Lecture 01 Moral Psychology: The Science of Good and Evil?

s.butterfill@warwick.ac.uk

1. Introduction

Moral psychology is the study of psychological aspects of ethical abilities.

Questions for this course:

What ethical abilities do humans have? What states and processes underpin them?

What, if anything, do discoveries about ethical abilities imply for political conflict, and what do they imply about ethics?

2. Why Moral Psychology?

2.1. Background: 'intuitive ethics'

Haidt & Joseph (2004); Haidt & Graham (2007) claim that there are five evolutionarily ancient, psychologically basic abilities linked to:

1. harm/care
2. fairness (including reciprocity)
3. in-group loyalty
4. respect for authorty
5. purity, sanctity

2.2. Human sociality

'Humans are [...] adapted [...] to live in morally structured communities' thanks in part to 'the capacity to operate systems of moralistic punishment' and susceptibility 'to moral suasion' (Richerson & Boyd 1999, p. 257). 'humans (both individually and as a species) develop morality because it is required for cooperative systems to flourish' (Hamlin 2015, p. 108)

2.3. Political conflict

'The moral framing of climate change has typically focused on only the first two values: harm to present and future generations and the unfairness of the distribution of burdens caused by climate change. As a result, the justification for action on climate change holds less moral priority for conservatives than liberals' (Markowitz & Shariff 2012, p. 244)

2.4. Ethics?

Humans lack direct insight into moral properties (Sinnott-Armstrong et al. 2010).

Intuitions cannot be used to argue against theories (Sinnott-Armstrong et al. 2010).

Intuitions are unreliable in unfamiliar* situations (Greene 2014, p. 715).

'*unfamiliar** problems [are] ones with which we have inadequate evolutionary, cultural, or personal experience' (Greene 2014, p. 714).

Philosophers, including Kant, do not use reason to figure out what is right or wrong, but 'primarily to justify and organize their preexising intuitive conclusions' (Greene 2014, p. 718).

3. Moral Intuitions and Heuristics: First Pass

3.1. What are moral intuitions?

This lecturer: *moral intuitions* are unreflective ethical judgements.

Sinnott-Armstrong et al. (2010, p. 256): 'When we refer to *moral intuitions*, we mean strong, stable, immediate moral beliefs.'

3.2. Puzzle

What do adult humans compute that enables their unreflective judgements to track moral attributes (such as wrongness)?

This question is puzzling because:

1. Moral attributes are inaccessible.
2. Unreflective ethical judgements are (often enough) fast.
3. Computing inaccessible attributes is slow.

Therefore:

4. Making unreflective ethical judgements does not involve computing moral attributes.

'We adopt the term *accessibility* to refer to the ease (or effort) with which particular mental contents come to mind' (Kahneman & Frederick 2005, p. 271)

3.3. Sinnott-Armstrong et al (2010)'s proposal

If not moral attributes, what do adult humans compute that enables their unreflective judgements to track moral attributes?

The *affect heuristic*: 'if thinking about an act [...] makes you feel bad [...], then judge that it is morally wrong' (Sinnott-Armstrong et al. 2010).

3.4. Implications?

Epistemic: 'if moral intuitions result from heuristics, moral intuitionists [...] must stop claiming direct insight into moral properties' (Sinnott-Armstrong et al. 2010, p. 268).

Should we trust moral intuitions? 'Just as non-moral heuristics lack reliability in unusual situations, so do moral intuitions' (Sinnott-Armstrong et al. 2010, p. 268).

'Critics often argue that consequentialism can't be accurate, because it implies moral judgments that are counter-intuitive, such as that we are morally permitted to punish an innocent person in the well-known example where this is necessary to stop riots and prevent deaths. With the heuristic model in hand, consequentialists can respond that the target attribute is having the best consequences, and any intuitions to the contrary result from substituting a heuristic attribute.' (Sinnott-Armstrong et al. 2010, p. 269).

4. The Affect Heuristic: a Case Study

Three measures of risk:

1. perceived frequency (which cause of death has a higher annual mortality rate?)
2. Value of a Statistical Life, VSL (how much money should be spent to avoid one fatality due to this cause of death?)
3. perceived risk (which cause of death represents a higher risk of dying from it?)

Availability Heuristic The easier it is to bring a case of this cancer to mind, the more frequent or risky it is.

Affect Heuristic The more dread you feel when imagining it evokes, the more frequent or risky it is.

Hypothesis: The Availability Heuristic dominates frequency judgements , whereas the Affect Heuristic dominates risk and VSL judgements (Pachur et al. 2012).

Prediction: Number of cases in a subject's social network will better predict frequency judgements, whereas feelings of dread will better predict risk and VSL judgements.

Findings: 'availability-by-recall offered a substantially better descriptive account than the affect heuristic when people judged deindividualized, statistical mortality rates. Affect, however, was at least on par with availability when people were asked to put a price tag on a single life saved from a risk, or when they were asked to indicate the perceived risk of dying' (Pachur et al. 2012, p. 324).

5. Moral Intuitions and Heuristics: Some Evidence

Q: What do adult humans compute that enables their moral intuitions to track moral attributes (such as wrongness)?

Hypothesis: They rely on the 'affect heuristic': 'if thinking about an act [...] makes you feel bad [...], then judge that it is morally wrong' (Sinnott-Armstrong et al. 2010).

Prediction: if you make people feel bad (/good) without them realising it, they will be more (/less) inclined to judge that something is morally wrong.

Evidence: 'For high-PBC [Private Body Con-

sciousness] (but not low-PBC) people, our disgust manipulations increased the severity of moral condemnation relative to the neutral conditions' (Schnall et al. 2008, p. 1105)

'rather than being obligatory, affective influences on judgment can often be eliminated by making salient an irrelevant but plausible cause for the feelings. We unwittingly evoked this process in an earlier and failed attempt to carry out these experiments. As a disgust manipulation, we asked participants to immerse one hand in a gooey substance [...]. Immediately afterward, participants made morality ratings. This very concrete disgust experience, [...] did not influence moral judgments [...], presumably because the unusual nature of the experience and its obvious relation to disgust remained highly salient as participants made their moral judgments. In retrospect, it seems likely that any disgust elicited by the moral dilemmas was likely to be attributed to the feeling of the gooey substance rather than the other way around.' (Schnall et al. 2008, p. 1106)

Four conclusions:

1. 'the effect of disgust applies regardless of whether the action to be judged is itself disgusting.

2. disgust influenced moral, but not additional nonmoral, judgments.

3. because the effect occurred most strongly for people who were sensitive to their own bodily cues, the results appear to concern feelings of disgust rather than merely the primed concept of disgust.

4. induced sadness did not have similar effects' (Schnall et al. 2008, pp. 1105–6).

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