

Moral Illusions Explained

Human beings' five physical senses (sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste) are all subject to being fooled by illusions. Additionally, evolutionary biologist Steven Pinker writes: "It seems we may all be vulnerable to moral illusions—the ethical equivalent of the bending lines that trick the eye on cereal boxes and in psychology textbooks. ... Today, a new field is using illusions to unmask a sixth sense, the moral sense." That new field is [behavioral ethics](#), a subject emphasized on the Ethics Unwrapped website.

During the long course of human evolution, the five physical senses – especially sight, hearing, and touch – have been critical for survival. It makes sense, then, that these physical senses are probably better calibrated than our moral sense. Although these physical senses are clearly subject to illusions (as the McGurk effect illustrates) Robin Kar, a professor of law and philosophy, warns:

...moral illusions are more than just errors. They are persistent and species-typical tendencies toward error, which can be especially hard to identify and correct because we are subject to them collectively. Our human species of moral vision is, moreover, the basic lens through which we either bring moral facts sharply into focus or distort them, and so we cannot simply rely on this vision to determine which we are doing.

This video explains that the [self-serving bias](#) is a moral illusion. The self-serving bias (which affects everyone) distorts how people gather, process, and even remember information in ways that serve their self-interest and their established beliefs. This often leads well-intentioned people to conclude that *what is good for them, is what is good*. This is, of course, a moral illusion.

There are many, many other moral illusions caused by social and organizational pressures, cognitive heuristics and biases, and even situational factors that people are unaware are affecting their moral judgments, decisions, and actions. These pressures, biases, and situational factors are the subject of behavioral ethics research.

Here are two more examples of moral illusions to consider, which are described by the research of behavioral ethics:

In-group Bias

The [in-group/out-group bias](#) may cause people to unfairly discriminate in favor of friends, relatives and other members of their perceived in-group and against out-group members. Indeed, studies show that people use different parts of their brain to judge the actions of in-group members and out-group



members. Therefore, people are likely to judge the actions of out-group members more harshly without even realizing that they are doing so. For example, we may harshly condemn the morals of out-group members who, say, drink too much and become boisterous, while finding rationalizations to excuse similar actions by members of our in-group. Our belief that *we are judging both groups using the same moral yardstick* is a moral illusion.

Just World Hypothesis

The “Just World” view is an interesting phenomenon. People, it seems, can sleep better at night if they believe that the world is generally a fair place. So, in order to avoid constant anxiety, most people tend to believe that world is, in fact, a just place. Therefore, when people read about strangers who were the victims of a crime or a serious accident, people tend to believe (just a bit!) that those victims deserved what happened to them. Then, people can tell themselves that because they are good people who live in a just world, these kinds of bad things are unlikely to happen to them. This Just World Hypothesis is a moral illusion that often causes people to unfairly blame the victim of an unfortunate incident.

Additional Resources

Cara Biasucci & Robert Prentice, *Behavioral Ethics in Practice: Why We Sometimes Make the Wrong Decisions* (Routledge, 2020)

Robin Bradley Kar, *The Two Faces of Morality: How Evolutionary Theory Can Both Vindicate and Debunk Morality (with a Special Nod to the Growing Importance of Law)*, p. 31, in *Evolution and Morality* (James E. Fleming & Sanford Levinson, eds., 2012)

Steven Pinker, *The Moral Instinct*, p. 61, in *Understanding Moral Sentiments: Darwinian Perspectives?* (Hilary Putnam, Susan Neiman & Jeffrey P. Schloss, Eds., 2014).

Transcript of Narration

You know the five physical senses: sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch. But did you know we also have a moral sense? It’s what helps guide our moral judgments and actions.

You know that pit that opens up in your stomach when you’re about to do something wrong? That’s your moral sense kicking in. But beware! The brain can be fooled.

Ever seen an optical illusion? Take a look at this. What do you see? Not everything is as it seems. Even sound can trick your brain.

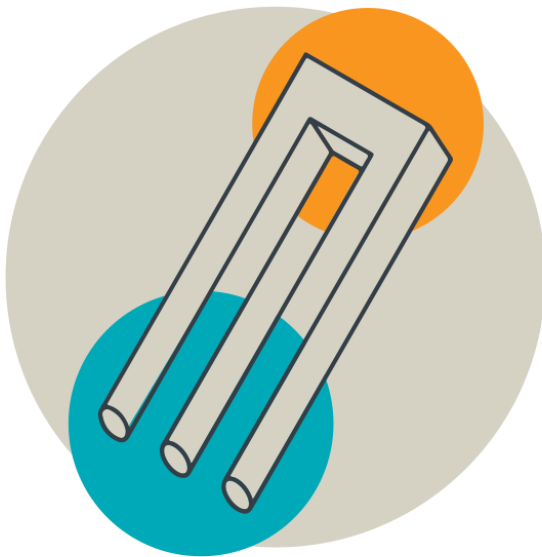
Watch this. [BaBaBa sound effect plays] What do you hear? [BaBaBa sound effect plays] What about now? [BaBaBa sound effect plays] The only sound that ever bounced off your eardrums was “Bababa,” but the brain prioritizes what we see over what we hear. So, you probably heard “Fafafa” the second time. This illusion is known as the McGurk Effect. [BaBaBa sound effect plays] Pretty wild, huh? Just as our brain can be tricked by optical and auditory illusions, our moral sense can also be fooled.

For example, because our brain has evolved to help us survive, we tend to process information in ways that serve our self-interest. Often, what is best for us, seems to us to be what is best. But this is a moral illusion. It’s called the self-serving bias.

There are many ways moral illusions can lead even the most well-meaning people astray. All the psychological biases, mental shortcuts, social pressures, and other factors such as time pressure and stress that are described by behavioral ethics research create moral illusions. Learning about behavioral ethics can help you uncover these moral illusions. And it can also help you learn how to guard against them.

Image Resources

These two popular optical illusions can be used in class discussions on moral illusions. Remember, just like our visual and other physical senses can be fooled, so too can our moral sense.



Impossible Trident Illusion



Kanizsa Triangle Illusion