

SUMMARY

THE POWER OF IDEALS

WILLIAM DAMON
ANNE COLBY



Summary of “The Power of Ideals” by William Damon and Anne Colby

Written by Alyssa Burnette

Learn how personal morality impacts our daily lives.

Introduction

5

Are Human Beings Inherently Bad?

6

The Role of Selfishness in Human Morality

8

The Evolution of Moral Disposition

10

Final Summary

13



**DO YOU WANT THIS BOOK
AS AN 20-MINUTE AUDIOBOOK?**



**Get the key insights of non-fiction books
in minutes instead of hours. Listen to
our free audiobooks while you workout
or on your commute to work.**



**DOWNLOAD
OUR FREE APP**



Introduction

If you found a wallet with a \$50 bill in it, what would you do? Would you try to track down the original owner and give their wallet back? Or would you take the money for yourself? Your answer to this question probably determines your answer to another important question: do you consider people to be inherently good or inherently bad? It might surprise you to learn that this question attracts a wide variety of answers. For example, many people would say that humans are inherently wicked; it is only through the influence of religion, social norms, or convention that we develop any morality at all. By contrast, however, many others would claim that people have an innate knowledge of right and wrong and that other differences can be chalked up to variations in cultural norms. Others might give an answer that falls somewhere in-between these two ends of the spectrum.

But with so much variation, how do we know which answer is correct? What's the real truth about humanity? Over the course of this summary, we'll explore the authors' in-depth study of human morality and investigate their conclusions.

Are Human Beings Inherently Bad?

According to psychologist Jonathan Haidt, the answer is a resounding yes! That's because Haidt is the father of something called "the new science of morality." But what does that mean in practice and what does this new school of thought look like? Haidt's theory can best be summarized as the belief that human beings are inherently immoral and that we only learn morality when society or religion imposes it upon us. Haidt supports his theory by using examples of controversial psychological experiments such as The Stanford Prison Experiment or The Milgram Shock Experiment. In case you're not familiar with these experiments, both involved highly controversial morality tests to determine how people will behave in ethically challenging situations. In The Milgram Shock Experiment, it was proven that most people would intentionally cause grievous bodily harm to another human being via electric shock as long as they were not personally held accountable for the consequences. Similarly, in The Stanford Prison Experiment, psychologist Philip Zimbardo constructed a "prison" environment in the basement of his university's psychology building. He assigned random roles to the assortment of male volunteers who had elected to be part of a psychological experiment. Some were randomly selected to be prison guards while others were assigned the role of prisoner.

As the experiment continued, the volunteers who were acting as guards became entirely too immersed in their roles. Even a fake form of "state-sanctioned" power went to their heads and they became overwhelmingly violent and sadistic towards the prisoners. The prisoners, by contrast, experienced a wide range of psychological conditions in response. Some became severely despondent and depressed or suffered mental breakdowns. These detrimental psychological effects lasted long after the experiment concluded and they were released. Others became increasingly violent in response to the guards' abuse and organized a resistance. Despite the variations, however, one conclusion was clear: the results were so horrific that Zimbardo could not, in good conscience, continue the experiment. He was forced to shut it down early.

As a result of experiments like these, Haidt argues that we have conclusive proof that human beings are inherently evil. According to him, if we do good things or make moral choices, it is either by accident or because we have almost been “tricked” into it by our society. But is he right?

The Role of Selfishness in Human Morality

Would you describe yourself as a selfish person? To a degree, everybody is; deep down, there's at least a part of us that wants our own way. We might want to eat that slice of cake we're bringing to a friend and enjoy our slice and theirs as well. We might want to take the last chicken leg at dinner or choose a career option that's best for us rather than the option that's best for our family. There's no doubt about it-- we all experience selfish desires from time to time. But the crucial distinction is that we don't all act on those desires every time. Psychologists like Haidt would disagree, however; if we accept Haidt's conceptualization of human morality, all human beings are intrinsically selfish and all but pre-destined to choose the selfish option every time.

And while it's true that human beings unarguably experience selfishness and that many objectionable examples of human behavior occur as a result of selfishness, the authors affirm that selfishness is not the driving force behind the majority of our behavior. If you're a parent, for example, you already know this to be true because you've experienced it firsthand. As a parent, your motivations for getting up at 3am to feed your child a bottle or change a dirty diaper are not for your personal benefit. You don't sacrifice your time, money, or personal satisfaction for your child's benefit because of selfish desires. Similarly, if you're a white person who fights against racism or a straight person who challenges homophobia, your motives can only be described as altruistic. The system already benefits you, so why fight for someone else's rights if your motives are purely selfish?

The authors observe that these examples point to a deeper truth about human behavior: the role of moral commitment. Because although examples of selfishness abound, for every one that can be touted by the new science of morality, there are at least three examples of pure altruism. These are the examples that illustrate the truth: that people can be kind when there is nothing in it for them, that people will give of themselves when they get nothing in return, and that we do so willingly, not as a result

of some societal mirage. Moral commitment is, quite simply, our dedication to something that is bigger than ourselves. It's our desire to be part of something more and to feel as though we're making the world a better place. That's what makes moral commitment the fly in the ointment of psychological experiments like those touted by Haidt.

Because although it's true that the people in those experiments acted selfishly-- and indeed, even heinously-- the authors point out that academic experiments are still only simulations. They don't provide an accurate representation of human behavior "in the wild" because they can't. Because if people really were faced with the choice of shocking their fellow human being to death, they would give it more thought and go through a significant moral debate. Likewise, people who really do become prison guards are not always holistically evil. Though many do abuse their power or behave sadistically, this proves that those specific people are immoral or selfish. Others, by contrast, simply do their jobs and retain their sense of basic humanity and decency. So, because these psychological experiments are not realistic representations of the choices people make when they're faced with real ethical dilemmas, they cannot be considered to be infallible supporting evidence for the new science of morality.

The Evolution of Moral Disposition

Your moral disposition can best be defined as the attitudes and behaviors that you believe are moral or ethical as a result of the influences around you. For example, if you grow up in a privileged and myopic home, you're likely to become a selfish person who prioritizes your own interests over those of others. You're similarly unlikely to care much about social justice or defending the rights of those who experience discrimination. However, the authors acknowledge that our moral dispositions are not static. Rather, they are fluid and changeable and they can be molded by new information and new experiences if we are simply open-minded enough to take them on board.

To flesh out this theory, the authors provide supporting evidence from an experiment known as “the ultimatum game.” Here’s how the game works: it starts with two players, a sum of money, and the instruction for the two to divide the money between themselves. The first player must start by making an offer to the second player, who has the option of choosing whether or not to accept that offer. However, the first player must choose their offer and their pitch carefully, because if the second player declines to accept, neither participant will get any money. This experiment has been repeated multiple times with participants who vary greatly in age so that researchers can get the best results. After running the experiment for a significant period of time, they found that young children are likely to allow themselves to be short-changed on a deal, but that this changes after just a few years. With the added perspective of only two or three years, children have already developed an innate sense of fairness that motivates their decision-making. As a result, older children are more likely to advocate in favor of both players losing than allow either of them to receive an unfair deal.

Additional experiments have proved that this is even true for monkeys. When psychologists conducted an experiment that required monkeys to make determinations of fairness, the overwhelming result was that even

our animal counterparts recognized inequality. Over the course of the experiment, every single time a monkey was faced with the opportunity to short-change his friend and receive a treat himself, the monkey would opt to decline the treat. In some cases, a monkey might even accept the deal, only to turn around and give the treat to his neglected friend even when it meant he would receive nothing himself. And in some especially unique versions of the experiment, some monkeys were so outraged by the inequality that they instigated a revolution, screaming and throwing things at the researchers!

These examples provide brilliant illustrations for the authors' core point: that human beings have an innate sense of right and wrong and it evolves as we grow. Although we may be influenced by our surroundings or our culture, we all have an inherent understanding of morality and it can change for the better if we allow it. The authors have also observed that our experiences play a tremendous role in our understanding of morality and in the future development of our personal moral disposition. To contextualize this, let's return to the earlier example we mentioned at the beginning of this chapter.

Imagine that you were born into a very privileged family and encouraged to develop a selfish worldview. But what if, one day, you saw a child from a poor family being treated cruelly? What if you watched her being denied access to her dreams because of her socioeconomic status or saw her being bullied? Would you abandon the moral disposition that had been impressed upon you, educate yourself, and become an activist for equality? Many people would and indeed, many have! That's because our moral dispositions enable us to select certain formative experiences and use them to update our conceptualization of morality. And we often choose to make these updates even when they call us to go against what we've been taught or to defy the norms of our social circle.

In short, our ability to grow, evolve, and alter our moral disposition is the essence of social change. And because change is possible, because we do see a rise in social justice and altruism, we have proof that human beings are

not irreparably selfish and immoral. This is also proof that morality is not simply the result of pressure from society or indoctrination by some form of organized religion. We know that certain things are “right” or “wrong” because we have the ability to look at injustice that does not affect us and identify it as being unjust. We have an innate sense of morality because we can look at a deal and know that it is unfair-- and therefore not okay-- even if that inequality benefits us. And as we’ve seen in the previous examples, this innate morality is so obvious that it’s even readily apparent to children. In fact, it’s also evident to monkeys! So, if this is the case, then we can safely say that the new science of morality cannot be correct.

Final Summary

A budding school of thought known as “the new science of morality” argues that humans are inherently selfish and immoral. Psychologists and thinkers who subscribe to this school of thought posit that if human beings do anything “good” or “moral,” it is all but accidental or as a result of societal manipulation. However, as the authors have proved, there are multiple examples throughout history and psychology which prove that humans do have an innate knowledge of morality and that we often use it for good. We are, in fact, frequently altruistic and kind, even when we stand to gain nothing in return. This is the result of our ability to update our moral disposition and this ability has often been put to good use in the form of social activism.



**DO YOU WANT THIS BOOK
AS AN 20-MINUTE AUDIOBOOK?**



**Get the key insights of non-fiction books
in minutes instead of hours. Listen to
our free audiobooks while you workout
or on your commute to work.**



**DOWNLOAD
OUR FREE APP**

