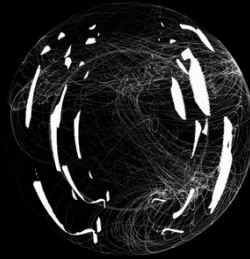
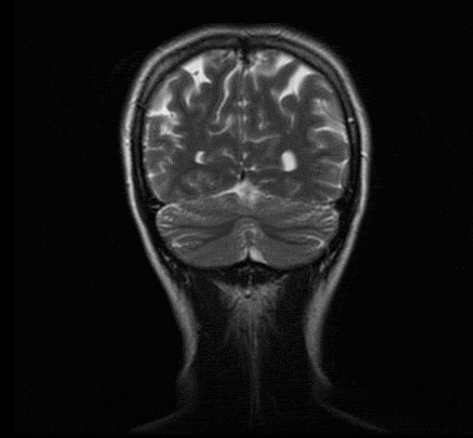




The Enigma of Reason



RECALL:

Modern cultural relativism was formulated in the **moral panic** after the first World War.

Although **cultural evolution** is clearly important in the development of norms, as moral skeptics admit, **the notion of relativistic moral truth seems untenable** (see Rachels [1986](#)).

“The flowering of classical cultural relativism awaited the work of Boas’s students, including Ruth Benedict, Margaret Mead, and Melville Herskovits. Their articulation of a comprehensive relativist doctrine was appealing to intellectuals disillusioned by the pointless brutality of World War I, which undermined faith in the West’s cultural superiority and inspired a romantic search for alternatives to materialism and industrialized warfare...” ([Brown 2008: 364-5](#)).

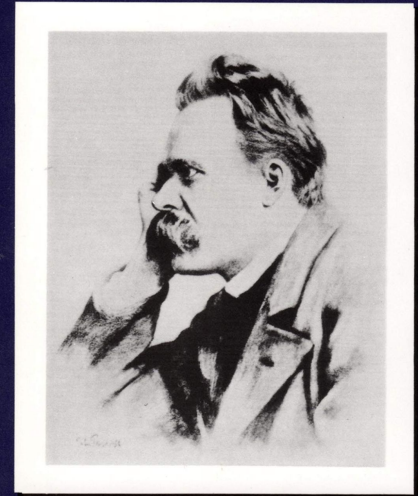


Moral skepticism and related views (e.g., moral nihilism) were also motivated by historical events.

Notably, the publication of Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871) had a profound effect on thinkers like Friedrich Nietzsche.

BEYOND
GOOD AND EVIL

THE GENEALOGY
OF MORALS



FRIEDRICH
NIETZSCHE



“GOD IS DEAD.”

“AND **WE** HAVE KILLED HIM...”

“GOD REMAINS DEAD.”



“HOW SHALL WE COMFORT OURSELVES, THE **MURDERERS**
OF ALL MURDERERS?”

WHAT WAS HOLIEST AND MIGHTIEST OF ALL THAT THE WORLD
HAS YET OWNED HAS BLED TO DEATH

UNDER OUR KNIVES:

WHO WILL WIPE THIS **BLOOD** OFF US?

WHAT WATER IS THERE FOR US
TO CLEAN OURSELVES?”



“What festivals of ATONEMENT, what
sacred games shall we have to
invent?

Is not the greatness of this deed
too great for us ?”



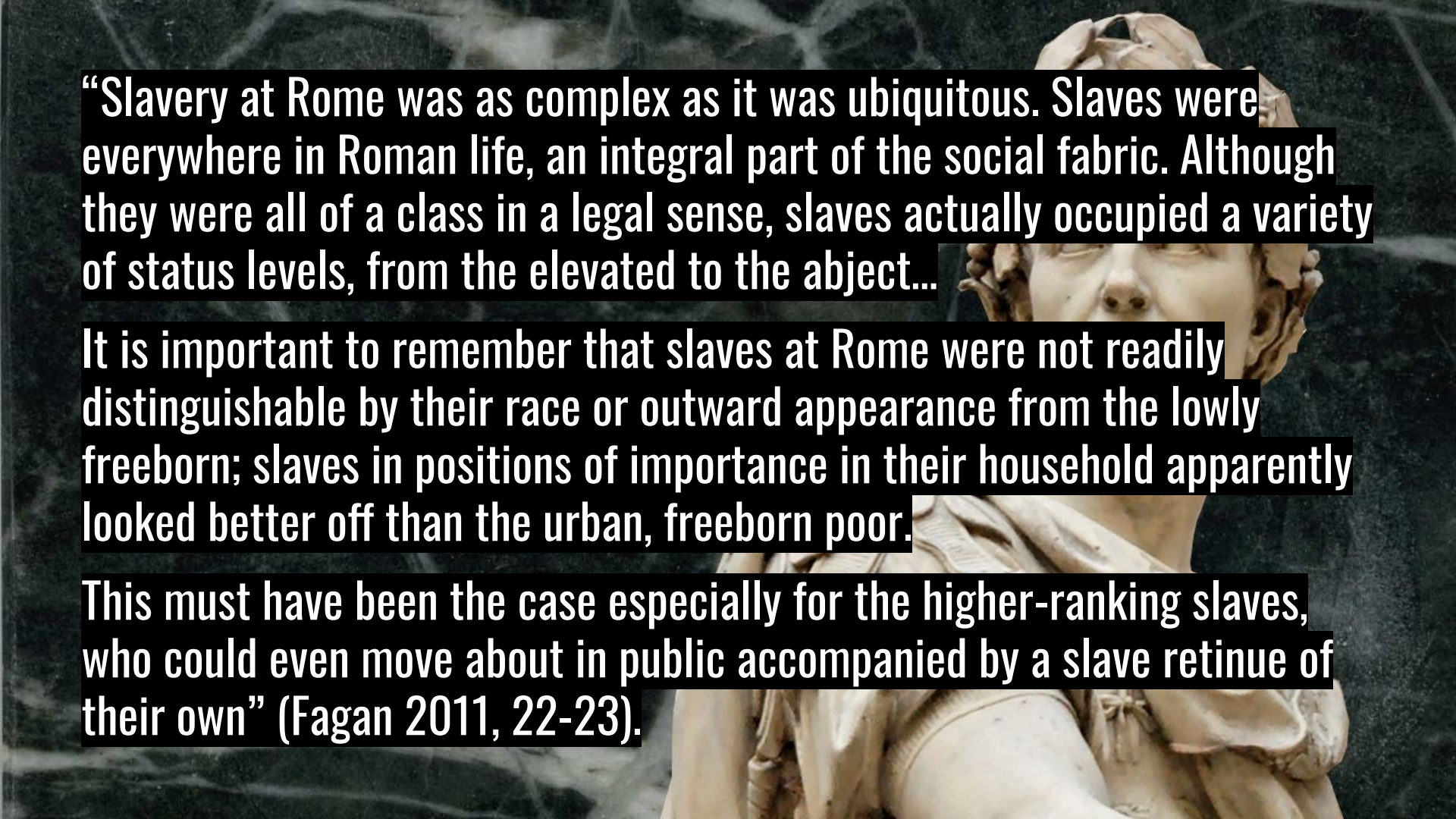
“Must we ourselves not become
GODS simply

to appear worthy of
it?”

Master/Slave Morality

The **Master/Slave Morality Distinction** is a distinction that Nietzsche makes between what he claims is the life-denying **morality of resentment** preached by the clergy (i.e., slave morality), and the **life-affirming morality** (i.e., master morality) which was practiced by the elite before the rise of the clergy.






“Slavery at Rome was as complex as it was ubiquitous. Slaves were everywhere in Roman life, an integral part of the social fabric. Although they were all of a class in a legal sense, slaves actually occupied a variety of status levels, from the elevated to the abject...

It is important to remember that slaves at Rome were not readily distinguishable by their race or outward appearance from the lowly freeborn; slaves in positions of importance in their household apparently looked better off than the urban, freeborn poor.

This must have been the case especially for the higher-ranking slaves, who could even move about in public accompanied by a slave retinue of their own” (Fagan 2011, 22-23).



“One of the chief arguments against maltreatment of slaves in the ancient sources is not the immorality of handling a fellow human being harshly but the deleterious effect such behavior had on the psyche of the owner and the loss of dignity inherent in losing one’s temper” (Fagan 2011, 24-5).

BLESSED ARE

the POOR
in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven

those who

MOURN

for they will be comforted

the

MEEK

for they will inherit the earth

those who

HUNGER



The Beatitudes



the $\rho\tau\lambda\omicron\mu$ turned right-side up



A person in dark clothing stands on a rocky outcrop, looking out over a vast, misty landscape. In the background, there are mountains and a river. The scene is atmospheric and somewhat somber.

“HE WHO DOES NOT

OBEY HIMSELF

WILL BE COMMANDED.”



“What does not
destroy you

makes you
stronger.”

Moral Nihilism

Nihilism is the condition of living without moral values.

Although Nietzsche claimed that the death of God rendered all objective moral values obsolete (i.e., descriptive DCT), he believed you should invent your own values by which to live by (and **not** live in a state of nihilism).



“THOSE WHO FIGHT MONSTERS SHOULD TAKE CARE
THAT THEY DON’T BECOME ONE.

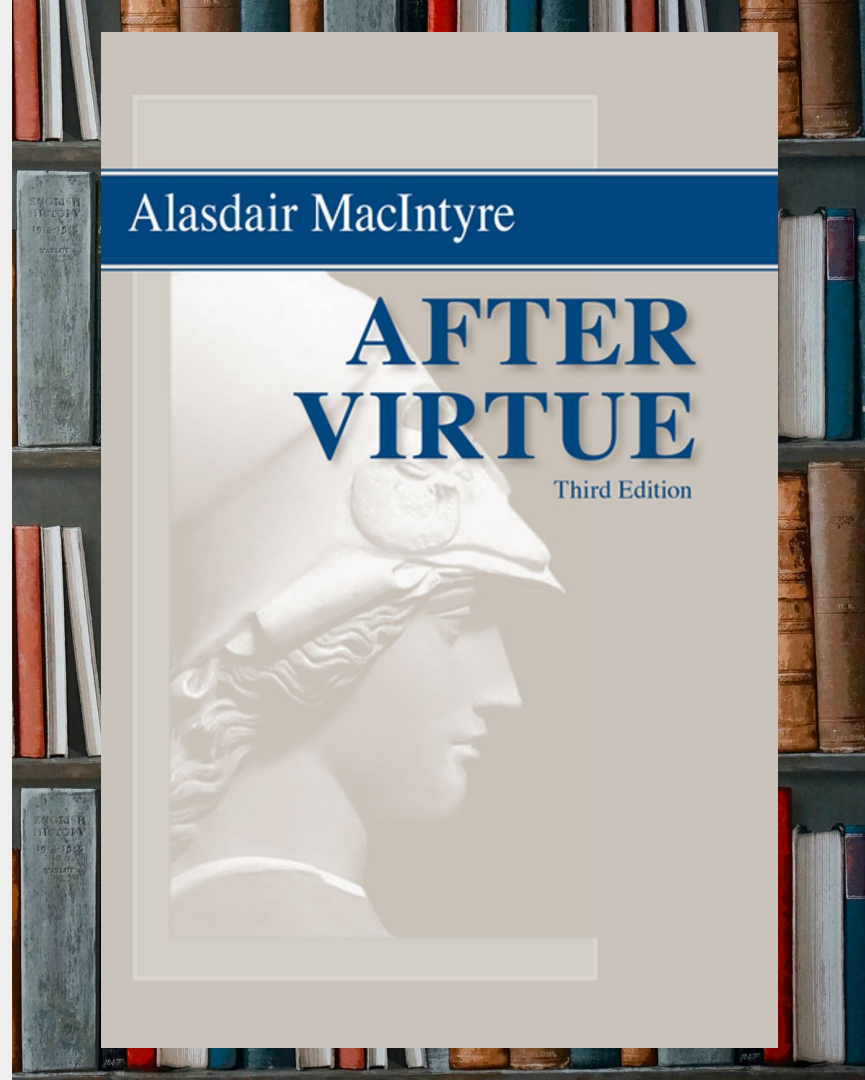
AND IF YOU GAZE FOR LONG INTO AN ABYSS,

THE ABYSS GAZES ALSO

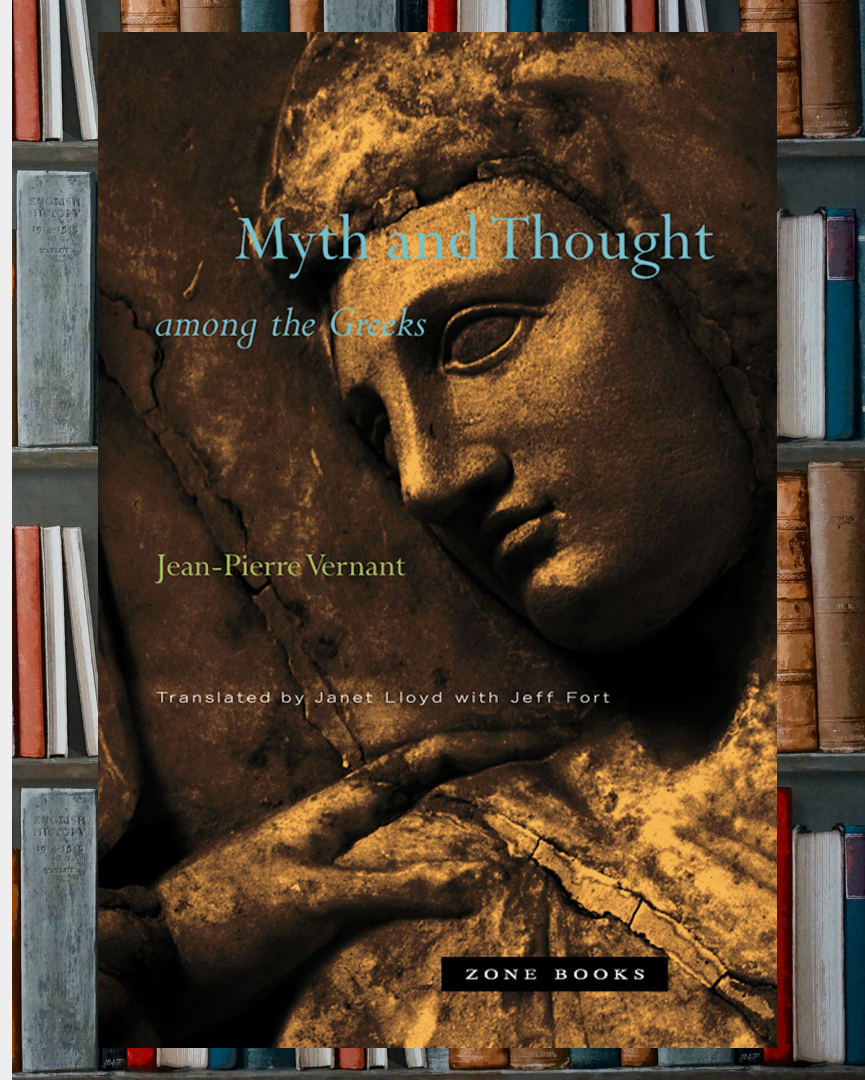
INTO YOU.”

But other ethical theories we're covering also were inspired by **historical events**.

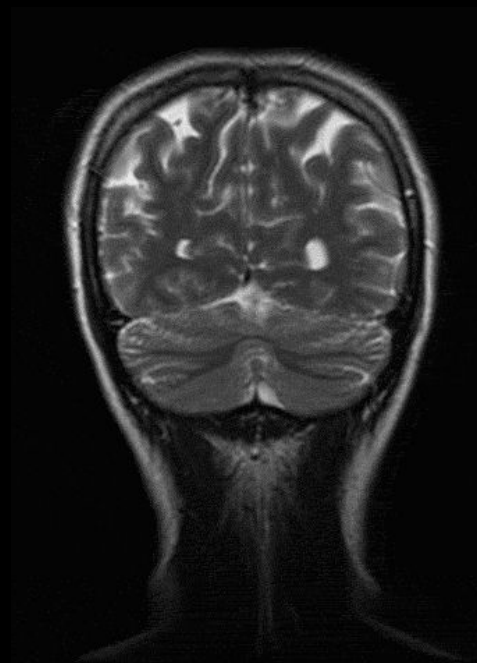
Alasdair MacIntyre (1981) reminds us that Utilitarianism and Kantianism were a result of the **hubris of the Enlightenment**: an attempt to ground morality itself in **reason**.



...and Vernant (1965) reminds us that the era in which Aristotle was operating was one in which the Greeks were moving towards **rationalism** and away from myth.









Empirical Claims of Virtue Theory

- ❑ Reason has the capacity to help us arrive at what virtue is, and guide us in developing said virtues.



“[This is a process that requires the agent at every stage to use his [or her] mind, to think about what he [or she] is doing and to try to achieve understanding of it” (Annas 2009: 517).

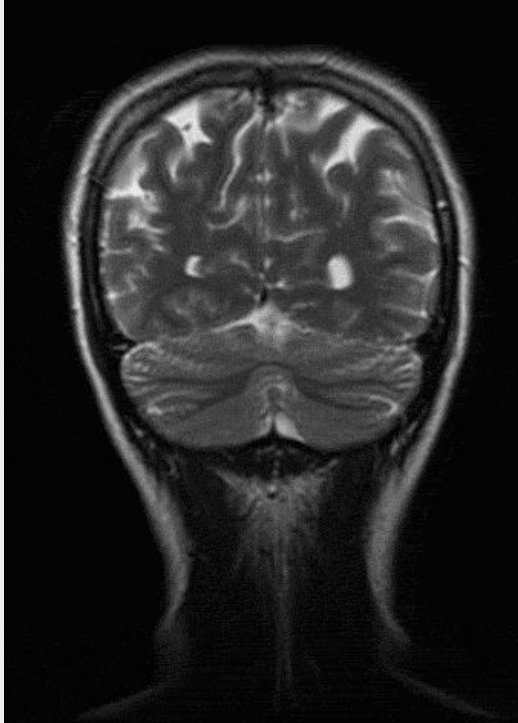


Empirical Claims of Virtue Theory

- ❑ Reason has the capacity to help us arrive at what virtue is, and guide us in developing said virtues.
- ❑ Once we've developed the right virtues, the right actions will flow out of us when we are put in certain situations.

In other words, virtue is moral and intellectual excellence; it requires doing the right thing for the right reason without serious internal opposition, as a matter of character.





Empirical Claims of Kantianism

- ❑ Reason has the capacity to help us arrive at objective moral truth.

Note: Kant had several empirical problems (on account of the state of science during the time period in which he wrote) that have been banished to [Appendix A](#).



EMPIRICAL

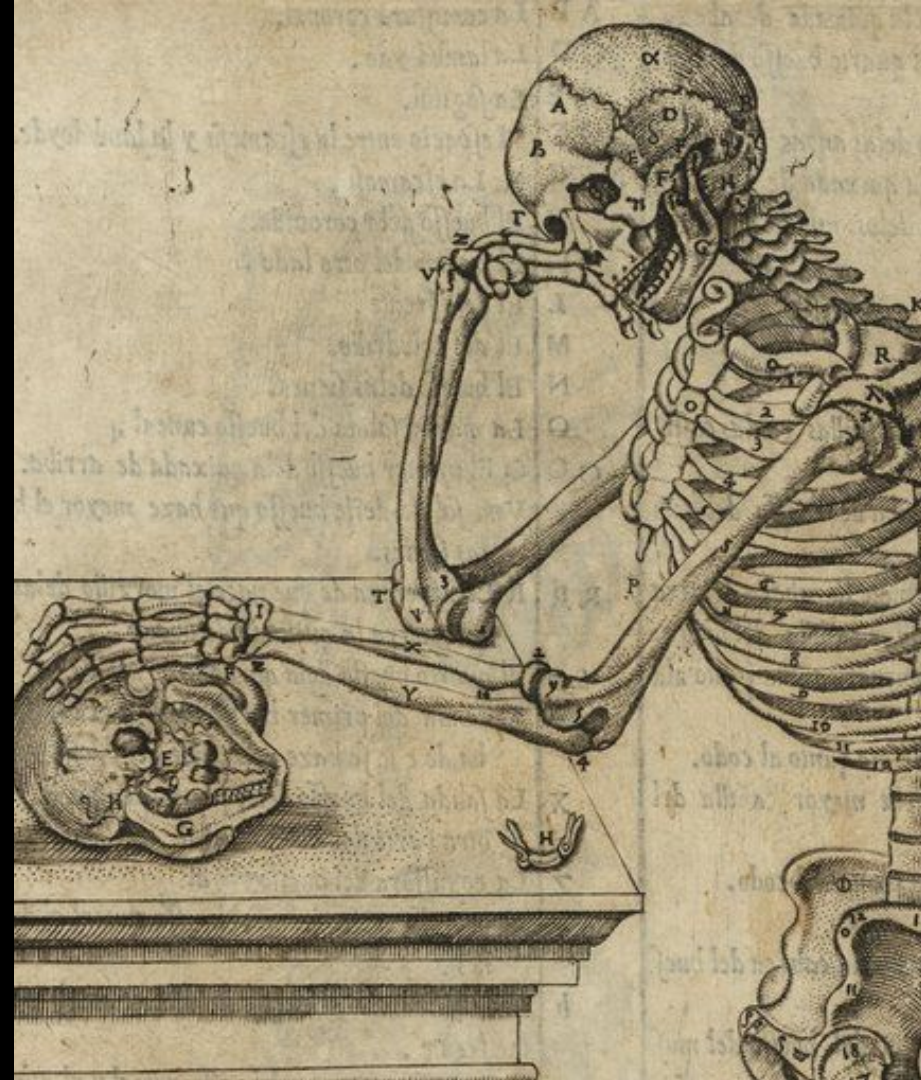
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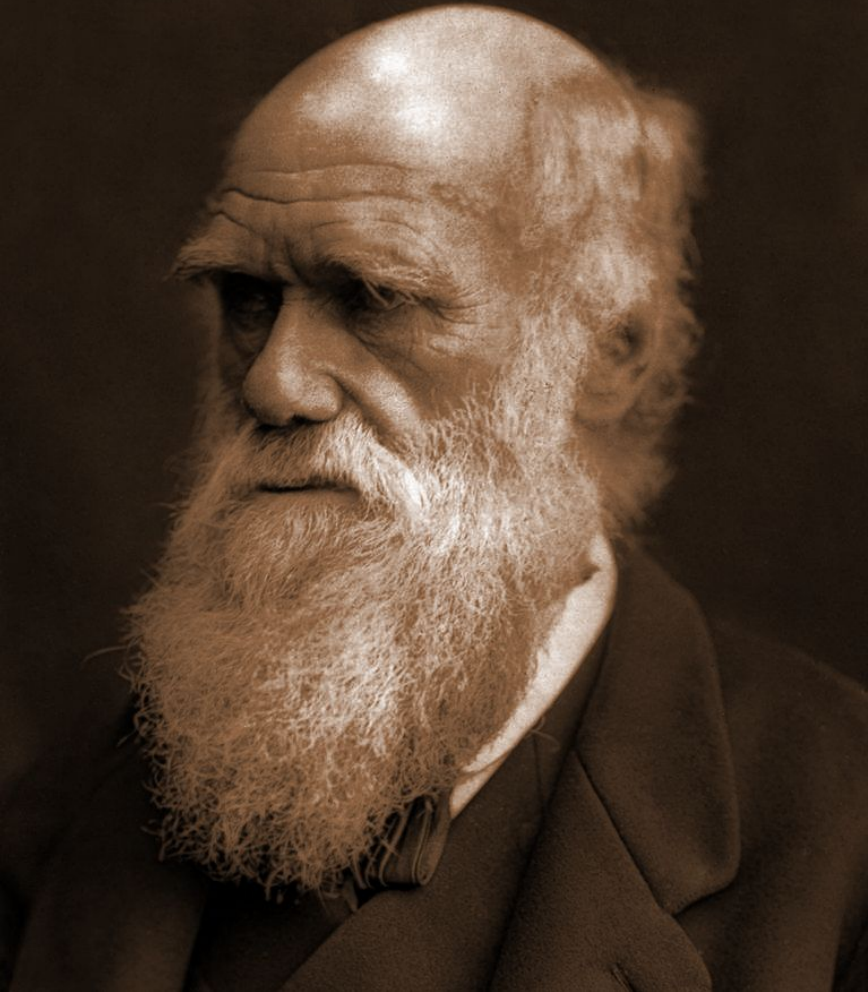
TIME

Question:

What is the evolutionary function of reason?

“There is no deeper mystery in the entire long biological history of humankind than how we came to acquire our distinctive mental qualities... In the behavioral realm, *Homo sapiens* as we know it today is a totally unprecedented kind of being” (Tattersall 2008: 100).





“Darwin was content to explain the acquisition of our species’ cognitive abilities as a result of the pressure of natural selection on our precursors over long periods of time. And most scientists today, it would seem, concur with him” (Tattersall 2008: 101).

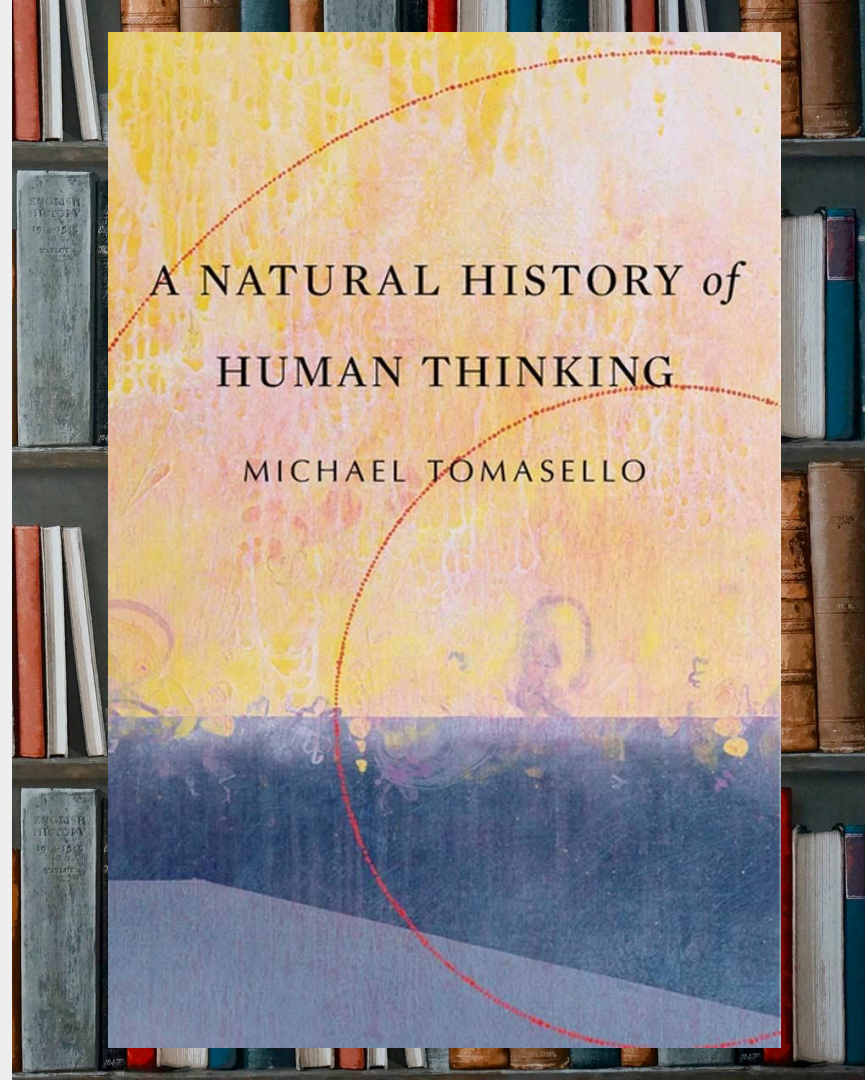
“Wallace [co-inventor of the notion of evolution by natural selection], however, simply could not see how natural selection could have bridged the gap between the human cognitive state and that of all other life forms. What he did see was the breadth and depth of the discontinuity between symbolic and nonsymbolic cognitive states” (Tattersall 2008: 101-2).





“As far as we know, modern human anatomy was in place well **before** *Homo sapiens* began behaving in the ways that are familiar today” (Tattersall 2008: 102; emphasis added).

Nonetheless, most theorists are moving towards a social-communicative origin to our capacity to reason, meaning that reason **did not specifically evolve for truth-tracking.**



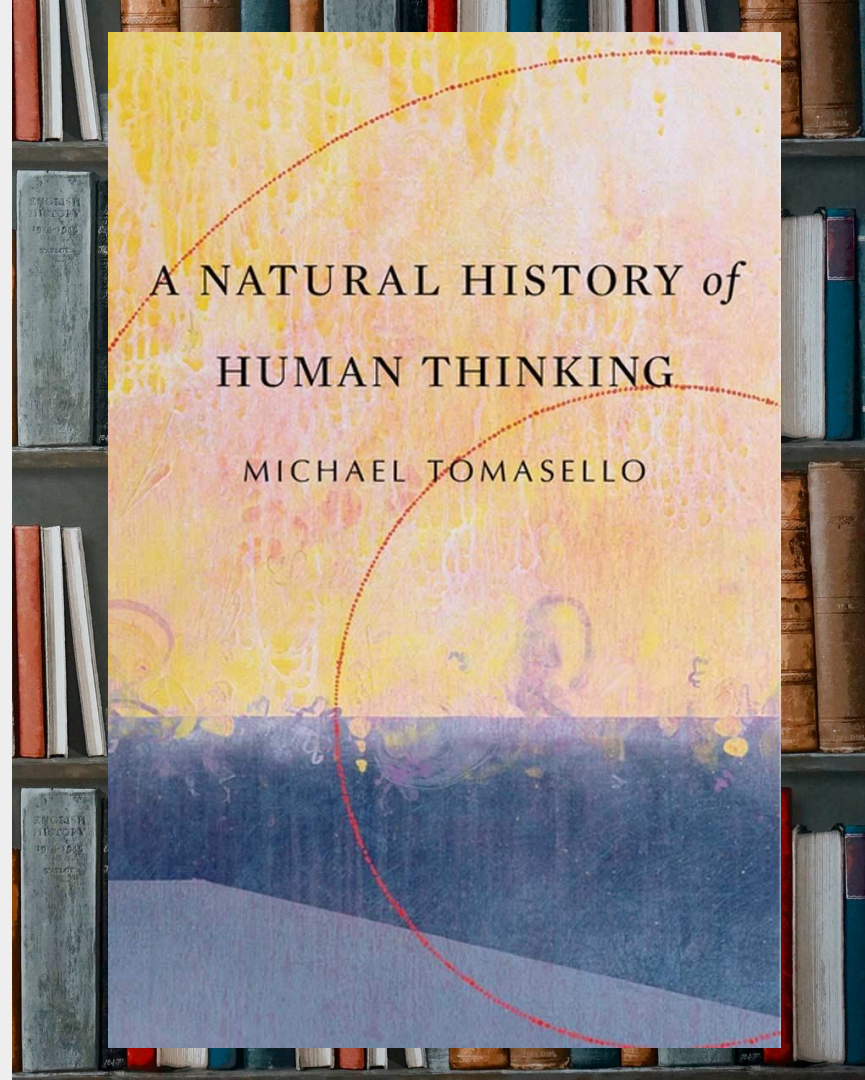
The Traditional View

From Aristotle to the 20th century, reason has been viewed as a means for individuals to acquire more accurate beliefs and hence make better decisions.

In other words, reason, by performing this intellectual function, allows humans to gain knowledge: reasoning is for forming true beliefs (see Mercier and Sperber 2017).

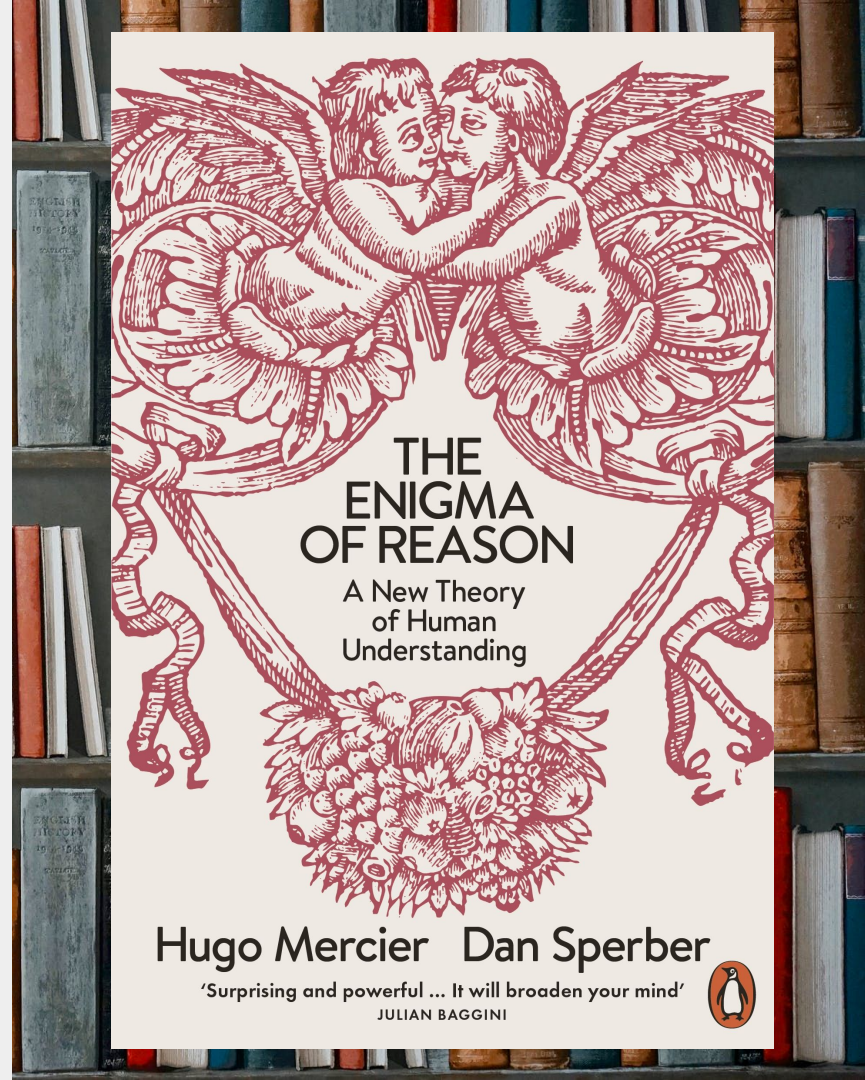
Nonetheless, most theorists are moving towards a social-communicative origin to our capacity to reason, meaning that reason **did not specifically evolve for truth-tracking**.

For example, Tomasello (2018) argues that we developed our capacity to reason in order to better communicate **reasons** for plans of action for the group.



Mercier and Sperber (2017) argue that we developed the capacity **to win arguments**, so that we explain our behavior and not be ousted by our tribe.

This explains our built-in **confirmation bias**.



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](#)).

RELATED, BELIEF BIAS IS THE TENDENCY TO RATE THE STRENGTH OF AN ARGUMENT ON THE BASIS OF WHETHER OR NOT WE AGREE WITH THE CONCLUSION.

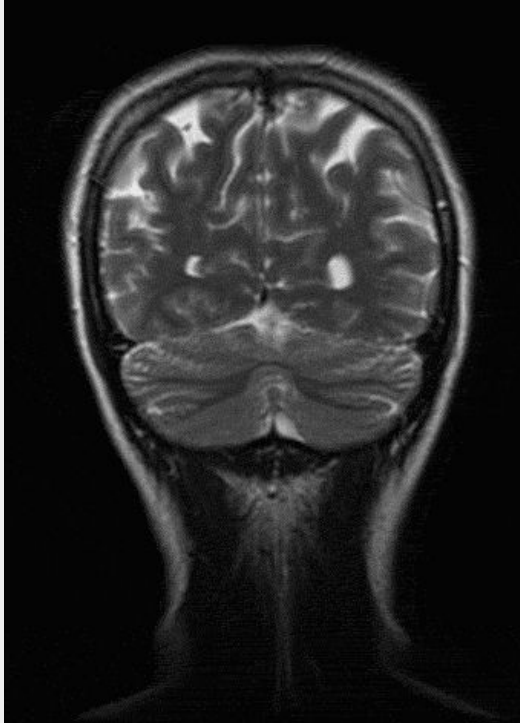


There is a risk, then, that reason does not help us arrive at virtues that allow for human flourishing (eudaimonia) or objective moral values, but instead defends our pre-existing biases about how we think we should live...



Empirical Claims of Virtue Theory

- X** Reason has the capacity to help us arrive at what virtue is, and guide us in developing said virtues.
- Once we've developed the right virtues, the right actions will flow out of us when we are put in certain situations.



Empirical Claims of Kantianism

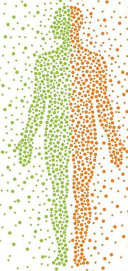
X Reason has the capacity to help us arrive at objective moral truth.

Note: Kant had several empirical problems (on account of the state of science during the time period in which he wrote) that have been banished to [Appendix A](#).

Recently, Sapolsky (2017) used neuroscience to argue that virtue ethics is ultimately the correct ethical theory when it comes to what drives our moral behaviors.

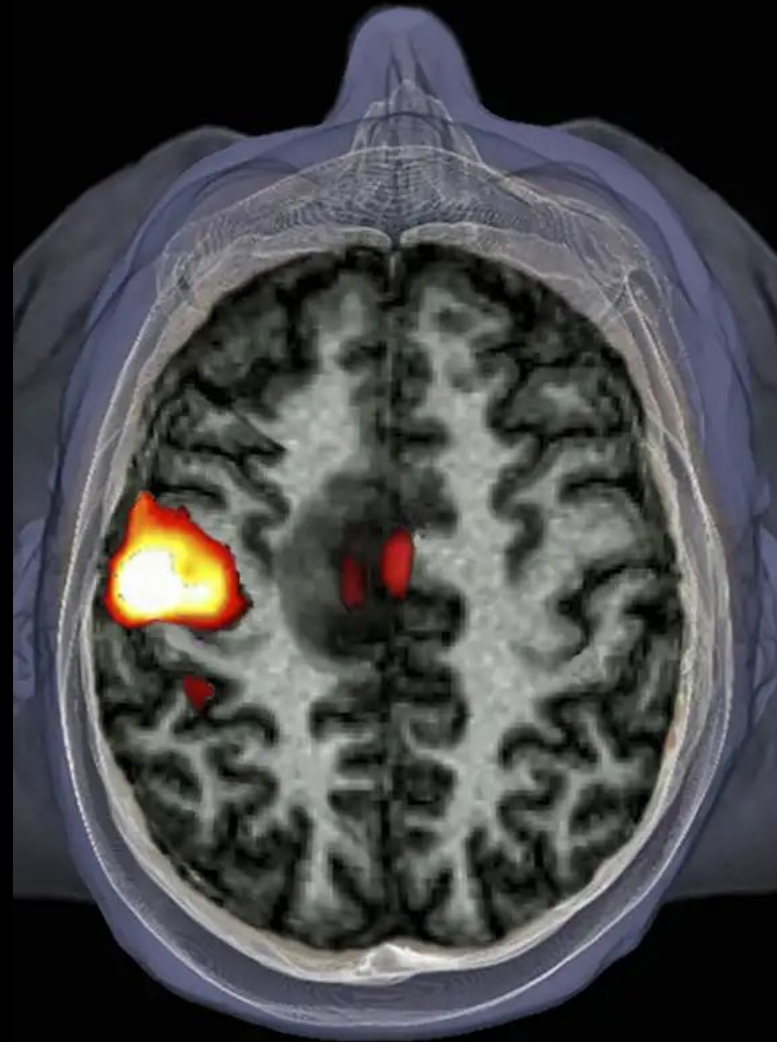
BEHAVE

THE BIOLOGY
of HUMANS *at* OUR
BEST *and* WORST



ROBERT M.
SAPOLSKY

Context— Sapolsky was surveying a battery of economic games (with opportunities for cheating) in which fMRI was used to note activation of four regions in particular: the dlPFC, the vlPFC, the ACC, and the amygdala.





“And now for probably the most important finding in this chapter. What about subjects who never cheated? There are two very different scenarios... Is resisting temptation at every turn an outcome of ‘will,’ of having a stoked dlPFC putting Satan into a hammerlock of submission? Or is it an act of ‘grace,’ where there’s no struggle, because it’s simple; you don’t cheat?”

“It was grace. In those who were always honest, the dlPFC, vlPFC, and ACC were in veritable comas when the chance to cheat arose. There’s no conflict. There’s no working hard to do the right thing. You simply don’t cheat...”



**Practice
Makes
Perfect**



“This isn’t a deontological or consequentialist moment. It’s virtue ethics sneaking in the back door in that moment — ‘I don’t cheat; that’s not who I am.’ Doing the right thing *is* the easier thing” (Sapolsky 2017: 519-20).

But...



Some scholars consider it the conception of virtue that Sapolsky is using to be too thin (e.g., Fahmy communicated this to me in private communication in 2019).



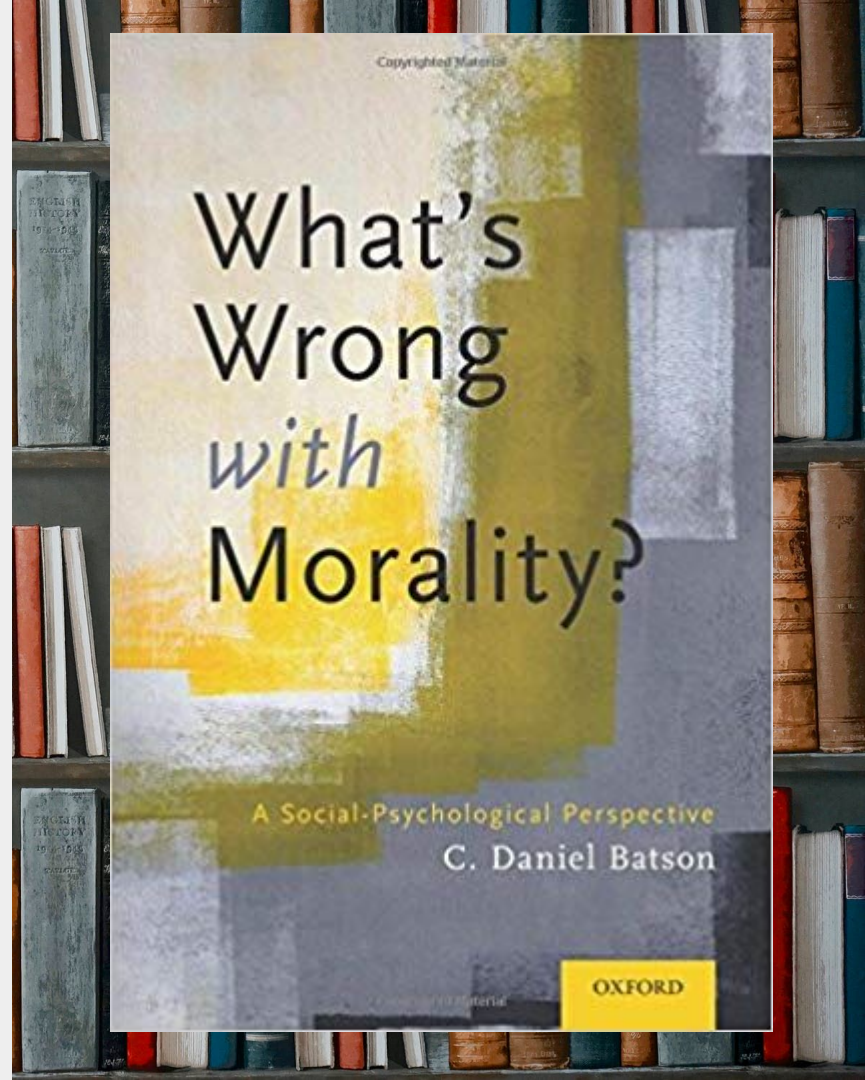
Moreover, Aristotle claimed that the right actions would flow from virtuous persons **when they found themselves in the situation.**

But being inside an fMRI machine is **not** the situation Aristotle had in mind...

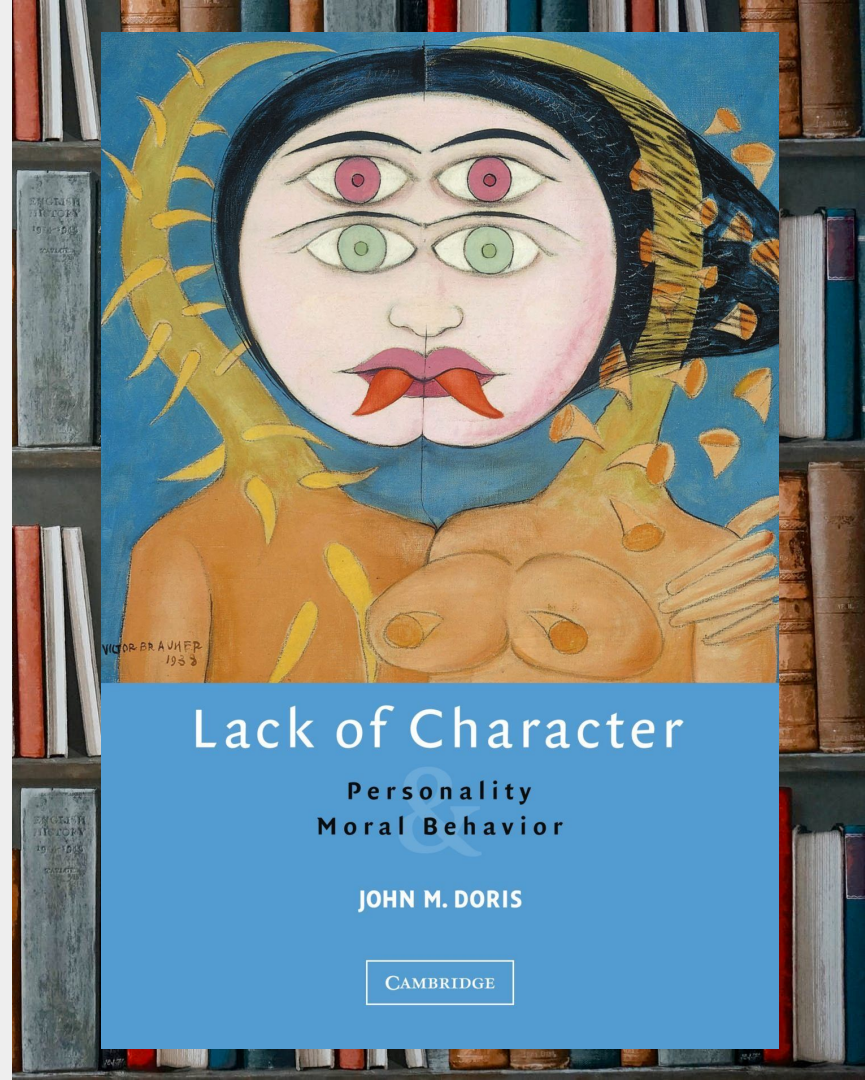
On the other hand, Batson (2016: 42-3) reviews the data from the Character Education Inquiry, a massive, longitudinal study into schoolchildren's honesty and generosity.

The results are not good for Aristotle...

“Rather than a general trait (i.e., virtue) of honesty, many children seemed to have more nuanced standards tuned to specific circumstances. Instead of ‘Thou shalt not cheat,’ the behavior of many was more consistent with, ‘Thou shalt not cheat unless you need to in order to succeed and can be certain you won’t get caught’” (ibid.).



In *Lack of Character*, John Doris (2010) goes on an all-out empirical assault on Virtue Ethics.



Case Study #38927
The Milgram
Experiments



Case Study #22412
The Stanford Prison
Experiment



TRAILER

HD

Case Study #53490
Moral Psychology

We make harsher value judgments when we breathe in foul air ([Schnall et al. 2008](#)) or have recently had bitter (as opposed to sweet) drinks ([Eskine, Kacinic, and Prinz 2011](#)).

Good smells appear to promote prosocial behavior ([Liljenquist, Zhong, and Galinsky, 2010](#)).



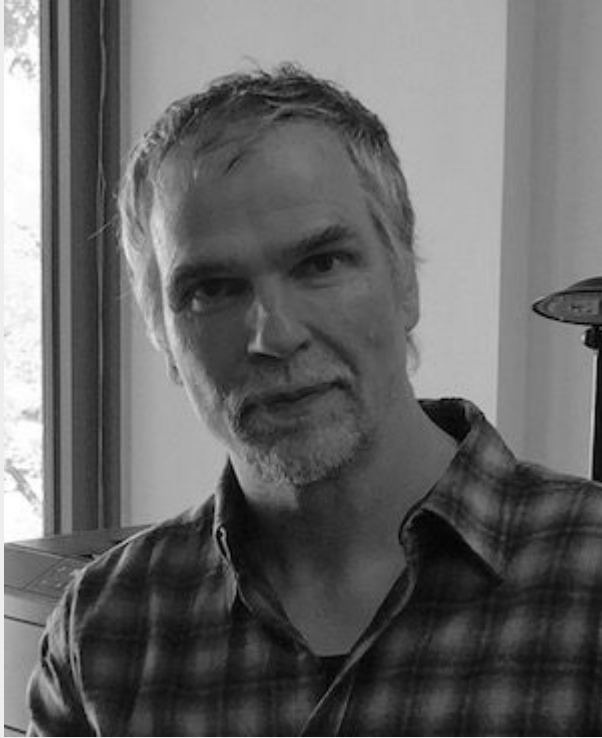
Washing your hands before filling out questionnaires causes one to be more moralistic, (Zhong, Strejcek, and Sivanathan 2010). Answering a questionnaire near a hand sanitizer dispenser makes us temporarily more conservative ([Helzer and Pizarro 2011](#)).



A person's tendency to act dishonestly can be enhanced by their wearing sunglasses or being placed in a dimly lit room ([Zhong et al. 2010](#)).

Moral opinions can be made more harsh if there is a dirty tissue nearby ([Schnall, Benton, et al. 2008](#)).





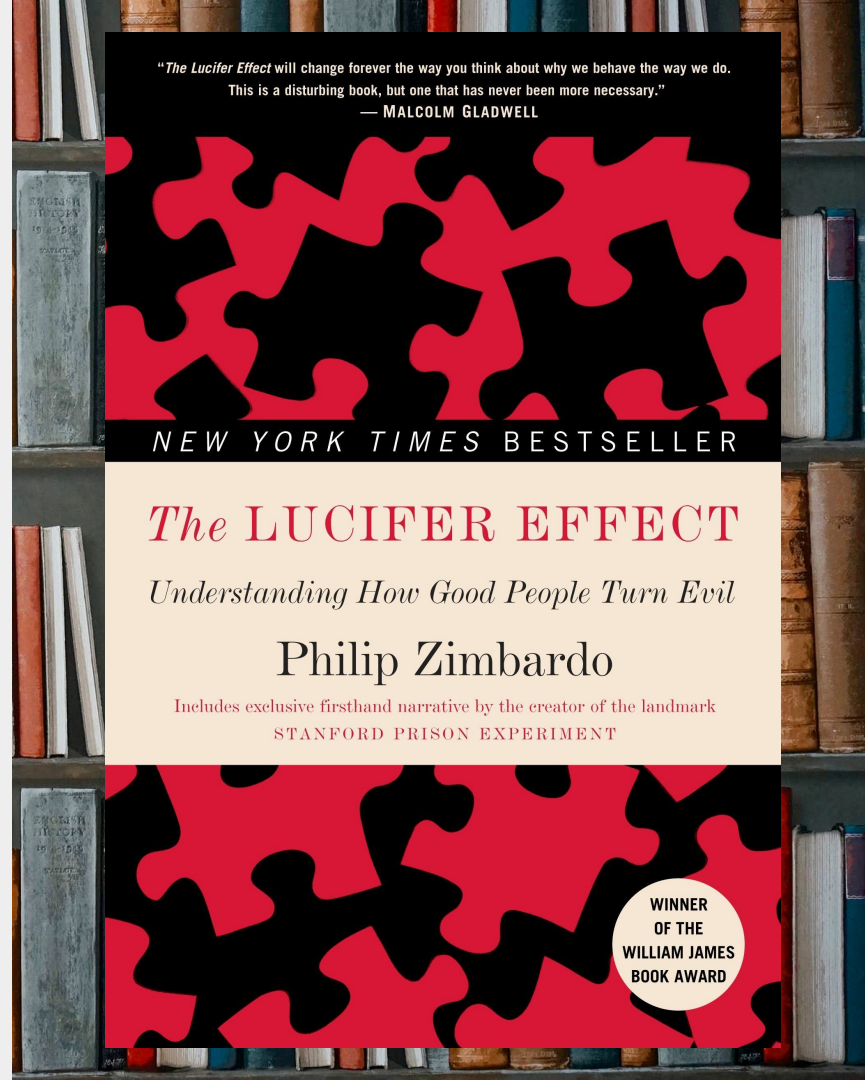
“Social psychologists have repeatedly found that the difference between good conduct and bad appears to reside **in the situation more than in the person**” ([Doris and Stich et al. 2006](#)).



“I do not think that social psychology demonstrates there are no character traits [or virtues]...

But I do think that results in social psychology undermine one’s confidence that it is obvious there are such traits”
([Harman 2008](#); interpolation is mine).

See also Zimbardo (2008).



S | D E B A R

Annas (2009) is not impressed with Doris' argument: "However, [Doris'] studies assume a notion of disposition that is defined solely in terms of frequency of actions, where the actions in question are defined with no reference to the agent's own reasons for acting. For virtue ethics, however, a virtue is a disposition to act for reasons, and claims about frequency of action are irrelevant to this, until some plausible connection is established with the agent's reasons, something none of the situationists have done" (Annas 2009:519).

