

We can't rely on science alone to make us better people

Editorial

New Scientist #3040, 26 September 2015

Our sense of right and wrong is often inadequate for modern challenges. But the combination of rationality and humanity can lead us to more effective morality.

“WE MUST learn not to take traditional morals too seriously.” So said the biologist J. B. S. Haldane in a 1923 talk on science and the future. Haldane predicted that scientific progress would be disruptive to every belief, value and institution. The future would be bright only “if mankind can adjust its morality to its powers”.

Haldane had a point: our powers have led to challenges without precedent. Climate change is a threat unlike any we have ever seen. Our machines might become smarter than us (see “Forget the Turing test – there are better ways of judging AI”). Genetic engineering could change humanity forever (see “Gene editing: Bring it on”).

In the face of such challenges, our evolved moral sense often proves inadequate (see “Morality 2.0: How manipulating our minds could save the world”). Part of the problem is sheer scale. The anthropologist Robin Dunbar says we can maintain no more than about 150 meaningful relationships at once. But today, all 7 billion of us are connected – if not in meaningful relationships, not in meaningless ones, either. “Society” is now too expansive a concept for our brains to parse.

One result is conflicting demands that are hard to resolve. The plight of our fellow humans in vulnerable parts of the world compels us to deploy every possible climate change mitigant. But that could hurt our own way of life. And then there's the urge to just forget all that stress and get on a plane to somewhere sunny.

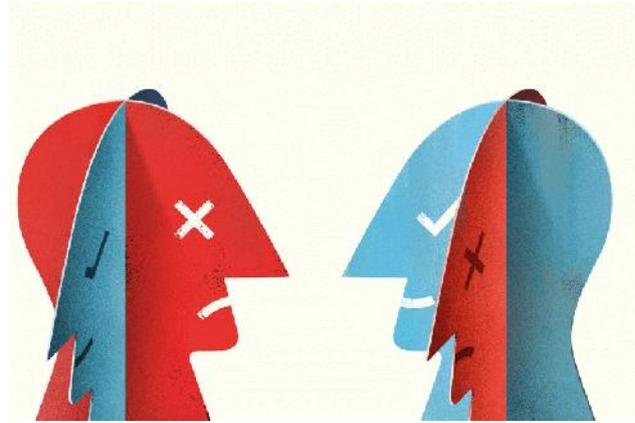
Given this cognitive overload, our primal emotional responses tend to win out. We do what feels right. But such responses don't necessarily produce the best outcomes. So how can we make sure we do what really is right?

It will take evolution a long time to catch up, if it ever does. So it is down to us to ensure that we are doing the right thing. It's a tall order, but never fear: moral philosophers are on the case.

Some, such as those based at the Centre for Effective Altruism in Oxford, UK, aim to maximise the good we can do by quantifying the outcomes of our actions. Many of their suggestions have raised eyebrows: that it may be better to become a generous banker than work for a charity, for example. And their approach has been criticised for relying on the status quo and as being inhumane, because it may prioritise the well-being of distant strangers over those closer to home.

Others suggest modifying our moral brains directly, through a hit of drugs or a zap of electricity (see “Brain stimulation can alter our desire to punish wrongdoers”). The difficulties with this idea are obvious: who decides what constitutes improvement? The history of moral re-education is long and ugly, most recently manifest in the inverted values of the so-called Islamic State. And setting such dystopian scenarios aside, wouldn't this rob people of their moral autonomy? Letting someone else direct our sense of right and wrong would strike many as, well, immoral.

Its proponents claim these issues are not much different to those raised by conventional moral instruction.



Fixing our moral compass

(Image: Pawel Jonca)

But if so, and given the practical difficulties of large-scale morality hacking, we should perhaps stick to education. We are not simply prisoners of our emotions: we can reason our way to workable compromises. Science alone will not get us there: if there is a 21st century moral duty, it is to learn how to think through the ethics, law, sociology and even spiritual aspects of a problem.

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So no, we shouldn't take traditional morality too seriously where it fails to address modern problems. But the basic humanity that gives rise to its flaws can also lead us to its successor.