Morality and Psychology: A Conceptual Study of the Intersectional Relationship

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ABSTRACT: Moral psychology is a field of study in both philosophy and psychology. Some use the term "moral psychology" relatively narrowly to refer to the study of moral development. However, others tend to use the term more broadly to include any topics at the intersection of ethics, psychology, and philosophy of mind. Some of the main topics of the field are moral judgment, moral reasoning, moral sensitivity, moral responsibility, moral motivation, moral identity, moral action, moral development, moral diversity, moral character (especially as related to virtue ethics), altruism, psychological egoism, moral luck, moral forecasting, moral emotion, affective forecasting, and moral disagreement. Moral psychology is a novel branch within the field of psychology. The study of moral identity development is one aspect of psychology that shows the most potential for growth due to the numerous sections within the field regarding its structure, mechanisms, and dynamics. A moral act is a type of behavior that refers to an act that has either a moral or immoral consequence. Moral Psychology can be applied across a broad range of studies, including philosophy and psychology. However it is implemented in different ways depending on culture. In many cultures, a moral act refers to an act that entails free will, purity, liberty, honesty, and meaning. An immoral act refers to an act that entails corruption and fraudulence and usually leads to negative consequences.

KEYWORDS: Moral psychology, Moral development, Philosophy

1. INTRODUCTION

Psychology originated as a branch of philosophy, and for centuries the two areas of inquiry have richly informed each other. Some of history’s greatest moral philosophers have written on the moral implications of “human nature,” “moral sentiments,” and “the crooked timber of humanity,” while psychologists have probed how concepts elucidated by philosophers are implemented in ordinary minds. As psychologists we have continued to profit from this dialogue, particularly since we have found philosophers to be the best reasoners in the

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academy: the scholars most likely to read carefully, summarize accurately, respect distinctions, and expose fallacies.

As such we were surprised to read a long essay in the February 25 issue of The New York Review by Tamsin Shaw (a professor of European and Mediterranean studies and philosophy at NYU) which lumped five recent books in psychology (including one by each of us) with two reports on the CIA’s 2001–2006 program of torturing detainees. In defiance of the best philosophy, Shaw asserts that psychological and biological facts are “morally irrelevant” and “can tell us nothing” about moral propositions. She insinuates that psychologists, corrupted by their current theories, lack “a reliable moral compass” that would equip them to oppose torture. And she prosecutes her case by citation-free attribution, spurious dichotomies, and standards of guilt by association that make Joseph McCarthy look like Sherlock Holmes [1].

The trouble begins with Shaw’s repeated assertion that psychology claims “special authority” over morality. In fact, Shaw can cite no psychologist who claims special authority or “superior wisdom” on moral matters. In projecting this ambition onto five books which merely discuss recent research on the moral sense, Shaw apparently cannot conceive of any contribution of psychology to moral philosophy that falls short of outright takeover: the only acceptable contribution, on her reckoning, is zero.

Shaw thus repeatedly asserts that researching the moral sense is tantamount to claiming to be an oracle of moral truth. She then educates us: “It is a fallacy to suggest that expertise in psychology, a descriptive natural science, can itself qualify someone to determine what is morally right and wrong.” It is indeed a fallacy. That is why Pinker wrote, in a section on morality in the book Shaw claims to have read:

The starting point is to distinguish morality per se, a topic in philosophy (in particular, normative ethics), from the human moral sense, a topic in psychology.

It is why Haidt, near the end of his book, wrote:

Philosophers typically distinguish between descriptive definitions of morality (which simply describe what people happen to think is moral) and normative definitions (which specify what is really and truly right, regardless of what anyone thinks). So far in this book I have been entirely descriptive.

Haidt then offered a definition of “moral systems” that he said “cannot stand alone as a normative definition,” but that might be useful as an “adjunct” to philosophical theories.

In a similar vein, Damon and Colby write:
A moral psychology cannot entirely avoid questions of what should be (questions that philosophers call prescriptive or normative)…. This kind of analysis…relies on philosophical argumentation rather than empirical validation [2].

Joshua Greene’s book, for its part, has a section entitled “Does Science Deliver the Moral Truth?” which lays out his answer: No. And when we asked Paul Bloom whether his book contained a pithy quote that acknowledged the distinction, he replied, “The fact that one cannot derive morality from psychological research is so screamingly obvious that I never thought to explicitly write it down.”

In fact, it is Shaw’s insistence on the complete irrelevance of moral psychology to normative questions that is a departure from centuries of moral philosophy, and from the practice of the many contemporary philosophers who are avid consumers of and contributors to psychology. It has long been recognized that findings about moral sentiments, even if they don’t determine the truth of moral propositions, are highly relevant to philosophical inquiry about them. Utilitarianism alludes to the capacity of humans (and animals) to reason, suffer, and flourish. Virtue ethics hinges on traits of character. Kant, in explicating his deontological theory, famously wrote that “the action to which the ‘ought’ applies must indeed be possible under natural conditions.” As each of these theories is elaborated, it will necessarily make contact with assumptions about cognition, affect, personality, and behavioral flexibility—the subject matter of psychology.

Recent discoveries in moral psychology offer another point of contact. Many ethical convictions are underpinned by strongly felt intuitions that some action is inherently good or bad. Sometimes those intuitions can be justified by philosophical reflection and analysis. But sometimes they can be debunked and shown to be indefensible gut reactions, without moral warrant. Historical examples include outrage over heresy, blasphemy, and lèse-majesté, revulsion against homosexuality and racial mixing, squeamishness about medical advances like vaccination and blood transfusions, callousness toward slaves and animals, and indifference or hatred toward foreigners. Any news reader will confirm that some of these historical examples are all too modern [3].

2. THE NATURE OF MORAL PSYCHOLOGY
In psychology, study of the development of the moral sense—i.e., of the capacity for forming judgments about what is morally right or wrong, good or bad. The U.S. psychologist Lawrence Kohlberg hypothesized that people’s development of moral standards passes through several levels. At the early level, that of pre-conventional moral reasoning, the child uses external and physical events (such as pleasure or pain) as the source for moral decisions; his standards are based strictly on what will avoid punishment or bring pleasure. At the intermediate level, that of conventional moral reasoning, the child or adolescent views moral standards as a way of maintaining the approval of authority figures, chiefly his parents, and acts in accordance with their precepts. At the third level, that of post-conventional moral reasoning, the adult bases his moral standards on principles that he himself has evaluated and accepts as inherently valid, regardless of society’s opinion. Beginning in the 1970s Kohlberg’s work was criticized by psychologists and philosophers influenced by feminism. According to Carol Gilligan, Kohlberg’s stages are inherently sexist, because they equate moral maturity with an orientation toward moral problems that is socially instilled in males but not in females. Whereas the male “ethic of rights and justice” treats morality in terms of abstract principles and conceives of moral agents as essentially autonomous, acting independently of their social situations according to general rules, the female “ethic of care” treats morality in terms of concrete bonds to particular individuals based on feelings of care and responsibility and conceives of moral agents as connected and interdependent through their feelings of care and responsibility for each other [4].

The study of moral psychology is simultaneously pursued in two disciplines with very different methodologies. Until recently, the moral psychology of philosophy departments has been largely speculative; prominent empirical claims—about the structure of character, say, or the nature of moral reasoning—have seldom been subject to systematic empirical scrutiny. Conversely, although better grounded empirically, the moral psychology of psychology departments has not always been conversant with important philosophical considerations. At the beginning of the 21st century, this situation has begun to change, as researchers in both philosophy and psychology have begun to pursue thoroughly interdisciplinary approaches to moral psychology.

Moral psychology is a discipline of both intrinsic and practical interest; uncovering the determinants of moral judgment and behavior is fascinating in its own right, and a better understanding of these determinants may help us to better understand what educational and policy interventions may facilitate good conduct and ameliorate bad conduct. Of particular
philosophical interest, however, is how inquiry into moral psychology may help adjudicate between competing ethical theories. The plausibility of its associated moral psychology is not, of course, the only dimension on which an ethical theory may be evaluated; equally important are evaluative or normative questions having to do with how well a theory fares when compared to important convictions about such things as justice, fairness, and the good life. Such questions have been, and will continue to be, of central importance for philosophical ethics. Nonetheless, there has been in recent years a growing consensus to the effect that an ethical theory committed to an impoverished or inaccurate conception of moral psychology is at a serious competitive disadvantage. As Bernard Williams (1973, 1985; cf. Flanagan 1991) forcefully argued, an ethical conception that commends relationships, commitments, or life projects that are at odds with the sorts of attachments that can be reasonably be expected to take root in and vivify actual human lives is an ethical conception with—at best—a very tenuous claim to our assent [5].

Questions about the psychological contours of actual human lives demand empirically substantiated answers; accordingly, problems in ethical theory choice making reference to moral psychology can be structured around two related inquiries:

(1) What empirical claims about human psychology do advocates of competing perspectives on ethical theory assert or presuppose?

(2) How empirically well supported are these claims?

The first question is one of philosophical scholarship: what are the psychological commitments of various positions in philosophical ethics? The second question takes us beyond the corridors of philosophy departments, to the sorts of questions asked, and sometimes answered, by the empirical human sciences, such as biology, psychology, anthropology, sociology, history, cognitive science, linguistics and neuroscience. Thus, contemporary moral psychology is methodologically pluralistic: it aims to answer philosophical questions, but in an empirically responsible way.

However, it will sometimes be difficult to tell which claims in philosophical ethics require empirical substantiation. Partly, this is because it is sometimes unclear whether, and to what extent, a contention counts as empirically assessable. Consider questions regarding “normal functioning” in mental health care: Are the answers to these questions statistical, or evaluative? For example, is “normal” mental health simply the psychological condition of most people, or is it good mental health? If the former, the issue is, at least in principle, empirically decidable; if the latter, the issues must be decided, if they can be decided, by
arguments about value. Additionally, philosophers have not always been explicit about whether, and to what extent, they are making empirical claims: For example, are their depictions of moral character meant to identify psychological features of actual persons, or to articulate ideals that need not be instantiated in actual human psychologies? Such questions will of course be complicated by the inevitable diversity of philosophical opinion [6].

In every instance, therefore, the first task is to carefully document a theory's empirically assessable claims, whether they are explicit or, as may often be the case, only tacit. Once claims apt for empirical assessment have been located, the question becomes one of identifying any relevant empirical literatures. The next task is to assess those literatures, in an attempt to determine what conclusions can be responsibly drawn from them. Science, particularly social science, being what it is, many conclusions will be provisional; the philosophical moral psychologist must be prepared to adjudicate controversies in other fields, or offer informed conjecture regarding future findings. Often, the empirical record will be crucially incomplete; in such cases, philosophers may be forced to engage in empirically disciplined conjecture, or even to engage in their own empirical work, as some philosophers are beginning to do.

When the philosophical positions have been isolated, and putatively relevant empirical literatures assessed, we can begin to evaluate the plausibility of the philosophical moral psychology: Is the speculative picture of psychological functioning that informs some region of ethical theory compatible with the empirical picture that emerges from systematic observation? In short, is the philosophical picture empirically adequate? If it is determined that the philosophical conception is empirically adequate, the result is vindicatory. Conversely, if the philosophical moral psychology in question is found to be empirically inadequate, the result is revisionary, compelling alteration, or even rejection, of those elements of the philosophical theory presupposing the problematic moral psychology. The process will often be comparative: theory choice in moral psychology, like other theory choice, involves tradeoffs, and while an empirically undersupported approach may not be decisively eliminated from contention on empirical grounds alone, it may come to be seen as less attractive than theoretical options with firmer empirical foundations [7].

The winds driving the sort of disciplinary cross-pollination we describe do not blow in one direction. As philosophers writing for an encyclopedia of philosophy, we are naturally concerned with the ways empirical research might shape, or re-shape, philosophical ethics. But philosophical reflection may likewise influence empirical research, since such research is
often driven by philosophical suppositions that may be more or less philosophically sound. The best interdisciplinary conversations, then, should benefit both parties. To illustrate the dialectical process we have described, we will consider a variety of topics in moral psychology. Our primary concerns will be philosophical: What are some of the most central problems in philosophical moral psychology, and how might they be resolved? However, as the hybrid nature of our topic invites us to do, we will pursue these questions in an interdisciplinary spirit. Hopefully, the result will be a broad sense of the problems and methods that will structure research on moral psychology during the 21st century.

3. THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS AND THE METHODS OF ETHICS

“Intuition pumps” or “thought experiments” have long been well-used items in the philosopher's toolbox. Typically, a thought experiment presents an example, often a hypothetical example, in order to elicit some philosophically telling response; if a thought experiment is successful, it may be concluded that competing theories must account for the resulting response. These responses are supposed to serve an evidential role in philosophical theory choice; if you like, they can be understood as data competing theories must accommodate. If an appropriate audience's ethical responses to a thought experiment conflict with the response a theory prescribes for the case, the theory has suffered a counterexample.

The question of whose responses “count” philosophically is a question that has been answered in a variety of ways, but for many philosophers, the intended audience for thought experiments seems to be some species of “ordinary folk”. Of course, the relevant folk must possess such cognitive attainments as are required to understand the case at issue; very young children are probably not an ideal audience for thought experiments. Accordingly, some philosophers may insist that the relevant responses are the considered judgments of people with the training required to see “what is at stake philosophically.” But if the responses are to help adjudicate between competing theories, the responders must be more or less theoretically neutral, and this sort of neutrality, we suspect, is rather likely to be vitiated by philosophical education. A dilemma emerges: On the one hand, philosophically naïve subjects may be thought to lack the erudition required to grasp the philosophical stakes. On the other, with increasing philosophical sophistication comes, very likely, philosophical partiality; one audience is naïve, and the other prejudiced.
However exactly the philosophically relevant audience is specified, there are empirical questions that must be addressed in determining the philosophical potency of a thought experiment. In particular, when deciding what philosophical weight to give a response, philosophers need to determine its origins. What features of the example are implicated in a given judgment—are people reacting to the substance of the case, or the style of exposition? What features of the audience are implicated in their reaction—do different demographic groups respond to the example differently? Such questions raise the following concern: judgments about thought experiments dealing with moral issues might be strongly influenced by ethically irrelevant characteristics of example and audience. Whether a characteristic is ethically relevant is a matter for philosophical discussion, but determining the status of a particular thought experiment also requires empirical investigation of its causally relevant characteristics. We'll now describe two examples of such investigation.

As part of their famous research on the “heuristics and biases” that underlie human reasoning, Tversky and Kahneman presented subjects with the following problem:

Imagine that the U.S. is preparing for the outbreak of an unusual Asian disease, which is expected to kill 600 people. Two alternative programs to combat the disease have been proposed. Assume that the exact scientific estimate of the consequences of the programs are as follows:

If Program A is adopted, 200 people will be saved.
If Program B is adopted, there is a 1/3 probability that 600 people will be saved, and a 2/3 probability that no people will be saved.

A second group of subjects was given an identical problem, except that the programs were described as follows:

If Program C is adopted, 400 people will die.
If Program D is adopted, there is a 1/3 probability that nobody will die and a 2/3 probability that 600 people will die.

On the first version of the problem most subjects thought that Program A should be adopted. But on the second version most chose Program D, despite the fact that the outcome described in A is identical to the one described in C. The disconcerting implication of this study is that ethical responses may be strongly influenced by the manner in which cases are described or framed. Such framing sensitivities, we are strongly inclined to think, constitute ethically irrelevant influences on ethical responses. Unless this sort of possibility can be confidently eliminated, one should hesitate to rely on responses to a thought experiment for
adjudicating theoretical controversies. Such possibilities can only be eliminated through systematic empirical work.

Audience characteristics may also affect the outcome of thought experiments. Haidt and associates presented stories about “harmless yet offensive violations of strong social norms” to men and women of high and low socioeconomic status (SES) in Philadelphia (USA), Porto Alegre, and Recife (both in Brazil).[8] For example:

A man goes to the supermarket once a week and buys a dead chicken. But before cooking the chicken, he has sexual intercourse with it. Then he cooks it and eats it.

Lower SES subjects tended to “moralize” harmless and offensive behaviors like that in the chicken story: these subjects were more inclined than their high SES counterparts to say that the actor should be “stopped or punished,” and more inclined to deny that such behaviors would be “OK” if customary in a given country. The point is not that lower SES subjects are mistaken in their moralization of such behaviors while the urbanity of higher SES subjects represents a more rationally defensible response. The difficulty is deciding which—if any—of the conflicting responses is fit to serve as a constraint on ethical theory, when both may equally be the function of more or less arbitrary cultural factors.

In our experience, philosophical audiences typically decline to moralize the offensive behaviors, and we ourselves share their tolerant attitude. But of course these audiences—by virtue of educational attainments if not stock portfolios—are overwhelmingly high SES. Haidt's work suggests that it is a mistake for a philosopher to say, as Jackson does, that “my intuitions reveal the folk conception in as much as I am reasonably entitled, as I usually am, to regard myself as typical.” The question is: typical of what demographic? Are philosophers' ethical responses determined by the philosophical substance of the examples, or by cultural idiosyncrasies that are very plausibly thought to be ethically irrelevant? Once again, until such possibilities are ruled out by systematic empirical investigation, the philosophical heft of a thought experiment is open to question.

While a relatively small percentage of empirical work on “heuristics and biases” directly addresses moral reasoning, philosophers who have addressed the issue agree that phenomena like framing effects are likely to be pervasively implicated in responses to ethically freighted examples, and argue that this state of affairs should cause philosophers to view the thought-experimental method with considerable concern. According to Sunstein, philosophical analysis based on the exotic moral dilemmas typical of intuition pumps is “inadvertently and
even comically replicating the early work of Kahneman and Tversky, by uncovering situations in which intuitions, normally quite sensible, turn out to misfire.”[9]

How might this situation be rectified? One might, of course, eschew thought experiments in ethical theorizing. While this methodological austerity is not without appeal, it comes at a cost; despite the difficulties, thought experiments are a window, in some cases the only accessible window, on important regions of ethical experience. In so far as it is disconnected from the thoughts and feels of the lived ethical life, ethical theory risks being “motivationally inaccessible,” or incapable of engaging the ethical concern of agents who are supposed to live in accordance with the normative standards of the theory. Fortunately, there is another possibility: initiate a research program that systematically investigates responses to intuition pumps. In effect, the idea is to subject philosophical thought experiments to the critical methods of experimental social psychology. If investigations employing different experimental scenarios and subject populations reveal a clear trend in responses, we can begin to have some confidence that we are identifying a deeply and widely shared moral conviction. Philosophical discussion may establish that convictions of this sort should serve as a constraint on moral theory, while responses to thought experiments that empirical research determines to lack such solidity, such as those susceptible to framing effects or admitting of strong cultural variation, may be ones that ethical theorists can safely disregard.

4. MORAL BEHAVIOR AND THE ARCHITECTURE OF DECISION-MAKING

It is widely accepted that humans are averse to performing harmful actions and that this emotional response explains important properties of moral judgment and behavior. The specific nature of this emotional response, however, remains poorly understood. Some past models have assumed that the aversion stems from empathy; that is, the anticipated outcome of a suffering victim. But in recent research, we have demonstrated that another powerful contributor is an intrinsic aversion to certain canonically harmful actions, including even their sensory-motor properties. This line of research reveals deep and promising connections between the study of moral behavior and current neurocomputational models of learning and choice (Cushman, 2013; Cushman, 2015). At its heart is a distinction between psychological systems that learn the value of outcomes and those that learn the value of actions.
In one study, participants were asked to perform a series of pretend harmful actions toward an experimenter—for instance, shooting him in the face with a disabled handgun (Cushman, Grey, Gaffey & Mendes, 2012). This preserved the sensory-motor properties of an action while removing any expectation of an actual harmful outcome. Participants exhibited a large increase in peripheral vasoconstriction, a physiological state associated with an aversive emotional response. Critically, this response was significantly weaker if the participant merely watched an experimenter perform the action on another experimenter. These results point toward an intrinsic aversion to sensory-motor properties of a canonically harmful act, independent of the expected outcome of that act.

In another study, we asked participants how averse they would be to performing different methods of mercy killing: Giving a poison pill, shooting, suffocating, etc. (Miller, Hannikainan & Cushman, in press). We found that their reported aversion was not significantly predicted by the amount of suffering they expected the victim to experience (an outcome), but was almost perfectly predicted by their reported aversion to pretending to kill a person in the specified manner as part of a theatrical performance (preserving the sensory-motor properties of the action but without any harmful outcome or suffering).

Although these findings expose an apparent irrationality in the structure of our moral emotions, they are readily explained on the assumption that moral behavior is influenced by a specific class of ordinary, domain-general learning mechanisms (Cushman, 2013). Current computational and neurobiological theories of associative learning distinguish between two basic mechanisms for learning and deciding. One assigns value directly to stimulus-response associations (“pointing gun at face = bad”) and functions primarily through the midbrain dopamine system and basal ganglia. This system provides a natural model for understanding the aversion to harmful actions based on sensory-motor properties. In recent research we have shown that the same system can assign value to more abstract cognitive structures such as goals or intentions (Cushman & Morris 2015). This provides a potential explanation for a much-studied quirk of moral judgment called the "doctrine of double effect" (Cushman, 2014), and also illustrates how heuristic value assignment can operate over the kind of abstract representations that pervade moral thought [10].

Equally important, however, is another system that derives value from a causal model of expected outcomes (“pulling a trigger causes shooting, which causes harm, which is bad”) and draws on a network of cortical brain areas. We have proposed that both of these systems contribute to moral judgment and behavior and that conflict between the systems provides a
natural dual-process model for the moral domain as well as for cognition generally, with substantial advantages over the more traditional contrast between emotion and reasoning. Consistent with this interpretation, moral judgments of trolley-type dilemmas exhibit sensitivity to both action-based and outcome-based value representations, which are themselves dissociable (Miller et al., 2014).

Notably, these studies imply that one's own aversion to performing an action ultimately contributes to the moral condemnation of third-party action. In current research, we are testing a model for this first-person to third-person transfer, which we call "evaluative simulation." Past research has emphasized the role that simulation may play in describing, explaining and predicting others' behavior (i.e., theory of mind). We propose a parallel process by which simulation is used to evaluate another person's behavior. In other words, a common way of asking, "Was it wrong for her to do it?" is to instead evaluate, "How would it make me feel to do it?"[11].

5. CONCLUSIONS

Progress in ethical theorizing often requires progress on difficult psychological questions about how human beings can be expected to function in moral contexts. It is no surprise, then, that moral psychology is a central area of inquiry in philosophical ethics. It should also come as no surprise that empirical research, such as that conducted in psychology departments, may substantially abet such inquiry. Nor then, should it surprise that research in moral psychology has become methodologically pluralistic, exploiting the resources of, and endeavoring to contribute to, various disciplines. Here, we have illustrated how such interdisciplinary inquiry may proceed with regard to central problems in philosophical ethics. We depart with the hope that we have begun to chart the lines of further progress.

REFERENCES


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