

Lecture 02 Moral Psychology: The Science of Good and Evil?

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1. 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).

2. 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 Consciousness] (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).

2.1. Details from Experiment 1

‘The sadness clip (from *The Champ*) portrayed the death of a boy’s mentor, the disgust clip (from *Trainspotting*) portrayed a man using an unsanitary toilet, and the neutral clip (from a *National Geographic* special) portrayed fish at the Great Barrier Reef’ (Lerner et al. 2004).

‘Three of these vignettes involved a moral violation with disgust—Dog (a man who ate his dead dog), Plane Crash (starving survivors of a plane crash consider cannibalism), and Kitten (a man deriving sexual pleasure from playing with a kitten)—and three of the vignettes involved a moral violation with no disgust—Wallet (finding a wallet and not returning it to its owner), Resume (a person falsifying his resume), and Trolley (preventing the death of five men by killing one man). The instructions told participants to go with their initial intuitions when responding’ (Schnall et al. 2008, p. 1100)

2.2. Vignettes from Schnall et al (2008) Experiment 4

Dog Frank’s dog was killed by a car in front of his house. Frank had heard that in China people occasionally eat dog meat, and he was curious what it tasted like. So he cut up the body and cooked it and ate it for dinner. How wrong is it for Frank to eat his dead dog for dinner?

Plane Crash Your plane has crashed in the Hi-

malayas. The only survivors are yourself, another man, and a young boy. The three of you travel for days, battling extreme cold and wind. Your only chance at survival is to find your way to a small village on the other side of the mountain, several days away. The boy has a broken leg and cannot move very quickly. His chances of surviving the journey are essentially zero. Without food, you and the other man will probably die as well. The other man suggests that you sacrifice the boy and eat his remains over the next few days. How wrong is it to kill this boy so that you and the other man may survive your journey to safety?

Wallet You are walking down the street when you come across a wallet lying on the ground. You open the wallet and find that it contains several hundred dollars in cash as well the owner’s driver’s license. From the credit cards and other items in the wallet it’s very clear that the wallet’s owner is wealthy. You, on the other hand, have been hit by hard times recently and could really use some extra money. You consider sending the wallet back to the owner without the cash, keeping the cash for yourself. How wrong is it for you to keep the money you found in the wallet in order to have more money for yourself?

Resume You have a friend who has been trying to find a job lately without much success. He figured that he would be more likely to get hired if he had a more impressive resume. He decided to put some false information on his resume in

order to make it more impressive. By doing this he ultimately managed to get hired, beating out several candidates who were actually more qualified than he. How wrong was it for your friend to put false information on his resume in order to help him find employment?

Kitten Matthew is playing with his new kitten late one night. He is wearing only his boxer shorts, and the kitten sometimes walks over his genitals. Eventually, this arouses him, and he begins to rub his bare genitals along the kitten’s body. The kitten purrs, and seems to enjoy the contact. How wrong is it for Matthew to be rubbing himself against the kitten?

Trolley You are at the wheel of a runaway trolley quickly approaching a fork in the tracks. On the tracks extending to the left is a group of five railway workmen. On the tracks extending to the right is a single railway workman. If you do nothing the trolley will proceed to the left, causing the deaths of the five workmen. The only way to avoid the deaths of these workmen is to hit a switch on your dashboard that will cause the trolley to proceed to the right, causing the death of the single workman. How wrong is it for you to hit the switch in order to avoid the deaths of the five workmen?

3. Moral Intuitions and Heuristics: Evaluating the Evidence

Always ask:

1. Has the study been replicated? (No, afaik.)
2. Are there similar studies? If so, are the findings convergent? (Yes, Eskine et al. (2011); yes, convergent findings.)
3. Has the study featured in a review? If so, does the review broadly support the findings of this study? (Yes, Chapman & Anderson (2013, p. 313); yes, it does.)

‘To date, almost all of the studies that have manipulated disgust or cleanliness have reported effects on moral judgment. These findings strengthen the case for a causal relationship between disgust and moral judgment, by showing that experimentally evoked disgust—or cleanliness, its opposite—can influence moral cognition’ (Chapman & Anderson 2013, p. 313)

‘What is the function of moral disgust? One of the most intriguing features of moral disgust is that it is not clear why it exists at all. Why should an emotion originating in defense against toxicity and disease be triggered by a social stimulus? The mystery deepens when we consider that human beings already have a social emotion that seems tailored to respond to moral wrongdoing, namely, anger (Weiner, 2006). Why then

do we feel disgust in response to moral transgressions?’ (Chapman & Anderson 2013, p. 317).

4. Does emotion influence moral judgment?

‘these data fail to isolate the precise point at which emotion has a role in our moral psychology. ... emotional stimuli ... presented before the scenario is read could ... influence the interpretation of the scenario or the question. Or, emotion could act as a gain on what has already been conceived as a moral infraction (thereby, increasing the severity of the perceived wrong)’ (Huebner et al. 2009, pp. 2–3).

5. A Linguistic Analogy

5.1. Background: What are modules?

They are ‘the psychological systems whose operations present the world to thought’; they ‘constitute a natural kind’; and there is ‘a cluster of properties that they have in common’ (Fodor 1983, p. 101):

- domain specificity (modules deal with ‘eccentric’ bodies of knowledge)
- limited accessibility (representations in modules are not usually inferentially integrated with knowledge)

- information encapsulation (modules are unaffected by general knowledge or representations in other modules)
- innateness (roughly, the information and operations of a module not straightforwardly consequences of learning; but see Samuels (2004)).

Syntactic abilities are quite widely held to rest on a ‘language module’, although not all proponents of a language analogy accept this (e.g. Dupoux & Jacob 2008).

5.2. Moral grammar

Researchers who consider various analogies between linguistic and ethical abilities include Roedder & Harman (2010), Mikhail (2007), and Dwyer (2009). See Dupoux & Jacob (2007) (reply: Dwyer & Hauser (2008), reply reply Dupoux & Jacob (2008)) and Mallon (2008) for opposition.

Mikhail’s idea: ‘the mind contains a moral grammar: a complex and possibly domain-specific set of rules [...] this system enables individuals to determine the deontic status of an infinite variety of acts and omissions’ (Mikhail 2007, p. 144)

Do humans have a language ethics module? Reconstruction of an argument from Mikhail (2007):

1. ‘adequately specifying the kinds of harm

that humans intuitively grasp requires a technical legal vocabulary’

Therefore:

2. The abilities underpinning unreflective ethical judgements must involve analysis in accordance with rules.

Mikhail’s defence of the premise: ‘concepts like battery, end, means and side effect [...] can [...] predict human moral intuitions in a huge number and variety of cases’ (Mikhail 2007, p. 149); see further Mikhail (2014).

Illustration: intuitions about Trolley vs Transplant ...

Trolley A runaway trolley is about to run over and kill five people. You can hit a switch that will divert the trolley onto a different set of tracks where it will kill only one. Is it okay to hit the switch?

Transplant Five people are going to die but you can save them all by cutting up one healthy person and distributing her organs. Is it ok to cut her up?

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