Lecture 06: Moral Psychology

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1. The Question

Could scientific discoveries undermine or support moral principles?

Key source: Greene (2014)

2. Preview

1. There is a puzzle about apparently inconsistent patterns in judgement (switch-drop).

2. We can solve the puzzle by invoking a dual-process theory …

   (a) … where one process is faster; and

   (b) the faster process is affective and

   (c) less consequentialist.

3. The faster process is unlikely to be reliable in unfamiliar* situations.

4. Therefore, we should rely less on the faster (and less consequentialist) process in unfamiliar* situations.

3. Background

'In putting forward an account of light, the first point I want to draw to your attention is that it is possible for there to be a difference between the sensation that we have of it, that is, the idea that we form of it in our imagination through the intermediary of our eyes, and what it is in the objects that produces the sensation in us, that is, what it is in the flame or in the Sun that we term 'light'' (Descartes 1998, p. 81 (AT XI:3))

3.1. Perceiving Impetus

Sometimes when adult humans observe a moving object that disappears, they will misremember the location of its disappearance in way that reflects its momentum; this effect is called *representational momentum* (Freyd & Finke 1984; Hubbard 2010).

The trajectories implied by representational momentum reveal that the effect reflects impetus mechanics rather than Newtonian principles (Freyd & Jones 1994; Kozhevnikov & Hegarty 2001; Hubbard et al. 2001; Hubbard 2013). And these trajectories are independent of subjects' scientific knowledge (Freyd & Jones 1994; Kozhevnikov & Hegarty 2001). Representational momentum therefore reflects judgement-independent expectations about objects' movements which track momentum in accordance with a principle of impetus.[1]

'one may think of moral theory at first […] as the attempt to describe our moral capacity […] what is required is a formulation of a set of principles which, when conjoined to our beliefs and knowledge of the circumstances, would lead us to make these judgments with their supporting reasons were we to apply these principles conscientiously and intelligently' (Rawls 1999, p. 41); see Singer (1974) for critical discussion.

'Advances in our understanding of [moral psychology] do not themselves directly imply any normative conclusions, but they undermine some conceptions of doing ethics which themselves have normative conclusions. Those conceptions of ethics tend to be too respectful of our intuitions. Our better understanding of ethics gives us grounds for being less respectful of them' (Singer 2005, p. 349).

3.2. Consequences for ethics?

'genetic transmission, cultural transmission, and learning from personal experience […] are the only mechanisms known to endow […] automatic […] processes with the information they need to function well' (Greene 2014, p. 714)

unfamiliar problems* = 'ones with which we have inadequate evolutionary, cultural, or personal experience'

[1] Note that momentum is only one of several factors which may influence mistakes about the location at which a moving object disappears (Hubbard 2005, p. 842).

'it would be a cognitive miracle if we had reliably good moral instincts about unfamiliar* moral problems' (Greene 2014, p. 715).

'The *No Cognitive Miracles Principle*: When we are dealing with unfamiliar* moral problems, we ought to rely less on [...] automatic emotional responses and more on [...] conscious, controlled reasoning, lest we bank on cognitive miracles' (Greene 2014, p. 715).

4. Puzzle

Why do people tend to respond differently in Switch and Drop? And, when given both, why do they tend to respond consistently when Drop comes first (Schwitzgebel & Cushman 2015)?

Switch Vicki is standing by the railroad tracks when she notices an empty boxcar rolling out of control. It is moving so fast that anyone it hits will die. Ahead on the main track are five people. There is one person standing on a side track that doesn't rejoin the main track. If Vicki does nothing, the boxcar will hit the five people on the main track, but not the one person on the side track. If Vicki flips a switch next to her, it will divert the boxcar to the side track where it will hit the one person, and not hit the five people on the main track.

Drop Mary is standing near a footbridge over the railroad tracks when she notices an empty boxcar rolling out of control. It is moving so fast that anyone it hits will die. Ahead on the track are five people. There is a person standing on the footbridge, and he weighs enough that the boxcar would slow down if it hit him. (Mary does not weigh enough to slow down the boxcar.) If Mary does nothing, the boxcar will hit the five people on the track. If Mary pulls a lever it will release the bottom of the footbridge and that one person will fall onto the track, where the boxcar will hit the one person, slow down because of the one person, and not hit the five people farther down the track (Schwitzgebel & Cushman 2015).

5. Dual-Process Theory

Dual Process Theory of Ethical Abilities (core part): Two (or more) ethical processes are distinct: the conditions which influence whether they occur, and which outputs they generate, do not completely overlap.

Additional assumptions: one process is faster; the faster process is affective; and the faster process is less consequentialist.

'The Central Tension Principle: Characteristically deontological judgments are preferentially supported by automatic emotional responses processes, while characteristically consequentialist judgments are preferentially supported by conscious reasoning and allied processes of cognitive control' (Greene 2014, p. 699)

'it's worth highlighting three ways in which the camera analogy may mislead' (Greene 2014, p. 698)

6. Unreliability and Unfamiliarity

unfamiliar problems* = 'ones with which we have inadequate evolutionary, cultural, or personal experience'

'genetic transmission, cultural transmission, and learning from personal experience [...] are the only mechanisms known to endow [...] automatic [...] processes with the information they need to function well' (Greene 2014, p. 714)

7. Unreliability and Unfamiliarity

'A dominant theme in normative ethics for the past century or more has beenthe debate between those who support a systematic normative ethical theory—utilitarianism and other forms of consequentialism have been theleading contenders—and those who ground their normative ethics on [...] intuitions' (Singer 2005, p. 343).

'the chief weapons of opponents of utilitarianism have been examples intended to show that the dictates of utilitarianism clash with moral intuitions that we all share' (Singer 2005, p. 343).

'genetic transmission, cultural transmission, and learning from personal experience [...] are the only mechanisms known to endow [...] automatic [...] processes with the information they

need to function well' (Greene 2014, p. 714)

8. Rely less on faster processes in unfamiliar* situations

'it would be a cognitive miracle if we had reliably good moral instincts about unfamiliar* moral problems' (Greene 2014, p. 715).

'The *No Cognitive Miracles Principle*: When we are dealing with unfamiliar* moral problems, we ought to rely less on [...] automatic emotional responses and more on [...] conscious, controlled reasoning, lest we bank on cognitive miracles' (Greene 2014, p. 715).

8.1. Singer's version

'If [...] our intuitive responses are due to differences in the emotional pull of situations that involve bringing about someone's death in a close-up, personal way, and bringing about the same person's death in a way that is at a distance, and less personal, why should we believe that there is anything that justifies these responses?' (Singer 2005, p. 347).

Note that Singer's version of the argument works differently from that in Greene (2014) (at least on my reconstruction of it).

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