

Does moral action depend on reasoning?

Yes and no.

My answer is a strong “yes” because the actions we can truly call moral depend on the work of reason at some stage in the process leading to their execution. But my answer is also “no” because the moment-to-moment execution of actions, moral or otherwise, is not necessarily under the control of reason, even if reason has a role in the deliberations behind the action and in strengthening the control system that executes it. My answer is an even stronger “no” if the question implies that moral actions are *invented* by reason, springing fully formed from the consorting of knowledge and logic.



Looming large over the question is the issue of the origins of morality. Does reason construct moral intuitions, beliefs, conventions, and rules? Or does morality emerge from prerational processes?...

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Antonio Damasio is the David Dornsife Professor of Neuroscience and the director of the Brain and Creativity Institute at the University of Southern California. He is the author of Descartes' Error and Self Comes to Mind, which will be published later this year.

Not so much.

Psychopaths can teach us a lot about the nature of morality. At first glance, they seem to have perfectly functioning minds. Their working memory

isn't impaired, they have excellent language skills, and they don't have reduced attention spans. In fact, a few studies have found that psychopaths have above-average IQs and reasoning abilities; their logic is impeccable. But the disorder is associated with a severe moral deficit.



So what's gone wrong? Why are psychopaths so much more likely to use violence to achieve their goals? Why are they so overrepresented in our prisons? The answer turns us to the anatomy of morality in the mind. That's because the intact intelligence of psychopaths conceals a devastating problem: The emotional parts of their brains are damaged, and this is what makes them dangerous...

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Yes, if...

that means that moral action depends on reason. I prefer to put it this way because we do not have to go through a process of reason-ing in order to arrive at a view of what morality requires on every occasion. Often, we simply know. But moral action does not merely depend on reason. Moral action is rational action, because the moral law is a law of reason.

Two distinctions will help to clarify this claim. The first is between intelligence and reason. Intelligence is a power that



looks outward, to the world around the intelligent animal. Speaking roughly, an intelligent animal is one who learns from his experiences, displays some awareness of what causes what, and can use that awareness to solve problems. Reason, by contrast, looks inward, to what is going on in the animal's own mind...

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No, it does not!

Rather, moral action depends on compassion. Parents need no reasoning to nourish their children in loving-kindness. Children need no reasoning to lovingly care for their aging parents. Neighbors need no reasoning to warmly welcome strangers to the neighborhood. Human beings need no reasoning to help other needy humans and creatures. All we truly need, for moral action to arise, is compassion. Compassion is the necessary and sufficient condition on which moral action depends.



Yes, compassion often gives rise to, and involves, a kind of compassionate discernment, especially when difficult choices

have to be made in a complex world teeming with conflicting demands...

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Yes, within limits.

Freedom of the will is real, but that does not mean that we are totally free. Human experience, thought, and action are constrained by a variety of factors, including our evolutionary heritage, law and custom, overt social influences, and a range of more subtle social cues. But within those limits, we are free to do what we want, and especially to think what we want, and we are able to reason our way to moral judgments and action.

Many evolutionary psychologists assert that reasoning in general and moral reasoning in particular are constrained by cognitive modules that evolved when we were hunter-gatherers on the East African savannah during the Pleistocene era...

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