

The Evolution of Relentless Badassery

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“I’m a superstitious man, and if some unlucky accident should befall Michael—if he is to be shot in the head by a police officer, or be found hung dead in a jail cell... or if he should be struck by a bolt of lightning, then I’m going to blame some of the people in this room; and then I do not forgive.”

--The Don

His eldest son assassinated and his second son dimwitted and gullible, Vito’s top priority was to save his youngest and most promising son, Michael. In a meeting with the heads of the Five Families, Vito announced he would retaliate if any injury should befall Michael, even if the misfortune were apparently as random as a strike of lightning. The point, of course, was to deter his rivals from harming Michael by explicitly declaring his bias will be to blame others no matter the circumstances surrounding any injury.

Few of us have established sufficient enemies—not to mention sufficient importance—to worry our sons might be targeted for assassination, but here, *The Godfather* is displaying a natural human tendency to ascribe excessive responsibility to harmful behaviors. For many decades, philosophers and psychologists have puzzled over consistently replicated asymmetries in judgments of responsibility for helpful and harmful actions such that people more readily hold people responsible for harmful, transgressive behaviors than they do for helpful, charitable behaviors.

The Crime Should Fit the Punishment

Perhaps the most well-known demonstration of this tendency in the experimental philosophy literature is referred to as the Side-effect Effect or the Knobe Effect (after

philosopher, Joshua Knobe, who discovered the puzzling asymmetry).¹ Imagine the following scenario:

The vice president of a company went to the chairman of the board and said, 'We are thinking of starting a new program. It will help us increase profits, but it will also harm the environment.'

The chairman of the board answered, 'I don't care at all about harming the environment. I just want to make as much profit as I can. Let's start the new program.'

They started the new program. Sure enough, the environment was harmed.

Now ask yourself, did the chairman *intentionally* harm the environment?

If you are like most people, you answered this question in the affirmative. But it turns out, when people are presented with the *exact same scenario* save that the side effect helped rather than harmed the environment, most people say the chairman did *not* intentionally help the environment. So people ascribe more intentionality to harmful side effects than to helpful ones that result from otherwise identical behaviors.

Dozens of psychology and experimental philosophy studies have replicated similar patterns—people attribute more responsibility to people who cause harmful outcomes than to people who cause helpful or neutral ones, even when the actor behaved in virtually identical

¹ Knobe, J. (2003). Intentional action and side effects in ordinary language. *Analysis*, 63(3), 190-194.

ways.² For example, people report that an actor was more culpable for causing a car accident when his reasons for speeding were criminal or nefarious (rushing home to hide a vial of cocaine) than when his reasons were virtuous (rushing home to hide an anniversary present).³ Recently, scholars have termed this pro-blame bias *The Don Corleone Principle*.⁴ Rather than dispassionately evaluating the intentions and conditions behind a harmful outcome and assigning the appropriate amount of punishment, people feel desires to punish and then assume there was an ill-intentioned culpable agent.

Moral intuitionism is the view that our moral judgments often work this way.⁵ People believe that they form their moral judgments through careful, rational consideration. But often, moral judgments are based on gut-level feelings or *intuitions* about what is right and wrong, and only after we have reached a verdict (and when probed by others to explain our judgments) do we start to search for explicit reasons to justify our moral assessments. When people experience intuitive desires to punish others for their harmful behaviors, they feel compelled to justify their desires to punish by asserting that the harmdoer purposefully and intentionally caused the harm and so *deserves* to be punished.⁶

² Clark, C. J., Shniderman, A., Luguri, J. B., Baumeister, R. F., & Ditto, P. H. (2018). Are morally good actions ever free?. *Consciousness and Cognition*, 63, 161-182.

³ Alicke, M. D. (1992). Culpable causation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 63(3), 368-378.

⁴ Clark, C. J. (2022). The blame efficiency hypothesis: An evolutionary framework to resolve rationalist and intuitionist theories of moral condemnation. In T. Nadelhoffer & A. Monroe (Eds.), *Advances in Experimental Philosophy of Free Will and Responsibility*. London, UK: Bloomsbury Publishing.

⁵ Haidt, J. (2001). The emotional dog and its rational tail: A social intuitionist approach to moral judgment. *Psychological Review*, 108, 814-834.

⁶ Clark, C. J., Baumeister, R. F., & Ditto, P. H. (2017). Making punishment palatable: Belief in free will alleviates punitive distress. *Consciousness and Cognition*, 51, 193-211.

Nietzsche contended,⁷ and psychology research has confirmed,⁸ that pro-blame biases may even contribute to the human belief in free will. When people desire to punish another person, they report higher beliefs in human free will and are more skeptical of science that challenges it. And so the very belief that fellow human beings *deserve* to be held morally responsible for their actions may be motivated, in part, by the *desire* to hold people morally responsible.

Throughout *The Godfather*, Vito is portrayed as the kind of person who assumes there is an intentional malevolent agent behind any mishap. Michael describes his father, “*Tom, don't let anybody kid you. It's all personal, every bit of business. Every piece of shit every man has to eat every day of his life is personal. They call it business. OK. But it's personal as hell. You know where I learned that from? The Don. My old man. The Godfather. If a bolt of lightning hit a friend of his, the old man would take it personal... And you know something? Accidents don't happen to people who take accidents as a personal insult.*” Here, Michael perfectly identifies the benefit of being the sort of person who is quick to blame—other people will work *diligently* to avoid crossing you. The Don is so quick to take offense that not even *accidents* happen to him.

Vito is aware of the reputational benefits of his vindictiveness as well. In conversation with Bonasera, he declares, “...if by some chance an honest man like yourself made enemies, they would become my enemies. And then, they would fear you.” Being known as a reliable retaliator not only provides protection for Vito, but also his friends and family.

They're All Dead from Vendettas

⁷ Nietzsche, F. (1954). *Twilight of the idols* (W. Kaufmann, Trans.). New York, NY: Penguin Books. (Original work published 1889)

⁸ Clark, C. J., Luguri, J. B., Ditto, P. H., Knobe, J., Shariff, A. F., & Baumeister, R. F. (2014). Free to punish: a motivated account of free will belief. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 106(4), 501-513.

Throughout the *Godfather*, it is apparent that Vito's relentless badassery has earned him deference and respect, but it also cost him his first son and nearly his own life. Although being vengeful may intimidate some potential enemies, it also might cause retribution, especially if the vengeance appears unwarranted or disproportionate in relation to the original offense. Thus, even though people evolved a pro-blame bias, people also evolved primarily to blame and punish others when the blame and punishment can appear justifiable and reasonable to other people. Indeed, Vito and the other heads of the Five Families repeatedly profess to one another that they are reasonable men (after all, they are not communists).

According to moral intuitionism, explicit moral reasoning often occurs *after* we arrive at a moral judgment and primarily serves the function of justifying our moral judgments to others so as to persuade others of our own reasonableness and righteousness. The analogy often used is that we reason more like lawyers, searching for evidence to support our already determined conclusions than like detectives carefully evaluating the evidence to determine which conclusion is correct.⁹ Although it is evolutionarily useful to have a reputation as a relentless badass, it is also evolutionarily useful to maintain a reputation as a reasonable and morally upstanding individual. And so people work hard to justify their judgments and behaviors to others.

Both Vito and Michael justify their behavior as unfortunate but necessary, a way to protect their family and loved ones from the threats and encroachments of rivals. And when explaining to Kay that he is working for his father, Michael explicitly compares it to the behavior of "any other powerful man—any man who is responsible for other people, like a senator or president." When Kay protests that Michael is being naïve, Michael asks, "Why?" Kay responds, "Senators and presidents don't have men killed." And Michael retorts, "Oh, who's being naïve,

⁹ Tetlock, P. E. (2002). Social functionalist frameworks for judgment and choice: intuitive politicians, theologians, and prosecutors. *Psychological Review*, 109(3), 451-471.

Kay?” Even as Michael descends into cold vindictiveness and relentless competition against his rivals, he continues to contend that his actions are necessary to protect the family—even as they require the ultimate violence against his own brother. At the end of the second film, we see Michael, aged and alone, against an autumn background, and we imagine that whatever regrets he has, he is thoroughly convinced that he always strived to defend the interests of the family.

This evolved impulse to appear reasonable explains why biases in human judgment, including pro-blame bias, are observed more frequently in *ambiguous* situations.¹⁰ In the case of the Side-effect Effect mentioned earlier, one cannot know all the desires and intentions of the Chairman when he makes the decision and harms the environment, so it can appear reasonable to ascribe intentionality to him. The only way experimental philosophers were able to detect that people have double standards when side-effects are harmful vs. helpful was by randomly assigning some people to read about the helpful side-effect and other people to read about the harmful side-effect. If people were presented with both stories, they would likely anchor their second judgment to their first to disguise their own double standards.¹¹ Blatant biases and unfairness can injure a person’s reputation and social status, and so people aim to disguise or justify these tendencies to appear reasonable to others and avoid retaliation.

After Sonny is killed, Vito realizes his vengeful reputation has started to harm himself and his family, and he calls off the vengeance, “This war stops now.” Instead, he arranges a meeting with the heads of the Five Families and assures them he will not avenge his son’s death so long as Michael is able to return to the United States unharmed and live safely. However, he makes this offer while also asserting that he *will* exact revenge should anything—anything at

¹⁰ Kopko, K. C., Bryner, S. M., Budziak, J., Devine, C. J., & Nawara, S. P. (2011). In the eye of the beholder? Motivated reasoning in disputed elections. *Political Behavior*, 33(2), 271-290.

¹¹ Winegard, B. M., Clark, C. J., Hasty, C. R., & Baumeister, R. F. (in press). Equalitarianism: A source of liberal bias. *Journal of Open Inquiry in Behavioral Science*.

all—happen to Michael, perfectly navigating the balance of relentless badassery with appearing reasonable and trustworthy.

Khartoum Had It Coming

Evolutionary psychologists contend that pro-blame bias, or *The Don Corleone Principle*, evolved in human psychology because of the asymmetric costs of false positive and false negative blame judgments. If Person A deliberately harms or takes advantage of Person B, and Person B assumes it was an accident and is quick to forgive, Person B signals to their community that they are easily exploitable and thus puts a target on their back for others who might want to take advantage. In contrast, if Person A unintentionally offends Person B, and Person B retaliates by decapitating Person A's champion racehorse and placing the severed head in bed with Person A while he sleeps, Person B signals to their community that they are not to be fucked with. And so, people evolved to err on the side of assuming harmdoers are culpable.

Error management is a general principle of evolutionary psychology—when the costs of false positive and false negative errors were asymmetric throughout human evolution, human cognition should display *biases* in favor of the less costly error.¹² This is why, for example, when we are lying in bed at night and hear creaks down the hallway, we assume an armed burglar is in the house. Most of the time we are wrong, but it is costlier to assume incorrectly that the creaks are just regular house sounds and get slaughtered in bed by an armed robber (a false negative error) than it is to assume there is a murderer in the house and unnecessarily grab a bat and tiptoe down the hall (a false positive error).

It may seem puzzling that humans would have evolved a tendency to be systematically incorrect in certain judgments. But many decision-making environments are ambiguous—or at

¹² Haselton, M. G., & Buss, D. M. (2000). Error management theory: A new perspective on biases in cross-sex mind reading. *Journal of personality and social psychology*, 78(1), 81-91.

least, one cannot be 100% certain of another's intentions or plans, and so perfect accuracy is impossible. And it is often advantageous to make assumptions about others' bad intentions. We can see the benefits of assuming the worst in other people in the final scene between Vito and his favorite son, Michael.

Before disclosing his newly found appreciation for wine, Vito warns Michael, "Barzini will move against you first. He'll set up a meeting with someone that you absolutely trust, guaranteeing your safety. And at that meeting, you'll be assassinated." When there was an invitation to meet, even though Michael could not know for certain he was being set up for assassination, he assumed the worst and was able to pre-empt his own murder by assassinating the heads of the other five families while baptizing his first Godson. Had Michael assumed the families were looking for a truce, he might have been killed. Just as people evolved a bias toward blaming others, so too people evolved a hypervigilance toward potential dangers.¹³

After Michael successfully unleashes his vengeance against the heads of the other five families and against the traitors of his family, Tessio and Carlo (his sister's husband!), he earns the full respect, a respect compelled by both admiration and fear, that his father achieved after assassinating the gaudy gangster, Fanucci. Rocco, Clemenza, and Neri enter Michael's office and kiss his hand, signaling the elevation of Michael to revered and feared leader. Michael becomes a ruthless and vindictive Godfather, a man whose goal is to eliminate all viable competitors, and who is so comfortable with hypocrisy that he renounces Satan in a church while his bloody plans unfold. In other words, Michael evolves into a relentless badass.

¹³ Baumeister, R. F., Bratslavsky, E., Finkenauer, C., & Vohs, K. D. (2001). Bad is stronger than good. *Review of General Psychology*, 5(4), 323-370.

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