

cohere at all levels of generality. Deontological principles, in contrast, do not – at least once one descends from broad injunctions like “treat others as ends in themselves,” to the incommensurate set of rights and duties such injunctions are typically taken to imply. Thus, the answer to Sunstein’s sly rhetorical question, “Is Kantianism a series of cognitive errors?” is probably yes, at least as judged by his criterion.

A more neutral criterion, I think, would have to shed the substantive requirement of “moral coherence,” leaving something closer to a pure procedural requirement: A moral intuition gets to be called a moral principle in its own right only if, after hard scrutiny alongside other principles one holds, one still holds to it as an end in itself, and not an uncertain means to some other end. Although that test may seem too toothless to compel any familiar moral intuition to be re-characterized as a mere heuristic, I share Sunstein’s optimistic belief that it might suffice, at least for some of the more dubious intuitions he catalogues here.

Moral judgments in narrative contexts

Richard J. Gerrig

Department of Psychology, Stony Brook University, Stony Brook, NY 11794-2500. rgerrig@notes.cc.sunysb.edu

Abstract: In narrative contexts, people often find themselves mentally rooting for “bad guys.” These circumstances lead to questions about how Sunstein’s moral heuristics function during narrative experiences. In particular, must people undertake explicit moral analysis for the heuristics to apply?

At the outset of the movie “Matchstick Men,” a character named Frank Mercer is on the telephone trying to complete a con job. Although we don’t see the person on the other end of the phone, her voice and utterances identify her as a rather helpless elderly woman. Even so, it is hard to watch the scene without rooting that Frank’s con will succeed. Although his actions are far from heroic, he is momentarily the hero of the tale and so his goals are the viewers’ goals – however immoral those goals might be. A movie critic offered a similar analysis of moral disengagement in narrative experiences: “Narrative art forms like novels and movies are governed by certain mysterious but implacable laws, and one of them is that when people are in danger of being caught – even if they are doing something awful – we root for them to get away. Our identification overcomes our scruples” (Denby 1991, p. 32).

These anecdotes of narrative experiences provide interesting cases for Sunstein’s account of moral heuristics. In Frank Mercer’s case, it seems clear that he will profit from his immoral action. As such, viewers’ tacit approval of his behavior suggests that the heuristic *Punish, and do not reward, betrayals of trust* does not govern responses in this situation. Similarly, we might expect viewers to be outraged by the way in which Frank victimizes the elderly woman, so that the *outrage heuristic* would assert itself. This does not appear to be the case. Why not?

Consider Denby’s assertion that “identification overcomes our scruples.” Perhaps we can encapsulate this insight in the heuristic *The hero should succeed* where “hero” refers to the character or group whose goals viewers have (locally) come to embrace. We could give the same gloss for this putative heuristic as Tversky and Kahneman (1974), and Sunstein, in turn, have given for the ones they have articulated. Specifically, for most of the narrative situations people face, it seems likely that rooting for the hero will be an entirely moral response – one that rises above external criticism. However, the heuristic would leave viewers vulnerable to unfortunate occasions upon which writers and directors arrange for viewers to identify with the wrong individuals (or individuals in the wrong). Then, the heuristic would lead to moral lapses. Still, it should be the case that were we to tally up the situations in which viewers mentally root for moral outcomes (as a consequence of

characters accomplishing their goals) those situations would outnumber those in which they root for characters such as Frank Mercer to succeed.

Suppose that a heuristic such as *The hero should succeed* does, in fact, play a role in narrative experiences. Then, it also seems to be the case that it takes precedence over other heuristics such as *Punish, and do not reward, betrayals of trust* – judging, at least, by the responses that reach the viewers’ consciousness. During the moment-by-moment experience of the scene in which Frank Mercer attempts to hustle the helpless elderly woman, there’s little hint that viewers examine the scene with sufficient rigor to realize that Frank is betraying the woman’s trust.

This observation leads to the broader issue of when and how it is that moral heuristics operate. We typically think of heuristics as being automatic – availability or representativeness affect judgments without any particular entry conditions. The putative heuristic *The hero should succeed* has the same feel to it. That is, viewers do not need to make a conscious identification with a particular character before they start to embrace that character’s goals. The question with respect to moral heuristics is whether people need to make an overt analysis of a situation as one in which moral judgments are relevant, before those moral heuristics come into play. With respect to Frank Mercer, it seems quite likely that one could get most viewers to apply *Punish, and do not reward, betrayals of trust* once they began to align themselves with the victim rather than with the “hero.” Similarly, suppose viewers were rooting for a bank robber to escape the clutches of the police. If they took a moment for moral reflection, they might feel chastened and root instead for the police. The issue, once again, is why reflection appears to be required. Do other forces take precedence (e.g., *The hero should succeed*)? Do aspects of narrative experiences suppress or attenuate moral responses? Do moral judgments (driven by heuristics) only occur when viewers expend strategic effort?

Although the focus here has been on anecdotes from movies, there’s every reason to believe that people have the same responses to narratives in other media (Gerrig 1993). In addition, it probably doesn’t much matter that “Matchstick Men” is a fictional narrative. Theorists sometimes seize upon Coleridge’s (1817/1907) phrase “the willing suspension of disbelief” (p. 6) as a way of conceptualizing how it is that people experience fictional narratives. In that context, we might imagine that part of what gets willingly suspended in narrative contexts would be the impulse to make moral judgments. However, “the willing suspension of disbelief” does not survive either philosophical or empirical scrutiny (e.g., Carroll 1990; Prentice & Gerrig 1999). Rather, it seems that people must effortfully encode experiences as fictional – they construct disbelief rather than suspend it. If moral judgments are affected by concomitants of narrative experiences, that ought to be equally true for nonfictional as for fictional narratives. The challenge, therefore, is to specify under what general circumstances moral heuristics are able to have an impact on covert or overt moral judgments.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This material is based upon work supported by National Science Foundation Grant No. 0325188. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this material are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the National Science Foundation.