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FINDINGS

Deep Down, We Can't Fool Even Ourselves

By JOHN TIERNEY

In voting against the Bush tax cut in 2001, Senator John McCain said he “cannot in good conscience support a tax cut in which so many of the benefits go to the most fortunate.” Today he campaigns in favor of extending that same tax cut beyond its expiration date.

Senator Barack Obama last year called himself a “longtime advocate” of public financing of election campaigns. This month, he reiterated his “support” for such financing while becoming the first major party presidential nominee ever to reject it for his own campaign.

Do you think either of these men is a hypocrite?

If so, does this hypocrite really believe, in his heart, what he is saying?

Fortunately, we don't need to get into the fine points of taxes or campaign finances to take a stab at these questions. We can probably get further by looking at some experiments in what psychologists call moral hypocrisy.

This is a more devious form of hypocrisy than what was exhibited by, say, the governor of New York when he got caught patronizing a prostitute. It was obviously hypocritical behavior for a public official who had formerly prosecuted prostitutes and increased penalties for their customers, but at least Eliot Spitzer acknowledged his actions were wrong by anyone's standards.

The moral hypocrite, by contrast, has convinced himself that he is acting virtuously even when he does something he would condemn in others. You can understand this “self-halo” effect — and perhaps discover it in someone very close to you — by considering what happened when two psychologists, Piercarlo Valdesolo and David DeSteno, tested people's reactions to the following situation.

You show up for an experiment and are told that you and a person arriving later will each

have to do a different task on a computer. One job involves a fairly easy hunt through photos that will take just 10 minutes. The other task is a more tedious exercise in mental geometry that takes 45 minutes.

You get to decide how to divvy up the chores: either let a computer assign the tasks randomly, or make the assignments yourself. Either way, the other person will not know you had anything to do with the assignments.

Now, what is the fair way to divvy up the chores?

When the researchers posed this question in the abstract to people who were not involved in the tasks, everyone gave the same answer: It would be unfair to give yourself the easy job.

But when the researchers actually put another group of people in this situation, more than three-quarters of them took the easy job. Then, under subsequent questioning, they gave themselves high marks for acting fairly. The researchers call this moral hypocrisy because the people were absolving themselves of violating a widely held standard of fairness (even though they themselves hadn't explicitly endorsed that standard beforehand).

A double standard of morality also emerged when other people were arbitrarily divided in two groups and given differently colored wristbands. They watched as one person, either from their group or from the other group, went through the exercise and assigned himself the easy job.

Even though the observers had no personal stake in the outcome — they knew they would not be stuck with the boring job — they were still biased. On average, they judged it to be unfair for someone in the other group to give himself the easy job, but they considered it fair when someone in their own group did the same thing.

“Anyone who is on ‘our team’ is excused for moral transgressions,” said Dr. DeSteno, a psychologist at Northeastern University. “The importance of group cohesion, of any type, simply extends our moral radius for lenience. Basically, it’s a form of one person’s patriot is another’s terrorist.”

If a colored wristband is enough to skew your moral judgment, imagine how you are affected by the “D” or the “R” label on your voting registration. If you are a Democrat, you are more likely to think Mr. McCain hypocritically switched tax policies to pick up conservative votes, but Mr. Obama’s decision to abandon public financing probably looks more complicated. If you’re a Republican you’re likelier to figure Mr. Obama did it just so he could raise more

money on his own, but you're more willing to consider Mr. McCain's economic rationales.

The more interesting question is how presidential candidates, and their supporters, turn into hypocrites. It has been demonstrated repeatedly in experiments that humans are remarkably sensitive to unfairness. We've survived as social animals because we are so good at spotting selfishness and punishing antisocial behavior.

So how we do violate our own moral code? Does our gut instinct for self-preservation override our moral reasoning? Do we use our powers of rationality to override our moral instinct?

"The question here," Dr. DeSteno said, "is whether we're designed at heart to be fair or selfish."

To find out, he and Dr. Valdesolo brought more people into the lab and watched them selfishly assign themselves the easy task. Then, at the start of the subsequent questioning, some of these people were asked to memorize a list of numbers and retain it in their heads as they answered questions about the experiment and their actions.

That little bit of extra mental exertion was enough to eliminate hypocrisy. These people judged their own actions just as harshly as others did. Their brains were apparently too busy to rationalize their selfishness, so they fell back on their intuitive feelings about fairness.

"Hypocrisy is driven by mental processes over which we have volitional control," said Dr. Valdesolo, a psychologist at Amherst College. "Our gut seems to be equally sensitive to our own and others' transgressions, suggesting that we just need to find ways to better translate our moral feelings into moral actions."

That is easier said than done, especially in an election year. Even if the presidential candidates know in their guts that they are being hypocritical, they cannot very well be kept busy the whole campaign doing mental arithmetic. Besides, they are surrounded by advisers with plenty of spare mental power to rationalize whatever it takes to win.

Politicians are hypocritical for the same reason the rest of us are: to gain the social benefits of appearing virtuous without incurring the personal costs of virtuous behavior. If you can deceive even yourself into believing that you're acting for the common good, you'll have more energy and confidence to further your own interests — and your self-halo can persuade others to help you along.

But as useful as hypocrisy can be, it's apparently not quite as basic as the human instinct to do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Your mind can justify double standards, it seems, but in your heart you know you're wrong.

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