

# **Myths and Misconceptions about Ethics**

*Ethics in a Time of Polarization*

Osher Course

*John Hooker, study leader*

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# Myths and Misconceptions

- **Myth 1.** The purpose of ethics is to judge who is **good** and **bad**.
  - ...and nobody wants to be told they are bad.



# Myths and Misconceptions

- **Wrong**
  - Ethics is a **negotiation tool** for working out how we are going to live and work together.
  - It provides the basis for the **social infrastructure** we rely on.



# Myths and Misconceptions

- **Myth 2.** Society relies primarily on **legal enforcement**, not ethics.



# Myths and Misconceptions

- **Wrong**

- Suppose everyone starts **running red lights** tomorrow morning.
- There is **no way** the police can stop it.
- We rely on voluntary compliance with rules on which we **agree**. Ethics provides the agreement.
- **Laws** and **regulations** cannot keep up with a **complex** and **fast-moving** world.



# Myths and Misconceptions

- **Myth 3.** We all know what's right. It's just a matter of doing it.

# Myths and Misconceptions

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- **Then why do we disagree all the time?**



# Myths and Misconceptions

- **Myth 4.** Ethics is simple.
  - Just don't do anything you wouldn't want to appear on the first page of the newspaper.
  - Or you wouldn't want to go viral on Facebook, etc.





# Myths and Misconceptions

- **Wrong.**
  - Suppose you must lay off most of your restaurant employees due to Covid.
  - They have families and end up homeless.
  - Yet otherwise you would go into bankruptcy and lay off **everyone**.
  - You wouldn't want this on the **back page** of the newspaper.



# Myths and Misconceptions

- **Myth 5.**
  - Ethics is based on **religion**.
  - Therefore, we can never think about it **rationally**.

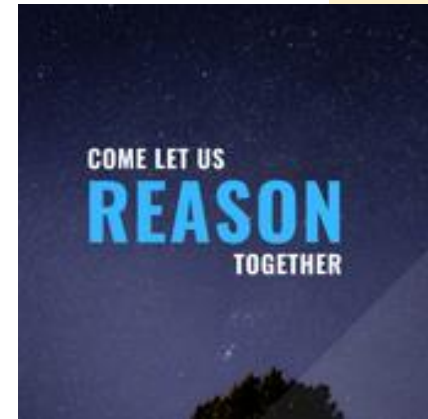


# Myths and Misconceptions

- **This much is true...**
  - Religions have made fundamental contributions to ethics.

# Myths and Misconceptions

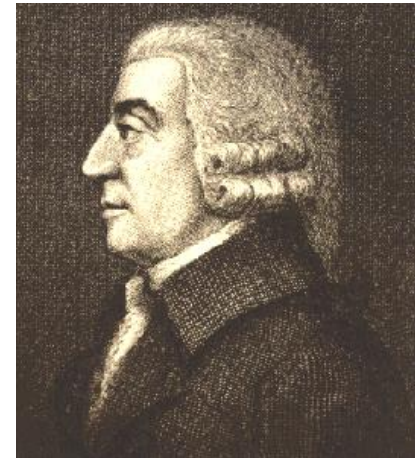
- **This much is true...**
  - Religions have made fundamental contributions to ethics.
- **But...**
  - Religions have a long tradition of **rational discourse** on ethics and other subjects.
    - *Judaism: Talmudic scholarship*
    - *Islam: Ulema (community of scholars)*
    - *Christianity: Thomist philosophy*
    - *Religions gave us mathematics!*
  - Anyway, ethical reasoning can be done **independently** of religious assumptions.



Isaiah  
8<sup>th</sup> c. BCE

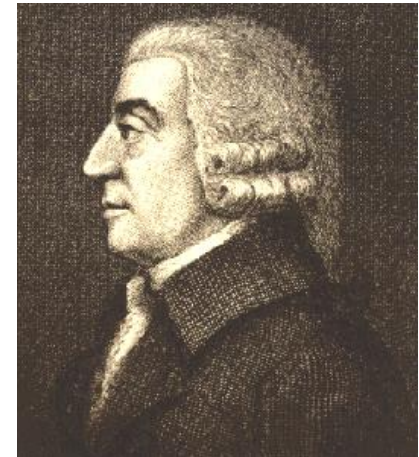
# Myths and Misconceptions

- **Myth 6.** People end up acting in their self-interest.
  - So ethics is **irrelevant**.
  - This is **psychological egoism**.
  - **Adam Smith** agrees.
    - *“It is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer or the baker that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own self-interest.”*
  - Self-interest runs society like an **“invisible hand”** that **benefits everyone**.



# Myths and Misconceptions

- **Wrong.**
  - Smith is quoted grossly out of context.
  - He emphasized that human behavior is based on **empathy** as well as self-interest.
    - Theory of Moral Sentiments (1759), *beginning with very first sentence.*
    - *The quote about the butcher, brewer and the baker explains how **specialization of labor** leads to **trade.***
  - The “invisible hand” refers to self-regulation of **international trade.**
    - *Which he preferred to **mercantilism.***



# Psychological egoism?

- An even older idea...
  - Mencius (*Mèng Zǐ*), 372-289 BCE
  - Human beings are **altruistic** by nature.
    - *Example – child in danger*



# Psychological egoism?

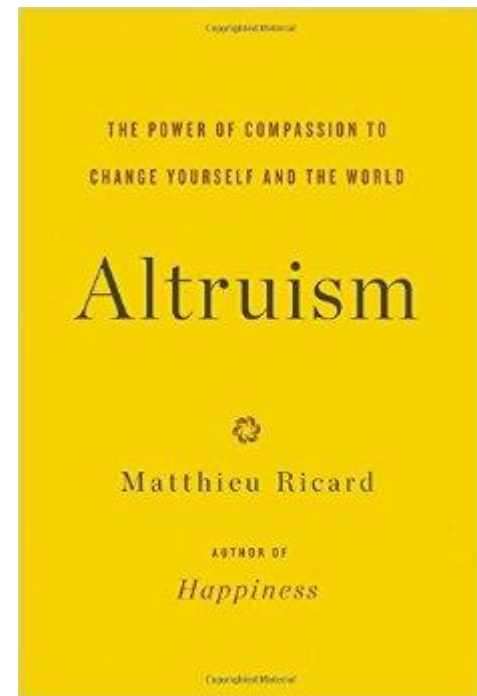
- An even older idea...
  - Mencius (*Mèng Zǐ*), 372-289 BCE
  - Human beings are **altruistic** by nature.
    - *Example – child in danger*
  - But we must **cultivate** this trait.
  - Education is key.
    - *Mèng mǔ sān qiān* (“Mencius’s mother, three moves”).





# Psychological egoism?

- 800 pages of recent evidence for human altruism.



# Myths and Misconceptions

- **Myth 7.** We learn our ethics as little kids, not as adults.
  - For adults, it's too late to study ethics.

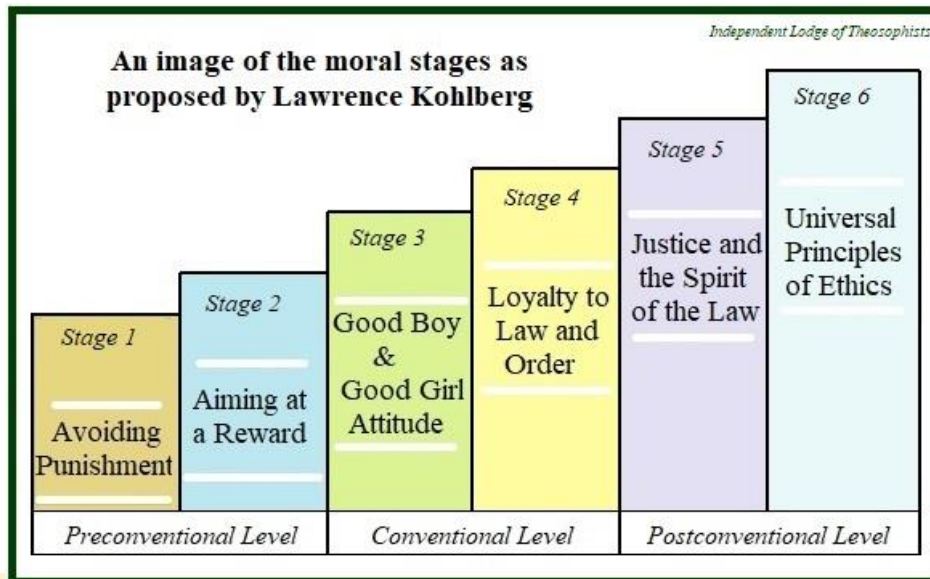
# Myths and Misconceptions

- **Myth 7.** We learn our ethics as little kids, not as adults.
  - For adults, it's too late to study ethics.
- **Wrong.** Ethical maturity grows with cognitive and social maturity.
  - We learn how to think about our actions and their consequences.
  - A lifelong process.



# Myths and Misconceptions

- Lawrence Kohlberg's developmental stages
  - He identified **6 stages** of moral development.
    - *Ethical reasoning skills improve in later stages.*
    - *Final stage reached only in the 60s, if at all.*



# Myths and Misconceptions

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  - There are no objective standards.
  - Only **personal values**.

# Myths and Misconceptions

- **Myth 9.** Ethics is just a matter of opinion.
  - There are no objective standards.
  - Only **personal values**.
- Try to remember this the next time you are **mugged**.



# Myths and Misconceptions

- Some say ethics **shouldn't** be objective!
  - We shouldn't **“impose our values on others.”**
  - Ethics should therefore be a matter of **personal values.**



# Myths and Misconceptions

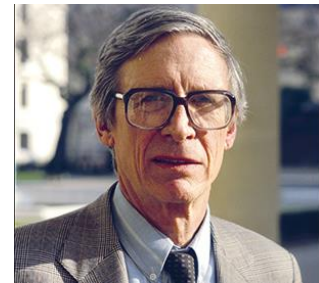
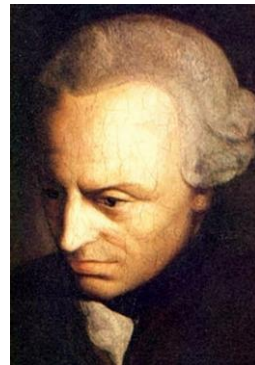
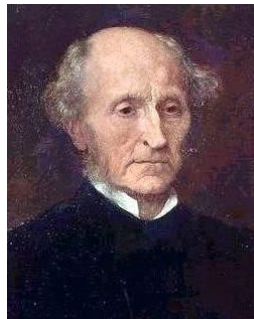
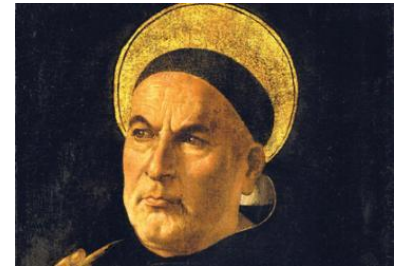
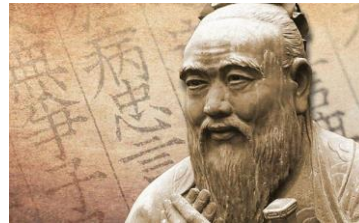
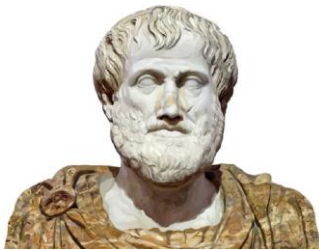
- Ethics does not “impose values on others.”
  - **Just the opposite!**
  - It seeks **consensus** on values!
  - This is the **whole point!**
    - *Ethics can't do its job if it's purely about personal values.*
    - *It must be about interpersonal values.*





# Myths and Misconceptions

- Is rational analysis possible in ethics?
  - It is **hard**, but people have been doing it for **centuries**.
    - *Including some of the smartest people who ever lived.*
    - *We can distill the best ideas from their thought.*



# Myths and Misconceptions

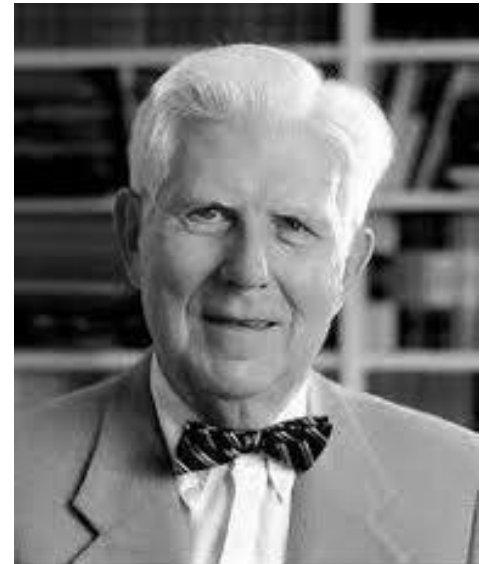
- **Myth 10.** Humans are driven by emotion, not reason.
  - The idea that we act rationally is **false consciousness**.
  - So **ethical reasoning has no influence** on behavior.
    - *At best, it only justifies what we already want to do.*



Sigmund Freud  
1856-1939

# Myths and Misconceptions

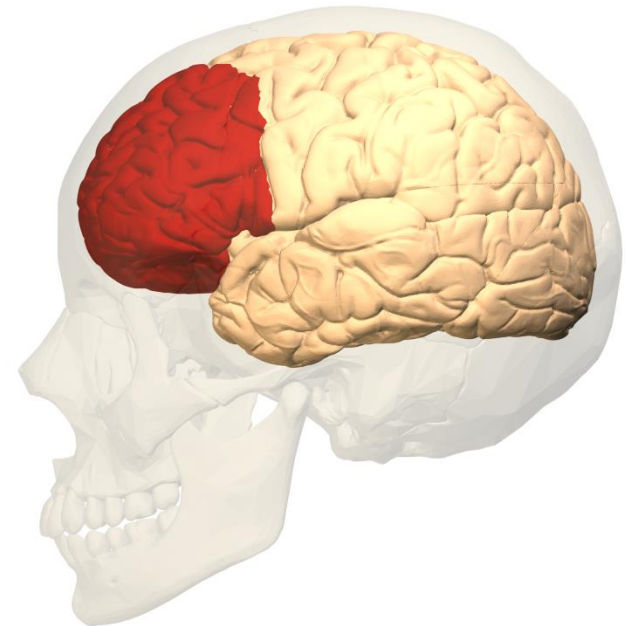
- **Wrong.** This is, at best, warmed-over Freud.
  - **Cognitive psychology** recognizes that reason is a co-equal partner with emotion.
    - *Cognitive therapy is used to treat depression, phobias, PTSD, even schizophrenia.*



Aaron T. Beck  
1921- (!!)

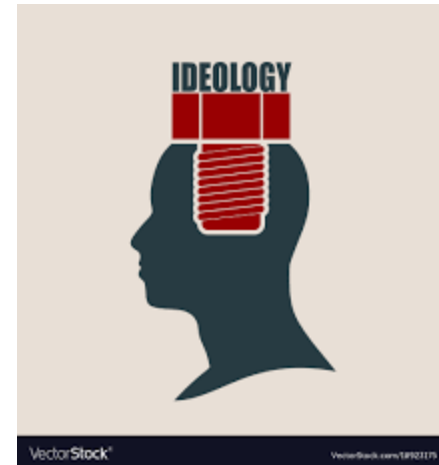
# Myths and Misconceptions

- We are **rational creatures**.
  - It's why we are called *homo sapiens*.
  - It's how we survived 200,000 years.
- The **prefrontal cortex** evolved for its survival value...
  - ...in the rapidly changing climate of the African savannah.
    - *It was necessary to solve problems as they arose, rather than rely on instinct.*
    - *The prefrontal cortex interacts with limbic system, is not governed by it.*



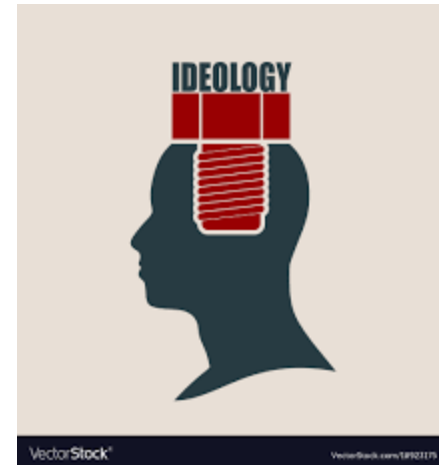
# Myths and Misconceptions

- Our brain demands a **rationale** for our actions.
  - Our thinking influences our emotions and actions, as well as vice-versa.
  - This is why so much effort is invested in political ideology and talking points.



# Myths and Misconceptions

- Our brain demands a **rationale** for our actions.
  - Our thinking influences our emotions and actions, as well as vice-versa.
  - This is why so much effort is invested in political ideology and talking points.
- *If you doubt that **thought influences emotions and actions**, imagine that you read a lab report that indicates terminal cancer.*



# Myths and Misconceptions

- But people believe crazy conspiracy theories...
  - **This proves the point!**
  - The brain demands a **rationale** for our behavior.
    - *...often supplied by talk radio, TV commentators, social media, extreme web sites.*



# Myths and Misconceptions

- Issues are **complicated** and **abstract** in our postmodern world.
  - Very different from those facing our prehistoric ancestors.
  - We must **learn** how to think about them.
  - This requires **education** in abstract reasoning.
    - *Similar situation in business.*

