massimo.pigliucci@gmail.com

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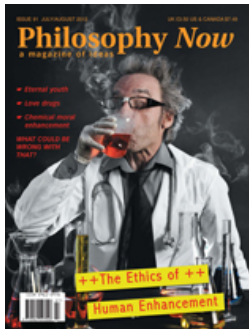
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Science

Testing My Own Morality

By our philosophical science correspondent **Massimo Pigliucci**.

Apparently, I'm a righteous son of a bitch, morally speaking. At least that's the conclusion I would have to reach if I trusted the results of a morality test I took at the BBC website (bbc.co.uk/labuk/experiments/morality). The test was devised to collect data for a "new theory" that seeks to make sense of human morality in terms of a super-organism concept. Briefly, the idea is that "we, as individuals, behave as if we are part of a bigger 'superorganism' when we are organised into large social groups, as in cities or societies. … all moral actions are based on the fundamental need to 'police' society in order to keep the 'superorganism' functioning properly."

I don't buy the idea that human societies are superorganisms in any meaningful (non strictly metaphorical) sense of the term. But it is very plausible that our sense of right and wrong did evolve as a result of being highly intelligent social primates, so I was curious to take the test and see how the results squared with my own, reflective, understanding of morality.

The BBC test looked at five dimensions of morality: my sense of wrongness (it turns out to be higher than average), my sense of anger (higher), my sense of disgust (higher), my desire to avoid (higher), and my desire to punish (lower). That is, I am less tolerant than average of moral wrongs, I feel more anger than average when confronted with a moral wrong, my sense of disgust toward moral wrongs is higher than average, and I tend to avoid people who do moral wrong, but I am less forceful than average when it comes to punishment of perceived moral wrongs.

Actually, the above results do square reasonably well with what I could have told you before taking the test, and perhaps there is a less harsh interpretation than the one with which I started this essay. I simply seem to deeply (and emotionally) care about moral issues, and while I stay clear of bad people, I don't necessarily demand that they be burned at the stake.

Someone familiar with the major frameworks developed in moral philosophy may perhaps conclude from the above results that I am some sort of Kantian *deontologist* (holding that moral behavior is a duty), and most likely not a *consequentialist* (holding that an action's morality should be judged by its consequences). The second inference would be correct, but the first one would be off the mark. In fact, I consider myself a *virtue ethicist* (moral behavior is the result of a well-trained character), in the Aristotelian spirit (updated *sans* the slavery and misogyny). Of course I don't know how Aristotle would have fared on the BBC test, but he would likely have recognized that there is such a thing as the right emotional reaction (anger and disgust) to immoral behavior, and he certainly would have advised his pupils to keep good, exemplary company since youth, in order to develop a virtuous character. The virtuous individual, presumably, would also develop a heightened sense of what is right and what is wrong. But what about the bit concerning punishment?

Aristotle taught to strive for the right middle ground, steering clear of extremes. Courage, famously, lies somewhere in the middle between foolhardy and cowardly behavior. Does the fact that my willingness to punish people is less than average, then, signal that I am failing to keep on the virtuous middle path? Well, at the cost of sounding arrogant (oh, what the hell), it may instead be that the average respondent to the BBC survey is a bit too comfortable with the idea of punishment, i.e., it may be the average person that is off the Aristotelian path, not yours truly.

Regardless of the specific virtues of the BBC test, it seems a good idea for people to check their positions on morality using standardized tests (more examples of such surveys are at moral.wjh.harvard.edu, and at philosophyexperiments.com — and there are others!), and to see what sort of philosophical framework they may find themselves most comfortable with. This accomplishes two things: on the one hand it tells you where you are in comparison with other people, which in turn may allow you to have a better sense of why public and private ethical debates lean one way or another (although, of course, the biasing and filtering effect of the media has to be taken into account). On the other hand, these tests represent a good starting point for reflecting on one's own positions, as they may uncover aspects of our moral reasoning of which we ourselves were not aware. And that in turn may lead to some reflection that may even change what we think about specific ethical issues. Surely that is not a bad return for half an hour spent on the internet, is it?

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Massimo Pigliucci is Professor of Philosophy at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. He is the author of Nonsense on Stilts: How to Tell Science from Bunk *(University of Chicago Press, 2010). His philosophical musings can be found at: www.rationallyspeaking.org.*

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