



# Moral air space



by Paul Biegler



A young woman accused of adultery is taken to a piece of waste ground where three men have dug a hole. She is buried waist deep, her torso propping puppet-like from the earth. There is silence as the stony dirt thuds in around her. But minutes later a crowd gathers, hurling insults, and soon the first rock is thrown.

If I offered you a ringside seat to this most repugnant act chances are you would turn me down. Or take me down. And I bet you're not crazy on boiling animals to death either. But if we scored some lobsters in the Old Harbour at Biarritz, and there was chilled Chenin Blanc on offer, maybe I could twist your arm to drop the delectable crustaceans in a bubbling pot.

You protest. You've come to a moral view after deep reflection and have made an inner commitment to hold true. Torture of humans and animals is, and always will be, abhorrent. And if I quipped that your morals could shift just by tripping into the air space of a different room, state or country, you'd laugh. And then I'd submit my first exhibit.

In 1963 psychologist Stanley Milgram had people punish someone in the next room with electric shocks when they gave wrong answers on a memory test. Egged on by an experimenter, twenty-six out of forty participants tortured the errant student to death before discovering it was all bogus. And these weren't mild-mannered clones of Pol Pot, just ordinary citizens who'd answered a newspaper ad to be in a study. Milgram confirmed that morality isn't the reinforced concrete we'd once thought it to be. More like Indian rubber.

There was just one authority figure in Milgram's laboratory but, on the outside, society gives its own subtle orders. We bend to its will because it often makes good sense to do what everyone else is doing. If all the gazelles are grazing on grasses, it's likely you'll shorten your own gazelle shelf-life if you eat those purple berries no one else is touching. And there are fail-safes to make sure we don't stray too far from the pack.

We are innate mimics. If I cross my leg or rub my nose, you will too. When I know in

advance that you are politically progressive I'll automatically nudge my politics in that direction before we meet and greet. And, like chameleons, we can switch our moral colours to match the terrain.

In 1964 thirty-eight people witnessed the stabbing murder of Kitty Genovese as it played out below their Queens apartment block. And they all sat on their hands. Although this account has been questioned, the public hue and cry led psychologists John Darley and Bibb Latané to investigate. They put people in a room where they could hear someone having a seizure next door. When participants thought they were alone, 85 per cent came to the victim's aid. But when they thought others heard the fit too, only 31 per cent helped. They had crumpled to the prevailing norm of doing nothing, and only found out later it was all a hoax.

How could thinking people let this happen? Well, if you ask psychologist Jonathan Haidt, thinking is just a bit player on the moral stage. Tradition has us reasoning our way to a moral stance then getting all hot under the collar when we spot

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wrongdoing. But Haidt reckons this is upside down. We take umbrage first and then find reasons to support the feeling.

Emotions work to keep us in step with the moral status quo, be it bystander apathy, the revulsion of incest or even sadistic punishment. It feels bad to be different so we go with the flow. Reason, more often than not, is just an impotent latecomer. If this is right things have panned out much as enlightenment philosopher David Hume figured. For Hume, reason was the "slave of the passions" and "all morality depends upon our sentiments; and when any action, or quality of the mind, pleases us after a certain manner, we say it is virtuous".

For the nomadic, new lands promise Arcadian vistas and exotic morsels, but also a different moral air that may enchant even the well-intentioned. Humans are social by necessity, and that drives us to make moral trade-offs to keep faith with the dominant clan. I don't say this turns the unwary traveller barbarous, but it might mean a change of heart about lobster thermidor. ▀





Photo: Library of Congress

**“Own only what you can always carry with you: know languages, know countries, know people. Let your memory be your travel bag.”**

— Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn