Reasoning about Moral and Political Topics

You are taking part in a psychology experiment about moral judgment. The experimenter makes you sit in a small room and fill in a questionnaire containing several short stories. One of them tells of a documentary film that used dubiously acquired footage: some of the people in the movie claim they didn't realize they were being filmed when they were interviewed. Asked whether you approve of the decision of the studio to release the movie anyway, you voice a rather strong disapproval. Why are you so severe? Perhaps it's because the complaints came from Mexican immigrants to the United States, a population that doesn't need to be portrayed in a bad light, or perhaps because you worry about recent assaults on privacy, or perhaps it's because of a terrible smell in the room.[1]

Psychologists can be creative when it comes to surreptitiously manipulating people's behavior. To study the impact of disgust on moral judgments, they have had recourse to hypnosis, video clips of nauseating toilets, and trashcans overflowing with old pizza boxes and dirty tissues. In this case, they used fart spray: some of the participants filled in their questionnaires after the foul smell had been sprayed around. Those smelling the unpleasant odor were more severe in their moral judgments than those breathing a cleaner air. Reason wasn't driving moral judgment. Fart spray was.

Other unwanted influences are even more unsettling, as Israeli prisoners might discover if they read the scientific literature. In 2011, three researchers reported a strange pattern in the decisions of Israeli judges sitting on parole commissions.[2] The judges would start the day relatively lenient, granting about two-thirds of the parole requests. Then the rate would drop to zero by

10:00 AM. At 10:30 AM a strong rebound brought the rate of parole back to 65 percent, only to see it plunge back after a couple of hours. There was another shot back to over 60 percent of requests granted at 2:00 PM and then a quick decline back to very low rates for the end of the day.

No rational factor could explain this pattern. What was happening? Breaks were happening. The judges were served a snack around 10:00 AM and took lunch at 1:00 PM. Those breaks brought them back to the same good mood and energy they had started the day with. But their motivation quickly waned, and since more paperwork is required to accept a parole request than to deny it, so did the prisoners' hopes of getting out. We do not know if prisoners' associations have bought a snack vending machine for the courtroom. What we do know is that the judges never gave as a reason to deny parole that they were getting tired.

So far we have mostly looked at issues that admit of a more or less right answer, whether it is a logical task, making predictions, or even delivering a verdict. However, reasoning is also used in domains in which what is the right answer or even whether there is one is much less clear, such as esthetics or morality.

Moral reason has often been treated quite independently from other types of reason. We can still discern, though, the equivalent in the moral realm of the intellectualist approach to reason. This intellectualist view of moral reason—a simplistic version of Kant's position, for instance—suggests that reason can be and should be the ultimate arbiter in moral matters. Through reason, people should reach sound moral principles and act or judge in line with these principles. For most of the twentieth century, moral psychologists such as Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg have adopted a version of the intellectualist view, postulating that better use of reason is what makes people behave more morally.

However, reflections on morality have also led some thinkers—from Paul to Kierkegaard—to view morality as being rightfully dominated by emotions and intuitions. They, too, have found allies among psychologists—such as the experimenters who conducted the ingenious studies described in the preceding paragraphs.

While we have built a solid case against the individualist approach in Chapters 11 through 15, the moral domain offers a fresh challenge. Perhaps in this

domain solitary reason is in fact able to overcome intuitions and guide the lone reasoner toward more enlightened decisions. Or, on the contrary, perhaps reason is so impotent in the moral realm that even sound arguments fail to change people's minds.

How Reasoning Lets Us Behave Immorally

In 2001 Jonathan Haidt published a groundbreaking article called "The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail."[3] For Haidt, reasoning is here only to "wag the dog," to create post-hoc justifications that cover the tracks of the intuitions and emotions secretly running the show. The studies mentioned earlier in this chapter fit well with Haidt's theory, as they show moral judgments being driven by irrelevant factors—a bad smell or tiredness-induced bad mood—rather than reason. But Haidt went further, suggesting that instead of making us do the right thing, reason may give us excuses *not* to do the right thing.

In the 1970s, Melvin Snyder and his colleagues performed a clever experiment showing that students are ready to jump on the flimsiest excuse to avoid sitting next to someone with a disability.[4] Participants were told they would have to evaluate old comedies. The movies were showing on two TV screens, in a single room separated by a partition. In front of each TV screen were two chairs, an empty one and one occupied by a confederate—an experimenter pretending to be just another participant. While one of the confederates had no distinguishable signs, the other confederate's heavy metal braces signaled a motor handicap.

Participants were told that each TV would play a different type of movie—a slapstick comedy or a sad clown comedy. Which movie did the participants prefer? It turned out that they consistently wanted to see the movie that would make them sit close to the confederate without a disability—whichever movie that was. They were making up on the fly preferences for old comedies in order to avoid sitting next to someone with a disability.

Similar demonstrations have piled up since. For instance, male participants adjust their preferences in order to pick the sports magazine with the swimsuit issue: if it's the one that has more sports cover, then sports cover is the decisive factor; if it's the one that has more feature articles, then feature

articles become the decisive factor. As the old excuse goes, "I read *Playboy* for the articles."[5]

The philosopher Eric Schwitzgebel took this logic to the extreme and looked at the behavior of expert moral reasoners, people whose job it is to read about, think about, and talk about moral reason: ethics professors. It turns out that for all their moral reflection, the ethicists are not more likely to vote, to pay conference registration fees, to reply to students' emails, or to abstain from rude behavior than other philosophy professors.[6]

These examples support Haidt's model and demonstrate the pettiness of moral reason, whether it helps undergrads avoid people who make them feel uncomfortable, lets men look at scantily clad models, or allows ethics professors to skip voting.[7] In none of these cases are the rationalizations produced likely to cause any further harm. The undergrads' newfound passion for slapstick comedies will hurt neither them nor people with disabilities. But for moral violations of a different scale, more powerful rationalizations are needed, and these can take on a ghastly life of their own.

Great Reasoner, Awful Rationalizations

A few years ago, one of us, Hugo, was invited by Jon Haidt to share our ideas at the University of Virginia. No trip to Charlottesville is complete without a tour of Monticello, the home of Thomas Jefferson. There is much to be learned about the founding father in this "little mountain." His love of books, which used to fill two big rooms. His admiration for the thinkers of the French enlightenment, immortalized in marble busts. His ingenuity, on display with a giant clock of his making. His architectural acumen, which gave birth to this neoclassical marvel.

Yet none of this house's wonders should make us forget who built it and who operated the five-thousand-acre plantation it dominated. Slaves. Nearly two hundred of them.[8] Slaves who were sold like chattel when Jefferson needed to pay for these fancy busts and other frivolous expenses.[9] Slaves who were whipped into submission.[10] Slaves who were sold away to distant quarters "to make an example . . . in terrorem to others."[11]

As many of Jefferson's biographers have pointed out,[12] there is nothing extraordinary about this behavior for a Virginia planter of the revolutionary

era. Jefferson, however, was anything but a typical Virginia planter of the revolutionary era. He was a proponent of universal education, the founder of a major university, a fighter of cruel punishment, the architect of religious toleration in Virginia, and the writer of these words: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." Talk about cognitive dissonance.

Because he was such a brilliant reasoner, Jefferson offers one the most dramatic illustrations of Haidt's model. When Jefferson reflects on what is to be done about slavery, he has no trouble finding reasons to oppose emancipation.

In his *Notes on the State of Virginia*,[13] Jefferson laid down his fear that emancipation would only lead to "the extermination of the one or the other race." He could have stopped there, but he really wanted to bolster his point, and so "to these objections, which are political," he "added others, which are physical and moral." Blacks and whites can't live in harmony together because of the many defects in black people's physique and spirit. "Are not the fine mixtures of red and white, the expressions of every passion by greater or less suffusions of colour in the one, preferable to that eternal monotony, which reigns in the countenances, that immoveable veil of black which covers all the emotions of the other race?" The blacks may be "more adventuresome" but only "from a want of forethought." Their love is but "an eager desire." "Their griefs are transient." "Their existence appears to participate more of sensation than reflection." To conclude, "this unfortunate difference of colour, and perhaps of faculty, is a powerful obstacle to the emancipation of these people."

This is reason at its worst. Patently biased, it turns the most subjective evaluation—"a more elegant symmetry of form"—into an objective assessment—"the real distinctions which nature has made." It makes of a scientific mind a dunce ready to accept that the orangutan has a preference "for the black women over those of his own species." It pushes a sharp intellect to say that blacks both "seem to require less sleep"—when it comes to "sit up till midnight" for the "slightest amusements"—and have a "disposition to sleep"—after all, "an animal whose body is at rest, and who does not reflect, must be disposed to sleep of course." It lets a master rhetorician argue, in effect,

that there's nothing to be done right now about blacks being reduced to the most abject submission, *because they don't have flowing hair.*[14]

One cannot tell whether Jefferson's fear of a race war or his racist beliefs drove his rejection of immediate emancipation.[15] Instead of emancipation, he favored long-term and far-fetched plans for educating young blacks, separating them from their parents and sending them back to Africa.[16] But it can only be his views on the inferiority of the black race that made him so fearful of interracial encounters (except when it came to sleeping with his mistress, his slave Sally Hemings). Why send emancipated slaves as far away as Africa? Because "when freed, [they are] to be removed beyond the reach of mixture."[17] After all "their amalgamation with the other color produces a degradation to which no lover of his country, no lover of excellence in the human character can innocently consent."[18]

It is already difficult to figure out why people hold such and such beliefs when they can be asked; reconstructing the thought process of a dead man is an even more speculative business. Yet we know that Jefferson didn't become a slave owner because of his racist beliefs. Rather, he inherited a plantation along with its slaves and, presumably, the attitude of ordinary slave owners at the time. Later he also adopted the enlightenment ideals of his intellectual peers. This massive contradiction could be reconciled only by a creative reasoner, and the sad way Jefferson rose to the challenge is also part of his legacy.

Clearly, reason is not behaving as we would like it to, helping people pass more enlightened judgments and make fairer decisions. Jefferson, armed with a brilliant intellect, all the knowledge of his time, and the noblest ideals, should have reasoned his way to the right creed and the just behavior. Instead, reason provided him with convenient rationalizations, allowing him to keep his slaves and his wealth. Sadly, these rationalizations proved far from inert, turning him into the "intellectual godfather of the racist pseudo-science of the American school of anthropology."[19]

Such examples might prompt us to safely lock up moral reason and throw away the key. Yet we should also consider that if reason's power of rationalization is immense, it is not limitless. Sometimes no excuse is to be found, and people have the choice of either behaving immorally without any justification or behaving morally after all. We have described how students invented a taste

for one kind of movies to avoid sitting next to someone with a disability. In the same study, another group of participants was denied that opportunity: the two TV screens showed the same movie. These participants could not use even a bogus preference to justify sitting away from someone with a disability—as a result, they were much less likely to do so. Likewise, some of Jefferson's contemporaries found it beyond their ability to justify owning people. George Washington freed his slaves and provided for them in his will. Benjamin Franklin freed his slaves in his lifetime. It seems that one cannot, in fact, "find or make a reason for *everything* one has a mind to do"[20]—unless perhaps one is as smart as Thomas Jefferson.[21]

Can Reasoning Change People's Moral Opinions?

The picture of moral reasoning painted so far, the one stressed by Haidt, fits one side of the interactionist approach to reason perfectly. Instead of proceeding to a careful assessment of the moral value of a judgment or a decision, reason looks for justifications that may be mere excuses for what people wanted to do all along, moral or not—the myside bias at work. Being content with shallow reasons and flimsy rationalizations reflects another pitfall of solitary reason: the lack of critical examination of one's own justifications and arguments.

But Haidt's theory has another component, the "wag-the-other-dog's-tail illusion." As the argumentative theory of reasoning might predict, "in a moral argument, we expect the successful rebuttal of an opponent's arguments to change the opponent's mind." For Haidt, "such a belief is like thinking that forcing a dog's tail to wag by moving it with your hand will make the dog happy."[22] In other words, however strong your arguments might seem, they won't change other people's position on moral issues. People will keep being driven by their intuitions and emotions instead.[23]

Haidt's famous "Emotional Dog" article begins with an example of reasoning's powerlessness to affect moral judgments:

> Julie and Mark are brother and sister. They are traveling together in France on summer vacation from college. One night they are staying alone in a cabin near the beach. They decide that it would be

interesting and fun if they tried making love. At the very least it would be a new experience for each of them. Julie was already taking birth control pills, but Mark uses a condom too, just to be safe. They both enjoy making love, but they decide not to do it again. They keep that night as a special secret, which makes them feel even closer to each other. What do you think about that? Was it OK for them to make love?[24]

Among the participants Haidt and his colleagues interviewed, most said it was not acceptable for Julie and Mark to make love. When the experimenter asked them why, they had many reasons. Nine reasons each, on average. All of them were shot down by the experimenter. "They might have children with problems." No, they used two forms of contraception, so there will be no children. "They'll be screwed up psychologically." On the contrary, they grow closer after the experience. "They'll be shunned when people find out." They keep it a secret; no one finds out. And so forth. But the participants didn't say, "I cannot articulate a rational basis for my moral condemnation, and therefore I retract it." Most held fast to a judgment they could not support anymore.

The interactionist approach, however, predicts that good reasons should carry some weight. Why, then, don't some of the people who find themselves unable to answer Haidt's argument change their minds?[25] More generally, if it is true that people don't change their minds in response to moral arguments, why the reluctance?

While it can be infuriating and depressing to fail to change people's minds, especially on important moral matters, that doesn't mean that those who won't budge are being irrational. According to the interactionist approach to reason, people should be sensitive to strong reasons, but even seemingly strong reasons shouldn't overwhelm every other concern. For instance, we might have a strong intuitive reluctance to accept a given conclusion. Some intuitions are difficult to make explicit, so that we can be at a loss when explaining why we reject an apparently strong argument. That doesn't mean that the intuitions are irrational—although failing to defend our point of view in the face of strong arguments might make us look so. Some of the most important intuitions that stop us from accepting even

arguments we cannot effectively counter have to do with deference to experts.

For instance, when Moana tries to convince Teiki, his more liberal friend, that climate change is a hoax, they both defer to experts—but not the same experts. Deferring to experts is rational. If we didn't, we would be clueless about a wide variety of important issues about which we have no personal experience and no competent reflection. Once we defer to some experts, it makes sense to put relatively little weight on challenging arguments from third parties. Even though we might not be able to come up with counterarguments, we believe that the experts we defer to would. For instance, Moana could give Teiki many arguments that he cannot refute on the spot, since he does not know exactly why the experts he trusts believe in climate change. Still, Teiki would likely not change his mind, thinking that his experts would be able to counter Moana's arguments.

When beliefs are not readily testable, it is quite rational to accept them on the basis of trust, and it is quite rational for people who trust different authorities to stubbornly disagree. We don't mean that these are the most rational attitudes possible. An intellectually more demanding approach asks for clarity and for a willingness to revise one's idea in the light of evidence and dissenting arguments. This approach, which has become more common with the development of the sciences, is epistemically preferable—but no one has the time and resources to apply it to every topic.

How Argumentation Helps Get Moral Problems Right

Should we keep reasoning about moral issues? Solitary reasoning has dubious effects, and even argumentation faces many obstacles. Yet our answer is a resounding yes. In fact, we suspect that most moral beliefs are more amenable to arguments than, say, gut feelings about incest. Beliefs about what the police can do to fix the crime problem in the neighborhood or beliefs about how wrong Ross was to cheat on Rachel don't have a preset consensual answer in one's community; they don't have the same power to signify whether we are a friend or a foe. When the overriding concern of people who disagree is to get things right, argumentation should not only make them change their mind, it should make them change their mind for the best.

An obvious problem for testing this prediction is the lack of a clear moral benchmark to tell whether argumentation leads to better moral beliefs—by definition, if there is a clear moral benchmark, then there should be no reason to argue. However, it is possible to look at cases in which adults agree and see what happens during child development. If children of a certain age differ or are confused about a given issue, it is possible to see which children are more convincing: those who share the adults' judgment or those who defend less mature points of view.

Jean Piaget made an art of confusing children. For instance, he would give children—for example, nine-year-olds—the following two stories:

Story 1
Once there was a little boy called John. He was in his room and his mother called him to dinner. He opened the door to the dining room, but behind the door there was a tray with six cups on it. John couldn't have known that the tray was behind the door. He opened the door, knocked the tray and all six cups were smashed.

Story 2
Once there was a little boy called David. One day when his mother was out he tried to get some sweets from the cupboard. He climbed on a chair and stretched out his arm. But the sweets were too high and he couldn't reach, and while he was trying to reach [them] he knocked over a cup and it fell and broke.[26]

Piaget would ask the children: Which of the two boys, John or David, is naughtier? When Patrick Leman and Gerard Duveen replicated Piaget's experiment, they found that most nine-year-olds thought John was naughtier.[27] Now, as adults, we can presumably all agree that this answer is wrong. Exactly how naughty David was is a matter for discussion, but clearly John did nothing wrong. His breaking the cups was purely accidental, not even the result of negligence. Reassuringly, when pairs of children who had different views on the matter were left to discuss with one another, they were five times more likely to end up thinking that David was naughtier. Thanks to argumentation, their moral judgments had gotten more accurate.

The Surprising Efficacy of Political Debates among Citizens

Among adults, some moral debates become political debates—debates not only about what is right or wrong but also about what the community should do to fix the problem. It is tempting to have a dim view of political debates. In some democratic countries, the most publicized of those debates occur between contenders for the presidency. These are somewhat unnatural spectacles in which the debaters know they have no chance of convincing each other and mostly seek to strengthen the support of their base. Fortunately, debates about political matters don't only occur between presidential contenders; they also occur between citizens.

Samuel Huntington expressed a common opinion when he argued that "elections, open, free and fair, are the essence of democracy."[28] But voting is not the only way to aggregate opinions in a (potentially) fair manner. Indeed, it is neither the oldest nor the most common.[29] As we noted in Chapter 16, bands of hunter-gatherers make group decisions based on public deliberation. To the extent that life in these bands bears a resemblance to that of our Paleolithic ancestors, this suggests that deliberation has a far greater antiquity than voting. In *Democracy and Its Global Roots,* Amartya Sen takes the reader on a brief tour of non-Western democratic traditions—many of which were deliberative.[30] From the great interreligious debates sponsored by the emperor Akbar in sixteenth-century India to the Thembu's open meetings that left a young Nelson Mandela with the impression of "democracy in its purest form,"[31] deliberation throughout the world carries the hope of reaching better beliefs and making better decisions.

In the early 1980s, political scientists started paying more attention to the role played by deliberation in a healthy democracy.[32] At first, the new field of *deliberative democracy* focused on lofty ideals, on the potential of deliberation to promote rational discourse, civility, public engagement, and mutual respect. Then political scientists confronted these lofty ideals to the reality of deliberation between divided, misinformed, sometimes irate citizens. To the surprise of many, the lofty ideals won. When a sample of citizens is brought together, divided in small groups, and, with the soft prodding of a moderator, made to discuss policy, good things happen.[33] The participants in these discussions end up better informed, with more articulate positions but also a

deeper understanding of other people's point of view. Their opinions tend to converge toward a reasonable compromise. They are more likely to participate in public life in the future. Deliberation among citizens works.

One of the most successful deliberative democracy experiments was launched by Robert Luskin and James Fishkin. In dozens of cities, they conducted deliberative polls in which citizens discussing among themselves reached more informed positions on various policy matters. One of these cities was Omagh, Northern Ireland.

On August 15, 1998, a bomb had exploded in Omagh, killing twenty-nine people and injuring more than two hundred. Claimed by a splinter group of the Irish Republican Army—creatively called the Real Irish Republican Army—the attack is remembered as one of the worst atrocities in the long and bloody conflict over the control of Northern Ireland. In Omagh, Catholics and Protestants have plenty of reasons to distrust each other and to stick to their group's beliefs—not the best place for deliberation to work.

Yet when Luskin, Fishkin, and two colleagues asked a sample of the local population that included both Catholics and Protestants to discuss education policy, the debates proved constructive, even on highly loaded topics.[34] When questions related to mixed religious schools emerged in the debate, the participants didn't fight and polarize. After the discussions, participants had changed their minds on several points, and they were much more knowledgeable about education policy. They also found that their interlocutors were more trustworthy and open to reason than they expected.

Critics of deliberative democracy have pointed out its scaling-up problem: debates work well with a handful of people, not so well with several millions. Fishkin, joined by the American constitutional scholar Bruce Ackerman, has proposed a Deliberation Day, a national holiday in which citizens would be invited to debate upcoming elections. While such institutions would further boost the role of discussion in public life, argumentation has already proven its ability to effect large-scale moral and political change.

Abolitionism: Not Such an Easy Argument to Make

By the end of the eighteenth century, the British dominated the transatlantic slave trade,[35] and they had just acquired huge swaths of territory in the Amer-

icas, bearing the promise of untold wealth. Economic logic dictated that they capture and ship hundreds of thousands of slaves to exploit these lands.[36] Instead they chose to abolish the slave trade. How did the abolitionists manage such a complete reversal?

From our modern vantage point, it seems like an easy argument to make. Why would it be necessary to convince someone that slavery is so wrong that it should be banished? Unfortunately, the evil of slavery hasn't always been a moral truism. Indeed, for most of history slavery was part of the fabric of life. Practiced by the Greeks and the Romans, sanctioned by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, slavery hadn't been an issue for most of European history. The tide turned when the Enlightenment's heralds, such as Diderot, staunchly denounced the practice. At the same time, new religious movements—most notably the Quakers—offered a new reading of the Bible that made of slavery a very un-Christian institution. At long last slavers and slave owners had to offer justifications for their practice.

Apologists of slavery obliged and, for a while, even tried to take the moral high ground. They argued that life in Africa was so tough as to be practically unbearable. By comparison, during the Middle Passage, the slaves were treated as VIPs, provided with "Cordial . . . Pipes and Tobacco," and "amused with Instruments of Music." The contrast was such that "Nine out of Ten [slaves] rejoice at falling into our Hands," the slavers claimed.[37] Moreover, the whole slave trade was only necessary because slaves, having reached their destination, failed to have enough children to maintain the population. That was due to female slaves' being "prostitutes" who must have frequent "abortions, in order that they may continue their trade without loss of time." "Such promiscuous embraces," continues Edward Long in his *History of Jamaica,* "must necessarily hinder, or destroy, conception."[38] Slaves should be thankful for the slave trade yet also blamed for it.

These arguments sound not just abominable but also preposterous. At the time, though, British citizens lacked reliable information about what was going on in Africa, the West Indies, or America. And British lives weren't exactly cushy, either. The industrial revolution generated great wealth but also its share of misery. In ports across Britain, thousands of men were "impressed," kidnapped and brought onboard navy ships for "several years of floggings, scurvy, and malaria."[39] Given the picture painted by the

slavers, common people might have thought the slaves weren't much worse off.

Still, the anti-abolitionists' strongest arguments weren't moral, but economic. Entire cities, such as Liverpool, relied on the slave trade. Even inland cities like Manchester were dependent on a constant supply of raw material gathered by slaves in the colonies to employ textile workers. Slavers' mouthpieces never tired of mentioning the "widows and orphans" that abolition would leave in its trail all over Great Britain.[40] The anti-abolitionists didn't hesitate to make up numbers—seventy million pounds were at stake![41]—or to invoke the British's favorite beverage—the lack of "Sugar and Rum[!]" would "render the Use of Tea insupportable."

Yet by the mid-1780s, the Quakers and other early abolitionists had managed to reclaim the moral high ground. They had done so by using an essential argumentative tool: displaying inconsistencies in the audience's position. In this case, the inconsistencies were glaring enough: Christianity and the English spirit on the one hand, slavery on the other. "The very idea of trading the persons of men should kindle detestations in the breasts of MEN—especially of BRITONS—and above all of CHRISTIANS," pleaded James Dore in a 1788 sermon.[42] Historian Seymour Drescher pointed out that the strength of this inconsistency was the main propeller of popular abolitionism: "How could the world's most secure, free, religious, just, prosperous, and moral nation allow itself to remain the premier perpetrator of the world's most deadly, brutal, unjust, immoral offenses to humanity?"[43] Still, the economic considerations put forward by the slavers held fast. The moral arguments were too abstract, the immensity of the suffering wrought by slavery not plain enough. The abolitionists needed more evidence for their arguments to carry their full weight.

Convincing a Country

For years, the abolitionist Thomas Clarkson crisscrossed England, accumulating the greatest wealth of evidence ever gathered on the slave trade. The fruits of his labors—*An Abstract of the Evidence Delivered before a Select Committee of the House of Commons in the Years 1790, and 1791; on the Part of the Petitioners for the Abolition of the Slave-Trade*—became the main weapon in

the abolitionists' growing arsenal. This arsenal was completed by the men and women who developed a "rhetoric of sensitivity," composing poems meant to restore the slaves' full humanity;[44] by the freed slaves who wrote widely successful autobiographies, putting a face on the numbers of the *Abstract;* by the former slavers who attested to the horrors they had witnessed, lending credibility to the cause. Yet it was the *Abstract* that remained "the central document of British mass mobilization."[45] But the abolitionists needed something more than popular clamor outside the walls of Parliament. They needed an insider's voice.

William Wilberforce, member of Parliament, was conservative on many issues, but by the mid-1780s he had become an evangelical, a conversion that seemingly made him more responsive to the abolitionists' arguments. Wilberforce was lobbied by the movement and finally convinced to lend his voice to the cause. Like other abolitionists, Wilberforce pointed out the inconsistency between slavery and belonging to a nation "which besides the unequalled degree of true civil liberty, had been favored with an unprecedented measure of religious light, with its long train of attendant blessings."[46] But Wilberforce didn't simply rehearse the standard arguments. He mastered the evidence, familiarized himself with the anti-abolitionists' arguments, and fought them on their own ground. Slavers claimed it would make no economic sense to mistreat their most precious cargo. Wilberforce pointed out that on the contrary, "the Merchants profit depends upon the number that can be crouded together, and upon the shortness of their allowance."[47] The anti-abolitionists relied on Long's supposedly well-informed *History of Jamaica* for many of their arguments, so Wilberforce decided to use Long's own assertions as premises. "Those Negroes breed the best, whose labour is least, or easiest,"[48] claimed Long. Well, added Wilberforce, if only slave owners exerted a less brutal dominion, the slave population would be self-sustaining, and trade unnecessary.

The overwhelming mass of reasons and evidence gathered by the abolitionists ended up convincing most members of Parliament—directly or through the popular support the arguments had gathered. In 1792, three-quarters of the House of Commons voted for a gradual abolition of the slave trade. The House of Lords, closer to the slavers' interests, asked for more time to ponder the case. Awkward timing: for years, the threats posed by the French revolution, and then by Napoleon, would quash all radical movements—which, at

the time, included abolition. But as soon as an opportunity arose, the aboli-
tionists whetted their arguments, popular clamor rekindled, Parliament was
flooded with new petitions, and Wilberforce again handily carried the debate
in the Commons. In 1807, both houses voted to abolish the slave trade.

The British abolitionists didn't invent most of the arguments against slavery.
But they refined them, backed them with masses of evidence, increased their
credibility by relying on trustworthy witnesses, and made them more acces-
sible by allowing people to see life through a slave's eyes. Debates, public meet-
ings, and newspapers brought these strengthened arguments to a booming
urban population. And it worked. People were convinced not only of the evils
of slavery but also of the necessity of doing something about it. They peti-
tioned, gave money, and—with the help of other factors, from economy to
international politics—had first the slave trade and then slavery itself banned.

The Best and Worst of Reason

The interactionist approach is in a unique position to account for the range
of effects reason has on moral judgments and decisions. Many experiments
and, before them, countless personal and historical observations have ren-
dered the intellectualist view of moral reason implausible. Moral judgments
and decisions are quite commonly dominated by intuitions and emotions with
reason providing, at best, inert rationalizations and, at worst, excuses that allow
the reasoner to engage in morally dubious behavior—from sitting away from
someone with a disability to keeping one's slaves. Reason does what it is ex-
pected to do as a biased and lazy producer of justifications.

Yet we do not quite share the pessimism regarding the ability of reason to
change people's minds. People do not just provide their own justifications and
arguments; they also evaluate those of others. As evaluators, people should
be able to recognize strong arguments and be swayed by them in all domains,
including the moral realm. Clearly, arguments that challenge the moral values
of one's community can be met with disbelief, distrust of motives, even down-
right hostility. Still, on many moral issues, people have been influenced by
good arguments, from local politics—for example, how to organize the local
school curriculums—to major societal issues—such as the abolition of the slave
trade.