



## The Good, the Bad, and the Bystanders

A Review of

The Social Psychology of Morality: Exploring the Causes of Good and Evil  
by Mario Mikulincer and Phillip R. Shaver (Eds.)

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A book review begins with a moral decision. Somewhere usually deep inside, reviewers start the process by asking themselves: "Shall I tell the whole truth?"

The notion that it's better to be safe than sorry is often the first immoral inclination. Write a mildly positive article, a review that is the least likely to offend anyone or draw criticism, and there probably will not be any problems. With a negative or even a harsh appraisal, you may have to publicly defend yourself from an angry group of the authors' supporters. And even if you absolutely love a book, your enthusiasm may appear amateurish and demonstrate an absence of objectivity. Then there are forces such as envy, ambition, timidity, sympathy, and laziness that all threaten the truth.

In *The Social Psychology of Morality: Exploring the Causes of Good and Evil*, Mario Mikulincer and Phillip Shaver explore the pervasive yet often overlooked moral element of human behavior. Be it in relation to book reviews, heroism, cruelty, or small acts of kindness and cowardice, moral choices permeate the human condition.

Readers expecting to find an update on Kohlberg may be surprised to see his work seldom mentioned. Moral psychology has quietly evolved over the past four decades. This volume presents how far we have come since Kohlberg yet makes clear that we are still trying to understand and deal with the Zimbardo et al. (1973) prison study, Milgram's (1974) obedience research, and Darley and Latane's (1968) observations on bystander behavior.

The first three chapters are philosophical essays that succeed in establishing a pace and tone that help readers appreciate the depth, complexity, and importance of moral psychology. Language is introduced, although the authors reassure their audience that it is not their intent to define right and wrong. Rather, it is their hope that this text will explain how human beings make this distinction.

Walker, Frimer, and Dunlop (p. 276) write: "Moral psychology is fundamentally an applied discipline: Real-world social issues are the standard to which the discipline's methods and data ought to be held to account." The majority of the book (i.e., Chapters 4–22) reflects the applied dimension of moral psychology. This is consistent with the editors' stated purpose: to "examine ways in which people make decisions about what is right and what is wrong—what is good and what is evil—and how these decisions are influenced by internal psychological and external social and cultural forces" (p. 4).



I suspect there may have been some debate among the authors concerning the book's title. There is clearly a social component to moral psychology. Gray and Wegner's remarkable piece "Morality Takes Two: Dyadic Morality and Mind Perception" is just one of several articles that eloquently explain the social context of moral reasoning. Yet there are also articles on clinical issues such as trauma and obsessive compulsive disorder. Moral psychology is not cloistered within any particular specialty. The entire field of contemporary psychology has a hand and a stake in this emerging field. Unfortunately, the title may limit the audience; one can only hope that the book will be considered by scholars beyond the social psychology arena.

## The Darkest Frontier?

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Evidently, psychologists who study morality are increasingly comfortable using the word *evil*. Many, if not most, of the contributors to this work include the term in describing their research. In Chapter 1, "Sacred Values and Evil Adversaries," Graham and Haidt define *evil* as "something that threatens to hurt, oppress, betray, contaminate, or otherwise profane something that is held as sacred" (p. 17). Although most of the discussion of evil is kept in secular terms, no effort is made to dismiss religious views on the matter.

There is a consensus among the authors that "most people who do evil do not regard their own actions as evil" (Baumeister and Graham, p. 402). Tavris and Aronson (2007) came to the same conclusion in their work on self-justification. The terrorist, it seems, needs to see himself as a freedom fighter. We are reluctant, perhaps incapable, of recognizing the worst within ourselves. This reluctance may extend to our collective selves. We may be better prepared to study the evil in groups we can call *those people*.

Moral psychology may be opening the darkest doors of our psyches. And it may have to do so with an uncooperative subject pool. Psychology professors advertising for evil college students willing to participate in research may find themselves looking at an *N* of zero. Furthermore, we may be equally reluctant to identify ourselves as moral heroes. Heroes and villains may not be names we give ourselves. Studying morality at the extremes should produce creative research strategies.

And what do we know about the bystanders, those passive souls who, according to Edmund Burke, allow evil to triumph? Staub (pp. 381–398) makes an intelligent presentation on the role of the bystander in the commission of evil. By refusing to resist immoral activity, bystanders assist in the process. As such, the moral climate of any system may be improved by convincing bystanders to act in a moral way.

Understanding bystander behavior may be an emerging priority in the study of morality. Sommers and Satel (2005) wrote of the moral paralysis observed in unsettling numbers of college students. Now interventions intended to move students from bystanders to moral activists have begun appearing on university campuses. Sexual assault prevention programs, for example, are focusing more on bystander behavior (McMahon, Postmus, & Koenick, 2011). Until recently such programs focused on educating potential victims; we may find, however, that engaging bystanders makes campuses safer and provides important lifelong lessons for students.

It might seem that evil represents the darkest dimension of the human condition. Yet it is also deeply troubling to consider our capacity for passivity in the face of tragedy and injustice. In the discomfiting examination of human immorality, we are rescued by examples of moral heroism. Yet this rescue is not ever after; evil and passivity appear inevitable. Heroism, fortunately, seems equally assured.

The hope is that bystanders can be transformed into rescuers, heroes perhaps. Still, we are left with the fundamental question: What to do about evil? Although *The Social Psychology of Morality* does not answer this, it advances the conversation by providing possibilities. Baumeister, for instance, poses the question: Why is there evil? He suggests that "preventing evil and reducing violence do not depend on eliminating the root



causes. We can simply strengthen the restraints. If we improve self-control, we can indeed make the world a better place and reduce the quantity of evil" (p. 378). Thus the resilient roots of evil may be controlled by moral heroes and engaged bystanders.

## Deeply Moral Creatures

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At the risk of sounding amateurish or without professional neutrality, I have to say that I love this book. If psychology graduate students are given a summer reading list, *The Social Psychology of Morality* should be on it. As I finished this volume, I envisioned a class, perhaps in the final semester of graduate training, where all the doctoral students come together to study the psychology of morality. It would be a single classroom that included clinical, experimental, and industrial/organizational psychology students. Students about to begin careers in school, social, and health psychology should also be there to join the give and take. The study and practice of psychology are replete with moral issues. Yet morality is too often the elephant in the room that we choose to ignore.

Pizarro and Tannenbaum (p. 91) may have succinctly summarized the book by saying, "Human beings are deeply moral creatures." The growing number of quality works on the psychology of morality (e.g., Churchland, 2011; Krebs, 2011; Walker, 2006) points to a renewed appreciation of the moral forces that guide human conduct. This rekindled interest will likely have a significant impact on the future of psychology. *The Social Psychology of Morality* will play a notable role in this evolution. It deserves to be considered a truly important book.

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