td>.71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Say something bad about your nation that you don’t believe on a radio station a foreign country.</td>
<td>1.39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authority</td>
<td>1. Slap a male friend in the face for a comedy sketch.</td>
<td>.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Slap your father in the face for a comedy sketch.</td>
<td>1.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sanctity</td>
<td>1. Attend avant-garde play where actors act like fools.</td>
<td>.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. ... actors act like animals for 30 minutes, crawling naked on the floor and grunting like chimpanzees.</td>
<td>1.45</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Observe Fairness in:
- Rhesus monkeys (Brosnan & DeWall, 2004)
- Prelinguistic infants (Hamlin, 2013)

Observe Ingroup Loyalty in:
- Capuchin monkeys (DeWall et al., 2008)
- Prelinguistic infants (Kanngiesser & Warneken, 2012)

Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009
Four “Myths” About Morality

1. It’s the people: There are good guys and bad guys.
   
   Truth: Mythical figures are evil or good, black or white. Most people are gray. Good people can do bad things under predictable circumstances.

2. It’s all about motives: Bad acts are guided by bad intentions, Good acts act guided by good intentions.
   
   —Truth: Context is surprisingly powerful. “The road to hell is paved with good intentions.”

3. It’s about ethical principles: Ethical actions are guided by ethical reasoning.
   
   —Truth: Reasoning often follows action to justify, explain, or rationalize it.

4. Everyone is different: Everything is relative.
   
   —Basic moral foundations to build on, even amid differences generated by individual experiences, background, and immediate context.
These four “myths”…

1. It’s the people.
2. It’s all about motives.
3. It’s about ethical principles.
4. Everyone is different.

…create misperception:

Unethical behavior is mainly a BELIEF problem.

So what?

This conference:

Ethics as a DESIGN problem.
Ethics by Design

Design to match constraints. Humans:

1. Have limited memory.
2. Have limited attention.
3. Pursue goals myopically.
4. Are highly social.
Ethics by Design

Design to match constraints. Humans:

1. Have limited memory.
2. Have limited attention.
3. Pursue goals myopically.
4. Are highly social.

A framework for designing ETHICs:

1. Explicit beliefs: Design missions that are clear, memorable, and actionable.

2. Thoughts during judgment: Design policies and heuristics that keep ethics top of mind.
   “Is it right,” rather than “Is it legal?”

3. Incentives: Design with multiple incentives in mind, aligned with ethics.
   Money and penalties, but also purpose, meaning, and reputation.
   Reward ethical behavior in addition to punishing unethical behavior.

   Include ethics in key drivers of organizational behavior: hiring, promotion, evaluation, rewarding.
   Highlight Beacons, not just Black Holes.