

## WE TELL OURSELVES STORIES

Two primary influences kicked off cultural evolution in human beings. The first was the awareness of self and other, the transcendent ape-to-man moment when our neocortex became capable of empathy and we could walk in somebody else's shoes. The second was the appearance of formal language. Although Neanderthals grunted and cooed and hissed, it was not until around fifty thousand years ago that humans gained full linguistic ability. This ability to put our feelings into words, and use our words to build a life together, began the snowballing cultural effect that E. O. Wilson calls "hypertrophy." Once we had languages with which to engage in discussions and tell stories, moral practices could be put into place.

Why does ethical conduct require language? Because self-control requires language. Our behavior is determined by what we tell ourselves is right and wrong. Also, what we call the "self" (another uniquely human concept) would not exist were it not for language. The self-image we form is largely based on the stories we tell ourselves *about* ourselves (based on experience, memory, and personal belief). But how we conceptualize ourselves is not how we really are. We go through our lives, every one of us, with a degree of "self dysmorphia" (just as anorexics suffer from body dysmorphia), a distorted image of our own character. Language is indispensable to how this self-shape comes to be in our minds. When we listen to our own minds in the process of confabulating reality, using semantics to strengthen one argument over another as we appraise a given situation, and our ethical position inside it, this becomes obvious.

In order to think about ourselves, we must create a narrative. For purposes of self-determination, each of us *is* his or her story, in fact. The self we believe in gives us an inner world full of simulations, social comparisons, and reputation concerns. This self also comes with an inner sadist, a contrarian voice that seems to enjoy tormenting us, to test our mettle, to challenge our motives. It is because of this self that we're able to make distinctions between right and wrong in the first place. Without the ability to sort mental impressions into words, we might have bits and pieces of thought derived from images, but in order to plan things, weigh pros and cons, and analyze past success and failure, we must have formal language. We know what we think when we find the right words. The writer Joan Didion, who famously wrote in an essay that "we tell ourselves stories in order to live," admitted to me that until she actually writes something down, "I don't even know what I *think*!" Without language, ethics itself is kaput.

To create systems of fairness, justice, loyalty, and so on, early humans set about experimenting with various sets of "normative resources" – rules, stories, myths, images, and more – to define, and refine, the way in which we ought to live. "Ought" is the operative word here: the leap from *is* to *ought* was our first step toward becoming moral beings, extrapolating general codes of conduct from successful social strategies for individual and group integrity. Animals may arrive at a nonverbal consensus about what kinds of behavior to tolerate, or forbid, in their midst, but without language, the principles behind such decisions could not be conceptualized, let alone debated. To communicate intentions and feelings is one thing; to clarify what's right and what's wrong – and *why* -- is another.

It's funny to learn that ethics would never have evolved without gossip. In the beginning, anthropologists tell us, "language evolved as a replacement for physical grooming."<sup>1</sup> Our human shift from picking each other's lice to minding each other's business appears to have been a natural progression for our nosy species. Gossip has been an indispensable method for policing one another ever since, helping us to monitor good and evil as well as prevent physical conflict. In fact, gossip is our first line of defense before violence in the exertion of social control, Haidt suggests. Before we punch someone in the face, or torch his house, we can always ruin his reputation. A good reputation is social collateral, and gossip is key to how we protect it. As a moral controlling device, it allows us to save face and cast aspersions on others. We are not autonomously moral beings, after all. The more closely people live together, the more they care; the more they care, the more they gossip; and the more they gossip, the more language can serve its ethical function. "Gossip paired with reciprocity allows karma to work here on earth, not in the next life," a psychologist quipped.

We care deeply about how others see us. Unfortunately, our private self and the one we present to the world may be at odds with one another, as we saw with the lecher and the prostitute on the subway car. It's entirely possible to put up a good front and be a dirty rotten scoundrel underneath. "Who I am is very different from the image which I try to create in the minds of others in order that they may love me," the poet W. H. Auden confessed. As social chameleons, most of us are willing to fake our colors – at least some of the time – to gain approval and avoid rejection. How much we're willing to dissemble, or even lie, when the majority are pulling in a direction we don't agree with

determines how morally sound we are. In obvious and subtle ways, our characters are tested every day in this tension between conformism and conscience.

People in all societies gossip, and the first rule of life in a dense web of gossip is: Be careful what you do. Humans use language primarily to talk *about* other people, to find out who's doing what, who's sleeping with so and so's husband, who cheated whom, who behaved heroically or who caved in. Indeed, gossip tends to be overwhelmingly critical, concerned primarily with moral and social violations. This is because individuals who were able to share information had an advantage in human evolution. Our ancestors surmised that, in a gossipy world, what we do matters less than what people think we do, so we'd better be able to frame our actions in a positive light. As ultra social creatures, we're also ultra-manipulators, fabricators, and competitors for the driver's seat; gossip created "a runaway competition in who could be master of the art of social manipulation, relationship aggression and reputation management" in human society, as E. O. Wilson tells us. We also learned to prepare ourselves for other people's attempts to deceive, compete against, and manipulate *us*.

As a species, we love to gab. From metropolitan centers to the primitive ends of the earth, we are language drunk, addicted to stories. An observer of the Kung bushmen verified this garrulous tendency toward universal comeuppance. "There is an endless flow of talk," he observed,

about gathering, hunting, the weather, food distribution, gift giving, and scandal. No !Kung is ever at a loss for words, and often two or three people will hold forth at once in a single conversation, giving the listeners a choice of channels to tune in on. A good proportion of this talk in even the happiest of camps verges on argument. People argue about improper food division, about breaches of etiquette, and about failure to reciprocate hospitality and gift giving . . . Almost all the arguments are *ad hominem*. The most frequent accusations heard are of pride, arrogance, laziness, and selfishness.

Gossip and storytelling allow us to pool the wisdom of communal emotion. Our chatter eventually amalgamates into systems of ethical conduct. Moral emotions like gratitude, contempt, and anger can be verbalized to create the *shared* sense of right and wrong that allows us to live together. Reciprocity is central to how gossip works. Have you ever noticed how hard it is *not* to share dishy information? (A friend of mine calls this “emptying the ashtrays,” after the irresistible note sharing between friends following a party.) That’s because our brains are wired to pay stories forward. Once you’ve unburdened yourself (“I just can’t hold this in!”), it’s likely that others will reciprocate in kind, divulging some tidbit of their own. We may judge indiscretions as a moral liability (“loose lips sink ships”), but indiscreet sharing is also a form of social insurance, as well as a source of intimacy. Being a memoir writer, I’ve often been surprised by this: I’ve received hundreds of intimate letters from readers who felt compelled to divulge (sometimes shockingly, once criminally) personal things to me simply because I’d been honest with them in a book. These letters ranged from poignant to obscene, but the content isn’t the point. It’s the automaticity of the gossip reflex that matters, and the reason for this is central to the cost-benefit side of morality. Communication is a non-zero-sum game where both players stand to win. It costs us nothing to share information and both parties are likely to come out ahead. We’re able to sharpen our ethical nails on gossip and scandal, and to feel contempt, a central moral emotion, as well as superiority, while being asked for nothing in return. Character assassination can also be morally damaging to the gossipier and turn all of us into hypocrites, of course. “In our condemnation of others’ hypocrisy we only compound our own,” Haidt warns. Hypocrisy is a tribute vice pays to virtue, after all.

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Clever individuals manipulate language (as Bill Clinton did when questioning what the definition of “is” is during the Monica Lewinsky scandal) and use semantics to obfuscate the truth. Hypocrisy thrives in our language-driven culture; sociopathy, too. A landmark study of prisoners showed that psychopaths process emotional words like “hate” and “love” differently from the way normal people do, using inappropriate parts of their brains. Instead of showing activity in the limbic system and midbrain, where emotions are meant to be processed, psychopaths showed activity only in the language center at the front of the brain. This makes them capable of understanding emotions only linguistically, “as if knowing the words but not the music.”

We “hear” right and wrong in the same way we pick out harmonious or discordant notes in music. The moral sense depends on such hearing, which in turn depends on our prejudices. If this sounds complex, that’s because it is. Since the moral sense is as prone to illusions as our other senses, the sound of right and wrong can be used to clarify or to cover up the truth. We “understand” moral issues similarly to how we “understand” the acoustic grammar of Beethoven or Joni Mitchell, using built-in cognitive grooves receptive to these stimuli. Though these sensors can be duped, they are accurate much of the time. The immune system could have responses to a massive number of molecules, but due to early experience it ends up locking onto only a few; the linguistic system could build a massive number of expressed languages, but due to experience with the native tongue, it switches on a few parameters in order to master the first language; and the moral system could respond to any number of stimuli, but fixes on the ones that most directly affect our lives, choosing our battles in a world filled with competing interests.

Morality is unconscious in the way that language acquisition is. If you had to think of noun, adjective, and so on every time you started talking, you wouldn't be able to communicate. Similarly, psychologist Marc Hauser assures us, "If every time you were confronted with a moral issue, you had to work it through, you would do nothing else." That's why stories, especially parables and fiction, are so integral to passing wisdom along. They're heuristic devices, shortcuts, to insight, communicating universal truths about our behavior and the lessons we might draw from more carefully observing it. For at least the past forty thousand years, our species has used stories to teach itself about good and evil and enable us to consider alternative versions of what is around us. Our ethical repertoires are widened by imagination. Although Victor Hugo lived two centuries ago, the question of what we'd do in Jean Valjean's place (go to prison for stealing a loaf of bread to feed our hungry family, or obey the law and watch them starve?) still arrests our moral imagination.

The received wisdom of stories allows us to create a sense of self. Character is composed of three levels, psychologists tell us: basic traits, characteristic adaptations, and life story. On a foundation of genetic inheritance and cultural influence, "our minds construct an evolving story that integrates a reconstructed past, perceived present, and anticipated future into a coherent and vitalizing life myth," writes Richard Tedeschi. Each of our "life myths" is, in fact, a work of historical fiction. Like all fiction, the stories we tell ourselves -- about ourselves and what we're made of -- are different from reality.

