

# On Stupidity and Morality

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# ON STUPIDITY AND MORALITY



On Christmas Day 2021, Aeon/Psyche published online two essays that hit me as right on-time and on-target: *Why some of the smartest people can be so very stupid* by Sacha Golub and *Forget Morality* by Ronnie de Sousa.

Sacha Golub is reader in philosophy at King's College in London, and co-director of the Centre for Philosophy and Visual Arts (CPVA).

Ronnie de Sousa is professor emeritus in philosophy at the University of Toronto.

## Smart & Stupid

Sacha Golub's piece starts with the Austrian novelist Robert Musil who delivered a lecture in Vienna, *'On Stupidity'* (1937). *At its heart was the idea that stupidity was not mere 'dumbness', not a brute lack of processing power. Dumbness, for Musil, was 'straightforward', indeed almost 'honourable'. Stupidity was something very different and much more dangerous: dangerous precisely because some of the smartest people, the least dumb, were often the most stupid.*

*Musil's lecture bequeaths us an important set of questions. What exactly is stupidity? How does it relate to morality: can you be morally good and stupid, for example? How does it relate to vice: is stupidity a kind of prejudice, perhaps? And why is it so domain-specific: why are people often stupid in one area and insightful in another? Musil's own answer, which centered around pretentiousness, is too focused on the dilettantism of interwar Vienna to serve us now. But his questions, and his intuition about stupidity's danger, are as relevant as ever.*

*Stupidity is a very specific cognitive failing. Crudely put, it occurs when you don't have the right conceptual tools for the job. The result is an inability to make sense of what is happening and a resulting tendency to force phenomena into crude, distorting pigeonholes.*

He then goes on with an example: *This is easiest to introduce with a tragic case. British high command during the First World War frequently understood trench warfare using concepts and strategies from the cavalry battles of their youth. As one of Field Marshal Douglas Haig's subordinates later remarked, they thought of the trenches as 'mobile operations at the halt': i.e., as fluid battle lines with the simple caveat that nothing in fact budged for years. Unsurprisingly, this did not serve them well in formulating a*

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*strategy: they were hampered, beyond the shortage of material resources, by a kind of 'conceptual obsolescence', a failure to update their cognitive tools to fit the task in hand.*

The problem here is his choice: a military. He should have read Albert Einstein's opinion piece (that I wholeheartedly share) On the Military System (as quoted in Gurteen Knowledge Website):

*This topic [the importance of individuality] brings me to that worst out-crop of the herd nature, the military system, which I abhor. That a man can take pleasure in marching to the strains of a band is enough to make me despise him. He has only been given his big brain by mistake; a backbone was all he needed. This plague-spot of civilization ought to be abolished with all possible speed. Heroism by order, senseless violence, and all the pestilent nonsense that goes by the name of patriotism -- how I hate them! War seems to me a mean, contemptible thing: I would rather be hacked in pieces than take part in such an abominable business. And yet so high, despite everything, is my opinion of the human race that I believe this bogey would have disappeared long ago, had the sound sense of the nations not been systematically corrupted by commercial and political interests acting through the schools and the press.*

Golub then goes on:

*Stupidity will often arise in cases like this, when an outdated conceptual framework is forced into service, mangling the user's grip on some new phenomenon. It is important to distinguish this from mere error. We make mistakes for all kinds of reasons. Stupidity is rather one specific and stubborn cause of error. Historically, philosophers have worried a great deal about the irrationality of not taking the available means to my goals: Tom wants to get fit, yet his running shoes are quietly gathering dust. The stock solution to Tom's quandary is simple willpower. Stupidity is very different from this. It is rather a lack of the necessary means, a lack of the necessary intellectual equipment. Combatting it will typically require not brute willpower but the construction of a new way of seeing our self and our world.*

*Such stupidity is perfectly compatible with intelligence: Haig was by any standard a smart man. Indeed, in at least some cases, intelligence actively abets stupidity by allowing pernicious rationalization: when Harry Houdini, the great illusionist, took*

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*Arthur Conan Doyle, the inventor of Sherlock Holmes, through the tricks underlying the seances in which Conan Doyle devoutly believed, the author's reaction was to concoct a ludicrously elaborate counter-explanation as to why it was precisely the true mediums who would appear to be frauds.*

Then, he elaborates:

*Stupidity has two features that make it particularly dangerous when compared with other vices. First, unlike character flaws, stupidity is primarily a property of groups or traditions, not individuals: after all, we get most of our concepts, our mental tools, from the society we are raised in. Suppose the problem with Haig (his selected very smart military) had been laziness: there was no shortage of energetic generals to replace him. But if Haig worked himself to the bone within the intellectual prison of the 19th-century military tradition, then solving the difficulty becomes harder: you will need to introduce a new conceptual framework and establish a sense of identity and military pride for it. Once stupidity has taken hold of a group or society, it is thus particularly hard to eradicate – inventing, distributing, and normalizing new concepts is tough work.*

*Second, stupidity begets more stupidity due to a profound ambiguity in its nature. If stupidity is a matter of the wrong tools for the job, whether an action is stupid will depend on what the job is; just as a hammer is perfect for some tasks and wrong for others. Take politics, where stupidity is particularly catching: a stupid slogan chimes with a stupid voter, it mirrors the way they see the world. The result is that stupidity can, ironically, be extremely effective in the right environment: a kind of incapacity is in effect being selected for. It is vital to separate this point from familiar and condescending claims about how dumb or uneducated the 'other side' are: stupidity is compatible with high educational achievement, and it is more the property of a political culture than of the individuals in it, needing to be tackled at that level.*

*Musil's indulgent, almost patrician, attitude to 'honourable' dumbness was certainly dangerously complacent: consider its role in the current anti-vax phenomenon. But dumbness alone is rarely the driving threat: at the head of almost every dumb movement, you will find the stupid in charge.*

*We can now explain why stupidity is so domain-specific, why someone can be so smart in one area, and such an idiot in another: the relevant concepts are often domain-specific. Furthermore, we can see that there will be many cases that aren't fully fledged*

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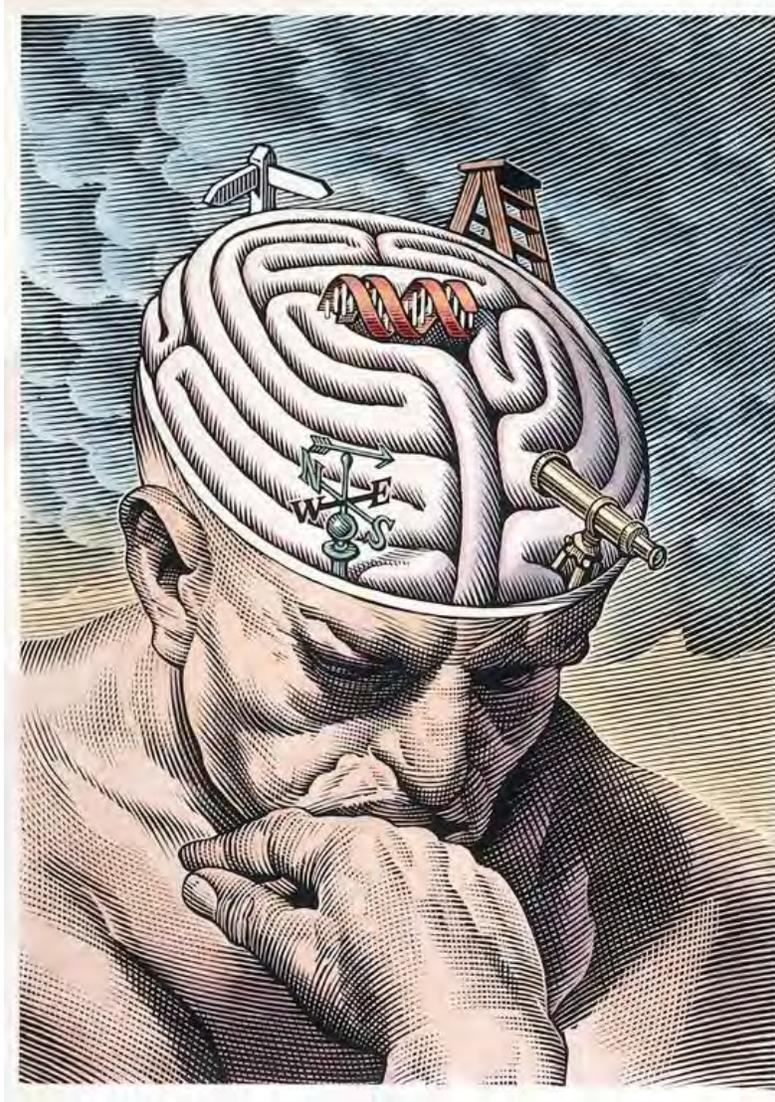
*stupidity but that mimic its effects. Imagine someone who had been blind to all evidence that they were being cheated on finally asking themselves ‘How could you be so stupid?’ Here the problem is not pure stupidity: the concept of a cheat is common enough. What we have here is rather someone ‘acting as if they were stupid’. It’s not just that they failed to apply the concept of betrayal, but that they literally didn’t think of it: it was effectively ‘offline’, due to emotional and other pressures. In this kind of case, agents possess the necessary intellectual tools but unwittingly lock them away. This marks an important contrast with dumbness – we can make ourselves stupid, but we don’t make ourselves dumb.*

He then concludes (and I fully agree!):

*So, stupidity is tough to fix. This is exacerbated by the way it dovetails with other vices: stubbornness stops me from revisiting my concepts even as they fail me. But once we understand stupidity’s nature, things are a little brighter than they might seem. To view political opponents as primarily cynical transforms them into Machiavellian monsters, leaving no space for anything but a zero-sum battle for domination. To view political opponents as primarily dumb is to suggest an irreparable flaw – one that, in our deeply hierarchical society, we often project on to those without the ‘right’ educational credentials. Both moves also offer a certain false reassurance: with a bit of reflection, we can be fairly sure that we are not cynical, and, with the right credentials, we can prove that we are not dumb. But we might well, nevertheless, be caught in the net of stupidity. If history is anything to go by, a few hundred years from now, our descendants will find at least one part of contemporary morality almost unintelligible – ‘How could decent people ever have believed that?’ If they are not to condemn us as evil, they might well have to conclude that we were stupid.*



## Forget Morality!



Where do Morals Come From? © Public Books.org

Ronnie de Sousa starts with a statement:

*Moral philosophy is bogus, a mere substitute for God that licenses ugly emotions. Here are five reasons to reject it.*

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He then explains:

*Let me start with a disclosure. I am not a 'moral philosopher', but I have taught moral philosophy for several decades. I have come to regard the very idea of morality as fraudulent. Morality, I now believe, is a shadow of religion, serving to comfort those who no longer accept divine guidance but still hope for an 'objective' source of certainty about right and wrong. Moralists claim to discern the existence of commands as inescapable as those of an omniscient and omnipotent God. Those commands, moral philosophers teach, deserve to prevail over all other reasons to act – always, everywhere, and for all time. But that claim is bogus.*

*By 'morality', I refer to the sort of rules the transgression of which common sense decries as 'immoral', 'wrong' or 'evil'. Such rules are generally regarded as obliging us without qualification. They prescribe duties not in virtue of your goals or role – such as 'the duties of the secretary include taking minutes of the meeting' – but without qualification. They are claimed to 'bind' us merely in virtue of our status as human beings. And philosophers have constructed a vast industry devoted to the elaboration of subtle theories designed to justify them. Against morality thus conceived, I have five complaints.*

*First, most systems of morality are inherently totalizing. Adhering to them consistently is impossible, and so each system is forced into incoherence by setting arbitrary limits to its own scope. Second, our preoccupation with morality distorts the force of our reasons to act, by effecting among them a triage that results in some reasons being counted twice over. Third, the intellectual acrobatics invoked to justify this double counting commit us to insoluble and therefore idle theoretical debates. Fourth, the psychological power of moral authority can promote deplorable systems of evaluation as easily as good ones. And fifth, the emotions cultivated by a preoccupation with morality encourage self-righteousness and masochistic guilt.*

*When making choices, I suggest, we should consider our reasons without asking what is 'morally right'. This might seem preposterous.*

*In short, many things are neither legally compulsory nor forbidden. But morality is not so restrained: a system of morality can, like God, claim total authority over every action and even every thought. Such a totalizing system would seem oppressively intrusive. Yet the leading theories of morality can mitigate their overreach only by setting arbitrary*

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*limits to their own relevance.*

*In this respect among many others, morality seems like the ghost of religion. Religion is totalizing by its very nature: God knows and judges everything you do and think. And terror, though less fashionable among Christians nowadays, is a tried-and-true instrument of faith. Many Christians have lived in terror of hell. 'Divine justice never stands in the way,' proclaimed the 18th-century revivalist preacher Jonathan Edwards. 'Yea, on the contrary, justice calls aloud for an infinite punishment.'*

*And it works: the threat of hell (though not the promise of heaven) turns out to be a good motivator. Without God, however, the moral terrorism that relies on hell loses some leverage. And anyway, most moralists are reluctant to equate morality with fear of punishment. Still, morality hardly retreats. The most commonly defended systems of morality, when taken to their logical conclusion, extend their tentacles to every choice. Just as venial sins can be forgiven, so in practice some acts are exempt from moral scrutiny. But that is only in virtue of ad hoc intellectual acrobatics with which moral systems insulate themselves from their more repugnant implications.*

He then explores and discusses the three of the most prominent systems of moral theory: Kantianism, utilitarianism, and virtue theory inspired by Aristotle. Each, if taken strictly, entails that everything comes under morality's purview.

He concludes:

*Surprisingly many philosophers have held that a person who is truly virtuous will have all the virtues. This doctrine of the 'unity of the virtues' is grounded in the idea that the exercise of a skill should not count as virtuous unless it serves good ends. It implies that no one is truly virtuous for, as Christians are wont to remind us, we are all sinners. But despite its popularity among philosophers, this doctrine is repugnant to common sense, as well as indefensible in the light of recent empirical research on the piecemeal nature of moral development.*

*As illustrated by many a caper movie, pulling off a major crime requires several traits traditionally regarded as virtues: prudence, courage, intelligence. More importantly, a person's life can be dominated by a devotion to evil goals every bit as fervent, and quite as dependent on prudence, courage, intelligence and especially 'honor', as that of the most admired paragons of conventional virtue. The possibility of a bad morality challenges us to define what counts as a good one. Unless you just assume that your*

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*morality is unquestionably the only right one, the term seems to fit any system of principles and values by which its adherents feel 'bound' – in some metaphorical sense that is both specific and hard to pin down.*

*When feeling bound by a moral rule in that special way, the rule's transgression, by oneself or others, is liable to trigger 'moral' emotions such as guilt or indignation. A Nazi might feel indignant at his colleague's lack of zeal in persecuting Jews. A fundamentalist jihadist might feel guilty for secretly teaching his daughter to read. Deciding between good and bad moralities will once again lead to a wild-goose chase after foundations. It can only add a distracting complication to the already difficult task of assessing the force of reasons. In their psychological profile, in the way that they structure a life and give rise to moral emotions, bad and good moralities are alike.*

*Perhaps, as Nietzsche argued, such emotions, rooted in fear and resentment, are what above all motivates us to believe in morality. For morality licenses a right to blame that we are reluctant to forfeit. It brings me to my last complaint: morality licenses ugly emotions. It encourages us to feel contemptuous of others who fail to share our principles, or superior to those who fail to live up to them. It allows us a daily twinge of the pleasure that St. Thomas Aquinas promised the elect, whose eternal bliss, he assured us, will be enhanced by witnessing the torments of the damned. Furthermore, it invites us to wallow in a certain kind of regret we dignify as morally superior by calling it 'guilt'. Guilt is the primary moral emotion. The benefit claimed for it is that it motivates you to behave better in the future. But simple regret is no less apt to inform and guide future choices. Unlike guilt, regret is not tied to the moral domain: I can regret missing a concert as readily as acting unkindly. We can learn from the past without laying claim to moral authority.*

*What do we lose by giving up morality? As an amoralist, I continue to prize what is beautiful, or good, or interesting, or virtuous – in the morally neutral sense of the Greek term *aretē*. I daresay I care about most of the things that many moral people care about. It includes the wellbeing of others, as well as my own. What I give up is above all the convoluted process of sorting my reasons into moral and non-moral. Insofar as that process aims to provide me with fresh reasons to act, it could do so only based on double counting, or by attempting to derive my existing reasons from obscure and disputed intuitions about ultimate values. I have plenty of reasons to be kind, not to cheat or lie, just as I have reasons to read some books rather than others or travel here*

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*rather than there. Why worry about which of those reasons are ‘moral’? The label adds nothing to the reasons. And if nevertheless I cheat or lie, those same reasons can lead me to regret it. The guilt I don’t need.*

*As the philosopher Joel Marks has argued, to renounce morality is to wake up to the fact that in every choice we are governed by desires. Some desires are for something we just want for itself; others are for ways or means of satisfying those. All constitute or are grounded in reasons to act. Those reasons can be almost exactly those that move a moralist. I merely forgo that added layer of pseudo-reasons that lets some of them count twice. I have perfectly good reasons for my desire not to cause harm, not to act unfairly, or to be kind. These reasons derive both from my first- order reasons and from my reflection on them. They matter not because of morality, but because I care.*

*For an amoralist, moral discourse is nothing more than misleading rhetoric. Given the psychological power of the emotions that sustain moral fervor, we amoralists have little hope of weaning many others from their addiction to guilt and blame. Neither do I expect professional ethicists to resign their jobs. Exploring the consequences of an act or policy envisaged is always to be encouraged. I hope only to have cast some doubt on the wisdom of dressing up some of our good reasons in the mantle of morality’s spurious authority.*

*Some speculative debates are undoubtedly fascinating in their subtle complexity, even when, like those of theology, they lack an existing subject. But even those who do not simply reject their theist presuppositions might concede those debates to be stubbornly undecidable, as well as of doubtful practical relevance. Similarly, the history of moral theory is full of baroque edifices of thought that might be intriguing to the historian of ideas. But they are no less irrelevant, at best – or toxic at worst – to the conduct of life. Better to just assess and compare your reasons and ignore moral theory’s labyrinths of futile debate and the high-minded contempt encouraged by the moralistic stance.*

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We are left with two inevitable components of human nature: Stupidity and Morality (among many, too many others!), and our lives will depend on how we manage, and deal with them. Tough task....



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