Lecture 01 : Moral Psychology

Stephen A. Butterfill
< s.butterfill@warwick.ac.uk >

Tuesday, 12th January 2021

Contents

1.   Introduction

Humans have ethical abilities–abilities to act in accordance with ethical considerations, to make ethical judgements, to exercise moral suasion, and to feel things in response to unethical or superordinate acts. Moral psychology is the study of the psychological aspects of these ethical abilities. The questions for this course are: 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?

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

The Overall Questions for this course are:

- 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.   How to Use the Online Lectures

Watch with a friend, and talk. Take notes. Use the 2x speed option. Skip around. Ask questions.

You can use the online lectures however you like, of course. But I do have some ideas ...

Watch with a friend, and talk as you watch.

Take notes. (The notes on these pages are intended to provide some key quotes and a list of references to save you some writing; they do not cover everything in the lecture recordings.)

Speed the videos up. I try to speak slowly enough that you may be able to watch at 1.5x or 2x speed.

If you understand a lecture recording, you probably don't need to read the notes as well. (Alternatively, reading the notes might save you some time understanding the recording.)

Skip around. If it's too boring, move on. Don't aim to use all the recordings and notes.

Most importantly, **ask questions**:

- Put them to your lecture buddy or buddies.

- Add them to the chat for the next Whole-Class Live Question Session.
- Ask them in your seminar.

3.   Components of This Course

How your assessment breaks down, what the formative (non-assessed) work is, and what the main events each week are for.

The video incorrectly mentions tasks on zoxiy. I removed all these tasks. (In response to feedback from last term.)

4.   Why Investigate Moral Psychology?

We consider three reasons (and one non-reason) for studying investigating moral psychology. This is not supposed to be an exhaustive list.

4.1.   Background: 'intuitive ethics'

Haidt & Joseph (2004) and 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

4.2.   Moral Psychology matters for understanding 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).

Further, 'humans (both individually and as a species) develop morality because it is required for cooperative systems to flourish' (Hamlin 2015, p. 108)}

4.3.   Moral Psychology matters for understanding 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).

4.4. Will moral Psychology change how philospohers do ethics?

Several claims in the literature imply that it will:

> 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).

> 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).

A key issue on this course is whether discoveries about moral psychology justify any such claims.

5.   Two Questions about Moral Intuitions

Moral intuitions are unreflective ethical judgements. Do emotions influence moral intutions? And what do adult humans compute that enables their unreflective judgements to track moral attributes (such as wrongness)?

Our long term aim is to answer this question: [Question 1] Do emotions influence moral intuitions?

5.1.   What are moral intuitions?

According to this lecturer: *moral intuitions* are unreflective ethical judgements.

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

As well as moral intuitions, humans have linguistic intuitions and mathematical intuitions. Mathematical intuitions appear to be underpinned by relatively automatic processes which are independent of other mathematical abilities and may also be domain specific. It is possible that the same is true

of moral intuitions. But note that we have not assumed this in characterising them as unreflective ethical judgements.

Note that moral intuitions are not to be conflated with what philosophers call intuitions.[1]

5.2.   Question 2

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

To illustrate the distinction between tracking and computing: a motion detector tracks the presence of people by computing patterns of infrared energy.

5.3.   The Affect Heuristic

The Affect Heuristic offers an answer to Questions 1 and 2.

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

Why is this an answer to Question 2? Because i t says that humans *compute* how an act makes them feel in order to *track* whether it is morally wrong.

Compare: humans track the toxicity of potential foods by computing how smelling or tasting the potential food makes them feel.

What about Question 1? If the Affect Heuristic is a true answer to Question 2, then the answer to Question 1 is yes, emotions do influence moral intuitions. For it is by computing emotions that our moral intuitions track moral attributes. (This assumes that feeling bad is an emotion, of course.)

Note that we have not yet considered whether the Affect Hypothesis is true.

6.   Moral Intuitions and Emotions: Evidence

What evidence might support Sinnott-Armstrong et al (2010)'s view that unreflective ethical judgements are the product of an affect heuristic?

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

---

[1] For example, Bedke (2008, p. 253) offers two ways of characterising what philosophers call intuitions: 'intuitions are understandings of self-evident propositions, where such understanding alone is sufficient for justification' and 'intuitions are sui generis seeming states [...] which are like [..] seemings based on sensory experience [...] in the way they justify'. Neither of these is a moral intuition for the purposes of this couse.

Hypothesis: They rely on the Affect Heuristic.

How can we tell whether the Hypothesis is correct? By testing its predictions …

Prediction generated by the Hypothesis: 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 that the Prediction is correct:

> '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)

(Schnall et al. 2008, p. 1106) summarise their discoveries in this way:

> '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.'

We should be cautious in putting too much weight on a single study, of course. Ideally we will have a range of studies, using different paradigms, from different labs. We should also consider evidence which does, or appears to, conflict with the Hypothesis. (It's common for a hypothesis to generate one prediction which is confirmed, leading us to provisionally accept it, only to discover, perhaps much later, another prediction which is falsified.)

Provisionally, we may draw four conclusions: > 1. 'the effect of disgust applies regardless of whether the action to be judged is itself disgusting. 1. disgust influenced moral, but not additional nonmoral, judgments. 1. 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. 1. induced sadness did not have similar effects' (Schnall et al. 2008, pp. 1105–6).

6.1.   Appendix: Some details

You probably don't need to read this, but you may be curious. And I'm usually going to expect you to get the details from the paper yourself, but as it's early in the course …

6.2.   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{:target="_blank"}, 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)

6.3.   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 Himalayas. 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

7

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?

7.   Conclusion

We have seen some evidence for the view that emotions influence moral intuitions; but, by itself, that evidence is far from sufficient to draw a conclusion. More research is needed.

8.   Seminar Tasks (yyrama)

The most important work on this course, apart from the assessments, is the weekly seminar tasks. You need to submit some work before your seminar each week. This mostly involves writing, or re-writing, a mini essay as well as peer-reviewing another student's work. The seminars exist for you to discuss your writing.

Sign up on yyrama and let yyrama know which seminar group you are in.

You can find the weekly essays and peer reviews here:

```
https://yyrama.butterfill.com/course/view/moralPsychology
```

If you attend a different seminar group one week, please update your seminar group on yyrama so that your work goes to your tutor.

9.   Question Session 01

These are the recordings of the live online whole-class question session. They are usually available on the day after the session. (You may need to refresh this page to make them appear.)

9.1.   Disgust: Nikki's Question

> 'Disgust is thought to have originated in distaste, a food-rejection impulse or motivation triggered by the ingestion of unpleasant-tasting substances, prototypically those that are bitter (Chapman, Kim, Susskind, & Anderson, 2009; Rozin & Fallon, 1987). Because many bitter substances are toxic (Garcia, Hankins, Denton, & Coghlan, 1975), the role of distaste in food rejection has a clear and concrete adaptive function. Distaste appears to have very ancient origins: Even sea anemones, which first evolved some 500 million years ago, will expel bitter foods from their gastric cavity (Garcia et al., 1975)' (Chapman & Anderson 2013, p. 300).

Chapman et al. (2009, p. 1222) provide an important clue on how to think about disgust when they refer to 'the primitive motivational system of disgust'. My proposal would be that we treat disgust as a primary motivational state.

For a basic introduction to primary ('primitive') motivational states, see:

- `https://mind-and-reality.butterfill.com/lecture_18_stream.html#action/motivational_states`

9.2.   Liberty: Bruno's Question

Bruno asked:

> Is there a particular reason, why in your lecture you listed only 5 of the 6 virtues related to Moral Foundations Theory? Missing Liberty/Opression

I checked this: there is. Liberty comes later than the others (Iyer et al. 2012) and it not measured in the Moral Foundations Questionnaire.

There's also a bit of a puzzle about the postulation of this foundation. Roughly, Iyer et al. (2012) found a group of people where the foundations do not appear to work (and we'll see later that others have found further groups; in particular, Davis et al. (2016)). On the face of it, this looks like an objection to the theory. Why is postulating an additional foundation a good response to that objection?

Haidt et al's own answer to this question does not appear convincing:

> 'MFT's five moral foundations appeared to be inadequate in capturing libertarians' moral concerns, but the approach that gave birth to these foundations served us well in examining this new group, and stimulated us to consider Liberty/oppression as a candidate for addition to our list of foundations' (Graham et al. 2013, p. 87).

I do think there might be more compelling answers to the question of why postulating an additional foundation is a good response to the objection. But I would not start from the view that the foundations should include Liberty — the case for that is quite different from the case for the other foundations.

Glossary

Affect Heuristic In the context of moral psychology, the Affect Heuristic is this principle: 'if thinking about an act [...] makes you feel bad [...], then judge that it is morally wrong' (Sinnott-Armstrong et al. 2010). These authors hypothesise that the Affect Heuristic explains moral intuitions.

A different (but related) Affect Heurstic has also be postulated to explain how people make judgements about risky things are: The more dread you feel when imagining an event, the more risky you should judge it is (see Pachur et al. 2012, which is discussed in **??**). 5, 6

heuristic A *heuristic* links an inaccessible attribute to an accessible attribute such that, within a limited but useful range of situations, someone could track the inaccessible attribute by computing the accessible attribute. 5

Moral Foundations Theory The theory that moral pluralism is true; moral foundations are innate but also subject to cultural learning, and the Social Intuitionist Model of Moral Judgement is correct (Graham et al. 2019). Proponents often claim, further, that cultural variation in how

these innate foundations are woven into ethical abilities can be measured using the Moral Foundations Questionnare (Graham et al. 2009; Graham et al. 2011). Some empirical objections have been offered (Davis et al. 2016; Davis et al. 2017; Doğruyol et al. 2019). See **??**. 9

moral intuition According to this lecturer, moral intuitions are unreflective ethical judgements.

According to Sinnott-Armstrong et al. (2010, p. 256), moral intuitions are 'strong, stable, immediate moral beliefs.' 5

moral psychology The study of ethical abilities. These include abilities to act in accordance with ethical considerations, to make ethical judgments, to exercise moral suasion, and to feel things in response to unethical or superordinate acts. 4

Social Intuitionist Model of Moral Judgement A model on which intuitive processes are directly responsible for moral judgements (Haidt & Bjorklund 2008). One's own reasoning does not typically affect one's own moral judgements, but (outside philosophy, perhaps) is typically used only to provide post-hoc justification after moral judgements are made. Reasoning does affect others' moral intuitions, and so provides a mechanism for cultural learning. 10

track For a process to *track* an attribute is for the presence or absence of the attribute to make a difference to how the process unfolds, where this is not an accident. (And for a system or device to track an attribute is for some process in that system or device to track it.)

Tracking an attribute is contrasted with *computing* it. Unlike tracking, computing typically requires that the attribute be represented. (The distinction between tracking and computing is a topic of 5.) 5

unfamiliar problem An unfamiliar problem (or situation) is one 'with which we have inadequate evolutionary, cultural, or personal experience' (Greene 2014, p. 714). 4

References

Bedke, M. S. (2008). Ethical Intuitions: What They Are, What They Are Not, and How They Justify. *American Philosophical Quarterly, 45*(3), 253–269.

Chapman, H. A. & Anderson, A. K. (2013). Things rank and gross in nature: A review and synthesis of moral disgust. *Psychological Bulletin, 139*(2), 300–327.

Chapman, H. A., Kim, D. A., Susskind, J. M., & Anderson, A. K. (2009). In Bad Taste: Evidence for the Oral Origins of Moral Disgust. *Science*, *323*(5918), 1222–1226.

Davis, D., Dooley, M., Hook, J., Choe, E., & McElroy, S. (2017). The Purity/Sanctity Subscale of the Moral Foundations Questionnaire Does Not Work Similarly for Religious Versus Non-Religious Individuals. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*, *9*(1), 124–130.

Davis, D., Rice, K., Tongeren, D. V., Hook, J., DeBlaere, C., Worthington, E., & Choe, E. (2016). The Moral Foundations Hypothesis Does Not Replicate Well in Black Samples. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *110*(4).

Doğruyol, B., Alper, S., & Yilmaz, O. (2019). The five-factor model of the moral foundations theory is stable across WEIRD and non-WEIRD cultures. *Personality and Individual Differences*, *151*, 109547.

Graham, J., Haidt, J., Koleva, S., Motyl, M., Iyer, R., Wojcik, S. P., & Ditto, P. H. (2013). Moral Foundations Theory: The Pragmatic Validity of Moral Pluralism. In P. Devine & A. Plant (Eds.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, volume 47 (pp. 55–130). Academic Press.

Graham, J., Haidt, J., Motyl, M., Meindl, P., Iskiwitch, C., & Mooijman, M. (2019). Moral Foundations Theory: On the advantages of moral pluralism over moral monism. In K. Gray & J. Graham (Eds.), *Atlas of Moral Psychology*. New York: Guilford Publications.

Graham, J., Haidt, J., & Nosek, B. A. (2009). Liberals and conservatives rely on different sets of moral foundations. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *96*(5), 1029–1046.

Graham, J., Nosek, B. A., Haidt, J., Iyer, R., Koleva, S., & Ditto, P. H. (2011). Mapping the moral domain. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, *101*(2), 366–385.

Greene, J. D. (2014). Beyond Point-and-Shoot Morality: Why Cognitive (Neuro)Science Matters for Ethics. *Ethics*, *124*(4), 695–726.

Haidt, J. & Bjorklund, F. (2008). Social intuitionists answer six questions about moral psychology. In W. Sinnott-Armstrong (Ed.), *Moral Psychology, Vol 2: The Cognitive Science of Morality: Intuition and Diversity* chapter 4, (pp. 181–217). Cambridge, Mass: MIT press.

Haidt, J. & Graham, J. (2007). When Morality Opposes Justice: Conservatives Have Moral Intuitions that Liberals may not Recognize. *Social Justice Research*, *20*(1), 98–116.

Haidt, J. & Joseph, C. (2004). Intuitive ethics: How innately prepared intuitions generate culturally variable virtues. *Daedalus, 133*(4), 55–66.

Hamlin, J. K. (2015). The infantile origins of our moral brains. In T. Wheatley & J. Decety (Eds.), *The moral brain: A multidisciplinary perspective* (pp. 105–122). Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.

Iyer, R., Koleva, S., Graham, J., Ditto, P., & Haidt, J. (2012). Understanding Libertarian Morality: The Psychological Dispositions of Self-Identified Libertarians. *PLOS ONE, 7*(8), e42366.

Lerner, J. S., Small, D. A., & Loewenstein, G. (2004). Heart Strings and Purse Strings: Carryover Effects of Emotions on Economic Decisions. *Psychological Science, 15*(5), 337–341.

Markowitz, E. M. & Shariff, A. F. (2012). Climate change and moral judgement. *Nature Climate Change, 2*(4), 243–247.

Pachur, T., Hertwig, R., & Steinmann, F. (2012). How Do People Judge Risks: Availability Heuristic, Affect Heuristic, or Both? *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Applied, 18*(3), 314–330.

Richerson, P. J. & Boyd, R. (1999). Complex societies. *Human Nature, 10*(3), 253–289.

Schnall, S., Haidt, J., Clore, G. L., & Jordan, A. H. (2008). Disgust as Embodied Moral Judgment. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 34*(8), 1096–1109.

Sinnott-Armstrong, W., Young, L., & Cushman, F. (2010). Moral intuitions. In J. M. Doris, M. P. R. Group, et al. (Eds.), *The moral psychology handbook* (pp. 246–272). Oxford: OUP.