

# Hodgepodge Morality

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What some individuals consider a sacrosanct ability to perceive moral truths may instead be a hodgepodge of simpler psychological mechanisms, some of which have evolved for other purposes.

It is increasingly apparent that our moral sense comprises a fairly loose collection of intuitions, rules of thumb, and emotional responses that may have emerged to serve a variety of functions, some of which originally had nothing at all to do with ethics. These mechanisms, when tossed in with our general ability to reason, seem to be how humans come to answer the question of good and evil, right and wrong. Intuitions about action, intentionality, and control, for instance, figure heavily into our perception of what constitutes an immoral act. The emotional reactions of empathy and disgust likewise figure into our judgments of who deserves moral protection and who doesn't. But the ability to perceive intentions probably didn't evolve as a way to determine who deserves moral blame. And the emotion of disgust most likely evolved to keep us safe from rotten meat and feces, not to provide information about who deserves moral protection.

Discarding the belief that our moral sense provides a royal road to moral truth is an uncomfortable notion. Most people, after all, are moral realists. They believe acts are objectively right or wrong, like math problems. The dangerous idea is that our intuitions may be poor guides to moral truth, and can easily lead us astray in our everyday moral decisions.