



Written by [Selwyn Duke](#) on June 17, 2023

Think We're Declining Morally? You're Detached From Reality, Say Researchers

Pay no attention to that libertine behind the curtain! While you may think our civilization is in moral decline, this is merely an illusion exhibited by vice-lamenting doomsayers across time and place, say researchers.

The findings and reasoning presented by the researchers, two scholars out of Columbia and Harvard, are interesting. The men do make some valid points, too. But do they miss the most important ones?

The Washington Post [reports](#) on the story, writing that



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every day seems to bring new evidence that humanity is plunging toward moral bankruptcy.

But is it?

Research by psychologists Adam Mastroianni and Daniel Gilbert says this is a powerful and persistent illusion. For decades, when people around the world have been asked to compare the morals of the present day with those of the past, they have, overwhelmingly, reported that morals are deteriorating. But when surveys asked about current morality, participant responses remained relatively stable across time — suggesting this perception of decline is false.

“This intense feeling we get that all this nastiness that we see today is new — that is an illusion,” said Mastroianni, the lead author on the paper, which was published last week in *Nature*.

As to why people across time and place have been convinced moral decline plagues them, the authors claim there are only two possibilities: “that morality has, in fact, been declining worldwide for



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millennia,” or “that the perception of moral decline is a psychological illusion to which people all over the world and throughout history have been susceptible.”

It should first be noted that the researchers don’t have relevant data going back “millennia,” but only about 70 years (this fact’s entire significance will be made clear later). In reality, however, there’s a third possibility:

People are prone to the psychological illusion in question — *and* man experiences repeating cycles of moral decline (and restoration).

The Real Illusion

Now, the elephant in the room here is: What is the yardstick for measuring “morality”? The authors write simply that morality “refers primarily to people’s treatment of each other.” This is untrue. Morality influences how, and is reflected by, people’s treatment of each other. But that isn’t what morality is *in essence*. Treatment is an action; morality is an abstract.

To analogize it, does medical expertise refer primarily to doctors’ treatment of patients? No, it’s field-specific knowledge and acumen doctors possess that *influence* treatment of their patients.

This confusion is reflected in the MSN.com [comments section](#) for the *WaPo* article. After one respondent stated that morality *is* declining — citing single-parent households, increasing divorce and abortion, hook-up culture, declining faith, self-centered emphasis on personal happiness, and the high out-of-wedlock birthrate — another commenter scoffed. “None of those things are actually morality related lol,” “Matthew Farmer” stated. “You’re not immoral for not being married...,” he continued, before complaining about viewing matters “through a restrictive religious lens.”

Witnessed here is our time’s rampant moral relativism/nihilism, the idea that what’s called “morality” is merely a function of human preference. Instead of having a common moral frame of reference — as, for example, medieval Europeans had in the form of God’s law, related via Catholic teaching — people now talk less about “morals” and more about “values,” as the latter can simply mean “what people happen to value.” Not believing in a divine, inerrant source for unchanging, infallible moral prescriptions, people today author their own faux “morality,” as they speak of “*their truth*.”

Yet as I explained via my oft-published [flavors analogy](#) (no room to [repeat it](#) here), if God and His law don’t exist and man’s preference is all there is, then everything is merely human opinion, desires, tastes. It then is ridiculous to even discuss “moral decline,” because morality can neither wane nor wax if it doesn’t exist.

It’s much as not believing in the laws of human nutrition/diet (e.g., a certain number of calories are needed for survival, junk food can damage health). The only yardstick you’d then have as to what to put in your mouth would be taste, and, lacking an objective measure, it would be silly to argue about whether man’s diet had gotten “better” or “worse.” The question would be irrelevant.

This said, since Truth and hence objective morality *do* exist, let’s proceed. In their paper, “[The Illusion of Moral Decline](#),” Mastroianni and Gilbert state that the purported illusion of moral decline is explainable mainly by way of two psychological factors: “biased exposure to information and biased memory for information.” Put differently, people are inundated with negative news about the present, and it’s fresh in their minds, while memories of the past fade, making idealization of it easy.

These are valid factors, of course. Yet to comedically analogize it, just because you’re paranoid, doesn’t mean they aren’t really out to get you. A psychological phenomenon may make you see giants in the



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past and Lilliputians today, but that doesn't mean people haven't shrunk — just, maybe, not as much as you perceive (and, perhaps, certain *parts* of them have actually grown).

To better understand the seemingly universal perception of moral decline, consider: Upon pondering how so many people throughout the ages have kvetched about aches and pains and creeping decrepitude, would we say, “Well, humans have *always* had that complaint, everywhere. There can't be anything to it!”? We realize, of course, that the complaint is universal because aging is universal.

Yet note that civilizations likewise have a life cycle: birth, growth, maturation, prime, decline, and death. And if civilizational declines are attended by, and perhaps are caused by, moral decline (and they are), wouldn't we expect recurring complaints of moral decline in history? The complaints could be universal because civilizational aging is universal.

As to this, and as mentioned earlier, it's significant that Mastroianni and Gilbert have data not for Western civilization's or the U.S.'s birth and growth phases, going back, respectively, to ancient Greece and 1776. Rather, they have data just for the last 70 years — most or all of which, history may show, were deep into the West's and America's decline phase. We are, after all, talking mainly about the *1960s and beyond*.

As for going back further, the researchers cite Roman historian Livy's 2,000-year-old lament about his time's “moral decline.” But since he lived 700 years after Rome's founding, would it be surprising if he truly could look back on lost virtue? Note that it was *during Livy's lifetime* that Rome transitioned from a “democratic” republic into an empire, with Augustus Caesar wielding sole power.

Again, none of this is to say the phenomena Mastroianni and Gilbert speak of don't often color people's judgment. It is to say that what they're coloring is an often real process, one that can only be properly judged by those who recognize Truth's existence and have a firm grasp of morality's principles (i.e., the virtues).

Speaking of which, Mastroianni, Gilbert, and others thus disposed should know that “psychology” is a Greek-origin term meaning “study of the soul.” Unless you're schooled in such species of study, morality is not something you'll be properly able to judge.



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