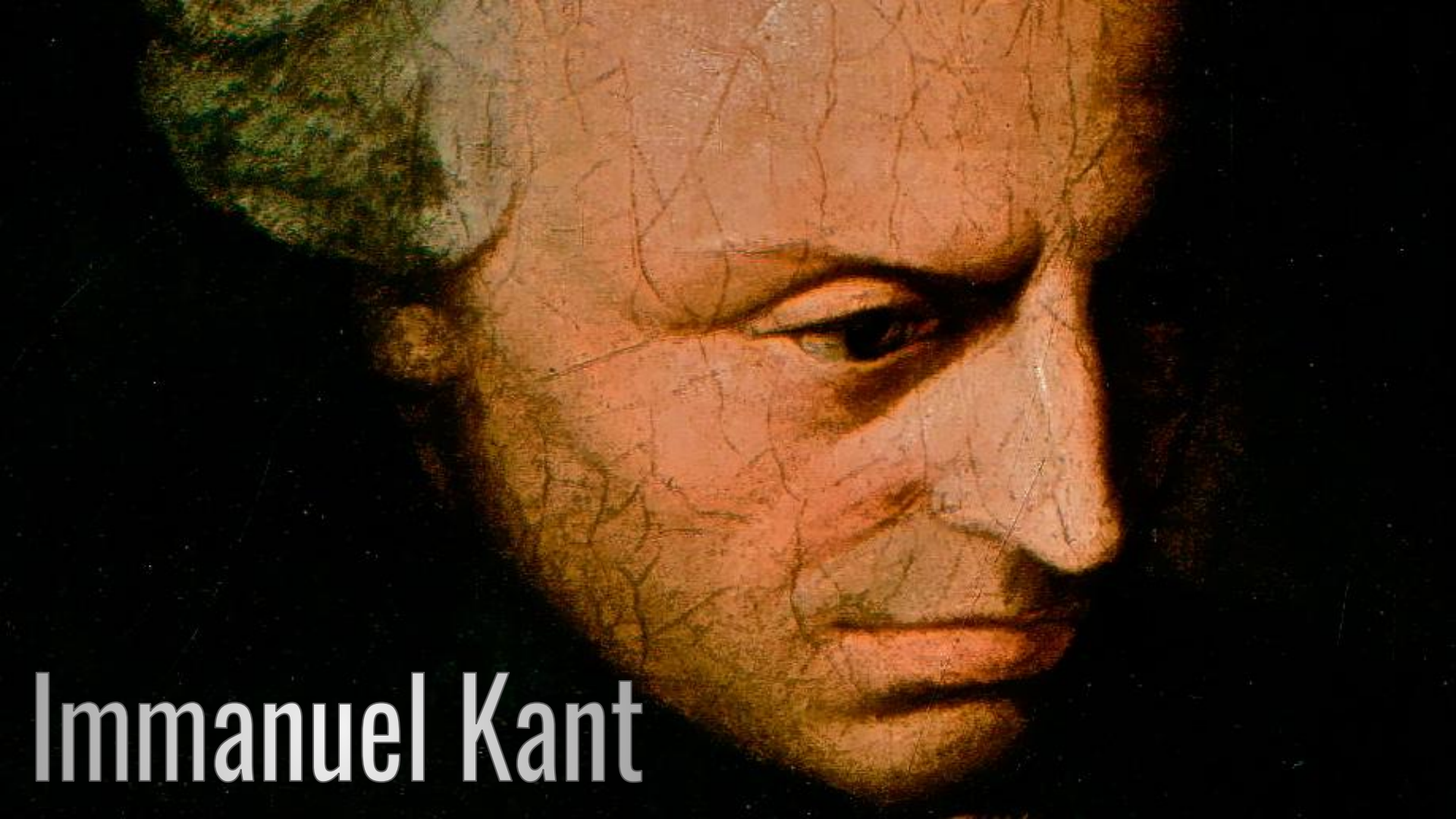
Morality as a Naturalistic Phenomenon

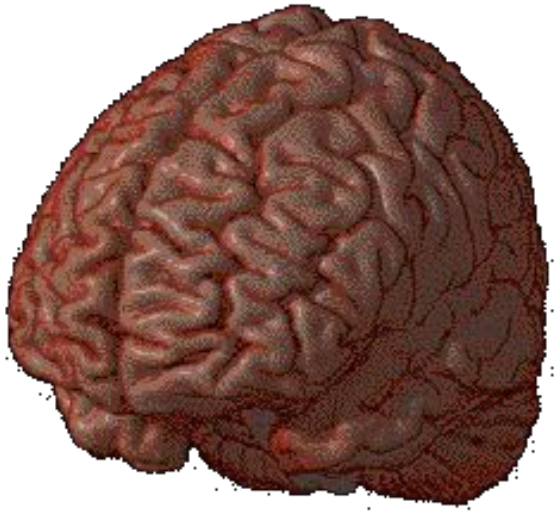
Why skepticism?

Moral skepticism might be motivated if one finds other ethical theories, realist and otherwise, unsatisfactory.

Question:
Are traditional ethical theories unsatisfactory?


Immanuel Kant

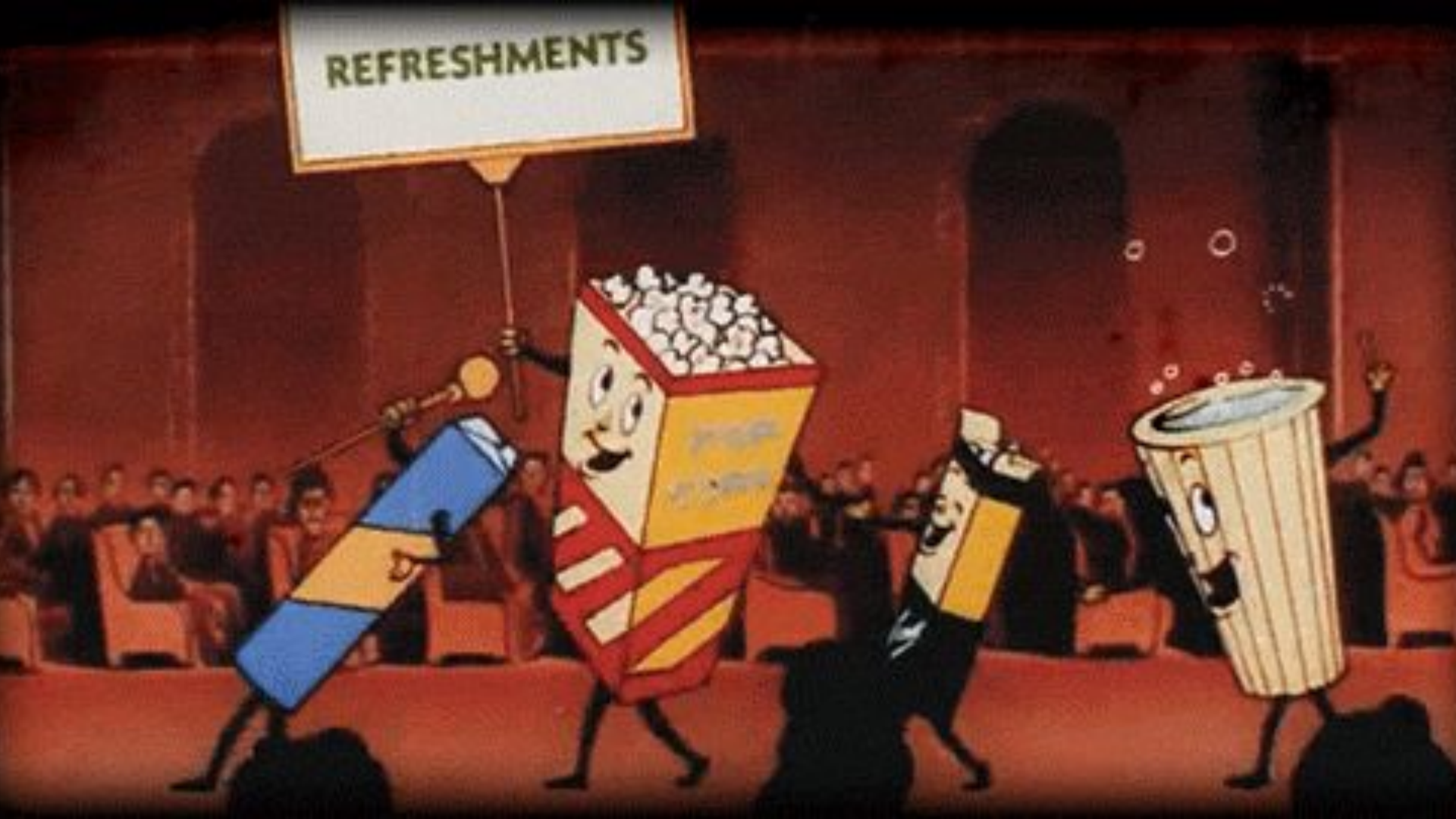
Kant argued that…



there’s an objective, rationally necessary supreme principle of morality.

We have access to our moral requirements through reason.

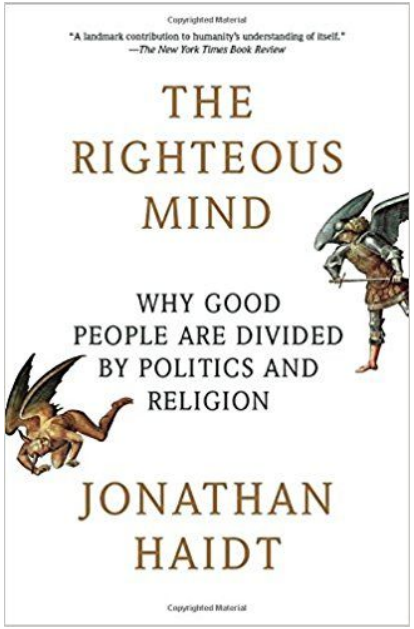
For example, you might wonder if it’s ok to kill annoying people.

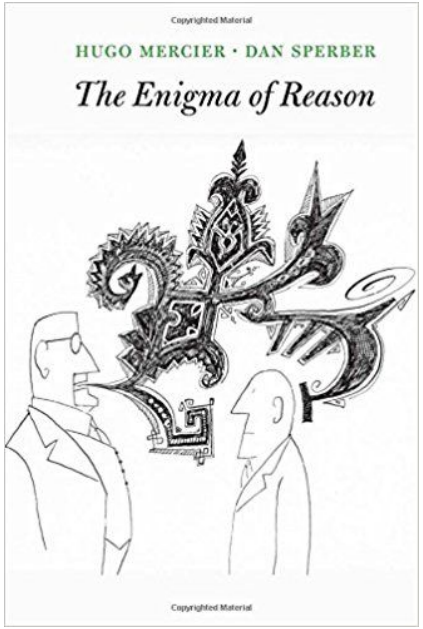

REFRESHMENTS

Kant believes reason can help us acquire more accurate beliefs, moral and otherwise.

Question:

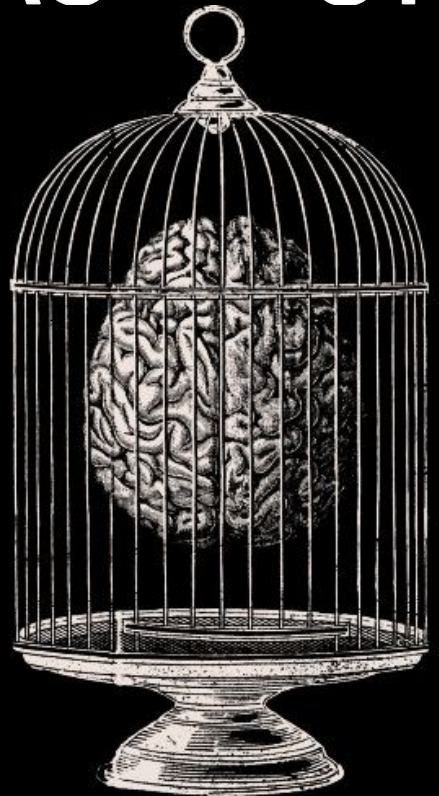
Is this the evolutionary function of reason?





Some theorists (Haidt 2012) (Mercier and Sperber 2017) argue that reasoning evolved in order to justify our actions to others as well as critique their views.

Cognitive Bias of the Day



Confirmation Bias, sometimes called *my-side bias*, is the unconscious tendency to seek, interpret, or selectively recall information in a way that confirms one's existing beliefs (Nickerson 1998).

FOR EXAMPLE

In a recent study, Donald Braman (2011) studied whether cultural cognition affected informational processing.

In one experiment, subjects were first sorted by political ideology. The conservatives were split into two groups. Both groups received a presentation from a researcher stating that global warming is happening and the consequences will be very bad. They were also given a possible solution to the crisis.

FOR EXAMPLE

One group was told the solution is strict regulation of industries responsible for greenhouse gas emissions.

The other group was told that the solution was ***DE-***regulation of certain industries, like nuclear energy, so the free market can find the appropriate solution.

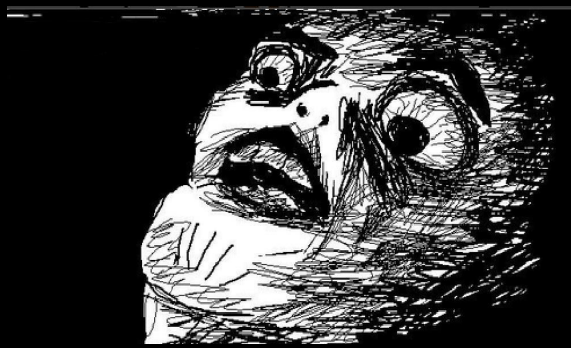
Afterwards, subjects were asked about their choices...

FOR EXAMPLE

The Result-

Conservatives told that the solution is strict regulation were more likely to:

- Deny global warming is real (or deny it is as serious as scientists claim), and
- Claim they would vote against such regulation



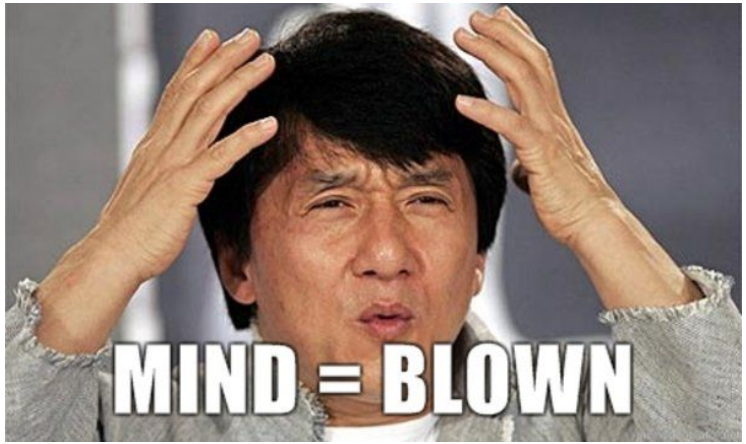
Question:

What do you think of this chair?

If you believe the traditionalist view (i.e. that reason is to help us have better beliefs) you might think reason is like this chair: it’s poorly designed.

This is because:

a. We have confirmation bias; and
b. Confirmation bias hinders our ability to acquire better beliefs.



Why *does* reason have a myside bias?

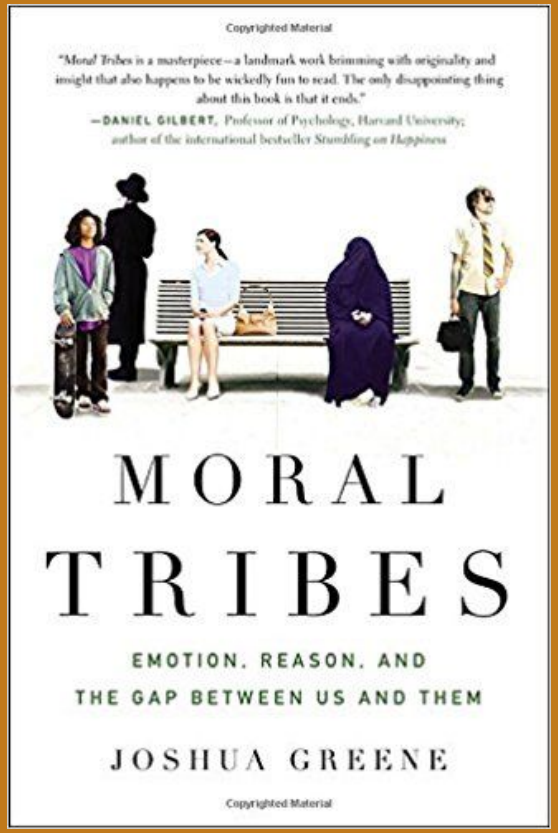
Because it evolved to win arguments, not to seek truth (Mercier and Sperber 2017).

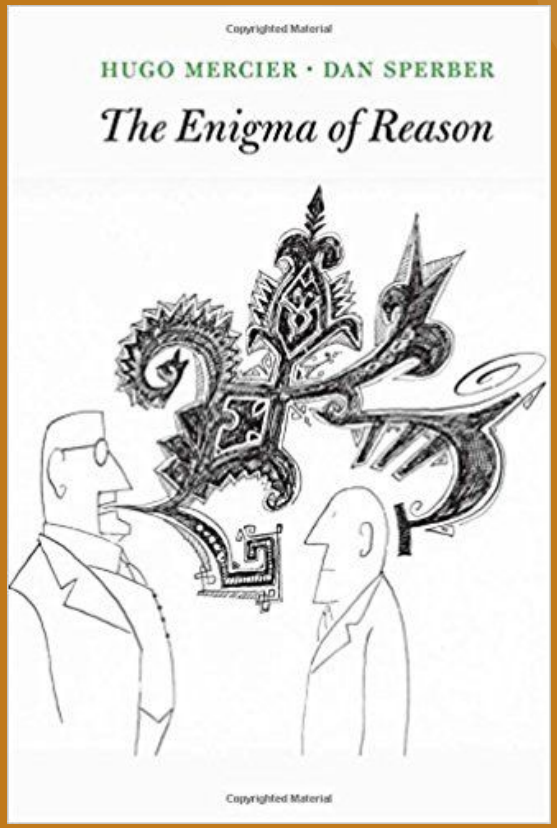
And once an artifact's real function is recognized, what may look like flaws can turn out to be well-designed features.

Note: This isn’t really a chair. It’s a church kneeler.

Kant's view hinges on an view of reason that has come into question. It could be the case that Kant is using his great intellect to justify the views that he already held.

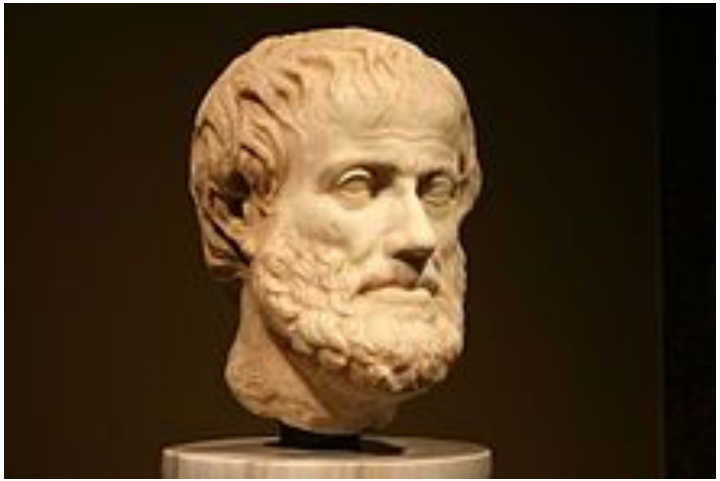
Suggested Reading:





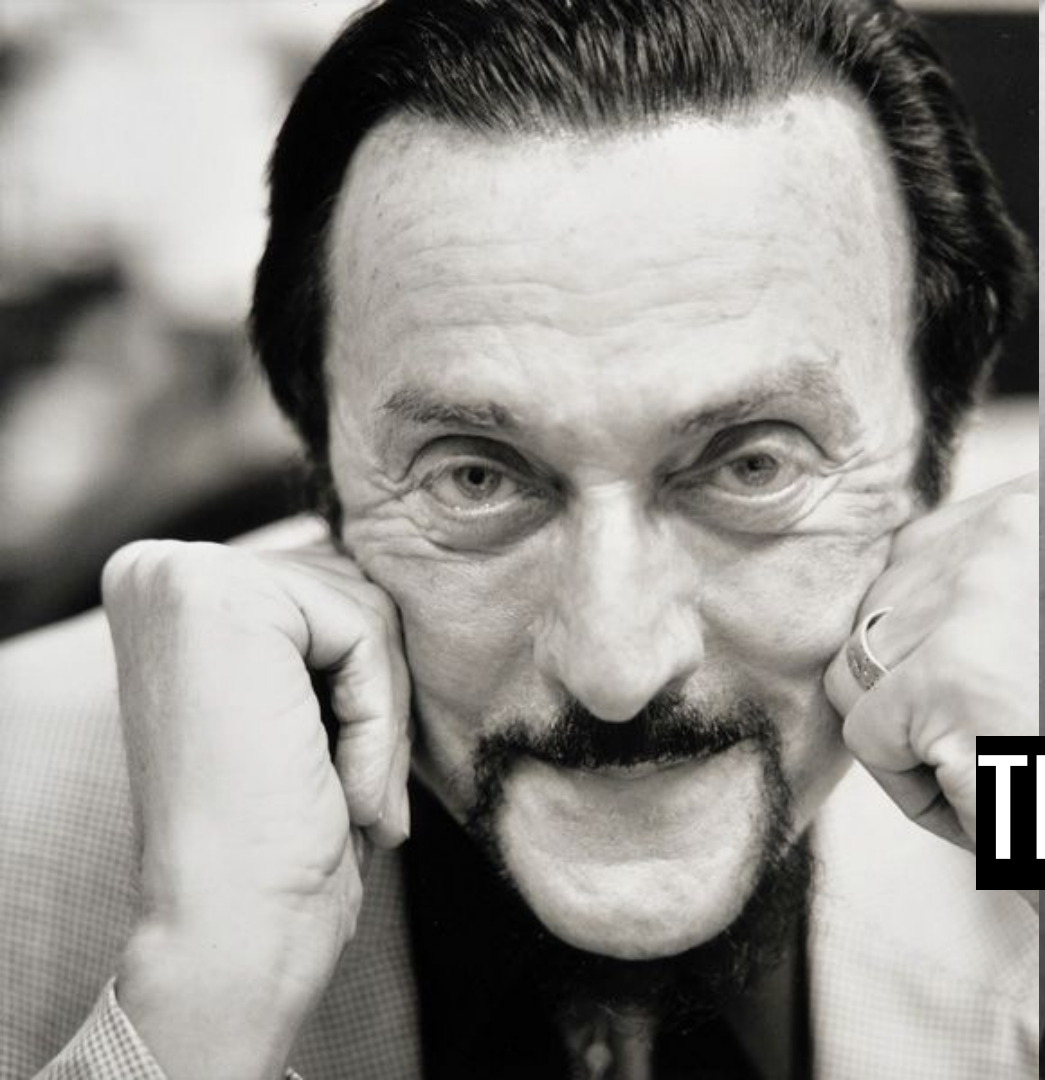
Virtue Theory

Aristotle argued that...



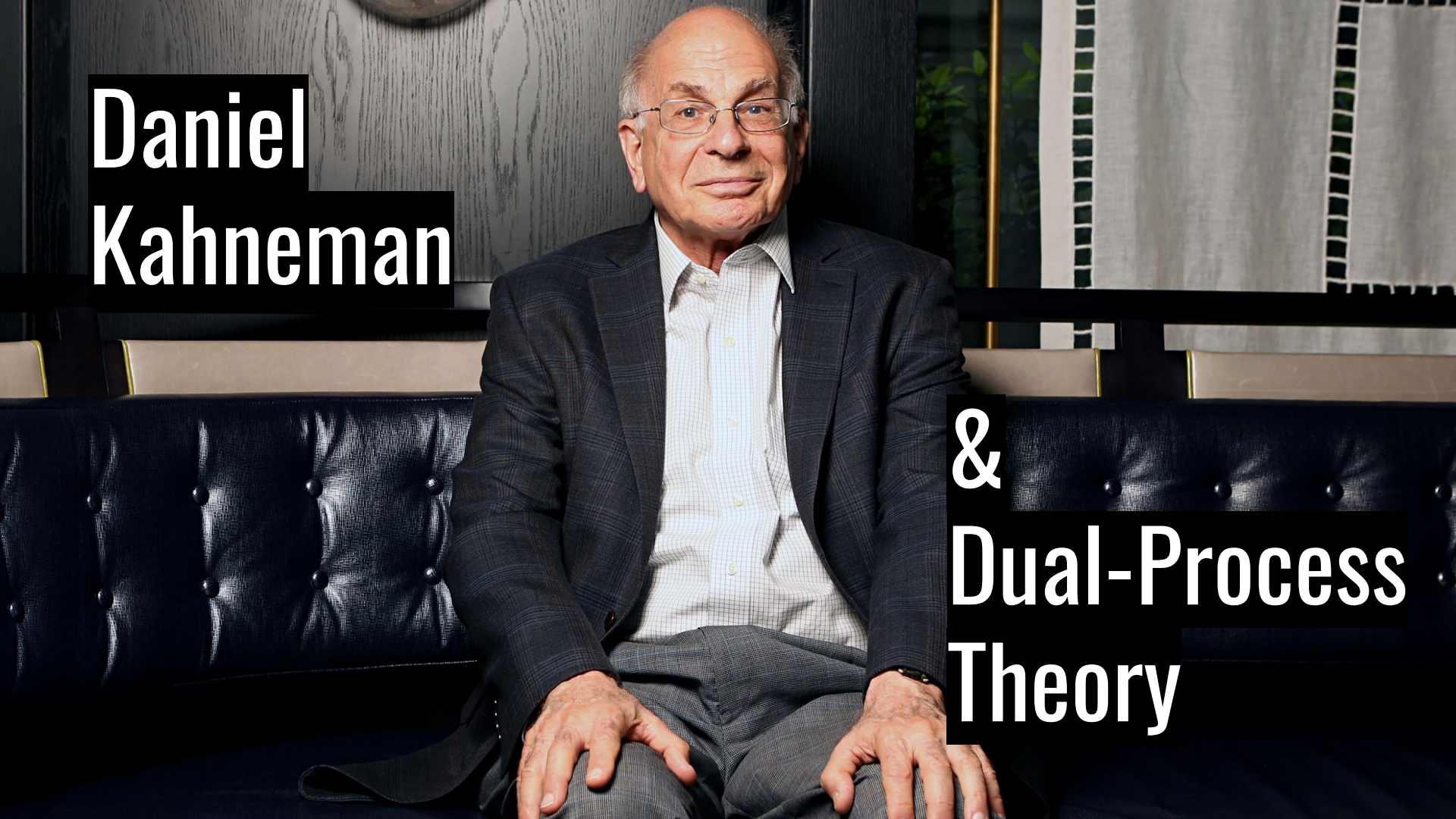
If we develop the right virtues, then the right actions will flow from them.

In the last few decades, social psychologists have discovered that the situation we find ourselves in is the greatest predictor of how we will behave.

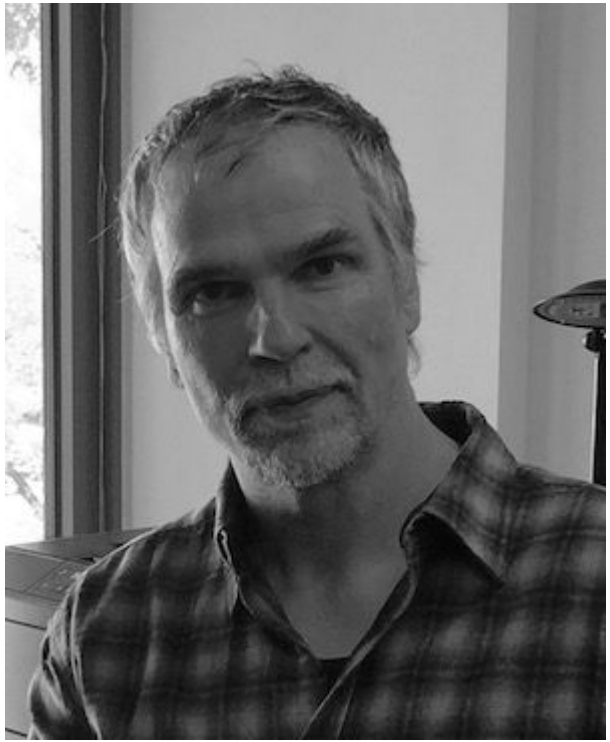


Philip Zimbardo & The Stanford Prison Experiment

Stanley Milgram & Obedience to Authority


Daniel
Kahneman
&
Dual-Process
Theory

Person of Interest: John Doris



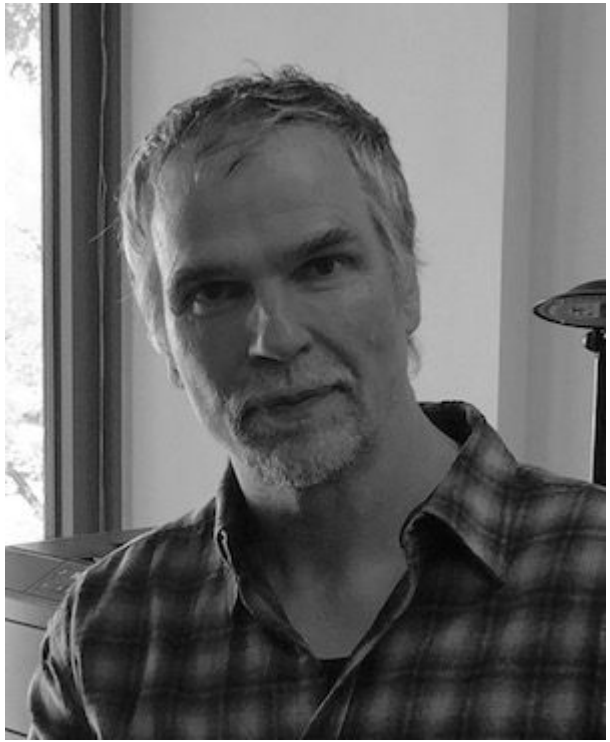
Affiliation:

Washington University in St. Louis

Notable Work:

Talking to Our Selves (2015)

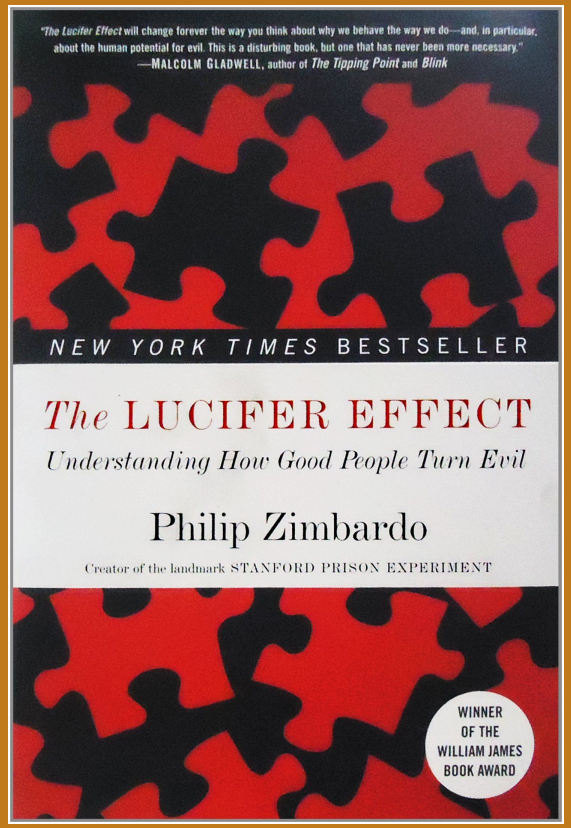
Person of Interest: John Doris

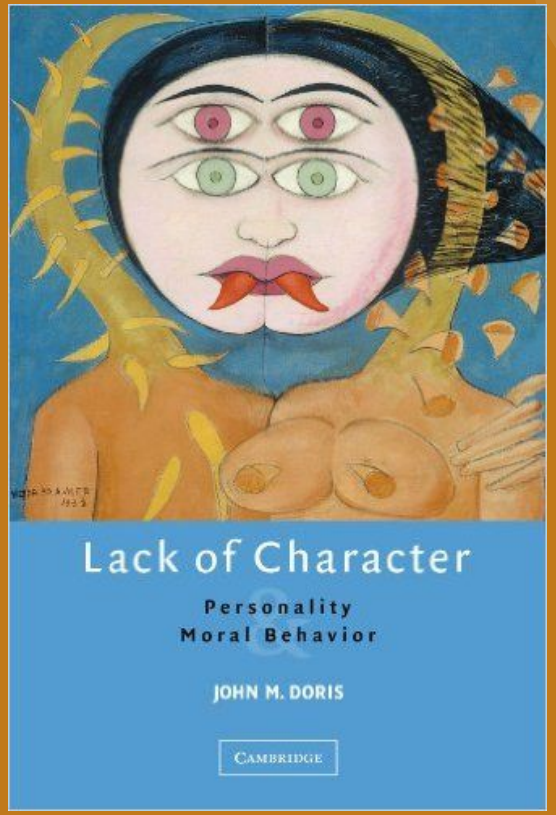


"Social psychologists have repeatedly found that the difference between good conduct and bad appears to reside in the situation more than in the person" (Doris and Stich et al. 2006).

In light of evidence from social psychology, the central claim of virtue theory seems untenable.

Suggested Reading:





If traditional ethical theories fail, then how do we explain the pervasiveness of moral judgments?

Here are some things we know:

1. Norms and values play a central role in regulating group behavior (Fukuyama 2001).
2. Cross-cultural evidence suggests an association between belief in morally concerned gods and large group size (Norenzayan and Shariff 2008).
3. Larger, cohesive groups outcompete smaller groups (LeBlanc and Katherine 2003).

Maybe…

Our capacity to make moral judgments evolved.

Tribes with a shared moral faculty were more cooperative and larger, and thus they beat non-moral tribes.

This makes tribes with a moral faculty more adaptive (i.e., evolutionarily fit).

Thus, our moral faculty became a feature of humans.

I think...

1. **Objective** moral properties probably don't exist, aka error theory.
2. If they do exist, they might as well *not* exist (because we wouldn't have access to them), aka justification skepticism.
3. The better explanation for morality is the naturalistic one, aka naturalism.
4. The origins of moral judgments appear to be emotional in nature, aka psychological emotivism, aka non-cognitivism* (see Joyce 2016).
5. We can still construct and endorse a useful moral *fiction* to alleviate tensions in the 21st century, aka moral fictionalism.

What do all good theories have in common?

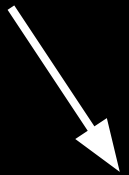
“There are at least twelve major virtues of good theories: evidential accuracy, causal adequacy, explanatory depth, internal consistency, internal coherence, universal coherence, beauty, simplicity, unification, durability, fruitfulness, and applicability” (Keas 2017).

Explanatory depth...

A good theory has greater depth with regards to describing the chain of causation around a phenomenon.

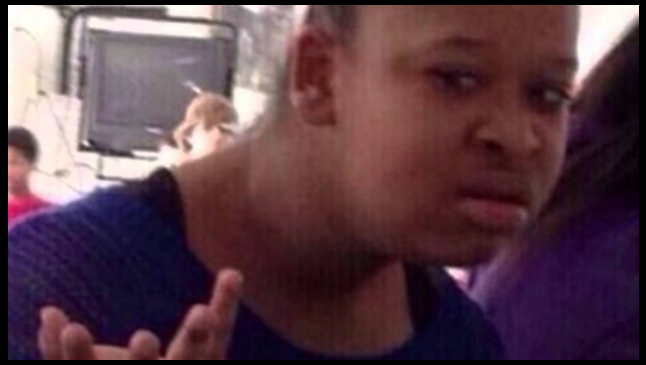
EVOLUTIONARY THEORY

COMPONENTS OF THEORY



MORALITY

GOD



COMPONENTS OF THEORY

MORALITY

God is a supernatural entity.

Supernatural entities are not explicable through natural means.

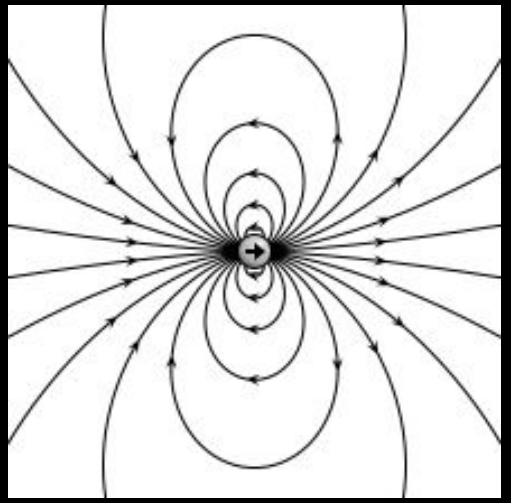
So, to use God in an explanation (of anything) is to explain nothing.

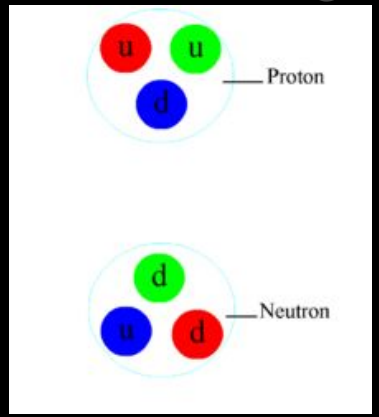
Round 1 2 3

Simplicity…

A good theory explains the *same* *facts* as rivals, but with *less* theoretical content.

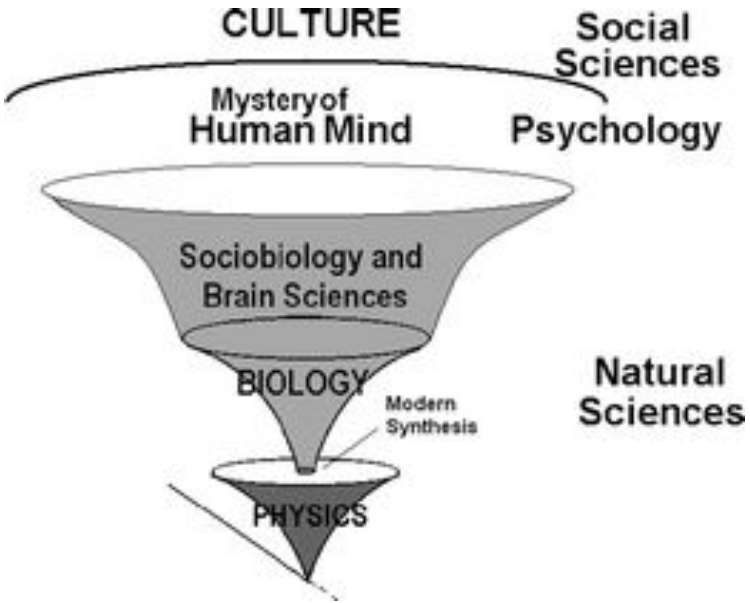
+ GOD



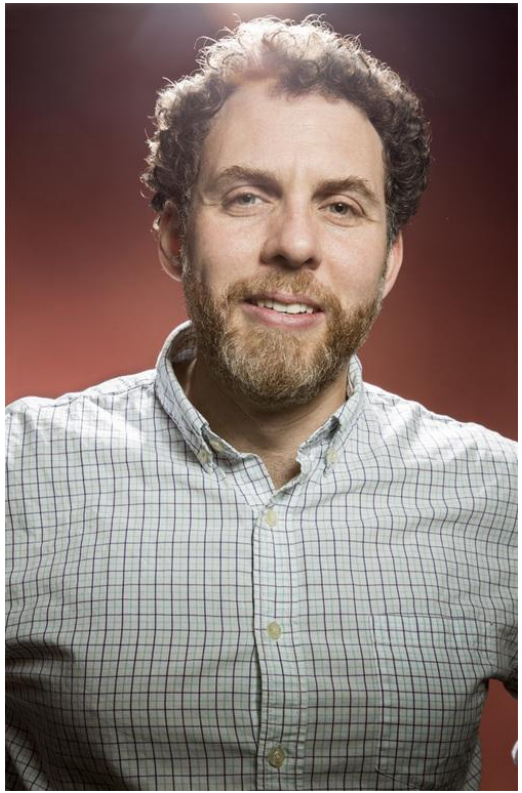


Round 1 2 3

Durability...

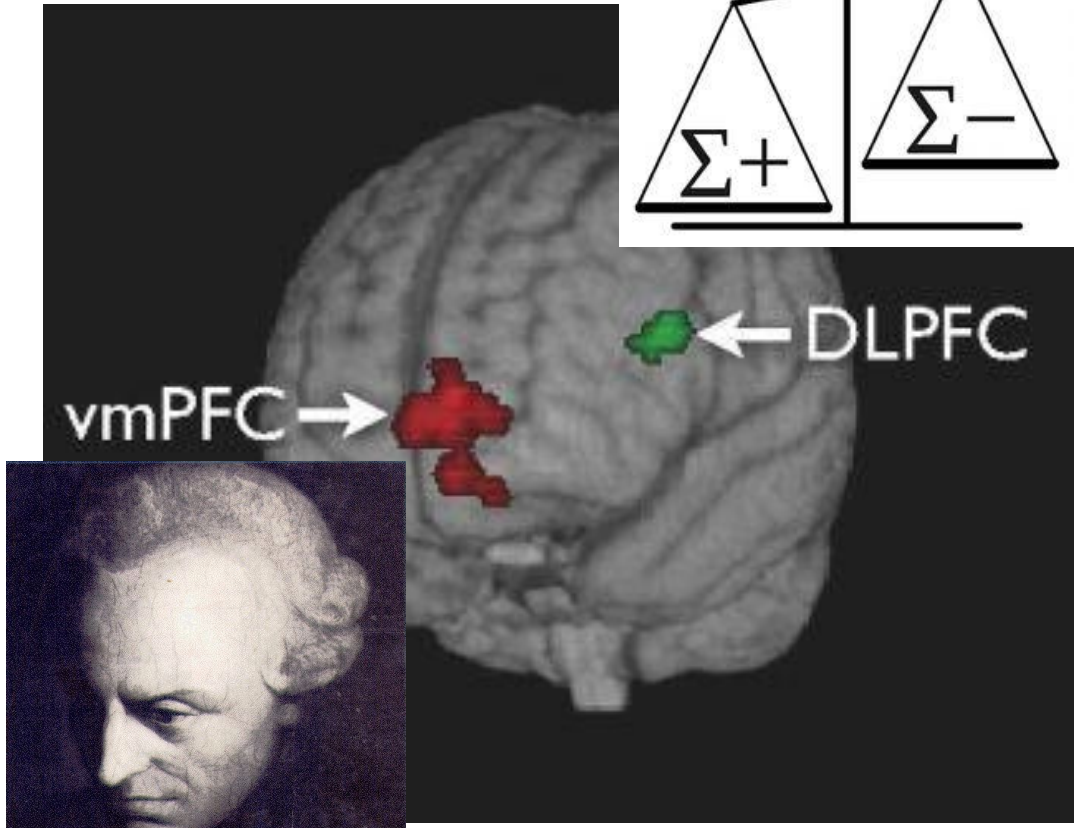


A good theory has survived testing by successful prediction or by plausible accommodation of new, unanticipated data (or both).

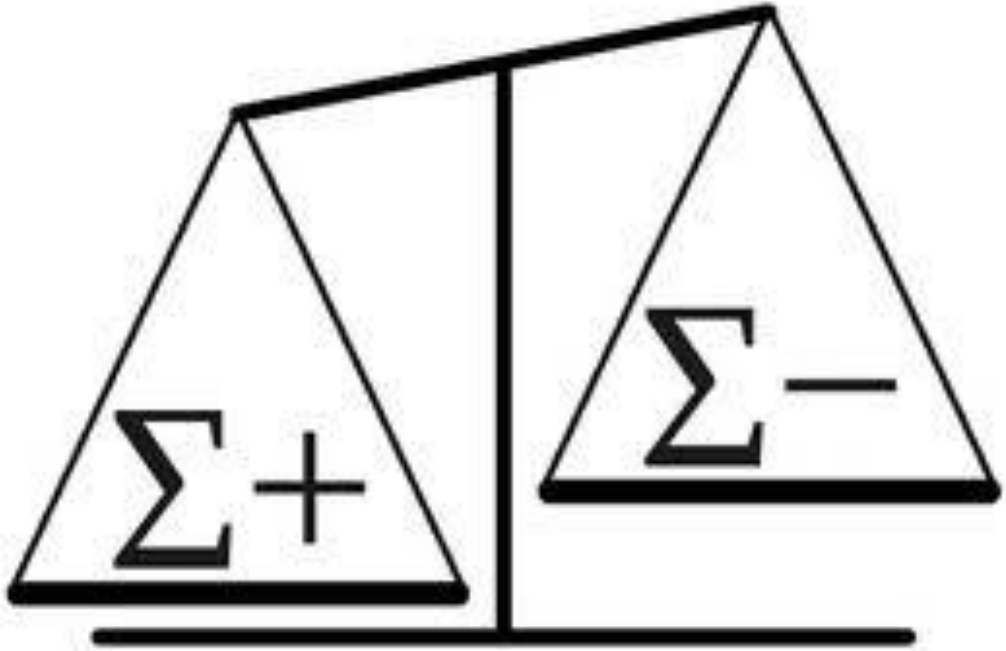


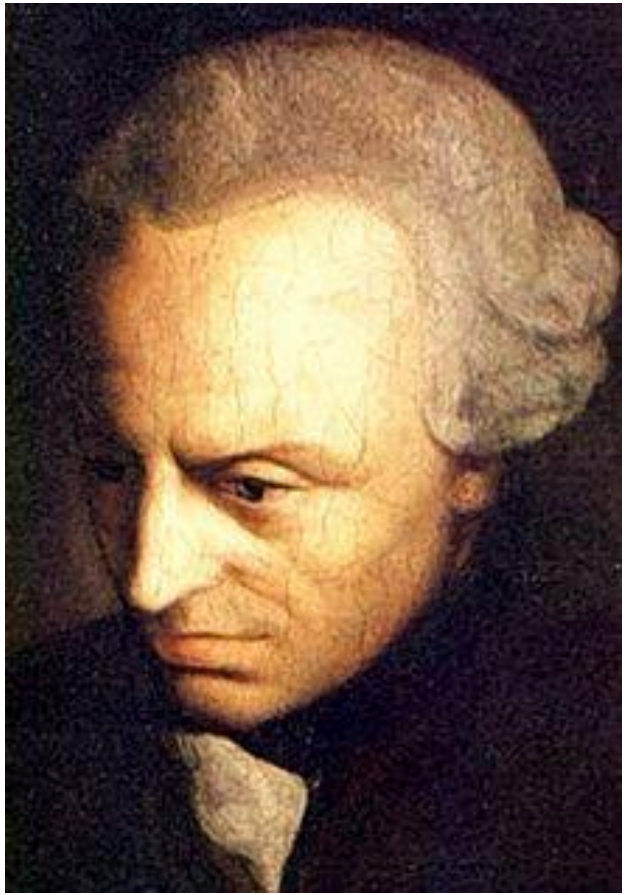
Greene (2001):

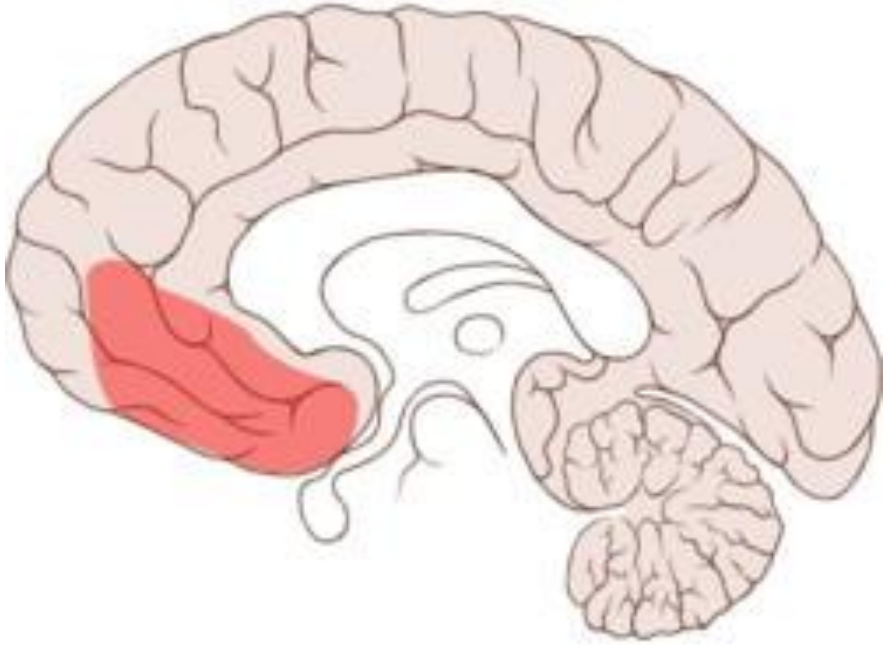
Our rule-based moral intuitions are driven by emotional mechanisms that played an adaptive role in our evolution.

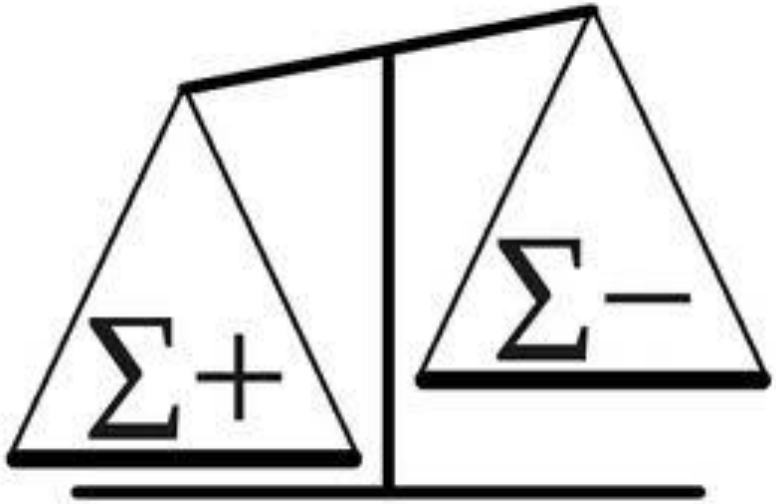

Σ+
Σ−
DLPFC
vmPFC

vmPFC Lesion Studies (Koenigs et al. 2007)








Σ+
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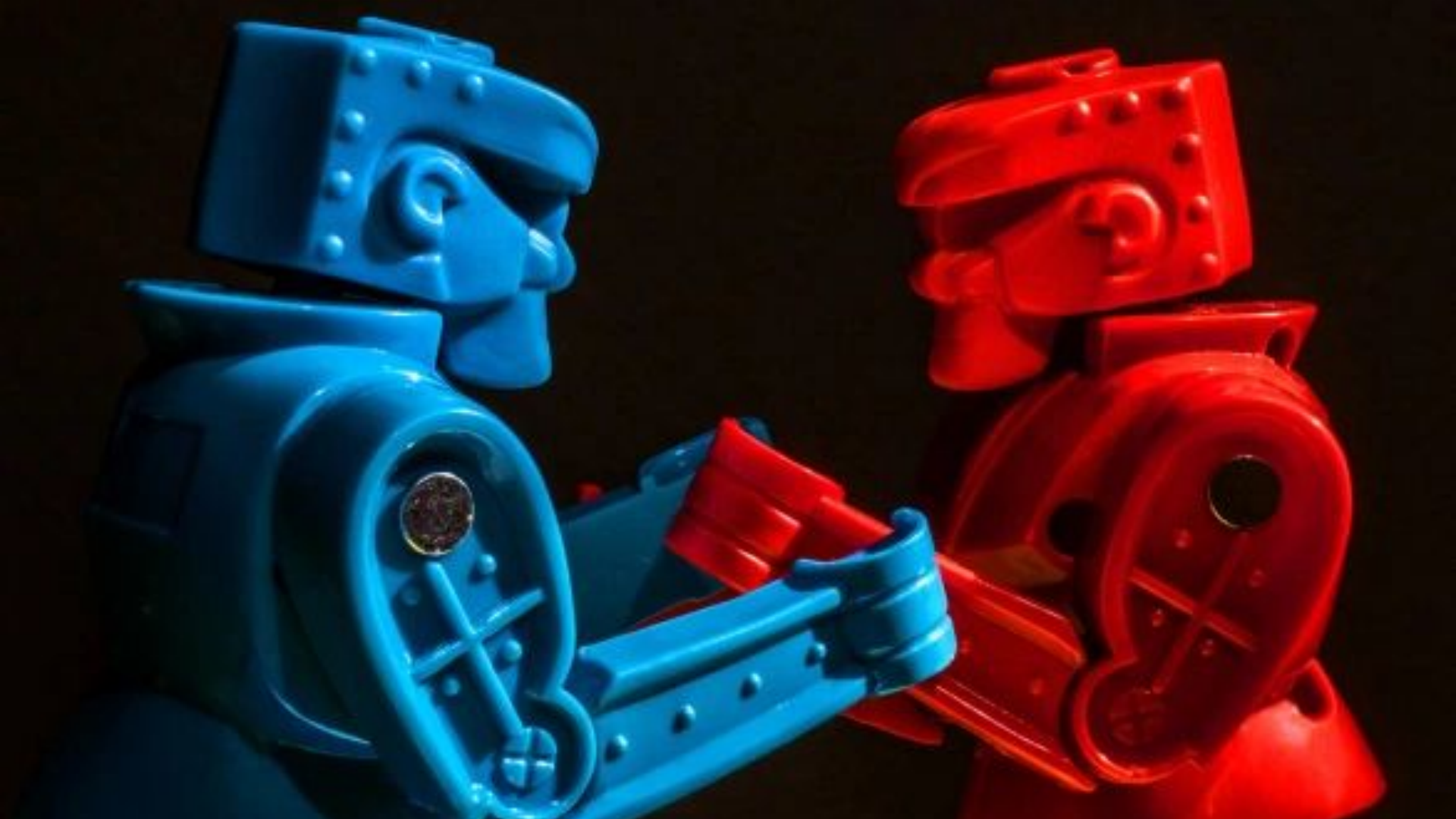
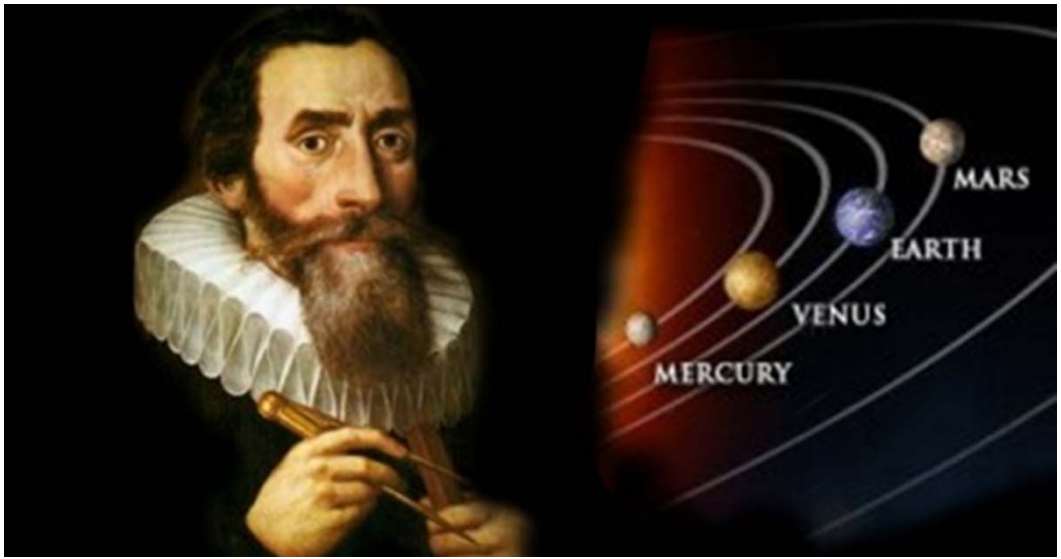
Round 1 2 3



“Truth is the daughter of time, and I feel no shame in being her midwife.”

~Johannes Kepler



Final message:

We must strive to truly *understand* morality,

and this means the naturalistic route.

Perhaps truth is unattainable

but we can at least produce better and better theories.

The first step in changing the world for the better is

understanding the world as it is,

not as we would like it to be.