What does it mean to be good and to act in a morally responsible way?

**Rapp:** One could approach this perennial question from a classical philosophical angle, but in our Research Focus on Moral Behavior at the Center for Advanced Studies we treat the issue from an empirical perspective: We ask to what extent moral behavior can be defined in terms of traits of character or psychological markers. We use an interdisciplinary method to investigate the “components” of goodness, and ask how they emerge during development in the context of social behavior. Here I should make one thing clear: We do not aspire to give a comprehensive account of what constitutes morally good behavior. But some aspects of the phenomenon can be tackled in an empirical fashion. For instance, we want to test the hypothesis that traits of character are fixed – in other words, ask whether the fact that a person is honest today is a trustworthy guide to his reliability at other times or under very different circumstances? In everyday life, we often bank on this sort of assumption. Our choice of partner is often determined by the belief that he or she will continue to exhibit certain traits of character “in sickness and in health”, i.e. in very diverse situations. But if one considers the problem from a psychological point of view, there are reasons to doubt that elements of character remain constant, given the range of contexts in which one can find oneself. Can people be induced to act in defiance of their psychological characteristics? If an honest person is deliberately led into temptation, can one reliably predict how she will react?

When the financial crisis began, many commentators argued that the system encouraged morally dubious practices by offering huge bonuses to successful traders and analysts. Can that be taken as a large-scale test case?

**Kocher:** The financial crisis of 2008 was caused by a combination of three factors: Instances of immoral behavior certainly contributed to it, as did false incentives and inadequate regulation by governments. Whether or not immoral behavior was the decisive factor is unclear. At all events, while economists cannot be held responsible for morality in the finance industry, they can have an impact on regulatory mechanisms and incentives.

What then distinguishes morally correct from morally dubious behavior?

**Betzler:** To put it in a nutshell: Giving due consideration to the interests of others rather than focusing exclusively on one’s own. Doing so presupposes that one knows something about the interests of the other parties. How do we discern or discover them? And how can we take them into account? Do we need emotional intelligence, i.e. empathy, to do so, or does the task demand abstract analysis?

Morality can be more than a matter of social behavior, it need not be exercised directly in interpersonal interaction but, in the end, it always involves how we treat others.

Anthropologically speaking, are humans as a species amoral?

**Kocher:** Humans are a diverse lot, and it shouldn’t come as a surprise to learn that they differ from each other in moral character. Here too, one observes a great deal of heterogeneity. It is extremely difficult to say what gives rise to moral behavior. As an economist, I am interested in finding out how much people deviate from the old model that we all strive to maximize our own advantage. In our experiments we have found that some people act in a very egoistic fashion in many situations where others behave in cooperative and altruistic ways. Furthermore, the proportions of the two sorts do not always depend on the incentives on offer. What they really depend on is a question that fascinates neuropsychologists, geneticists and economists, although very few serious studies of the genetic basis of social behavior have been done. Some of these have looked for correlations between electrical activity in the brain and behavioral patterns, for which there is some evidence. But why do some people feel good when they perform an altruistic act, while others obviously don’t get the same buzz?
How can one measure moral behavior?
Are there different grades of moral action?

Rapp: Some aspects of moral behavior can be better understood if we investigate them on an empirical basis. The ethics of virtue, for instance, includes the assumption that stable character traits such as honesty, a feeling for justice and a sense of fairness can be inculcated. But is there any empirical evidence for this idea? Does altruistic behavior have a measurable impact on decision-making in economic matters and, if so, what motivates it? Is it based on rational calculation or something that children can work out? Markus Paulus, a developmental psychologist who is also a member of our Research Focus, is studying at what age children first display specific modes of altruistic behavior. When do young children begin to show sympathy with others and how do they tease out its implications for their own actions? Do young children act in a fair-minded manner before they can explain their reasons for doing so? Or take the issues of autonomy and self-control – one of the classical ideals in moral philosophy is that one should strive to follow a steady course in life, and avoid giving in to sudden impulses. This is also a topic that interests developmental psychologists who deal with decision theories: How and when does one learn the ability to forgo the chance of immediate gratification in order to implement a long-term plan? These are questions that have always played an important role in moral philosophy, but they have seldom been tackled experimentally.

Betzler: In this context, take the issue of paternalism. There is a whole series of experimental studies on factors that enhance an individual’s well-being, and whether outside agents should intervene to regulate them. Should certain behaviors simply be outlawed? Or should one concentrate on making some of the options less attractive? Should one openly espouse paternalism and argue that there are limits to autonomy? For example, it could be argued that people have no right to endanger themselves by engaging in reckless behavior. But in that case, one would be well advised to consider carefully the wider impact of measures intended to regulate such behavior. These are areas where empirical social science can make a contribution, and where there are fascinating overlaps with philosophy.

Lighten our darkness: Caravaggio’s “The Seven Cardinal Works of Mercy” (1606). Source: akg-images/André Held
Professor Kocher, you mentioned that some of the participants in your experiments act in an altruistic manner. Can you also identify the factors that account for this? Does moral behavior pay off in the end?

Kocher: Behaving altruistically involves a surrender of assets, which weakens one’s position and reduces one’s range of options – at least initially. One can then ask under what circumstances that decision might still make sense – in a small group whose members have a common goal, or in which one wishes to enhance one’s reputation perhaps. For if everyone agrees that helping others is a good thing, and I show myself to be particularly generous – and can reap the benefits of having boosted my reputation. Here is a specific example to make the context clear: It may well be advantageous for an employer to pay his employees more than the market level. If behaving in a moral way makes one feel better, that return in itself could be sufficient. Some people will relinquish part of their assets because the emotional return makes up for the material loss.

Betzler: As soon as I incorporate that into my moral motivation, however, the problem of the self-defeating outcome appears. If I act in a morally impeccable fashion so as to maximize my profits, I subvert the purpose of moral behavior as defined above. My actions are no longer moral because they do not result from an appreciation of the other side’s interest.

It is very striking that politicians nowadays increasingly resort to ethics commissions. Why? Has the craft of politics reached its limits in modern societies?

Rapp: In areas such as medical technology, politicians too need new kinds of expertise. Good old common sense and well-meant convictions are not enough. But does this mean that politics can no longer deal adequately with such issues? Indeed, I, for one, see no signs of a crisis of morals. But there are fields that require adequate regulation, and this demands consultations between qualified persons who have the relevant knowledge and more time to reflect on the issues. On the other hand, commissions can also serve simply as an alibi. Christoph Knill, the political scientist in our Resource Focus, has said that the politicians are generally reluctant to be saddled with the task of making moral choices. It brings no pay-off at election time. So they tend to outsource such decisions.

Betzler: I am a member of the Swiss Commission on the Ethics of Biotechnology in Non-Human Organisms, and I can confirm that assessment. We have an advisory function, and the politicians’ job is to form their own opinions on the basis of our carefully pondered majority and minority reports. We supply a kind of draft outline of possible positions, simply because acquiring the necessary technical knowledge, acquainting oneself with theories of ethics and so on, is extremely time-consuming.

Kocher: As a politician, one is responsible to the electorate as a whole. So one should try to take a broad range of expert opinion into account, not decide on the basis of a gut feeling. I believe that is a perfectly legitimate way to proceed.

Rapp: However, if a politician wishes to ban genetically modified foodstuffs solely on the basis of a personal intuition, and without having consulted biologists and other relevant experts, that must be rated as unprofessional. For in areas that are changing rapidly, there is not enough time for trustworthy intuitions to emerge. Moral intuitions emerge from interactions with wider social processes. Advisory bodies such as ethics commissions must try to anticipate such processes, and do so in double-quick time.

For several years now, movements like Attack and Femen have been appealing to fundamental ethical principles as arbiters of everyday life. How can one account for this sudden emphasis? Has ethics become fashionable?

Rapp: Of course there are fashions here too. But the real question is whether what counts as empathetic behavior is itself subject to such vogues. Appeals to moral psychology from the perspective of political or social science raise the question of why these fields need to be placed in a new moral framework, and must consider the consequences of such moves for society at large. Because new moral norms are now being proposed in areas – such as prostitution and sustainability in the use of finite resources – that were seen as morally neutral only a few years ago, Christoph Knill is also studying how our political system deals with moral pressure in the context of demands for their regulation.

There is even an International Bag-Free Day to draw attention to the environmental damage caused by the use of plastic bags. Is this what ethical reflection has come to? Has it abandoned fundamental dos and don’ts for short-term campaigns – and turned moral behavior into a series of ‘events’?

Rapp: I wouldn’t go quite that far. The old model in the Federal Republic has always been that politicians have reacted every time one of the Churches has stated: ‘This is a moral problem for us, and we think something should be done about it.’ Abortion and the legal recognition of homosexual partnerships are cases in point. But nowadays there are more players involved. The large denominations are less influential, Islam is a force to be reckoned with, and there are other...
groups that take a moral stance on issues like conservation, world peace or women’s rights. With respect to the event culture you mention, the use of dubious moral arguments does not mean that an issue has a moral dimension. It is often the case – on the internet and on social media – that moral grounds are invoked simply to suggest a widespread feeling of outrage.

Kocher: There is no empirical evidence to indicate that humanity is becoming more sensitive to morals. It is an interesting question, but we simply don’t know whether we are now witnessing a systematic change in attitudes or only a change in perception by the media.

Betzler: It is also striking that relatively little work in moral philosophy has been devoted to the topic of moral progress. Perhaps the crucial point is that technological advances can confer a moral dimension on things that were previously morally irrelevant. In the past, animals were seldom accorded any moral status. Now, many people take a different view. Are we therefore better human beings than people were in antiquity? – Difficult to say …

What counts as moral action? “We cannot claim to provide an all-purpose answer to the question.” Martin Kocher, Monika Betzler and Christof Rapp (left to right). Source: LMU

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Monika Betzler, Martin Kocher and Christof Rapp are members of the Advisory Board for the Research Focus on Moral Behavior at CAS.