

The Creativity of Everyday Moral Reasoning

Empathy, Disgust, and Moral Persuasion

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At first glance, morality has nothing in common with creativity. It has long been clear to many philosophers that moral judgment (at least the right kind of moral judgment) is achieved through the careful and consistent application of moral principles. This approach is grounded in a school of thought that has long dominated the study of ethics – one that sees reason as the only proper foundation for moral judgment. In the 20th century, this tradition deeply influenced the study of moral judgment within psychology. The most influential theories of moral development in children, for instance, saw the development of moral judgment as being largely contingent upon the development of cognitive skills – as the quality of reasoning improves, so does the quality of moral judgment.

If one holds an exclusively reason-based view of moral judgment, then creativity applies to moral judgment as much as it does to simple arithmetic – not at all. This is because creativity is not rule based, but rule breaking. Creativity is about flexibility and innovation. Creative thinking demonstrates fluency, flexibility, and originality (Torrance, 1959). It is a type of problem solving characterized by its use of novel solutions (Newell, Simon, & Shaw, 1958). If moral reasoning entails the strict application of rules, creativity has nothing to do with it.

So why then would a volume devoted to creativity and reasoning include a contribution on moral reasoning? The answer is plain – mounting evidence suggests that an exclusively reason-based view of moral judgment is wrong as a psychological theory. Not because people do not reason *at all* when they make moral judgments (they most likely reason a great deal; Pizarro & Bloom, 2003), but because other processes are at work as well. There is evidence that everyday moral judgment is a much less rigid, more emotional, and more flexible process than previously described (for reviews, see Haidt, 2001; Pizarro, 2000). As such, there is much more room for creativity in everyday moral judgment than most psychological theories of morality have assumed.

In this revised view of moral judgment, we borrow a key insight from Haidt (2001), who argues that making moral judgments is an inherently interpersonal process. In contrast to the characterization of the moral agent as a lone individual forced to arrive at his or her own moral views through private reflection, the portrayal here is of an interdependent individual who is constantly modifying his or her views through interactions with others. Whether through private conversations, group discussions, or exposure to unidirectional sources of communication (e.g., listening to a sermon, reading a magazine, or watching the news), moral ideas are often spread through social communication. This insight connects our understanding of moral judgment to processes that have been extensively documented in the social psychological research on attitudes, persuasion, and group influence.

It follows from this perspective that the people who are most influential in the day-to-day shaping and molding of moral judgment, the “guardians of the moral order,” might not be the judges, philosophers, and ethicists who are in the business of reasoning about morality. Rather, morality’s true guardians might be found among the ranks of the creative; individuals who are talented at making us see things in novel ways. So although ethical treatises may influence policy, and reasoned Supreme Court decisions may legalize or punish particular behaviors, it is creative communication that influences the everyday morality of individuals.

THE MORAL CIRCLE

Nobody feels guilty about kicking a rock for the simple pleasure of doing so, but doing the same thing to a child is universally forbidden. What’s the difference? Somewhere between rocks and children, moral codes across all cultures draw a boundary line – there exists what the philosopher Peter Singer has characterized as “a moral circle” that distinguishes things that are worthy of moral concern from those that are not (Singer, 1981; see also Bloom, 2004; Pizarro, 2000).

Such a distinction is necessary for the application of moral rules. It specifies, for instance, who and what counts as an “other” in the rule not to harm innocent others. Admittedly, the notion of a moral circle is an oversimplification. For one thing, moral concern is a graded matter. Many people would view the wanton destruction of a fetus or bunny as an immoral act, worse than tearing up a sheet of paper, but few would see it as akin to the murder of a 4-year-old. Also, there is likely to be more than one moral circle – the circle of beings that one should not kill is different than the circle of beings that one is morally obligated to protect and provide for (which includes one’s children, but usually not strangers), and this is different from the circle of beings that are themselves viewed as moral agents (which excludes babies and most animals). Still, the notion of a

single moral circle, though crude, illuminates many significant principles of moral thought and action.

The process of deciding who and what belongs in the moral circle has received little attention from most psychologists studying morality. This is in part because psychologists who study morality have traditionally been interested only in the *processes* responsible for moral judgment, and much less so in the particular *content* of the judgments themselves. For instance, Kohlberg (e.g., 1969) was primarily interested in how individuals arrived at and justified moral conclusions, not necessarily *what* those moral conclusions were. Like Piaget (1932), his interest lay in the development of the cognitive operations responsible for moral judgment in general. In the well-known Heinz dilemma, in which Heinz must decide whether to steal a drug to save the life of his wife, Kohlberg was interested in the principles the participant appealed to and why, not whether the subject was in favor of stealing the drug. Even when psychologists have studied the specific content of moral judgments, such as judgments of blame and responsibility (e.g., Weiner, 1995) or judgments regarding the permissibility of certain acts within and across cultures (e.g., Haidt, 2001; Shweder, Mahapatra, & Miller, 1987), judgments about who or what belongs in the moral circle have gone largely unmentioned.

This is unfortunate, because the expansion and contraction of the moral circle poses an important problem for the psychology of morality. There is no mystery as to why animals, including humans, care about genetic relatives. This was long understood to follow directly from the facts of biological evolution (Darwin, 1859; Dawkins, 1976). Somewhat more puzzling is that even animals demonstrate altruism toward nonkin with whom they regularly interact. But this can be at least partially explained through the theory of *reciprocal altruism* (Trivers, 1971, 1985), which is essentially an account of enlightened self-interest – under some circumstances, animals are more reproductively successful if they enter into long-term alliances with other animals (for discussion, see Frank, 1988; Tooby & Cosmides, 1992).

What poses a genuine puzzle, however, is the expansion of the moral circle through human history (e.g., Bloom, 2004; Glover, 1999; Singer, 1981). For example, throughout most of recorded history the moral equality of all races was a foreign idea. Now, most people agree that members of other races deserve equal treatment. People now believe that slavery and sexism are wrong and that dying children in other parts of the world deserve our attention and care. Some individuals believe that animals and fetuses should receive the same moral protection afforded to young children, and they devote a significant amount of resources to convincing others of the same. As Darwin put it, something happened so that our “sympathies became more tender and widely diffused, so as to extend to the men of all races, to the imbecile, the maimed, and other useless members of society,

and finally to the lower animals . . .” (1871, p. 71). The puzzle that interests us is the cause of this expansion.

REASON AND EMOTION IN THE EXPANSION OF THE MORAL CIRCLE

One explanation for why the moral circle has expanded throughout history (and does so through each individual’s development) is that the evolving ability to reason enables individuals to recognize more accurately who and what *truly* deserves moral protection. Philosophers as otherwise diverse as Kant, Nagel, Rawls, and Singer have argued that reason allows us to transcend the natural instincts that originally led to a local and partial morality. The very notion of a system of ethics or morality, they argue, is the result of the intellectual discovery of *impartiality*, which has been made repeatedly throughout history. If I am asked to justify my actions, and I respond by saying “I can do what I please,” this is not ethics. But explanations such as “It was my turn” or “It was my fair share” can be ethical because they imply that anyone else who was in my position could have done the same. This allows for actual justification, in a way convincing to a neutral observer, and it makes possible the notion of standards of fairness, ethics, justice, and law.

Singer (1981) points out that impartiality is the one thing that all philosophical and religious perspectives share. Jesus said, “As you would that men should do to you, do ye also to them likewise”; Rabbi Hillel said, “What is hateful to you do not do to your neighbor; that is the whole Torah; the rest is commentary thereof.” When Confucius was asked for a single world that sums up how to live one’s life, he responded, “Is not reciprocity such a word? What you do not want done to yourself, do not do to other.” Immanuel Kant maintained, “Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.” Adam Smith appealed to an impartial spectator as the test of a moral judgment, and utilitarians argue that, in the moral realm, “each counts for one and none for more than one.” And David Hume observed that someone who is offering a justification has to “depart from his private and particular situation and must choose a point of view common to him with others. . . .”

The discovery of impartiality is at least in part the product of our intellect. Singer (1995, p. 229) reconstructs the logic of this intellectual step:

. . . by thinking about my place in the world, I am able to see that I am just one being among others, with interests and desires like others. I have a personal perspective on the world, from which my interests are at the front and center of the stage, the interests of my family and friends are close behind, and the interests of strangers are pushed to the back and sides. But reason enables me to see that others have similarly subjective perspectives, and that from “the point of view of the universe,” my perspective is no more privileged than theirs.

One feature of this account is that all rational social beings, even those that inhabit a distant universe, should come to adopt this principle of impartiality and hence would develop the notion of ethics.

Once the foundation of impartiality is present, it is not difficult to see how reason might partially explain the expansion of the moral circle. One might conclude, for instance, that we should include faraway strangers in our moral circle because it is merely an accident of birth that distinguishes a distant child from a child in the person's own neighborhood or family. Alternatively, you might argue that helping out a faraway child will serve the broader goal of maximizing happiness or allowing for greater fulfillment. Reason can thereby expand the moral circle.

One can even go further and establish an analogy between the role of reason in morality and the role of reason in science. Moral progress, like scientific progress, can exist through the accumulation of discoveries and insights; each generation can build on the accomplishments of the last. None of the readers of this chapter discovered that the earth revolves around the sun, just as none of us figured out that slavery is a bad thing. We reap the rewards of the reasoning process of previous generations.

Nonetheless, this account is seriously incomplete, as it ignores the influence of emotions in moral thought and action. Consider, for instance, Spock or Data, the famously emotionless and completely rational characters from *Star Trek*. If these fictional characters really existed, they would most likely be notoriously poor moral agents, unable to capitalize on the features of affective phenomena that facilitate social behavior (Pizarro, 2000). Moreover, they would have no moral motivation. As David Hume famously wrote, "'tis not contrary to reason to prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my little finger." There needs to be some extra impetus to act morally, and this impetus involves emotional experiences such as empathy and disgust.

EMPATHY AND MORAL THOUGHT

Empathy is to moral thought and action what hunger is to the evaluation and consumption of food. It is an emotional universal, present across cultures and present in most normal human beings, with the notable exception of sociopaths (Mealey, 1995). Empathy also shows up early on in development (Eisenberg, 2000; Hoffman, 2000), is elicited quite easily (at times, too easily, as argued by Hoffman, 2000; see also Hodges & Wegner, 1997), and, most importantly, seems to motivate prosocial behavior as well as concern for others. Without empathy, more complex moral emotions such as guilt and anger on behalf of others would probably not exist. In many instances of guilt, a person needs to vicariously sense the victim's suffering for the emotion to occur (Hoffman, 2000). Similarly, to feel anger on behalf of someone who has experienced an injustice, one must assume the feelings of the victim in order for indignation to occur.

Until recently the *proximal* causes of the empathic response were unclear. We review three such causes here, because it is only through an understanding of the mechanisms that trigger empathy that we can understand the role of empathy in the expansion of the moral circle.

1. *Mimicry and feedback*. Hatfield, Cacioppo, and Rapson (1993) have presented compelling evidence that we "catch" emotions from others through a two-step process. We tend to mimic, mirror, and imitate the actions of others, and this mimicry causes us to actually feel what others are feeling through the mechanism of bodily feedback. The smile of one person thus causes another to smile, and this smile in turn causes the other person to actually feel happiness. In this way, emotions are transmitted from one mind to another as a sort of "action-at-a-distance." This process may be a universal precursor to the emergence of moral sentiments. After all, if I "catch" your pain, I am suddenly motivated to care about you because you and your situation are, in essence, causing me pain. This reaction generally becomes a source of true concern for the target of empathic emotions (Batson, 1991; but see Cialdini, Schaller, Houlihan, & Arps, 1987).
2. *Perspective taking*. There is a more cognitive route to empathy as well: that of taking the perspective of others. This mechanism can be initiated by asking a person to put themselves in the shoes of another. But perspective taking can also occur fairly spontaneously. For instance, Storms (1973) was able to elicit perspective taking simply by shifting the camera angles of videotaped actions. If the actions in the video took place through the eyes of the actor, participants were more likely to perspective-take than if the actions were shown from the perspective of an observer. Similar spontaneous perspective taking occurred when individuals were given a story describing sexually permissive acts; they tended to judge the story using the standards of individuals of whom they were recently reminded (e.g., parents, friends, even the Pope; Baldwin, Carrell, & Lopez, 1990; Baldwin & Holmes, 1987).
3. *Similarity*. Describing a suffering individual as somehow similar to the target of the appeal is often an effective way to encourage an empathic reaction. For instance, telling us about an individual who lost his dog may make us feel sad, but if the individual happens to be from our hometown, we are likely to feel much worse. Anything that points out similarities to an individual seems to increase the chances that the individual will feel empathy. Conversely, describing others as different from us may serve to preempt the empathic response.

Hoffman has referred to this as an "empathic bias" (Hoffman, 2000), which has its roots in kin selection insofar as cues of similarity signal genetic

relatedness. However, this bias can be co-opted easily and used to for other purposes. Because human cognition is flexible, it is fairly easy to construe individuals as similar or dissimilar and thus increase or decrease the probability that someone will experience empathy for any given target. For instance, in one study, Batson and his colleagues (Batson, Turk, Shaw, & Klein, 1995) told participants a story about a woman who was in need of financial assistance. When the experimenters added that that the woman had attended the same college as the participants, the amount of help they were willing to provide increased substantially. Attending the same college is a far cry from being genetically related, but it primes empathy nonetheless.

Understanding the mechanisms underlying the elicitation of empathy is an important step toward understanding empathy's role as an effective source of moral persuasion, particularly in the expansion of the moral circle. But before we discuss this, we first we turn to an emotional response that works in the opposite manner of empathy (at least in the moral domain): disgust.

DISGUST AND MORAL THOUGHT

Although the expansion of the moral circle over time may lead to a more inclusive, altruistic world, a cursory glance at the preceding century demonstrates the scope of human cruelty and the ease with which individuals draw boundaries that exclude others from moral care (Glover, 1999). Even during its general trend toward expansion, the moral circle can shrink readily and easily, such as during World War II, when Japanese-American citizens went quickly from neighbors to interred prisoners. One way this occurs is through the recruitment of disgust.

Disgust first received scientific attention from Darwin (1872), who understood it as an adaptive response that protects the organism from ingesting potentially contaminating or poisonous substances. Indeed, most definitions of disgust continue to center on its role as a protective mechanism, signaling the danger of oral ingestion of a harmful substance (e.g., Angyal, 1941; Ekman & Friesen, 1975; Tomkins, 1963). As such, disgust generally is considered a universal reflex with very clear antecedents, functions, and motivational consequences. It is perhaps because of this narrow definition of disgust-as-reflex that it has traditionally received minimal attention within the emotion literature. Lazarus (1991), for instance, claims that disgust is "restricted in content and more rigid in elicitation" (p. 260) than other negative emotional states such as anger, anxiety, guilt, sadness, envy, and jealousy. It is certainly true that disgust has antecedents that transcend culture. For instance, rotting meat, urine, fecal matter, and blood are things that immediately and reflexively strike most adults as very disgusting.

However, further reflection suggests that characterizing disgust as such a simple phenomenon fails to capture the breadth and flexibility of this emotion. Although disgust generally is not grouped together with other social emotions (e.g., Leary, 2000), its frequent appearance in social contexts is testament to its ability to influence social thought. Disgust, although originating as an adaptive avoidance response, has become more than a mere aversion to inedible foods. The elicitors of disgust have grown to include objects well beyond any of our immediate survival concerns (Rozin, Haidt, & McCauley, 2000). Among other things, disgust is frequently felt in response to members of disliked social groups and people who have come into contact with members of these groups. Because of its universal presence and the ease through which it is induced in others, disgust can be a powerful tool in social dialogue, and it has played a profound role in the shaping of culture (Miller, 1997).

There is some controversy over how to make sense of disgust's increasing scope. Under the analysis defended by Rozin and his colleagues (e.g., 2000), disgust has grown more abstract. It started as a defense of the body (against certain microorganisms) and was originally restricted to real-world contaminants, such as feces. Over the course of cultural evolution, however, disgust has expanded to a defense of "the soul," of what we see as our uniquely spiritual and nonanimal selves. Hence disgust can be elicited by anything that reminds us of our animal nature, such as death, certain sexual practices, and even some immoral acts. An alternative analysis, elaborated in Bloom (2004), is that disgust is never abstract. It is always an instinctive response to certain specific triggers – but these triggers potentially include humans. After all, we produce urine, feces, semen, snot, and other disgusting substances; and we are made of meat. Cultural forces can strengthen the association between these repugnant qualities and certain classes of people, causing us to respond with disgust to these social groups, just as cultural forces can motivate disgust toward certain specific foods (e.g., organ meats). More generally, this second view predicts that we can be disgusted only by fleshy things, corporeal acts, and the people who perform them. Although we might use the metaphorical language of disgust to describe our reactions to unfair tax policies, incompetent grant reviewers, and the high cost of premium cable television, these entities will never really disgust us because they lack the right physical qualities.

Whether disgust can be truly abstract or must be elicited by specific triggers, the relationship between disgust and morality makes sense. The motivation (or action-tendency, in the words of some emotion theorists) associated with disgust is the rejection of the contaminating substance. It may be the case that the strong avoidance tendency associated with disgust motivates more than mere physical avoidance, but mental avoidance as well, including rejection of thoughts associated with the object. After all,

action-tendencies are not necessarily limited to physical readiness. Action tendencies apply to mental actions as well as overt behaviors, encouraging a turning toward or away from an object in thought (Frijda, 1986; Lerner & Keltner, 2000). Hence, disgust has the potential to shape the moral circle insofar as it elicits instinctive judgments and motivates avoidance of social objects. This makes disgust a handy tool in persuading others that certain individuals and groups are not worthy of moral concern. Indeed, as we shall see, one of the most powerful tactics to engender disdain for members of an outgroup is to label them filthy, vile, or just plain dirty creatures. This strategy is evident from sources such as the anti-Semitism of Nazi Germany to more modern day, where much of the antihomosexual rhetoric is fueled by appeals to the vileness of their sexual practices (see also Bloom, 2004; Nussbaum, 2001, for discussion).

CREATIVITY AND MORAL PERSUASION

So far we have built the case that moral judgment is heavily influenced by the sorts of emotions we feel toward others. In particular, empathy and disgust serve the opposite functions when it comes to morality. Although empathy causes concern for others, disgust motivates avoidance and disdain. Given the importance and nature of these moral emotions, it would not be surprising if the most persuasive moral communicators were those individuals who were also particularly effective at manipulating our emotions. Indeed this is true of persuasion across most domains. As early as the 4th century B.C.E., Aristotle recognized the persuasive power of arousing emotions in others and in his *Rhetoric* exhorts his students to study the causes and consequences of the emotions:

The emotions are all those feelings that so change men as to affect their judgments, . . . such are anger, pity, fear and the like, with their opposites. . . . Take, for instance, the emotion of anger: here we must discover . . . what the state of mind of angry people is, who the people are with whom they usually get angry, and on what grounds they get angry with them. It is not enough to know one or even two of these points; . . . the same is true of the other emotions

(Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, Book 2, chapter 1).

How is rhetorical creativity used to change our moral views? In what follows, we describe three sources through which our moral beliefs are often confronted, challenged, and sometimes completely changed: the creative use of language, the creative use of images, and the use of stories, songs, and films. Note that these sources of moral influence are creative arts. This reflects our claim that the guardians of the moral order are among the most creative individuals in a society – individuals such as poets, novelists, photographers, film directors, and musicians.

SOURCE 1: MORAL PERSUASION THROUGH THE CREATIVE USE OF LANGUAGE

Creative individuals have come to an intuitive realization that empathy is most easily aroused for genetic relatives and so have incorporated the use of familial terms to describe objects they believe are deserving of moral care. For instance, God is often described as a father, and members of a church often refer to each other as “brethren.” Members of sororities and fraternities – sisterhoods and brotherhoods – do the same. By using the language of family, individuals find it easier to treat people with the same respect and moral concern with which they treat members of their own genetic family. The genius behind this strategy is its recruitment of the natural tendency to protect family to extend the moral circle to include people we would otherwise disregard. Even gang members capitalize on the use of such familial language, using terms such as “cuzz” (short for “cousin”) and *blood* (a direct indication of relation) to bolster the cohesiveness of the group.

The creative use of language extends as well to the decision of what gets a name in the first place. A person without a name becomes less than a person, something that the Nazis exploited when they reduced their victims to serial numbers tattooed on their forearms. The framers of the United Nations declaration of human rights likewise understood the moral power of names, so they declared that every child has a right to one. Even giving the planet Earth a name and describing it as a single, living entity should make it much easier to have protective emotions directed at the planet. This is exactly the strategy used by proponents of the Gaia hypothesis (Lovelock, 1979), who speak of the Earth as a living organism and refer to it using an anthropomorphizing proper name, *Gaia* (the name is taken from the Greek Earth goddess). Imagine how much worse it might feel to harm the Earth by polluting the air and the ocean if we were on a first-name basis with her.

The descriptive power of language can also shrink our moral circle (see Glover, 1999; Zimbardo, 2004). When the Nazi regime was engaged in the genocide of the Jews, they chose to refer to Jews as “vermin” or “rats” and referred to the “extermination” of Jews rather than to their murder. Such use of euphemism is a strategy that effectively preempts the emotional response of empathy, and it often is magnified by the additional recruitment of disgust. In fact, the Nazis mounted an entire campaign of disgust, even using the language of disgust in children’s books, as is seen in the following caption to an illustration of two Jews:

“Just look at these guys! The louse-infested beards! The filthy, protruding ears. . . .”
 “Those stained, fatty clothes. . . [J]ews often have an unpleasant sweetish odor. If you have a good nose, you can smell the Jews.”

(*The Poison Mushroom Nazi Children’s Book*, 1938)

Similarly, the language of disgust has been used heavily in attacks on women and homosexuals (especially gay men) throughout history (see, e.g., Bloom, 2004; Miller, 1997; Nussbaum; 2001). A random selection of antigay sentiments on the Internet illustrates the use of this strategy. According to the authors of one Web site, homosexuals are “worthy of death for their vile . . . sex practices . . .”; they are “filthy” and are like “dogs eating their own vomit and sows wallowing in their . . . own feces” (Anti-gay website, <http://www.godhatesfags.com>, 4/16/00). Creativity can be used to suit a wide variety of agendas.

SOURCE 2: MORAL PERSUASION THROUGH THE CREATIVE USE OF IMAGES

Although language effectively recruits or preempts emotions through the distinctly human ability to comprehend metaphor, images are an even more effective way to elicit emotions. Images transcend language and geographical region, and they are often able strike instantly at the very heart of the viewer. Indeed, the increased availability of images throughout the world may be enough to explain a significant amount of the expansion of our moral sentiments to include people across the entire world.

For instance, in the 1980s, when a deadly drought hit the region of Africa that includes Ethiopia, a campaign was mounted to bring aid to those suffering in those regions. One of the most powerful sources of motivation to help came in the form of a multitude of detailed images of starving children that reached the television sets of Americans. It was difficult to go for any extended period of time *without* seeing the image of a starving child in Africa. These images, together with a tribute song performed by a collection of popular artists, had such an effect on Americans that approximately \$14 million dollars of famine relief was raised simply through the efforts associated with the song and images.

The creative use of images to stimulate sympathy and compassion, though much more prevalent in recent history with the advent of technologies such as satellites and cable news networks, is as old as art itself. Images of suffering, for instance, have been common themes of religious art for thousands of years. Before photography became a popular (or affordable) medium, the suffering and slaughter of individuals during times of war was often depicted in paintings, such as Francisco Goya's depiction of the execution of Spanish citizens by the French on the 3rd of May, 1808, as well as Picasso's similarly themed *Guernica*, which depicts, among other things, atrocities committed during the Spanish Civil War. Indeed, it is widely believed that images returning from photographers and camera crews in Vietnam contributed substantially to the outrage of American citizens, which ultimately brought an end to the Vietnam war.

More recently, images of the December 2004 tsunami in southeast Asia clearly contributed to the enormous financial outpouring by people across the world (just 10 days after the tsunami hit, American charitable organizations alone had received \$245 million in tsunami relief donations). As an example these image's power, consider the following exchange from a technology news Web site (certainly not a bastion of moral influence or concern) that posted satellite images of the tsunami's path:

[Reader A]: “The satellite images show the extent of damage, but remains impersonal. This picture graphically shows the actual devastation and number of deaths . . . [the user then provides a link to a high-resolution image of hundreds of dead bodies on a beach, seen with a stark clarity in detail]”

[Reader B]: “After seeing this I feel physically revolted. Every one of those people could well be someone's brother or sister, or parent . . . or child. . . .”

[Reader C]: “Horrific. I just donated \$150 to the Red Cross. I had been thinking about it, but it was that image that pushed me over the edge.”

(Accessed on <http://slashdot.org>, 12/31/04)

Were it not for the easy availability of these sorts of images, would we be moved to help people suffering in Thailand, Ethiopia, or Vietnam? Would our moral circle extend halfway around the world if we had never seen the suffering of these far-away individuals?

Images are not only effective in evoking concern for suffering humans, they may also persuade us that nonhumans are deserving of our moral concern as well. A perusal of materials from the nonprofit organization People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals serves as an illustrative exercise in how difficult it can be for anyone to view images of suffering animals. Prolife Web sites use similarly disturbing images. Through the depiction of the bodies of unborn fetuses, they attempt to convince others that fetuses may be capable of the same suffering as a baby that has already been born.

Given the right conditions, one can even feel sympathy for inanimate objects. When the director Steven Spielberg, in the movie *AI*, wanted to make the case that such machines warrant our affections and have moral value, he did not make his case by making his main character a clanking mechanical contraption. Instead he showed us a robot that looked like an attractive boy – the young actor Haley Joel Osment. By giving a robot the face of a child, we could be “tricked” into suspending our judgments concerning machines and into seriously considering the possibility that they deserve rights as well. The face of a child may not even be necessary to move us to feelings of sympathy toward the nonliving. Heider and Simmel (1944) noted that by simply animating triangles and circles with certain movements, subjects spontaneously attributed all sorts of social characteristics, motivations, and emotions to the shapes. Capitalizing on this phenomenon, developmental psychologists have found that even infants seem to make dispositional attributions to simple shapes that

have been animated to appear to be “harming” or “helping” another shape (e.g., Kuhlmeier, Bloom, & Wynn, 2003).

Visually creative individuals have known this for quite some time. In a recent Ikea commercial, directed by the filmmaker Spike Jonze, a discarded lamp was portrayed in such a sympathetic manner – it had been tossed outside in the rain by its owner, and was bent with the bulb facing down in what looked like a depressive slump – that when a voiceover told the audience not to be so silly as to feel bad for a lamp, individuals were genuinely caught off-guard. It seems that our minds are hardwired to see humanlike characteristics across a wide range of objects. And this, in the hands of the right person, can make us feel warm human emotions for hunks of wire and metal, not to mention for trees, animals, fetuses, or strangers. The expansion of the moral circle is often only one commercial away.

SOURCE 3: MORAL PERSUASION THROUGH THE CREATIVE USE OF STORIES, SONGS, AND FILMS

Images may be effective because they can easily target the relatively automatic mechanisms of mimicry and feedback to induce empathy. But stories, songs, and films can be equally effective. By causing us to shift our perspective and take the perspective of another person, we often come to feel just as that person might feel. Indeed, a well-told story with a sympathetic protagonist may serve as one of the most effective sources of moral persuasion.

Nussbaum (2001, p. 429) points out that early Greek dramas “moved their spectators, in empathetic identification, from Greece to Troy, from the male world of war to the female world of the household. Although all of the future citizens who saw ancient tragedies were male, they were asked to have empathy with the sufferings not only of people whose lot might be theirs – leading citizens, generals in battle, exiles and beggars and slaves – but also with many whose lot could never be theirs – such as Trojans and Persians and Africans, such as wives and daughters and mothers.”

By carefully crafting a tale and causing an individual to feel the predicament of someone else, many writers and directors force individuals to critically evaluate their moral beliefs. Movies such as *Philadelphia*, in which Tom Hanks depicts a gay man who endures discrimination, sickness, and the death of a loved one, are, in all probability, able to do more for the gay rights movement than are a thousand pages detailing a rational, ethical defense of gay rights.

The power of such stories is not limited to the obvious sources – such as moralistic tales or movies with a clear moral agenda – their effectiveness is evident across a wide variety of music, film, and literature. For instance, some of the most respected rappers (despite the generally negative

reputation this genre seems to possess) are skilled storytellers who are often able to communicate the plight of less fortunate individuals, usually from urban America. In one song, the late rapper Tupac Shakur tells the story of a 13-year-old girl who was beaten and raped. In the song, Shakur describes that her story has moved him so much that for a moment he felt as if he became the girl, was himself raped and beaten, and as a result was able to understand her grief:

Now here's a story bout a woman with dreams
So picture-perfect at thirteen, an ebony queen
Beneath the surface it was more than just a crooked smile
Nobody knew about her secret so it took a while
I could see a tear fall slow down her black cheek
Shedding quiet tears in the back seat; so when she asked me,
“What would you do if it was you?”
Couldn't answer such a horrible pain to live through
I tried to trade places in the tragedy
I couldn't picture three crazed niggaz grabbin' me
For just a moment I was trapped in the pain, Lord come and take me
Four niggaz violated, they chased and they raped me
Even though it wasn't me, I could feel the grief
Thinkin' with your brains blown that would make the pain go
No! You got to find a way to survive
'cause they win when your soul dies.
“Baby Don't Cry (Keep Your Head Up Pt. II)”
by Tupac Shakur and the Outlawz

We have focused thus far on the positive effects of stories, but of course, they can also shrink the moral circle by depicting some class of people as insignificant, anonymous, disgusting, or objectified. The genre of rap is not entirely innocent of such depictions, particularly with regard to depictions of women and homosexuals, but the best examples of this include many popular action movies, particularly war movies, where there is a deliberate blunting of potential empathy toward the villains. One might argue that such shrinking is often morally justified – presumably Nazis, terrorists, giant alien bugs, and killer robots from the future do not *belong* in the moral circle – our point here is merely to acknowledge the obvious – that creative persuasion can go in both directions.

In sum, common and accessible forms of popular communication, such as language, images, movies, and music, are often among the most effective sources of moral persuasion, particularly when it comes to the expansion and contraction of the moral circle. And among the most effective agents of this persuasion are creative individuals with a desire to communicate an idea – whether it be a graffiti artist who paints murals of his deceased friends, a famous film director who moves our emotions with her camera,

or a blogger who has a talent for describing a local tragedy in detail with posts on the Internet for the entire world to see.¹

CONCLUSION: REASONING, CREATIVITY, AND EMOTION IN MORAL JUDGMENT

It was once common to think of reason and emotion as antithetical and to conclude that one must defeat emotion to reason properly. In the domain of morality, emotions were thus seen as a contaminating force that pulled one's local sympathies in any random direction. The creative moral communications we have described above work through appeals to emotions such as empathy and disgust, and this raises the possibility that such moral persuasion is irrational, unmediated by the process of reason.

But this concern, voiced by philosophers since at least the days of Kant, is serious only if one views emotion as contrary to reason. Although the distinction between emotion and reason is intuitively compelling, the dichotomy is scientifically naïve. Research instead suggests that affect and cognition are fused together in their functioning all the way down through their neurophysiological roots (e.g., Damasio, 1994). This means that human experience, including intelligence and intelligent behavior, emerges through a symphony of cognition and affect.

The upshot of this revised view of emotion is that moral appeals that use emotion play the same supporting role to reason as do emotions in any other decision-making domain. So it is not the case that seeing a movie about the Civil Rights movement such as *Mississippi Burning* simply causes a short-term empathic response that fizzles out when we leave the theater. Rather, the emotions that many people feel after viewing such movies motivate discussion with others, stimulate reasoning on the topic, and may even force us to reconcile our moral principles with the emotions we just experienced. For example, one feels compelled to reason one's way through war's justification when watching a movie such as *Saving Private Ryan* or *The Thin Red Line*, just as one might worry about the risks of pacifism when seeing movies such as the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Ironically, then, the net result of many such creative emotional appeals may be an increase in the sophistication of reasoning in a particular moral domain. Moral issues that

¹ For reasons of space, we are restricting the discussion here to moral persuasion directed toward adults, but all of these sources of moral change are regularly applied as well to children, often in an effort to get them to adopt moral circles of appropriate sizes. These efforts are typically uncontroversial; nobody objects to the positive depictions of minorities in Disney films, for example. But there are occasionally concerns that the wrong boundaries are being drawn, as when, in 2005, conservatives were outraged by the notion that PBS would broadcast a children's television show that positively depicted a lesbian couple. Presumably, prochoice liberals would have been equally outraged by a cartoon that featured Franny the Friendly Fetus.

would have previously remained ignored by an individual suddenly force themselves to the forefront of moral thinking as a result of exposure to a film, painting, or poem that arouses moral sentiments.

Although there is certainly still debate over the scope and power of moral reasoning (see Bloom, 2004; Haidt, 2001; Pizarro & Bloom, 2003), there is widespread agreement about a few important facts: that morality most likely would not exist without the presence of certain emotions, that at times we utilize reasoning to deal with difficult moral issues, and that our moral judgments are strongly shaped by both innate biological forces *and* social influences. What we have argued here is that one of the most interesting and powerful sources influencing a particular domain of moral judgment (about who and what we view as deserving of moral concern) is the social communication we receive from the most creative members of society. What makes these sources of communication so powerful is their skilled recruitment of emotions that are most likely innate and have evolved to serve certain basic survival functions related to morality. Such creative appeals are often at the forefront of moral movements – wherever there is widespread change in moral ideas, it is not unreasonable to look for the creative forces that shaped these changes. This is a fairly reasonable depiction, we think, of a domain that has been traditionally characterized as not very creative at all.

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