

INTRODUCTION

When presented with a person in trouble, some of us will help, others pass by on the other side. What is it about those who help that distinguishes them from those who don't? Do they possess an innately better nature? Were they taught good moral principles and learnt to apply them? This is the question with which Janet Radcliffe Richard begins an excellent BBC podcast on recent experiments focussing on our moral intuitions and responses. The podcast is available at:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/podcasts/series/analysis/>

The classic experiment was performed on theology students who had been thinking about the good Samaritan, and who had to then give a sermon on the subject. Some were told they were late to give the sermon and others were not. On their way to the venue, the students passed someone in distress. Whether or not the students stopped and helped turned out to depend largely on whether they thought they were late. Yet surely someone who has been thinking about the good Samaritan would realize it's more important to act like a good Samaritan than not to be late? Other experiments show e.g. that whether or not someone will help others by giving the correct change for a dollar bill is heavily influenced by whether the air smells good (those positioned near a bakery were far more likely to be helpful).

These findings are suggestive – if we want to morally improve society, perhaps we should be focussing on adjusting people's environments, possibly without their even being aware that we are pulling their strings (e.g. by putting charity stalls near bakeries). But is this really the right way to produce a morally better world?

Stephen Law
Editor

doi:10.1017/S1477175609990091
Think 23, Vol. 8 (Autumn 2009)

© The Royal Institute of Philosophy, 2009