The Roots of Morality: Does Religion Play a Role or is the Tail Wagging the Dog?
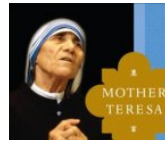
Luke Galen, Ph.D.
Department of Psychology

1. Do people *think* that morality is dependent on religion?
2. Is it?
3. The rational, social-learning model of morality
4. Are there sources of morality outside learning? The social-intuitive model.
5. Does religion foster morality? Or is morality rationalized via religion?

Do people *think* that morality is associated with religiosity?

Survey: "Is it necessary to believe in God to be moral?"
•47% yes vs. 50% no.
•"Are children *more likely* to grow up to be moral adults when raised in a religious faith"?
•61% yes; 35% No (just as moral in faith or not).
•Less than half would vote for an otherwise qualified presidential candidate who happens to be an atheist.
•In experiments, religious people are judged to be more moral and "nicer". But….
•How much of that judgment is based on *actual* morality vs. shared religious identify of perceiver and target?

Hmm… how moral?

Religious   Perceiver   ➔   Religious   Target
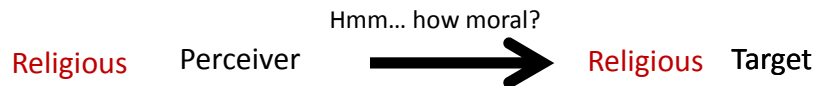
Perceived Morality as a Function of Religiosity: The Jesus Fish Study

- Student participants filled out questionnaires regarding their religious views (e.g., fundamentalism) earlier in semester.
- Student participants were asked to rate a series of three people shown in video bios, talking about their activities.
- One in particular ("Student B") discussed volunteer work.
- BUT in separate conditions, the reasons he gave for his volunteer work differed…..

Conditions: Why did "Student B" do his charity work?

| Religious/ Jesus Fish | Or... | Non Religious/ Darwin Fish |

Student A

Student B

Student C

Same

Student B: "I heard a sermon in church that we should do work for the less fortunate…it says in the bible… serving god by serving others in need."

Same

Same

Student B: "I was listening to a program about how some people can't afford good housing ..And I didn't think that that was right.

Interviewer: This was through church?

B: No I don't go to church.

Same
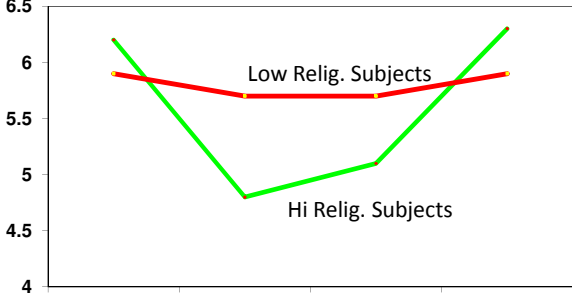
The "Jesus Fish" Study: Perceived Morality and Shared Religiosity

- Participants were divided into Low and High Fundamentalism
- In each of the 4 conditions (Student B shown as religious or not) Participants rated his morality:

Bottom line:
1) Stereotype of religious = moral.
2) But this is endorsed *more* by the religious (i.e., ingroup favoritism).

"How moral is Student B?

Low Relig. Subjects

Hi Relig. Subjects

Student B's religion: Religious | Non-religious | Darwin Fish | Jesus Fish

Plato's Euthyphro dilemma: a problem for morality based *on* religion

"Good"

… is commanded by God; he *makes* things right vs wrong.

Problem: arbitrary morality based on God's whim?
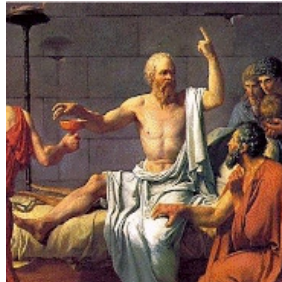
… is commanded by God because it *is* right

Problem: Why appeal to God? Just appeal to the standard itself.

(Thanks for pointing that out Socrates.. Now drink this..)

Problem with non-authority-based morality: how do we decide what is moral then?
Haidt's model: 5 domains of moral concern

1. Harm/ Care: Protect others from harm.
2. Fairness/ Justice: Treat others equally
3. Ingroup/ Loyalty: stick with group, clan, similar others
4. Authority/ Respect: Obedience to traditional authority (e.g., parents, those in charge).
5. Purity/ Sanctity: Avoid disgusting or unnatural things. ("its wrong *because* its weird").

Problem: Do individuals agree on what makes something moral? Ex: differ on religious basis?

www.moralfoundations.org

College students with HIGH vs. LOW religious involvement.

Agree   Disagree

Low: 77   Legal Abortion   High: 23

Low: 67   Premarital sex   High: 15

Low: 76   Same sex marriage   High: 28

High: 53
Laws prohibiting homosexual relationships   Low: 16

Low: 49   High: 19
Marijuana should be legalized

High: 36   Low: 30
The death penalty should be abolished

Low: 55   High: 51
Affirmative action in college admissions should be abolished

Source: Spiritual Life of college students from UCLA Higher Education Research Institute 2003

Correlation between moral *views* and religious attendance among college students (Weeden et al., 2008)

Abortion   .53
Casual sex   .50
Homosexuality   .49
Hooking up   .49
Getting drunk   .42

Drugs   .38
Cursing   .36
Divorce   .34
Disobey parents   .31
Lie to parents   .30

Moral view

Church Attendance

Not forgiving .26
Birth control .24
Shoplifting .22
Not sharing .20

Teasing .09
Traffic law .09

Cheating sex   .19
Not helping   .15
Cheat on exam   .16
Big lie   .15

BUT… These are moral *views*. Are there any problems with assessing one's morality by self-reports?

Religion is a stronger predictor of _attitudes_ or _self-report_....   than of _behavior_

More religious

Ex: Cheating/ honesty   No dif

Less religious

What about actual behaviors? Advantage goes to.....

More religious   Vs.   Less religious

Planned helping: Charity & Volunteer

Dependent on context: who is the "helpee" (family, friends, value-supporter)

Need to feel or be seen as helpful

Spontaneous helping: Bystander Assistance

More universal: include value violators

Based on helpee's stated need

Effect is expected given stereotypical association: "I must be moral because I'm religious".

Self-Other Bias: Holier than Thou Effect (Rowatt et al., 2002)

Compared Baylor U undergrads on: "To what degree do you follow 10 command & "love God" and "love neighbor"
Greater personal religiosity - greater self vs other evaluation

Highly (top 1/3) religious/ fundamentalist evaluated themselves better than non relig subjects _even on non religious_ attributes (intelligent, well-liked, attractive).

Does high religion cause "moral blind spot"?

Degree following commandments

Low Relig
Med Relig
High Relig

Self   Other

Sexuality: Religion and the attitude vs. behavior gap

- High religious disapprove of "non-traditional" sexual acts: homosexuality, cheating, pre-marital. BUT…
- Few differences in behavior of young (19) women
(Farmer et al., 2010)

	Agnos	Atheist	None	Jewish	Christian	Fund
Oral sex	90	100	93	83	90	85
Intercourse	80	88	89	59	74	68
Age 1st intercourse	17.1	17.7	16.4	17.3	16.6	16.7
Partners past year	2.0	2.1	1.9	1.5	1.9	1.5
Cheated on partner	1.6	1.4	1.7	1.4	1.4	1.3

Intercourse is slightly lower in Jewish and Fund Christian, but no difference in other categories of sexual behavior for women.

Sexual behaviors in young men (Farmer et al., 2010)

	Agnos	Atheist	None	Jewish	Christian	Fund
Oral sex	100	73	89	73	93	87
Intercourse	50	53	76	64	74	65
Age 1st intercourse	17	16.6	16.6	17	16.4	16.3
Partners past year	2.4	1.5	1.6	1.6	2.3	2.0
Partners life	5.8	4.6	4.4	3.2	3.9	5.7
Cheated on partner	1.7	1.5	1.8	1.3	1.7	1.5

- In men, virtually all faith groups report some form of premarital sex. Effect of religion was much less than in women.
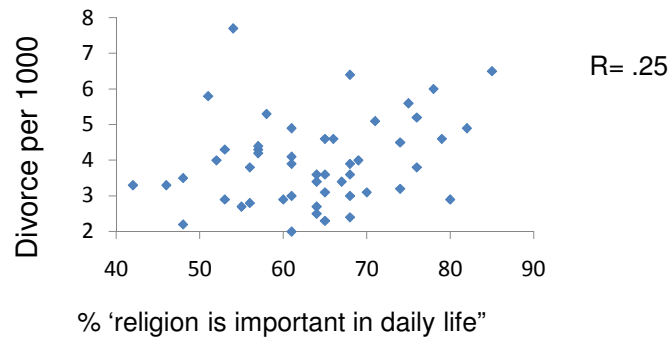- Religious affiliation is a poor guide to sexual behavior

Example of divorce as moral behavior (recall *opinion* of divorce was more negative in more religious).

From the Barna Research Group

Religion	Ever Been Divorced
Non Denominational protestant	34%
Jewish	30%
Baptist	29%
Mainline protestant	25%
Mormons/ LDS	24%
Catholic and Lutheran	21%
Atheist/ Agnostic	21%

States with the	Highest	% "religion very important		lowest divorce rate per 1000	
Nevada	9.0	54	58	Massachusetts	2.4
Arkansas	7.1	78	55	Connecticut	2.8
Oklahoma	6.7	75	60	New Jersey	3.0
Tennessee	6.6	79	53	Rhode Island	3.2
Wyoming	6.5	58	56	New York	3.3
Indiana	6.4	68	65	Pennsylvania	3.3
Alabama	6.2	82	61	Wisconsin	3.4
Idaho	6.2	61	68	North Dakota	3.4
New Mexico	6.0	66	65	Maryland	3.5

R= .25

% 'religion is important in daily life"

What *are* the major demographic predictors of divorce?
- Young age at marriage
- Education
- Income

Divorce rate by Religious Denomination (Pew Forum, 2008)

16%
Historically Black

13%
Protestant Evangelical

13%
Religious
Unaffiliated

12%
Avg. U.S. adult

12%
Protestant Mainline

12%
Unaffiliated

10%
Catholic

10%
Atheist/ Agnostic

9%
Mormon

So…
- What is the underlying reason?
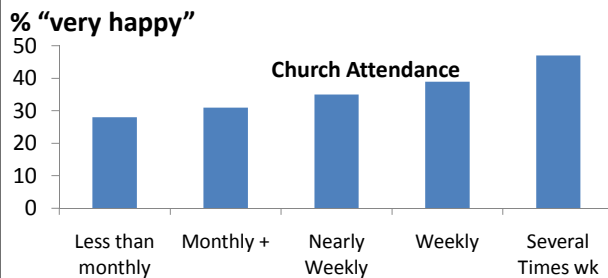- Cite David Myers on religious denomination

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David Myers
Hope College

"It is *individuals* (not states) who experience more or less faith, happiness, & health"

We need to distinguish between religious denomination membership and religiously *active*. "Compared with never-attenders, the most *religiously engaged* Americans were half as likely to be divorced and about one-fourth as likely to have been arrested."
- He's right; church attendance *does* predict lower divorce (and lots of other good things).

This is the "linear hypothesis": More religion, better outcomes (e.g., mental health)

% "very happy"

Church Attendance

Less than monthly	Monthly +	Nearly Weekly	Weekly	Several Times wk

But… focus has shifted to *attendance* not belief.
What's the opposite of a frequent church attender when studying *belief*?

Frequent church attender

Moderate attender

Infrequent/ non-attender

Confident Secular/ Atheist/ Agnostic

"Unsure" "Indifferent"
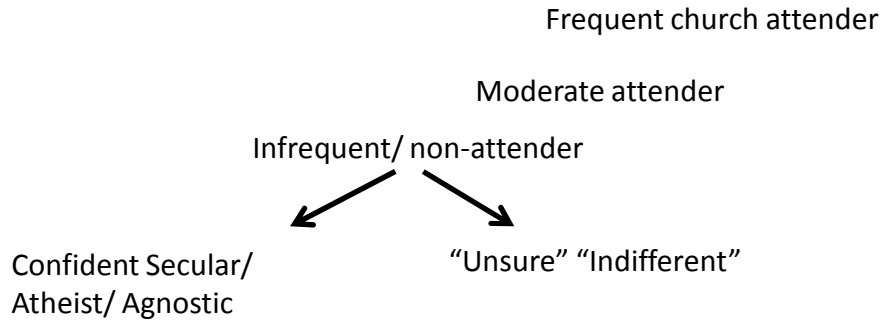
Q: Is it the religious belief itself, or other factors: (group, confident views) that relates to well-being?

Rather than high belief vs. "low/ unsure belief"…
"principled *non-believers in a secular group*"
My study of church *and* secular group (CFI) members on mental well-being and belief vs. group attendance (Galen & Klout 2011)

Emotional Stability

Satisfaction with Life
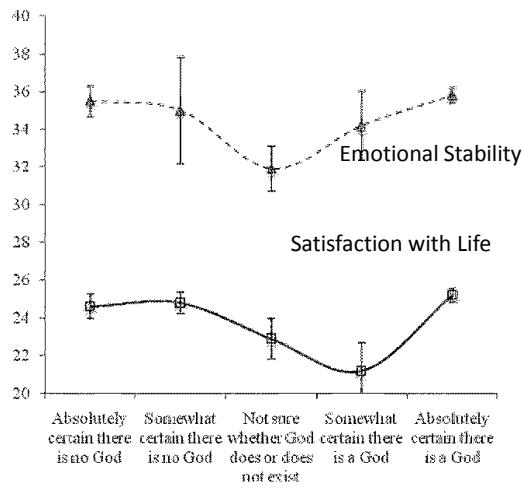
Comparing:
1) *completely* non-religious with strong believers. Who are:
2) Members of organized groups
= No difference in mental health.
BTW, Divorce:
Church: 15%
Secular: 11%

High Church Attendance ⟶ Moral Outcome

- "it's Religious Belief"

- Strong commitment
to ___a___ worldview

- Group allegiance
and attendance.

↑

Can this explain why religious have more volunteering and charity?

Rather than religion = morality, strongly religious may have *different* moral emphases

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Are there systematic differences in what is considered "moral"
using Haidt's moral domains

How relevant to moral judgment?

harm
fairness
Ingroup
authority
purity

Social/ political view

very liberal · liberal · slightly lib · moderate · slightly cons · conservative · very conserv.

Individualistic Autonomy

Group (beehive)

Conservatives (more trad. Religious) tend to weight these 3 more than less religious liberals.

Is this why High vs Low religious have different views re: sexuality?

"But without religion, morality would be relative"

1) Religion doesn't remove relativism .
   A) As we saw, little difference in actual behavior
   B) Even within same religion, disagreement

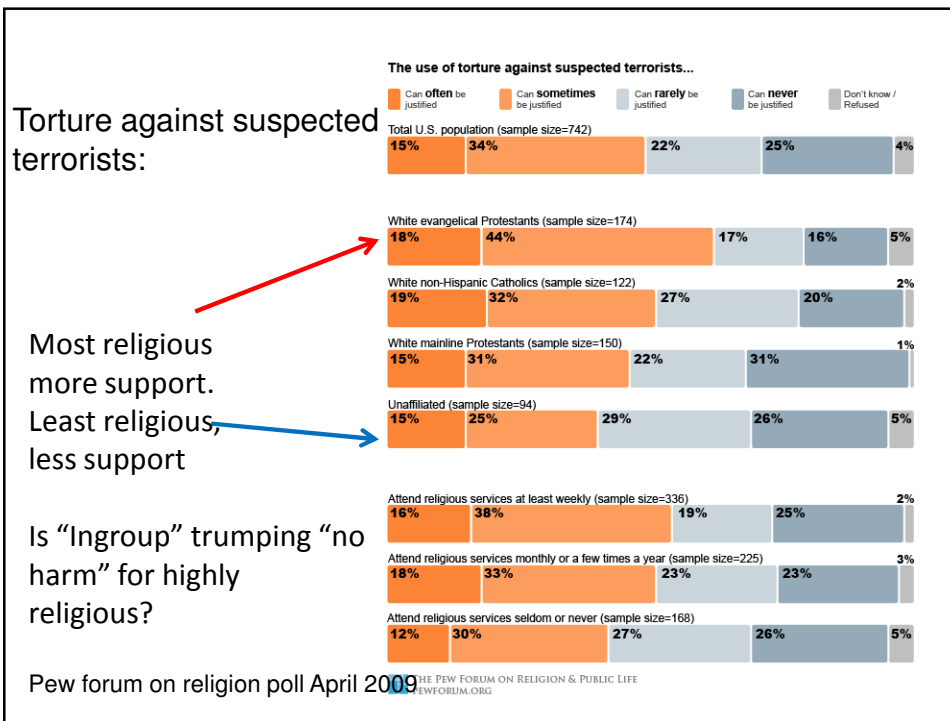"Thou Shalt Not Murder"

Death Penalty?

Conservative Protestants

Liberal Protestants
Quakers
Amish
Some Catholics

Abortion? Stem Cell research? Warfare? Euthanasia?
Conservative   vs.   Liberal

Torture against suspected terrorists:

Most religious more support.
Least religious, less support

Is "Ingroup" trumping "no harm" for highly religious?

Pew forum on religion poll April 2009

The use of torture against suspected terrorists...

	Can **often** be justified	Can **sometimes** be justified	Can **rarely** be justified	Can **never** be justified	Don't know / Refused
Total U.S. population (sample size=742)	15%	34%	22%	25%	4%
White evangelical Protestants (sample size=174)	18%	44%	17%	16%	5%
White non-Hispanic Catholics (sample size=122)	19%	32%	27%	20%	2%
White mainline Protestants (sample size=150)	15%	31%	22%	31%	1%
Unaffiliated (sample size=94)	15%	25%	29%	26%	5%
Attend religious services at least weekly (sample size=336)	16%	38%	19%	25%	2%
Attend religious services monthly or a few times a year (sample size=225)	18%	33%	23%	23%	3%
Attend religious services seldom or never (sample size=168)	12%	30%	27%	26%	5%

THE PEW FORUM ON RELIGION & PUBLIC LIFE
PEWFORUM.ORG

"But without religion, morality would be relative"

2. Religion *promotes* relativism due to emphasis on 3 moral domains

Authority-based   Ingroup-based
              Purity-based
"wrong because   "its unusual"
God says so"   "don't eat pork"

↑   ↑

Does this explain why religious people differ on abortion, homosexuality, and drugs/ alcohol?

These three moral areas are most subject to "rationalization" after the fact (post-hoc)
1st: "That seems wrong"   2nd "I thought of a reason"

"The emotional dog and the rational tail" Haidt's theory of social -intuition:

- Rather than a rationalist model: clear, explicit criteria for morality….
- *First* we have a quick, intuitive, affective reaction, *then* we search for reasons for it post hoc.
- Experiment: given scenarios of 1) unusual forms of masturbation; 2) cleaning toilet with flag; 3) brother sister incest; 4) cooking dead pet.
- With odd or disgusting – not harmful – scenarios, individuals were often at a loss to explain *why* it was wrong.
- Morally dumbfounded: "its just wrong … because."
- Judgments were predicted by affective reaction (disgust), not by perceptions of harm.
- Rather than unambiguous rules, rationalization occurs

Example of Religious Rationalization: Prejudice, Racism, Homophobia, Anti-Semitism

"The role of religion is paradoxical. It makes prejudice and it unmakes prejudice… "
-*Gordon Allport*
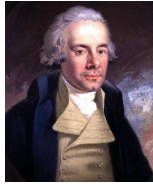
William Wilburforce

William Lloyd Garrison

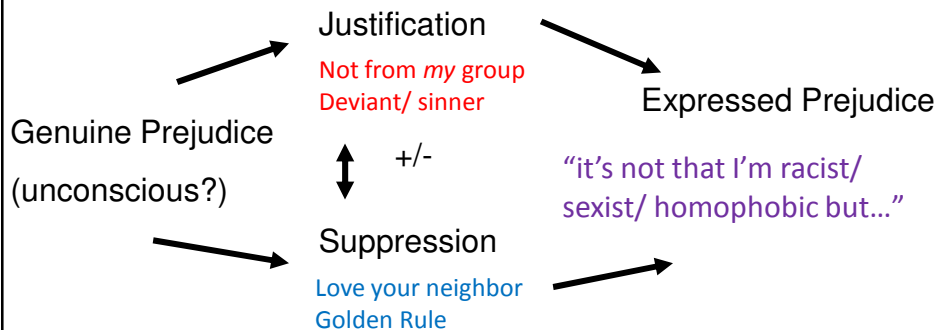"On the Jews and Their Lies" by Martin Luther

MLK

Black students attending Little Rock HS

Justification- Suppression model of Prejudice (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003)

Genuine Prejudice
(unconscious?)

Justification
Not from *my* group
Deviant/ sinner

+/-

Suppression
Love your neighbor
Golden Rule

Expressed Prejudice

"it's not that I'm racist/ sexist/ homophobic but…"

" *However, you may purchase male or female slaves from among the foreigners who live among you. . . You may treat them as your property, passing them on to your children as a permanent inheritance. You may treat your slaves like this, but the people of Israel, your relatives, must never be treated this way.* (Lev 25:44-6)

• Religion can work for/against prejudice.
• Allows rationalization based on Ingroup, Authority, Purity – based morality.

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•Problem: Religion and ingroup-based morality:
•Israeli study of ages 8-14 (Tamarin, 1966) Story of Joshua:
•*Joshua said to the people, "Shout….And the city and all that is within it shall be devoted to the LORD for destruction…But all silver and gold, and vessels of bronze and iron, are sacred to the LORD; they shall go into the treasury of the LORD."…Then they utterly destroyed all in the city, both men and women, young and old, oxen, sheep, and asses, with the edge of the sword…And they burned the city with fire, and all within it; only the silver and gold, and the vessels of bronze and of iron, they put into the treasury of the house of the LORD.* – Joshua Ch. 6

"Do you think Joshua and the Israelites acted rightly?"

Total Approval:*   66%
Partial approve/ disapprove: 8%
Total Disapproval   26%

*Example:"Joshua did good because the people who inhabited the land were of a different religion, when Joshua killed them he wiped their religion from the earth."

In a second study substituted "General Lin from a Chinese Kingdom 3000 years ago" for Joshua
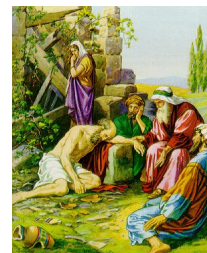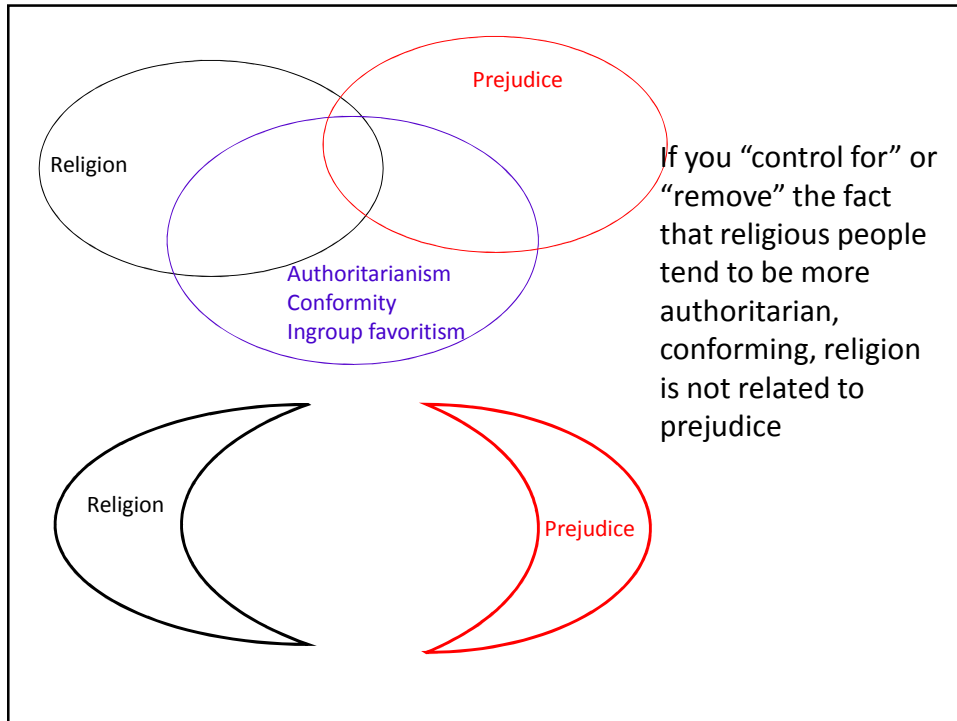
General Lin:
Total Approval: 7%
Partial approve/ disapprove: 18%
Total Disapproval: 75%

Problems with religious-authority based morality….

1) Contextualizing the action as religious removes it from scrutiny.
2) Religious texts are complex and do contain recommended actions that are indefensible outside religious context.

Obedience and Submission to authority *are* relativisitc

Prejudice

Religion

Authoritarianism
Conformity
Ingroup favoritism

If you "control for" or "remove" the fact that religious people tend to be more authoritarian, conforming, religion is not related to prejudice
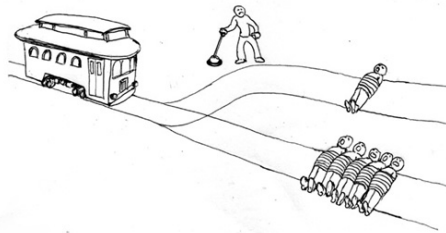
Religion

Prejudice

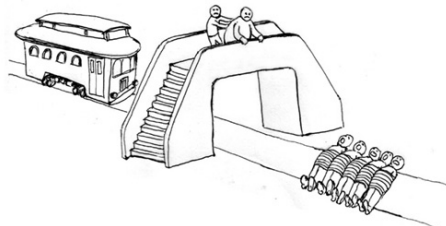If morality is not learned, what *is* the origin?

Morality is Intuitive: Gut Feeling

"The Trolley Problem": Would you flip the switch to save 5, at the cost of 1?
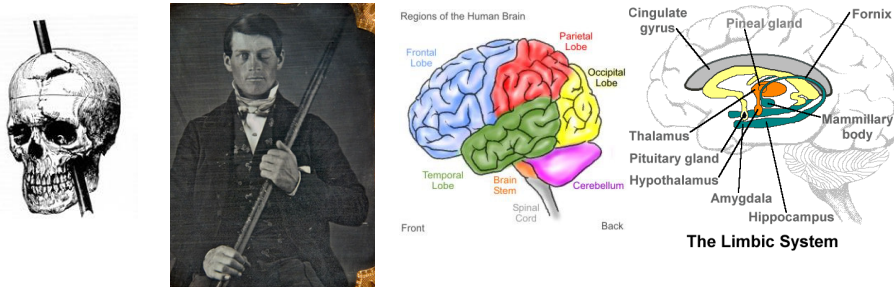Most individuals say "yes" universally.

Second Scenario: Would you shove a large person off to save 5, at the cost of 1?
• Many fewer say "yes"
• Take longer to decide
• Emotional brain systems active as well as rational systems

But why discrepant responses?

Different brain regions process different aspects of morality

Morality is physically determined. Ex: Damage to frontal lobes causes "ultra-utilitarian" (more likely to push fat man in the "trolley scenario")(Koenigs et al 2007)

Immorality is an emotional deficit: Psychopaths lack empathy, not moral knowledge

Moral intuitions develop early: Infants 1-2 y.o. prefer helpful shapes or puppets

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Morality, Cleanliness, Smell

We make associations (unconsciously) between physical purity and moral virtue.

Sitting at a dirty desk causes harsher moral judgments (Schnall et al)

Being in a room with fresh cleaning supply smell causes more trust in sharing game and more charitable donations (Lijenquist & Galinsky)

Writing about unethical deeds increases desirability of cleaning products
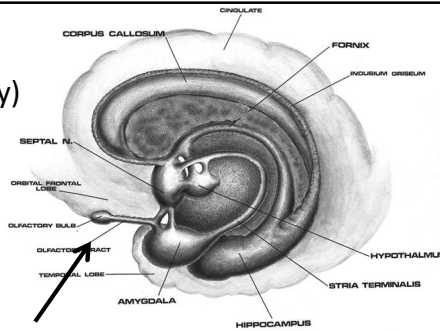
Dove soap
Crest
Windex
Lysol
Tide

Post-its
Nantucket
Energizer
Sony CD
Snickers

Elements of Morality in Other Animals

Sharing and reciprocity
Cooperation
Social Hierarchy
Empathy (selective)
Ingroup favoritism
Punishment of misbehavior and free-riders

Any intensely social animal species must evolve moral dispositions to survive.
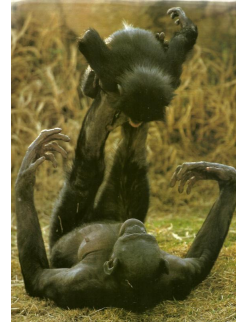
•Evolutionary roots: 1) Harm: empathy
•2) Fairness: reciprocal altruism,
•3) ingroup: coalitions,
•4) authority: hierarchy/ subordination
•5) purity: boundary marking and disgust

Rather than….
Religion → Moral Rules → Emotion & Action

Emotion & Action ↗ Moral Rules
↘ Religion