

INTRO TO ETHICS

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A woman with long dark hair, wearing a white patterned sweater, is shown in profile from the waist up. She is holding a smartphone in her right hand, pointing it towards a bright sunset over the ocean. The sun is a large, glowing orb in the center of the frame, casting a golden light across the sky and reflecting on the water. The overall mood is serene and contemplative.

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Introduction

In the previous chapter, we looked at contributions to the practice of ethics from the history of philosophy. One of the things that stands out in this overview is that most philosophy has approached ethics as a rational, theoretical, reflective process, while asserting that non-rational human experiences like impulses, gut-responses, urges, passions, desires, feelings and emotions should be kept out of the moral decision-making process. What about that?

This restrained attitude toward non-rational human processes is perhaps because non-rational human responses are rooted in the movements of the sensuous body. Dependency on these non-rational, bodily impulses was thought to lead to moral confusion and error. The rational intellect, on the other hand, was thought to be more reliable for making good moral judgments. Therefore, it has long been taught that we should lead our life according to what is the most rational and reasonable thing to do.

But human beings often don't act rationally. We like to do what we feel like doing. We frequently make moral judgments based on emotions, feelings and inclinations.

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Modern social psychological research has provided something of a needed corrective to the traditional philosophical dualism of mind and body, where the rational mind is idealized and the emotional passions are sent into moral exile.

By bringing to light through empirical research the way in which cognitive bias, unconscious situational factors, selective perceptual awareness, and the emotions impact the moral judgments we make every day, social psychological research has advanced the discussion and practice of personal, normative ethics.

In our everyday engagement with our social world, situated as we are in multiple, interlaced practices with other people, we respond with our whole self as a single moral entity, and not in a piecemeal, dualistic, calculative fashion with the moral mind trying to control the immoral body.

Existentially speaking, your whole body is suffused with mind and morality, immersed in it, as was reflected in the idea of *embodied cognition* in the previous chapter. In our pre-conscious responsiveness to other people we are moral before we know it. And even the deepest reflection never fully catches up with who we already are.

This chapter does not aspire to survey the whole field of moral psychology. Rather, our focus will concentrate on those contributions from moral psychological research that are particularly helpful for accomplishing the practical goals of this text. To do this, we will first turn to a consideration of various **cognitive and perceptual biases** that undermine moral perception and judgment. And then we will look at the importance of **emotion** in moral decision-making.

What is moral psychology?

The field of Moral Psychology is an empirical, descriptive, and objective science focusing on human and animal behavior that has made many contributions in recent years to the behavioral study of ethics.

Moral psychological research, using controlled, empirical experimentation methods, aims to describe objectively and in concrete, verifiable terms, how people act morally in various life situations and how elements of those situations can influence moral consciousness and



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behavior. This research is necessarily interdisciplinary, drawing on both the empirical resources of the human sciences and the conceptual resources of philosophical ethics.

Let's begin by looking at a specific example of how psychological research connects with moral deliberation and understanding in the research of social psychologist Dr. Paul Piff.



VIDEO (16:36): Professor Piff discusses his research on greed.

Paul Piff

Paul Piff, Ph.D. is a Social Psychology professor at U.C. Berkeley. Dr. Piff and his students carried out structured empirical experiments that focused on determining how the situational factors of income level and social position might influence moral behavior and self-understanding in various naturalistic and controlled circumstances. In the video above, Dr. Piff describes the experiments he performed. Check it out!

Dr. Piff found that “relative to lower-class individuals, individuals from upper-class backgrounds behaved more unethically in both naturalistic and laboratory settings” such as ignoring pedestrians in crosswalks, lying in a negotiation, cheating at a board game, or stealing candy from an off-limits jar.

Dr. Piff concluded that “upper-class individuals’ unethical tendencies are accounted for, in part, by their more favorable attitudes toward greed.”¹ Thus, as individuals climb the ladder of success financially and socially they become more self-interested and focused on the usefulness rather than welfare of others. Watch the video above and see what you think.

Dr. Piff’s findings seem to suggest that the pursuit of self-interest is a more fundamental motive among society’s elite, and the increased desire for material signs of success associated with greater wealth and status can promote wrongdoing. Unethical behavior in the service of self-

¹ Paul Piff, et al, “[Higher social class predicts increased unethical behavior.](#)” *Proceedings of the National Association of Science*, vol. 109 / no. 11 (2012), p. 4088. See also, Paul Piff “Does Money Make You Mean?” YouTube 12/20/2013. <https://youtu.be/bJ8Kq1wucsk>

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interest that enhances the individual's wealth and rank may be a self-perpetuating dynamic that further exacerbates economic disparities in society, Dr. Piff concluded from his research.

Then, based on the experimental outcomes of his work, Dr. Piff suggests that this mostly unconscious tendency of wealthy persons to lie, cheat, steal, and be more focused on self-interest and getting ahead at the expense of others is at the root of *income and wealth inequality*; and since income and wealth inequality is a bad thing that is causing harm to many, in Dr. Piff's view, we should do something about it. Rich people *are* greedy, Dr. Piff is asserting, so they *should* donate more money to help others. They *should* change their attitude, stop lying and stealing, be more altruistic and brake for pedestrians in crosswalks.

How about it? Does the empirical evidence about what is the case in Piff's experiments justify the moral assertion about what *should* be done? What do you think?

Zaria Gorvett



Zaria Gorvett

A second example of how social psychological research has been contributing to an understanding of our moral value formation and its everyday deployment is reflected in Zaria Gorvett's insightful article entitled "The reasons why politics feels so tribal in 2016," written just before the last U.S. presidential election featuring Trump versus Clinton.²

It is well known that, according to social psychological research, our moral beliefs and judgments can be influenced *externally* by unconsciously experienced situational factors and then be uncritically reinforced through *internal*, cognitive strategies that are biased or prejudiced. Gorvett applies these ideas to civil discourse today.

Gorvett believes that civil discourse is currently becoming more polarized into rigid, narrow-minded, camps of belief with little empathy for the other side. Such behavior, Gorvett asserts, is being reinforced by **situational factors** in modern society including educational levels, place of residence, and the internet ... *all of which facilitate the possibility of limiting our social interaction to others who have beliefs that are similar to our own, while avoiding those who have dissimilar beliefs. And that is what is creating increasing social value polarization.*

Gorvett cites the research of psychologist Matt Motyl of the University of Chicago who showed that people are more likely to move to places where other people share their moral and political views, and it is easier for them to do that these days because of the high mobility in our society. Online communities also make it easier for like-minded individuals to interact exclusively

² Gorvett, Zaria. "[The reasons why politics feels so tribal in 2016](https://www.bbc.com/future/2016/08/160816_tribal_politics)," BBC Future, www.bbc.com British Broadcasting Corporation, August 2016.

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with other like-minded persons and give a thumbs-down to opposing opinions, thus perpetuating the so-called “**group polarization effect**”:

people tend to gravitate toward others who share their views and avoid people who don't, which tends to further radicalize and reinforce the inflexible rigidity of their views, and further delegitimize the opposition.



Dr. Lilliana Mason: Social Polarization and the 2016 Elections. Mason's research shows that Democrats and Republicans are becoming more tribal and isolated from one another. (5:25)

Such critically unchecked views are then held in place by unconscious psychological strategies that are deployed to reinforce our biased and prejudiced beliefs. These strategies include things like “**the objectivity delusion**” (*the belief that I am being objectively true and reasonable, so if you don't agree with me you are being unreasonable*); “**the illusion of asymmetric insight**” (*the belief that I understand the views of others better than they understand my views*) and “**false consensus**” (*the belief that, if they knew what I know, any reasonable person would surely agree with me*).

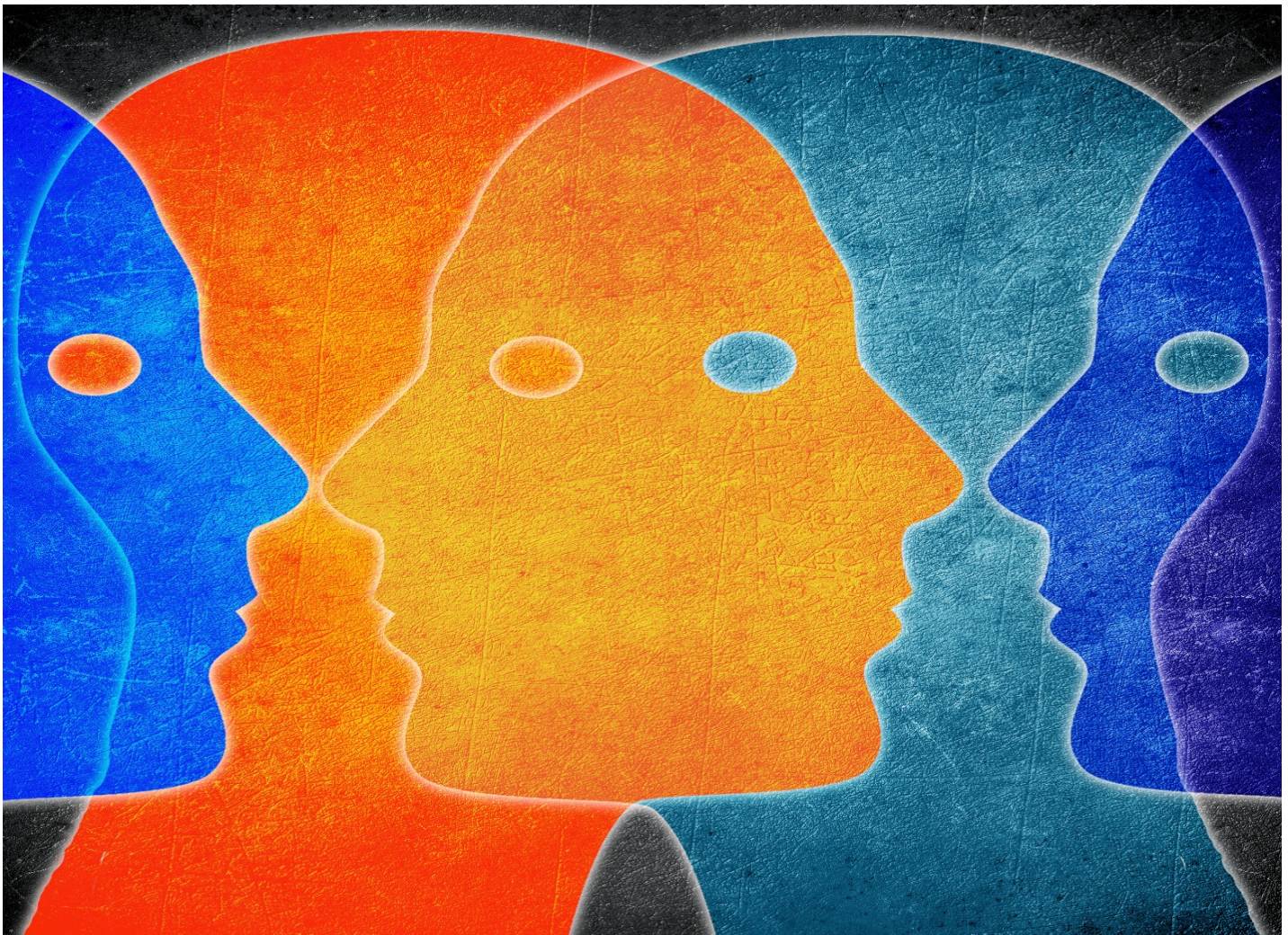
These strategies for maintaining biased and prejudiced beliefs are ***used to create and conceal our own moral blind spots***. Human beings alone seem to have figured out how to effectively fool themselves about their own true moral motivations without letting themselves know that they are doing so—a dubious achievement. The corrective for the development of this power of self-deception is to be challenged by an exposure to moral beliefs that are different from your own and that challenge you to reflect on the soundness and meaningfulness of your own

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moral beliefs and values. Because this takes us out of our “comfort zone,” we resist and build walls of self-deception.

The psychological research on bias that Gorvett points to in her reflection on how polarized moral value positions are becoming in the U.S. is very applicable to our formation of moral value orientations in the ongoing everyday construction and constant reconfiguring of our morality. It is exactly these unconscious biases and prejudices operating in the domain of our everyday personal and professional engagements, *and which can result in disastrous life consequences*, that our textbook aims to elucidate and make available to your conscious control.

It is only by being challenged by others who hold dissimilar views from your own that your own moral perceptual consciousness will be exercised and developed to its fullest potential in order to achieve living the best possible life.



How psychology informs morality

Bias and Prejudice

Psychological studies focusing on morality have revealed that unconscious biases can radically alter the way you perceive, evaluate, and act in moral situations. Biases can blind you to the way you are unconsciously influenced in your beliefs and values by various aspects of those situations ... without your knowing it.

Hot and cold empathy gaps, for example, are perceptual biases brought on by intense emotion, or the lack of it, which prevent us from empathizing with or understanding how others feel, or how we ourselves are being influenced by those emotions.

Confirmation bias causes us to unconsciously give more weight to evidence that confirms our own position than to evidence that is contrary to it.

Attractiveness bias is an unconscious bias that tilts peoples' evaluation in favor of individuals in hiring and other situations who fit the cultural or societal standard of "beauty."

Bias blind spot Studies show that *almost everyone* demonstrates bias blind spot in which they perceive bias easily in others while pretty much denying it in themselves.

Psychological research has repeatedly established the widespread prevalence of unconscious perceptual and cognitive biases like those listed above. Also, research reveals that believing you are less biased than your peers has detrimental consequences on judgments and behaviors, such as accurately judging whether advice is useful. This research has important ramifications for morality. A moral blind spot can ruin your shot at living the best possible life.





A LIST OF BIASES

People seem to have no idea how biased they are. Whether a good decision-maker or a bad one, everyone thinks that they are less biased than their peers. This susceptibility to the bias blind spot appears to be pervasive, and is unrelated to people's intelligence, self-esteem, and actual ability to make unbiased judgments and decisions³

Research has found that the extent to which one is blind to his or her own bias has important consequences for the resulting quality of decision-making. People more prone to think they are less biased than others are less accurate at evaluating their abilities relative to the abilities of others; they listen less to others' advice and are less likely to learn from training that would help them make less biased judgments.

So, it seems clear that these and other unconscious perceptual and cognitive biases and prejudices can interfere with how you make moral judgments. And remember, moral judgments are always aligned with your desire to live the best possible life. Thus, unconscious biases can influence you to make damaging mistakes in moral judgments that can negatively alter the entire course of your life.

By working to see biases in your own perceptions and doing what is necessary to eliminate or manage them effectively, you will dramatically increase your chances for success in actualizing the best possible life and achieving personal and professional success.

DEBIASING

Helping people get passed their biases has become a thriving start-up business. The technique used is called "[debiasing](#)." Debiasing is the reduction of biases in judgment and decision-making through incentives, nudges, understanding, reinforcement, and training. [Cognitive bias mitigation](#) and [cognitive bias modification](#) are forms of debiasing specifically applicable to cognitive biases and their effects.

Is possible to ever become a completely "debiased" human being, a person who is totally free of bias and prejudice? Is bias a necessary part of human cognitive/perceptual functioning?

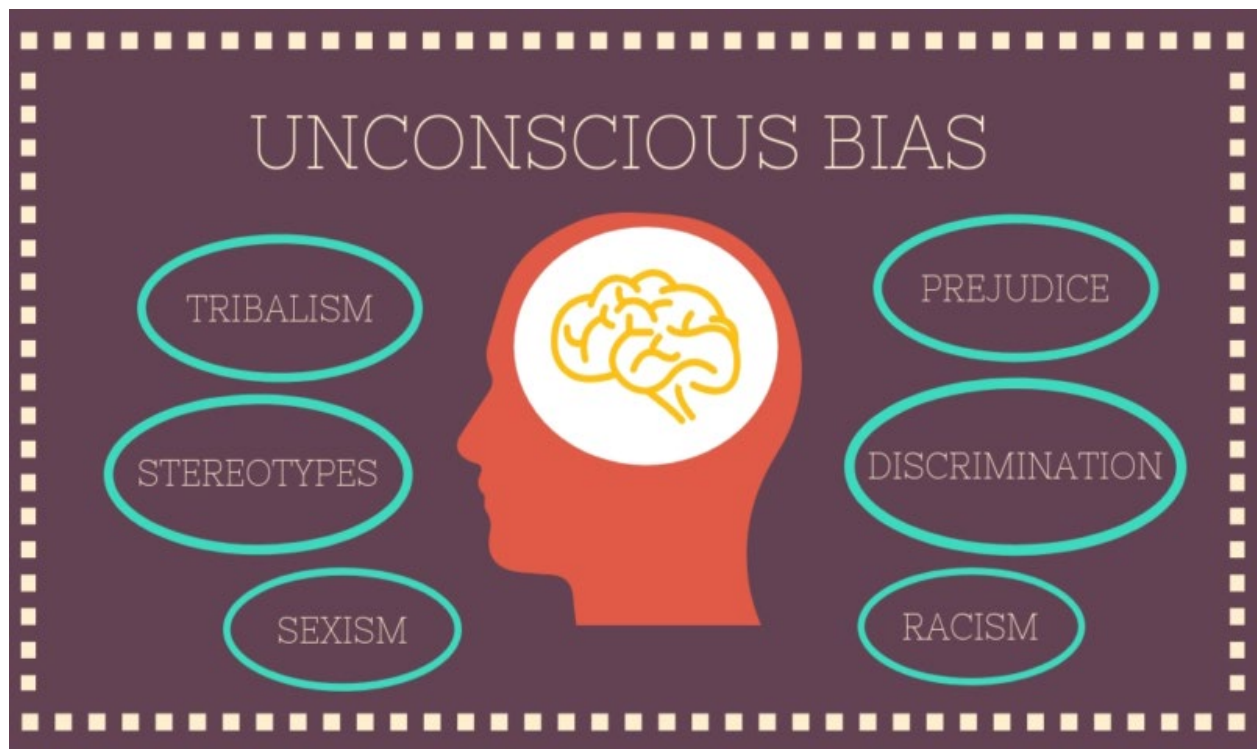
³ [Bias Blind Spot: Structure, Measurement, and Consequences](#). Irene Scopelliti, et al, *Management Science* 2015 61:10 , 2468-2486.

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When you think about bias as going against the norm of how “*the reasonable person*” would act in or evaluate a particular situation, you can see the necessity for distinguishing between bias, on the one hand, and original, divergent, critical, creative, disruptive and entrepreneurial thinking, on the other—a distinction which might be difficult to make clearly in some instances. The thing about most bias, however, is that it is entrenched, repetitive, and unrecognized as a bias.

Is bias a necessary aspect of human perception? We each see things from our own unique perspective even though, ambiguously, we also see those things with the belief that others see them in the same way as we do; which they maybe *do*, sort of, but, ambiguously, also they don't. From this ambiguous perspective, given the conjunction of both our individual uniqueness and simultaneous solidarity with others that ‘structures’ human perception, bias may be a necessary part of human perceptual experience. Like the need for a ‘slant’ in supposedly ‘objective’ news reporting, human perception may require a creative bias in order to form a new or revolutionary perspective.

So, perhaps it is not a matter of ridding yourself of bias and prejudice completely, but rather a matter of becoming aware of your pre-rational biases and how they might influence your perception and judgment. But keep this in mind: **believing that you are free of bias is itself a belief that is undoubtedly subject to bias.**



Cold and Hot Cognition

So-called “[cold and hot](#)” cognition (not to be confused with the bias of “hot and cold empathy gaps, see above) and “[slow and fast](#)” decision-making ‘systems’ illustrate another

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contribution from the psychological research that has implications for understanding moral feelings, motivation and responsiveness.

Hot cognition is a hypothesis about motivated reasoning in which a person's thinking is influenced by their emotional state. Put simply, hot cognition is cognition colored by emotion. Moral judgments made within the context of hot cognition can be problematic although hot responses are common in moral contexts since values are often held deeply with strong emotional wraps.

Hot cognition contrasts with cold cognition, which implies cognitive processing of information that is independent of emotional involvement.

Hot cognition is associated with cognitive and physiological arousal, in which a person is more responsive to environmental factors than usual. Hot cognition may arise, with varying degrees of strength, in politics, religion, business, personal relationships and other sociopolitical contexts where you are likely to encounter moral issues which are inevitably tied to emotion. As it is automatic, rapid and led by emotion, hot cognition may consequently cause biased and low-quality moral decision-making. For example, it is a bias to believe that you are capable of the same quality of decision-making under hot and cold cognition. In fact, research shows that hot cognition distorts our rational decision-making capabilities without our realizing it.

Thus, it is prudent not to make important decisions while under the influence of hot cognition. On the other hand, too cold of a response may cause you to miss a potentially rewarding opportunity. Knowing when to move fast and knowing when to slow down is a good trick to learn.

Slow and fast thinking and decision making



[From “Deciding, Fast and Slow” by David Ludden, Ph.D.](#)

“Traditionally, economists have assumed that humans are rational decision makers, yet in recent decades psychologists working in the field of [behavioral economics](#) have come to recognize that people are limited in their ability to make rational decisions. In some cases, such as when we have the time and the cognitive resources to think things through, we can be quite rational in our [decision making](#). But when we’re constrained by time or bombarded with other things that demand our [attention](#), we tend to make quick, gut-feeling decisions. In his 2011 book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*, psychologist and Nobel laureate Daniel Kahneman explains the so-called dual-process theory of decision making for lay audiences.

“Going with your gut isn’t necessarily bad. We humans have evolved some pretty effective intuitions that usually lead us to very quick—and reasonably accurate—judgments, at least in the social realm. Likewise, taking the time to make a rational decision can lead us to what psychologists call “paralysis by analysis.” That is, we’re unable to make a decision in real time because we’re bogged down by slow reasoning

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processes. For example, there's no rational process for deciding what to order for lunch, and so we just have to go with whatever feels right.

“According to dual-process theory, intuitive thinking is fast, while rational thinking is slow.”

Emotions, ethics, morality

Moral psychologists have increasingly focused on emotion as a key component of moral judgment and action. There are numerous theories of emotions. These theories focus mostly on what causes emotions and what we are experiencing when we report that we are feeling this or that emotion. But none of the theories of emotion are universally accepted by all researchers.

In short, we certainly know that we have emotions experientially and we have an immediate awareness of those emotions in connection to moral judgments. But we don't seem to know much more about emotions from a scientific point of view after that.

Fortunately, what matters most from the ethical perspective of this text—geared toward illuminating how your morality operates in your everyday experience—is your clear awareness of the emotions you are having at any given time; how and when they seem to come about for you; what the outcome of the emotional experience is; and your ability to manage your emotions (and others') within a moral context. This can be tricky to accomplish because emotions bridge the rational and non-rational domains. Sometimes emotion behaves the way thinking behaves. Emotions can be used in a rational way to make judgments. At other times, however, emotion behaves like passionate desire. In this mode it can be hard to control.

I am more interested in you being able to effectively work with highly charged and sometimes problematic energies rather than trying to scientifically figure out the nature of emotional 'mechanisms'. Phenomenological investigation begins with your subjective emotional experience, which is always immediately available to you, but it must be brought from the intuitive level into reflective consciousness in order to assess its coherence and meaningfulness.

Merely asserting that “I feel this is the right thing to do” is insufficient for our purposes without unpacking what those feelings that are motivating your moral judgment and being able to justify them. With this practical goal in mind, let us consider emotions from the perspective of the Emotional Intelligence.

Emotional Intelligence (EI)

The ability to recognize, express and control our emotions is essential, but so is our ability to understand, interpret, and respond to the emotions of others. Imagine a world in which you could not understand when a friend was feeling sad or when a co-worker was angry or when your child was feeling needy. Psychologists generally refer to these affective, emotional skills and abilities as “emotional intelligence.”

From a everyday perspective, emotional intelligence (fast thinking) may be more important than rational, calculative intelligence (slow thinking). This is particularly true from a moral point of view, since many of our everyday moral judgments are emotional judgments rather than

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reflective, cognitive judgments. We can know with great assurance that we do not approve of something without knowing clearly why we don't approve of it. With reflection on our emotional judgment, however, we can come to know why we disapprove.

Emotional Intelligence: The Social Skills You Weren't Taught in School

Emotional intelligence (EI) refers to the ability to perceive, control, and evaluate emotions. Some researchers suggest that emotional intelligence can be learned and strengthened, while others claim it is an inborn characteristic.

Since 1990, Peter Salovey and John D. Mayer have been the leading researchers on emotional intelligence. In their seminal article "Emotional Intelligence" they defined emotional intelligence as a "subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them and to use this information to guide one's thinking and actions."⁴

Learning to recognize what other people are feeling can be tricky. It is challenging enough just to be aware of what I am feeling. When I get very angry, for example, it is usually clear to me that I am not merely irritated or bothered or simply disgruntled, but am having a full-blown intense experience of hot, angry emotion in regard to another person, persons, or situation that entails much more powerful energies than simply feeling dismay or irritation.



My anger experience is accompanied by changes in my physical state, like feeling hot or suddenly flushed, and also with a desire to suddenly act out, or maybe a feeling of being on the

⁴ Salovey, Peter and Mayer, John D. "Emotional Intelligence," *Imagination, Cognition and Personality*, vol. 9, (3) March 1990.

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verge of getting out of control, so perhaps a little scary energy in there too. This all seems to happen without me willing it and I may find it difficult to control the anger energy, especially if it seems to happen suddenly in an already hotly charged context.

So, the first skill to develop to become more emotionally intelligent is simply to become more consciously aware of the emotions that you are experiencing at any given time, along with their subtle attributes and complexities, including when and how they occur, etc. This will help a lot when trying to identify what others are feeling, which is a tricky field full of difficulties. So, first try it out on yourself. What emotions are you feeling right now, for example? Try to describe them in as much detail as possible, not just a single word.

You can also ‘reason’ with your emotional experiences to a certain extent. Upon reflection, suppose you notice that you often have the same kind of emotional experience whenever you find yourself in a particular situation, like maybe when you first wake up or when you are under the stress of a work deadline or when you are with certain people. You can use that insight provided by your emotions to make improvements in your routines, like maybe avoiding certain people until after coffee in the morning, or making certain to plan appropriately and take rest breaks when engaged in stress-producing projects, or maybe to see less of certain friends.

The emotions of others as we perceive them can carry a wide variety of meanings, so learning to interpret the sense or meaning of our own and others’ emotional responses can be challenging.

If someone is expressing angry emotions, for example, you must interpret the cause and the strength of their anger and what it might mean. For example, if your boss is acting angrily, it might mean that she is dissatisfied with your work. Or, it could be that she got a speeding ticket on her way to work that morning or is stressed out by a personal relationship. You may be able to help your boss manage her emotions if your EI skills are up to it. But you can certainly manage your own emotions in relation to your boss’s situation. Anger, for example, is something that a person *can* control, don’t you think? Or, can other people cause you to get angry?

EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IS A FAST-GROWING JOB SKILL

The ability to manage emotions effectively is also a crucial, though challenging, part of emotional intelligence. Regulating your emotions with sensitive insight, responding appropriately, and responding to the emotions of others effectively are all important aspects of emotional management. This is a fantastic skill to have as a manager and business leader; perhaps *necessary* to achieve real success. And good for anyone and everyone aspiring to live the best possible life. Acquiring emotional skills, however, requires practice.

According to Salovey and Mayer, the four branches of their model listed below are, "arranged from more basic psychological processes to higher, more psychologically integrated processes. For example, the lowest level concerns the (relatively) simple abilities of perceiving

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and expressing emotion. In contrast, the highest level concerns the conscious, reflective regulation of emotion.”⁵

Remember, emotions are almost always complex—sometimes *incredibly* complex—and can be fluid even within a situation. So, be cautious not to reduce your own or others’ emotional responses to a simple formulaic term like “angry” or “sad” or “happy” when these experiences are usually much subtler, nuanced, inflected, influenced by and connected to other emotions and cognitive states, etc.

A HIERARCHY OF EMOTIONAL SKILLS

1. **Perceiving emotions** (awareness of the emotions you/others are feeling)
2. **Reasoning with emotions** (using emotion to determine what to do)
3. **Understanding emotions** (what do my/others’ emotions mean/signify?)
4. **Managing emotions** (using/guiding my/others’ emotions effectively)

Try this Reflective Exercise: Begin to notice the emotions you have at different times of the day and try to distinguish among them by describing them clearly to yourself. Note whether you are experiencing different emotions simultaneously and whether they are acting harmoniously or are in conflict or what. Notice how long the emotion lasts, whether it is pleasant or not, whether it is recurring or not, the physical, sensual feel of it, its intensity, the extent to which you can control it, and so forth.

Since emotion generally urges us to action, notice toward what kind of action the emotion is encouraging you.

Regarding others, here is a simple practice for sharpening your emotional insightfulness. Try to determine what another person might be feeling and then ask them if they are feeling that way. See how accurate your interpretation is. Try to improve.

⁵ Salovey and Mayer, 1990

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Caution: your perception of how others' might be feeling can easily be biased or skewed by other influences such as your physical condition, the mood you are in, beliefs, etc. "Checking out" your interpretation of others' feeling-states and correcting your view as warranted is the respectful thing to do. You might say: "You seem like you are feeling sad (or joyful or worried...). Are you?"

Moral Sentiment Theory

Moral sentiment theory approaches the intersection of emotion and morality from a naturalistic starting point. Although Moral Sentiment theory focuses on emotions like empathy and sympathy as a basis for moral decision-making, it was developed more as a philosophical theory than a psychological one. Yet, these two disciplines should not be thought of as separate, as should be clear from the present text you are reading.

Because of **Moral Sentiment theory's belief that human beings have an innate moral "sense"** there is a renewed interest in Moral Sentiment theory among contemporary moral psychologists and empirical philosophers. So, it is important to take moral sentiment theory into account, however briefly, since it is a moral orientation that will be useful in adjudicating the relation between emotion and reason in everyday moral practice and will re-appear later in our text.

The term "sentiment" is basically an older term for an emotion or an affective, feeling-state.

For moral sentimentalists, our emotions and desires play a leading role in the anatomy of morality. Some believe moral thoughts are fundamentally sentimental (emotion-oriented); others that moral facts make essential reference to our sentimental responses, or that emotions are the primary source of moral knowledge. Some believe all these things.

The two main attractions of moral sentimentalism are making sense of the practical aspects of morality, on the one hand, and finding a place for morality within a naturalistic worldview, on the other.

The corresponding challenges, however, are accounting for the apparent objectivity and normativity of morality if our moral judgments are merely autonomic (automatic) visceral responses. In other words, if our emotional moral judgments are relative to innate bodily processes, how can objectivism be avoided?

I have tried to respond to this worry with my description of "relational or intersubjective relativism" in the previous chapter, whereby social interaction and connectedness with others influences and socializes our visceral and innate moral reactions.

Recent psychological theories by empirical philosophers emphasizing the centrality of emotion in moral thinking have contributed to the renewed interest in sentimentalist ethics. This is true for the emerging **moral paradigm of Care theory**, for example. Moral sentiment theory has been embraced by some proponents of the Care approach to better understand the existential scene of moral experience from an organic, naturalistic, emotional and non-rational perspective.

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Moral sentiment theory is especially compatible with the Care approach to morality because of Care's emphasis on emotional response and the interpersonal, social dimension of everyday human interaction. The Ethics of Care will be investigated in the following chapter.

Here is a brief summary of Adam Smith's Moral Sentiment theory:

Adam Smith's (1723–1790) Theory of Moral Sentiments was a real scientific breakthrough. It shows that our moral ideas and actions are a product of our very nature as social creatures. It argues that this social psychology is a better guide to moral action than is reason. It identifies the basic rules of prudence and justice that are needed for society to survive, and explains the additional, beneficent, actions that enable it to flourish.

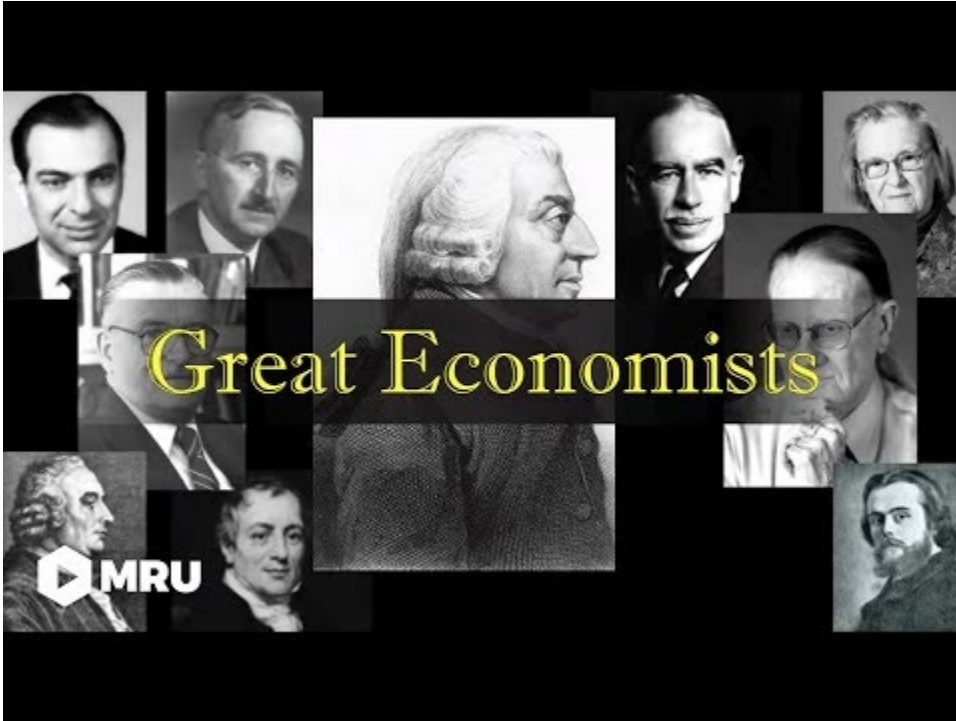
Self-interest and sympathy. As individuals, we have a natural tendency to look after ourselves. That is merely prudence. And yet as social creatures, explains Smith, we are also endowed with a natural sympathy – today we would say empathy – towards others. When we see others distressed or happy, we feel for them – albeit less strongly. Likewise, others seek our empathy and feel for us. When their feelings are particularly strong, empathy prompts them to restrain their emotions so as to bring them into line with our, less intense reactions. Gradually, as we grow from childhood to adulthood, we each learn what is and is not acceptable to other people. Morality stems from our social nature.

Justice and beneficence. So does justice. Though we are self-interested, we again have to work out how to live alongside others without doing them harm. That is an essential minimum for the survival of society. If people go further and do positive good – beneficence – we welcome it but cannot demand such action as we demand justice.

Virtue. Prudence, justice, and beneficence are important. However, the ideal must be that any impartial person, real or imaginary – what Smith calls an impartial spectator – would fully empathize with our emotions and actions. That requires self-command, and in this lies true virtue.

[From The Adam Smith Institute](#)

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Adam Smith's theory of moral sentiments explained (8:21)

FURTHER READING: [Adam Smith's words on market-driven economies still ring true](#)
(*Ravalli Republic*, 8/4/2019)

Some current research in Moral Psychology

Evolutionary psychology/primatology



[Franz de Waal's *The Bonobo and the Atheist*](#)⁶ and, more recently, [Mama's Last Hug](#), present some compelling evidence for a kind of **emotional proto-morality** among high level primates like chimpanzees, orangutans, and bonobos, a proto-morality that was co-opted by organized religion, according to de Waal. A respected primatologist and avowed atheist, de Waal is critical of religion's self-assigned monopoly on morality. The greatest enforcer of good behavior, according to de Waal, isn't the wrath of an omniscient deity or any dogmatic moral framework, but, rather, our own natural emotions.

De Waal offers vivid examples of emotionally guided moral behavior in animals: elephants recruiting friends to help pull a heavy box, chimps refusing undeserved rewards and bonobos comforting losers after a fight. Empathy and reciprocity, the basis of prosocial behavior, appear to have deeper evolutionary roots than religion, according to de Waal.

If morality comes from emotions and religion from superstitions, as de Waal claims, what explains their long, historical entanglement? De Waal suggests that as communities grew larger and more impersonal, religion gained influence as a supervisor of moral behavior. But he believes

⁶ De Waal, Frans. *The Bonobo and the Atheist: In Search of Humanism among the Primates*. New York: Norton, 2013.

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secular humanism could serve a similar role and do so by appealing to human potential rather than defaming human nature, as de Waal thinks dogmatic moral codes do.

De Waal's argument is basically that morality has evolved just as the human species has evolved. Morality was not injected into human beings from above. It grew and developed organically and naturally from below. Indeed, some thinkers believe that this development is already threatening to surpass human control, as seen in the growth of deep learning algorithms, robotics and big data analytics—the new triune god on the block to whom we now routinely expect to find answers to our most pressing questions.⁷

Cognitive & Social Psychology

Some recent research with infants seems to support de Waal's claims about the innate structure of prosocial (moral) behavior and its orientation to the emotions.

Philosophers and psychologists have long believed that babies are born "blank slates," and that it is the role of parents and society to teach babies the difference between right and wrong, good and bad, mean and nice. But, a growing number of researchers now believe differently. Their research argues that babies are in fact born with an innate sense of morality, and, while parents and society can help to develop a belief system in babies, they don't create it. Here is how the



Video (6:23) *Infant morality?*

team of researchers at [Yale University's Infant Cognition Center](#)--known as The Baby Lab--came to that conclusion.

About eight years ago, researchers at the lab began running a series of studies on babies under 24 months to see how much these babies understand about good and bad behavior. The first test is the simplest. Show a baby an example of good behavior, and then an example of bad behavior, then let the baby decide what she likes.

In one experiment, the infants see a gray cat trying to open a big plastic box. The cat tries repeatedly, but he just can't open the lid all the way. A bunny in a green T-shirt comes along and

⁷ Harari, Yuval. *"Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow."* HarperCollins: New York, 2017.

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helps open the box. Then the scenario is repeated, but this time a bunny in an orange T-shirt comes along and slams the box shut before running away. The green bunny is nice and helpful. The orange bunny is mean and unhelpful.

The baby is then presented with the two bunnies from the show. A staff member who doesn't know which bunny was mean and which bunny was nice will offer both bunnies at the same time to the baby. The baby's mother, who is usually present during the study, closes her eyes so as not to influence the baby in any way

Which bunny do the babies choose? More than 80% of the babies in the study showed their preference for the good bunny, either by reaching for the good bunny or staring at it. And with 3-month-olds, that number goes higher, to 87%.

Such research strongly suggests that the rudiments of empathic, prosocial morality are innately present or inborn in infants.⁸

What do you think about that?

A Brief Overview of Chapter 2

Chapter 2 focuses on some important contributions to Ethics from the field of Moral Psychology. Professor Paul Piff's work is a good example of how **empirical psychologists** go about doing empirical research about moral issues and is also a good example of **Descriptive Ethics**. Piff was looking at how **situational factors** -- "social status" and "economic level" - how these factors influence people's understanding of and moral judgments about greed; how this contributes to income inequality; and what should be done about it. You should have watched the video of Piff's TEDx talk and thought about it.

Piff is describing a kind of bias that he thinks forms in people's attitudes as they move up the socioeconomic ladder (the higher up the ladder, the more likely they are to believe that greed is good) and, like most biases, is probably invisible to the person biased in regard to greed.

The focus on **bias** in this chapter is important. It may be the biggest impediment to successful moral decisions and actions in our life. Overcoming bias and prejudice is the first step in the **phenomenological method of research**. If you view your experiences through a filter of bias or prejudice (without believing you are biased, of course), you will not see your experience clearly as it presents itself to you because your perception will be unconsciously skewed by the bias. Thus, you lose the benefit of the reflection and are perhaps led further astray from true

⁸ Van Ijzendoorn, Marinus H, et al. "On embodied and situational morality: neurobiological, parental, and situational determinants of altruism and donating to charity." In de Ruyter, Doret J. and Miedema, Siegren, eds. *Moral Education and Development*. Sense Publishers: The Netherlands, 2011.

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success. Be sure to focus on this in the text so you have a clear understanding of how this works. You should be familiar with the various biases brought up in **Zaria Gorvett's** article.

The section on **emotion** is very important because it seems to be inseparable from moral deliberation and judgment and our experience of moral situations. You should have a clear understanding of how emotion impacts moral judgment.

You should be clear about **Emotional Intelligence**, the difference between “**basic**” and “**moral**” emotions, and the general idea of **Moral Sentiment theory** (emotional moral response is hard-wired or innate and this innate moral sentiment is how we make moral judgments, etc.).

PRACTICE

TERMS TO KNOW

Exercise hint: If you really want to test your understanding of these terms, try this with a friend: First, explain to your willing friend one or more of the terms from the following list. Then, ask your friend to repeat your explanation back to you. Finally, see how close your friend's restatement matches your own understanding. Discuss and bring your understandings into sync. Repeat the exercise. Anyway, you should be able to give brief explanations of these key terms.

- moral psychology
- emotive reasoning
- group polarization effect
- the objectivity delusion
- the illusion of asymmetric insight
- false consensus
- bias
- hot and cold empathy gaps
- confirmation bias
- attractiveness bias
- bias blind spot
- debiasing
- cold and hot cognition

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- emotional intelligence
- emotional skills
- moral sentiment theory

TEST YOUR UNDERSTANDING

1. How does moral psychology differ from moral philosophy?
2. Briefly explain how psychologist Paul Piff relates his experimental research to the moral problem of income equality. How compelling do you think his argument is?
3. Explain how one or more of the specific biases presented in this chapter could influence you to maintain a false belief.
4. Is it possible to be totally free of bias? Is striving to become free of bias a worthy, realistic and meaningful goal?
5. Which of the cognitive biases presented in this chapter involves an unconscious willingness to give more weight to evidence that supports your own view and to downplay contrary or contradictory evidence? Describe an example of this bias. What would be a good practice strategy for overcoming such a bias? Here is one possibility. Watch carefully how you restate the views of others, especially when you do not agree. In your everyday conversations, try practicing the restatement of others' views in a fair and balanced way (even though you might disagree with the view), and, in order to compensate for any possible hidden bias on your part, always give the opposing view the 'benefit of the doubt' in your restatement. Take note whether people agree with your re-statements or not. Heed the feedback wisely
6. We all tend to think that other people are more biased than we are. What is this bias called and what can be done about it? Give an example.
7. Why is hot cognition a problem for moral reasoning? Describe a situation where this could happen.
8. Is it really possible to have a purely rational or a purely emotional moral judgment? Can these two elements of human beings be definitively separated in practice or not? Explain. Give an example.
9. Moral sentiment theory argues that we have a natural ability to empathize and sympathize with others. What does empathy mean to you, exactly? Give an example. Can we ever really put ourselves in another's shoes and feel what they are feeling? Is empathy an exercise in imagination only or do you think we can really feel what someone else feels?

REFLECTION EXERCISES

Begin to notice the emotions you have at different times of the day and try to distinguish among them by describing them clearly to yourself. Note whether you are experiencing different emotions simultaneously and whether they are acting harmoniously or are in conflict or what. Notice how long the emotion lasts, whether it is pleasant or not, whether it is recurring or not, the

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extent to which you can control it, and so forth. Since emotion urges action, notice to what kind of action the emotion is encouraging you. Try to distinguish between basic emotions and moral emotions.

Regarding others, here is a simple practice for sharpening your emotional insightfulness. Try to determine what another person might be feeling and then ask them if they are feeling that way. See how accurate your interpretation is. Try to improve.

Caution: your perception of how others' might be feeling can easily be biased or skewed by other influences such as the mood you are in, your physical condition, drugs, situational factors, etc. So, "checking" with others about your interpretation of their feeling-states and correcting your view as warranted is the respectful thing to do. Phenomenologically, each individual is the only expert on their own experiences. Try asking like this: "You seem to me like you are feeling sad (or joyful or worried or whatever...). Are you?"

SCENARIO EXERCISES

Here is a general note on engaging the scenario exercises in this text: "Sayeed's moral dilemma" is a moral thought experiment meant to highlight an actual, real-life moral dilemma in which you might or could possibly find yourself. For it to be most effective, you should engage the scenario from your total moral orientation, both how you think and how you feel. Try to imagine the scenario as being real, not pretend. Empathize with Sayeed as best you can. What would you really do? Of course, it is not merely an abstract, rational moral dilemma that Sayeed is dealing with. There are also emotional, relational, and situational factors for him in the conflict he is experiencing between how he feels about the fairness and thus importance of impartiality in making moral judgments, on the one hand, and the justifiable partiality he feels toward his friend, on the other. What does it feel like to be in such a bind? How would you deal with it? How would you justify how you dealt with it?

What should Sayeed do?*

Sayeed has the responsibility of filling a position in his firm. His friend Paulo has applied and is qualified, but Maria, a stranger, is even more qualified. Sayeed wants to give the job to his friend Paulo, but he feels guilty, believing that he ought to be impartial in order to be fair in his hiring practices. That's the essence of morality, he initially tells himself. This belief is, however, rejected, as Sayeed resolves that friendship has a moral importance that permits, and perhaps even requires, partiality in some circumstances. So he gives the job to Paulo.

Was Sayeed right? Briefly justify your judgment using any of the moral theories, principles, or orientations we have studied so far. What kind of emotions do you think Sayeed was experiencing? Do you think Sayeed's emotions influenced his hiring decision? What would you do in this situation?

*It might help your engagement with this scenario to review the following terms: ["favoritism,"](#) ["cronyism,"](#) and ["nepotism."](#)