

CASE #4: TESTING VIRTUE

Most people overestimate their ability to act on their principles, according to a recent article in the New York Times.¹ “In recent years, social psychologists have begun to study what they call the holier-than-thou effect. They have long known that people tend to be overly optimistic about their own abilities and fortunes – to overestimate their standing in class, their discipline, their sincerity. But this self-inflating bias may be even stronger when it comes to moral judgment, and it can greatly influence how people judge others’ actions, and ultimately their own,” is how Carey Benedict summed up the issue.

In the Good Samaritan experiment, even seminary students could not be counted on to stop and help a stranger in need. In the experiment, Princeton seminarians were asked to prepare a report on the parable of the Good Samaritan in one building and report to another building to discuss the parable. The seminarians were randomly assigned to one of three groups, those told that they were running late, right on time, and a little early. While making their way to the other building, each of the seminarians encountered a man slumped on the sidewalk in obvious distress. Of the seminarians told they were early, 63% stopped to help; those on time stopped 45% of the time; and 10% of those running late helped. The researchers found that, “Ironically, a person in a hurry is less likely to help people, even if he is going to speak on the parable of the Good Samaritan. (Some literally stepped over the victim on their way to the next building!) The results seem to show that thinking about norms does not imply that one will act on them.”²

The problem is how to develop empirical evidence that tests the credence of self-righteous claims or that shows those who claim moral certitude to be only deceiving themselves. Studies that best test individuals’ actions against their claims usually involve observing those individuals’ actions in manufactured situations where they are called on to act, but don’t know that the morality of their actions is being measured. They might not even know that they are the subjects of a research experiment. Critics claim that there is something unethical about using deceptive means to test the good character of others. For example, the University of Washington medical school cautions its researchers, “As a general rule, deception is not acceptable when doing research with humans. Using deception jeopardizes the integrity of the informed consent process and can potentially harm your participants.”³

For instance, Stanley Milgram’s experiments on authority have been roundly criticized as causing a potential crisis in the lives of test subjects. However, one is forced to wonder if tests of virtue are being criticized simply on the basis of the poor performance of test subjects. It is hard to imagine any test gauging the relationship between moral attitudes and actions which is not potentially harmful to participants. Research that uncovers an uncomfortable but important truth—moral hypocrisy—is likely to seem harmful to test subjects, but reveals important character trends.

¹ Carey, Benedict, “Stumbling Blocks on the Path of Righteousness,” <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/05/health/05mind.html>, *New York Times*, D5 (May 5, 2009).

² Darley, J. M., and C.D. Batson, “From Jerusalem to Jericho: A study of Situational and Dispositional Variables in Helping Behavior,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, v. 27, pp. 100-108 (1973). http://faculty.babson.edu/krollag/org_site/soc_psych/darley_samarit.html.

³ “Ethics in Medicine,” <http://depts.washington.edu/bioethx/topics/resrch.html>, *University of Washington School of Medicine*.