

# The Virtue in Being Morally Wrong

By David Pizarro



... a Utilitarian may reasonably desire, on Utilitarian principles, that some of his conclusions should be rejected by mankind generally ...

—Henry Sidgwick,  
*The Methods of Ethics* (1884)

It once seemed obvious to most scholars that our ability to reason was what made us moral creatures. Unlike the lowly animals, we could reason our way to a set of moral principles and (sometimes even) adhere to them. Yet along the way a few insightful thinkers, such as 18th-century philosophers David Hume and Adam Smith, argued that it was the “warm” feelings of sympathy and compassion, not the cold rules of logic, that seemed most responsible for our moral sense.

A century after psychology’s move out of the armchair and into the laboratory, the debate over the roots of morality is receiving more attention than ever. As Jorge Moll and Ricardo de Oliveira-Souza describe in the accompanying article, much of that attention comes from cognitive neuroscientists. A paper by Michael Koenigs, Liane Young and their colleagues in *Nature* adds some interesting wrinkles to the long debate over morality’s well-springs. The authors show that patients with damage to the ventromedial prefrontal cortex, or VMPFC, are consistently utilitarian in their moral decisions. The judgments of these patients, who appear unmoved by the prospect of shoving someone to his or her death so long as the math works out, look less like the frequent non-utilitarian judgments of normal participants and more like the responses of sociopaths.

## What about Ought?

As Moll and de Oliveira-Souza note, these findings elucidate the relative contributions of reason and emotion to moral judgment. They also have implications for a more controversial question: What should our moral judgments in these scenarios be? Are the normal people in the Koenigs study making the right call by rejecting utilitarianism if the utilitarian option is emotionally daunting? This line of questioning is often brushed aside with a reminder that empirical findings should have no say over questions of ethics; crossing the line between what

is and what ought to be is a no-no. But if sociopaths and brain-damaged patients make judgments that normal people find morally abhorrent, isn’t that good evidence that the normal people are right? Shouldn’t we be proud of our nonutilitarian tendencies?

This conclusion might hold water if it were not for the fact that some people other than sociopaths and brain-injured patients also stubbornly endorse utilitarianism. Many nonsociopathic, healthy-brained philosophers and social scientists take utilitarianism quite seriously. For them, the emotions that make us sheepish about acting for the greater good should not play a role in moral judgment at all.

## Are Utilitarians Good Roommates?

So, unlike, say, choosing a basketball team to root for, it is hard to know where to stand on utilitarianism by taking a look at the team’s fans. Does this fact mean that psychology can contribute nothing to this debate?

Imagine that you are in charge of fashioning a new species of humanlike creature from scratch. Would you strip this new species of the brain regions and emotional reactions responsible for our nonutilitarian tendencies, ensuring they would have no problem sacrificing a few for the sake of many? Even for utilitarians this notion can be disturbing, as exemplified by Sidgwick’s statement. As one of my economist colleagues put it, if you know a man who is perfectly fine with the notion of tossing someone off a bridge (even if it is for the greater good), it is a pretty good bet that he is not the kind of person who is going to win father of the year, donate to charity or be loyal to his team.

Utilitarianism may, in the end, be the right moral theory. But we want people who are utilitarians not because they are emotionally blunted (such as sociopaths and brain-damaged patients) but because they have decided that their warm, tender emotions should be set aside in a few specific cases. Maybe some people are capable of this subtle emotional regulation. But for most of us, being good utilitarians would require sacrificing emotions that, although they might make us morally superior, would also make us jerks.

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find their sense of fairness. The VMPFC players, however, rejected imbalanced offers more often than control subjects did—apparently because they allowed an insult over the inequitable but profitable proposal to overrule utilitarian reason. Overall emotional dullness and increased utili-

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