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2017 : WHAT SCIENTIFIC TERM OR CONCEPT OUGHT TO BE MORE WIDELY KNOWN?
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Fundamental Attribution Error

Aristotle taught that a stone sinks when dropped into water because it has the property of gravity. Of course, not everything sinks when dropped into water. A piece of wood floats, because it has the property of levity. People who behave morally do so because they have the property of virtue; people who don't behave morally lack that property.

Molière lampoons this way of thinking by having a team of physicians in *The Imaginary Invalid* explain why opium induces sleep, namely because of its dormative power.

Lampoon or not, most of us think about the behavior of objects and people much of the time in purely *dispositional* terms. It is properties possessed by the object or person that explain its behavior. Modern physics replaced Aristotle's dispositional thinking by describing all motion as being due to the properties of an object interacting in particular ways with the *field* in which it is located.

Modern scientific psychology insists that explanation of the behavior of humans always requires reference to the situation the person is in. The failure to do so sufficiently is known as the Fundamental Attribution Error. In Milgram's famous obedience experiment, two-thirds of his subjects proved willing to deliver a great deal of electric shock to a pleasant-faced middle-aged man, well beyond the point where he became silent after begging them to stop on account of his heart condition. When I teach about this experiment to undergraduates, I'm quite sure I've never convinced a single one that their best friend might have delivered that amount of shock to the kindly gentleman, let alone that they themselves might have done so. They are protected by their armor of virtue from such wicked behavior. No amount of explanation about the power of the unique situation into which Milgram's subject was placed is sufficient to convince them that their armor could have been breached.

My students, and everyone else in Western society, are confident that people behave honestly because they have the virtue of honesty, conscientiously because they have the virtue of conscientiousness. (In general, non-Westerners are less susceptible to the fundamental attribution error, lacking as they do sufficient knowledge of Aristotle!) People are believed to behave in an open and friendly way because they have the trait of extroversion, in an aggressive way because they have the trait of hostility. When they observe a single instance of honest or extroverted behavior they are confident that, in a different situation, the person would behave in a similarly honest or extroverted way.

In actual fact, when large numbers of people are observed in a wide range of situations, the correlation for trait-related behavior runs about .20 or less. People think the correlation is around .80. In reality, seeing Carlos behave more honestly than Bill in a given situation increases the likelihood that he will behave more honestly in another situation from the chance level of 50 percent to the vicinity of 55-57. People think that if Carlos behaves more honestly than Bill in one situation the likelihood that he will behave more honestly than Bill in another situation is 80 percent!

How could we be so hopelessly miscalibrated? There are many reasons, but one of the most important is that we don't normally get trait-related information in a form that facilitates comparison and calculation. I observe Carlos in one situation when he might display honesty or the lack of it, and then not in another for perhaps a few weeks or months. I observe Bill in a different situation tapping honesty and then not another for many months.

This implies that if people received behavioral data in such a form that many people are observed over the same time course in a given fixed situation, our calibration might be better. And indeed it is. People are quite well calibrated for abilities of various kinds, especially sports. The likelihood that Bill will score more points than Carlos in one basketball game given that he did in another is about 67 percent—and people think it's about 67 percent.

Our susceptibility to the fundamental attribution error—overestimating the role of traits and underestimating the importance of situations—has implications for everything from how to select employees to how to teach moral behavior.