

Morality: The Greater Good

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Guantánamo Bay, ‘black holes’ in the scope of civil liberties and human rights laws, and profound changes in social organisation are justified as being in the interests of the nation and of civilisation itself. Our leaders ask us to accept things such as ‘judicial’ institutions that are severed from any commonly accepted notions of natural justice, coerced and secretive interrogation, or ‘lawful’ surveillance by government over the private lives of individuals.

It is for the ‘common good,’ we are told.

The rights of individuals have been compromised to protect the security of all. We are supposed to look the other way when powerfully symbolic leaders, such as Saddam Hussein, are executed after unjust hearings, or when confessions are extracted through coercion and torture.

On 21 March [the New York Times reported](#) on a study published in the [March edition of Nature magazine](#) which should give us pause to reflect.

The study examined a small group of patients who had suffered a very specific brain damage affecting the thick outer wrapping of the brain where the mostly conscious functions of thinking and language reside. People affected can function and make moral decisions but tend to overlook subtle social clues.

They were asked to respond to a number of moral challenges. These included whether or not to push an individual onto train tracks if they knew that this individual’s body would stop a train that would otherwise kill five other people — it was put to them that their own death would not achieve the same result. Or whether they would poison someone who was determined to infect others with AIDS. Or whether they would kill a baby whose crying would reveal their hiding place to enemies who would kill them. (The ethicist, Peter Singer, [has written about this subject too](#).)

Those with the brain injury were much more likely to say that they would take interventionist action — for example pushing someone onto the tracks — than those who did not.

The researchers concluded that those with this particular kind of (ventromedial) brain damage were far more likely to endorse killing in all high-risk situations. It was posited that these disabled people did not experience the same tension between their higher-cortical cost-benefit calculations and more primitive, instinctive emotions. The damaged area of their brain was not able to put up the barrier — asserting an ancient principle of respect for the life of another human being — against the ‘logic’ of

more recently evolved and more complex cortical ‘reasoning’ structures.

This sympathy or primitive morality appears to be instinctive, rather than reasoned, and [can be seen in the decision making patterns of primates](#).

The primatologist, [Dr Frans de Waal](#), came to the conclusion, through studying apes, that morality’s building blocks were not nice or good behaviours but rather mental and social capacities for constructing societies ‘in which shared values constrain individual behaviour through a system of approval and disapproval.’



Thanks to [Fiona Katauskas](#)

The suggestion is that people who are prepared to sacrifice others for the possible good of a broader group, society or community, may have impaired functioning of that part of the brain used to form social emotions. And that those who can ‘reason’ without the complicating factor of more primitive, emotional constraints are more likely to approve of or implement actions that sacrifice another individual for the ‘greater good.’

This has implications for our leaders and the professionals who enable and justify their actions. We

often hear utilitarian arguments from those who seek to justify ‘collateral damage’ in Iraq and Afghanistan; or who justify retaliation against the families or neighbourhoods where individuals are suspected of engaging in guerrilla actions — as in the Gaza Strip; or those who seek to validate torture by redefining it and admitting confessions obtained through ‘coercion.’

[Dr John Yoo](#), an influential member of the Office of Legal Counsel in the US Justice Department, for example, redefined the powers and rights of suspects in Abu Ghraib prison just outside Baghdad. He has been a key architect of some of the Bush Administration’s [most controversial policies in the ‘War on Terror.’](#)

If it is true that the ‘reasoning’ part of the human brain seeks to authorise certain kinds of emotional responses to individual life and suffering that the ‘primitive’ part of the brain instinctively prohibits, then we must question how ethical standards should be allowed to evolve.

This is the most profound ethical dilemma of our age. We are busy intelligently redesigning ‘the economy’ — the networks of interactions that affect the personal security of individuals in community — as well as dealing with the external threat on ‘the nation’ embodied in language such as the ‘War on terror.’ Is it acceptable to impose or justify suffering by the individual and the weak in the ‘greater’ interests of society?

I am no formal philosopher, and as a woman and a small-l liberal I am easily charged with allowing emotion to cloud my moral judgment. My argument is that human judgment requires both reason and empathetic considerations.

Researchers, such as [Carol Gilligan](#), have established significant differences in the way that many men and women make moral decisions. Women are far more likely to consider the impact of such decisions on and through the medium of relationships and conversation, and the likelihood of harm to particular people. Men are more likely to appeal to ‘universal principles’ such as justice.

But it was utilitarian constructs such as ‘sacrificing the weak to strengthen the whole’ from 1938 that led to the [Aktion T4 Project](#), in which German psychiatrists killed or allowed to be killed thousands of intellectually handicapped and mentally ill people to better direct scarce medical resources towards those who could make greater contributions to the Reich. The technologies of T4 would later be developed into the ‘Final Solution’ and extended to all of the ‘social parasites’ holding back the triumph of the ‘master race.’

This recent research not only suggests that we should question those who assert the right to make these kinds of decisions based on ‘reason,’ but also whether those persons may themselves be disabled according to the ‘scientific and objective’ criteria they apply to others.

Perhaps we need to recalculate what is truly valuable in human life.

About the author

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