Morality 2: Innate Bases & Moral Syntax

Foundations Of Mind
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Evidence For Innate Moral Sense

• Evidence 1: Comforting behavior in Chimps and Children
• Evidence 2: Early understanding of moral/conventional distinction in children and its absence in psychopaths
• Evidence 3: Cognitive impenetrability of moral commitments: Moral intuitions can not be justified, but are universal

Evidence 1:
Comforting behavior in Chimps and Children

• A juvenile male embraces a screaming adult male, Yoroen, who has just lost a confrontation with his chief rival. (de Waal, 1982)

De Waal and Aureli (1996)

• Looked at affiliative contacts (kissing, embracing, grooming, gentle touching, mounting) directed by bystanders toward conflict participants.
• Contacts were studied after:
  – strict aggression
  – mild aggression
  – and during randomly chosen baseline periods

Check out how sad poor Yoroen is that he got wooped on
Comforting in other animals summary

- Chimpanzees, but not macaques, approach victims of aggression and engage in various affiliative actions (embracing, gentle touching, grooming, etc.).
- These approaches appear to be attempts at consolation rather than peace-making - since they are directed at victims rather than aggressors.
- Chimps as our moral cousins?
Michael, 15 months, is struggling with his friend Paul over a toy. Paul starts to cry. Michael appears concerned and lets go of the toy so Paul has it. But Paul continues to cry. Michael pauses, then gives his own teddy bear to Paul; Paul continues crying. Michael pauses again, runs to the next room, gets Paul’s security blanket, and gives it to him. Paul stops crying.

Anecdote from Hoffman (1976):

Dunn & Kendrick (1982)

- 15-month-old, Len, was a stocky boy with a fine round tummy, and he played at this time a particular game with his parents that always made them laugh. His game was to come toward them, walking in an odd way, pulling up his T-shirt and showing his big stomach.
- One day his elder brother fell off the climbing frame in the garden and cried vigorously. Len watched solemnly. Then he approached his brother, pulling up his T-shirt and showing his tummy, vocalizing, and looking at his brother.
Summary Evidence 1:
Comforting Behavior in Chimps & Children

- Both children and chimps show comforting behavior that is more than mere distress
- This behavior emerges early in development (2 year olds) and is not mere mimicry of adult behavior (e.g. getting the blanky)

Evidence 2:
Moral/Conventional Distinction

Social convention transgression story:
"At Grove School, children are allowed to talk in class without raising their hand. It’s ok to talk without raising your hand. Do you think it’s right for Grove School to say you can talk without raising your hand if you want to?"

Moral transgression story:
"At the Park School, children are allowed to hit and push if they want to. It’s ok to hit and push others. Do you think it’s right for Park School to say kids can hit and push others if they want to?"

Moral/Conventional Distinction

Mean judgments of seriousness of transgression

Seriousness scale: 1-10

3yr boys  3yr girls  4yr boys  4yr girls  Psychopaths

• 3&4-year olds treat moral transgressions differently than conventional transgressions
Moral/Conventional Distinction

• Normal children differentiate moral from conventional rules
• Psychopaths think that violating either of these rules is serious
• Normal children think that you can change a conventional rule, but not a moral rule
• Psychopaths think that neither of these rules can be changed
• Further evidence: Normal adults will show arousal (higher skin conductance) to images of a threat, and to images of distress in another person.
• Psychopaths, while they show a response to threat, show no response to distress in another person
• Psychopaths are missing the innate distress detector that children and chimps have

Is this innate knowledge?

Two options:

YES, children know that there will be two different kinds of rules (similar to how children know that there will be two kinds of entities, animate and inanimate)

No, children must learn that these two types of rules are different

How might children learn to distinguish the two types of rules?

First way: Parents might respond more strongly to moral vs. conventional breaches
  “go to your room” vs. “go to your room and no supper for you”

Second way: Parents might respond differentially to moral vs. conventional breaches
  “Look at the mess you made!” vs. “Think how you would feel if he did that to you!”

Third way: Moral breaches (hitting, stealing) might cause distress.
  Children notice which actions cause distress in others; these become the moral breaches

No evidence for First way

Proportion of moral and conventional transgressions responded to by younger and older toddlers and by adults (Smetana, 1984)

• Adults do not respond more strongly to moral breaches…
• A fortiori, Strictness of punishment from a parent is negatively correlated with later levels of moral reasoning and moral behavior in a child (Hoffman, 1983)!
Some Evidence For Second way

Hetherington & Parke (1999)

- Conventional: Mothers of 2-year-olds responded to social-conventional violations with rules about social order and social regulation that focused on the disorder that the act created (“Look at the mess you made!”).
- Moral: In contrast, mothers responses’ to moral transgressions focused on the consequences of the acts for other’s rights and welfare or made perspective-taking requests (“Think about how you would feel if you were hit!”).

Some Evidence For Third way

Veterans and novices at preschool:
(Siegal & Storey, 1985)

- Preschool novices treat both moral and conventional as serious
- Preschool veterans judge conventional breaches more lightly
- Children who have been in preschool longer differentiate more sharply moral breaches from conventional breaches

A Possible Story

- Experience with other children provides a criterion (no-distress versus distress) for down-grading the seriousness of a conventional breach
- By implication, interaction with other young children helps mark the distinction

Origins of Morality, Summary Evidence 2:
Moral/Conventional Distinction

- By 3 year-of-age children differentiate between moral and conventional rules
- Psychopaths never make this distinction
- Psychopaths do not recognize distress cues in another’s face
- Children rely on distress cues to show them which violations are moral
- And may also rely on differential reinforcement
- Moral = rule + distress

X Alternative 1: Parents respond more strongly to moral vs. conventional breaches
  “go to your room” vs. “go to your room and no supper for you”
✓ Alternative 2: Parents respond differentially to moral vs. conventional breaches
  “Look at the mess you made!” vs. “Think how you would feel if he did that to you!”
✓ Alternative 3: Moral breaches (hitting, stealing) cause distress.
  Children notice which actions cause distress in others; these become the moral breaches

Evidence 3:
Are The Bases Of Our Moral Intuitions Modular (cognitively impenetrable)?

“Julie and Mark are brother and sister. They are traveling together in France on summer vacation from college. One night they are staying alone in a cabin near the beach. They decide that it would be interesting and fun if they tried making love. At the very least it would be a new experience for each of them. Julie was already taking birth control pills, but Mark uses a condom too, just to be safe. They both enjoy making love, but they decide not to do it again. They keep that night as a special secret, which makes them feel even closer to each other. What do you think about that? Was it OK for them to make love?”

(Haidt et al., 2000; Haidt, 2001)
A typical dialogue

E: Is it OK?
S: No, it is definitely not ok.
E: Why?
S: (pause). Well, for one thing it’s incest and that’s bad, it leads to birth defects.
E: But they’re using two kinds of contraceptives—is it still wrong if there isn’t a baby?
S: Yes.
E: Why?
S: (pause). Well, it would be bad for the rest of the family.
E: But they don’t tell anyone. …

S: I don’t know. I can’t explain it. But I just know it’s wrong.

How can we study moral principles?

Language: is the following sentence grammatical?
“Je ne pas parle de francais”
“Me hablo no espanol”
“Him english no speak”

Noam Chomsky
Jon Haidt
John Mikhail

Morality: is the following action permissible?

Insights from moral philosophy
(Foot, 1967; Thomson, 1985)

“Mary is the only lifeguard at the beach, with just one boat, when two pleasure boats are capsized by large waves. One person, who was in a small boat, is calling urgently for help in one place. Five people, who were in a large boat, are calling urgently for help in another place. None of the people can swim. If Mary takes the boat to the one person, the five will drown. If she takes the boat to the five people, the one will drown.”

Is it morally permissible for Mary to save the five people who were in the big boat, letting the one person from the small boat drown?

Why?

Principle 1: utilitarianism (greatest good for the greatest number)

Utilitarianism?
Dr. Brown has five patients in the hospital who are dying. Each patient needs a new organ in order to survive. Dr. Brown can save all five patients if he takes a single healthy person and removes her heart, kidneys, and lungs to give to these five patients. Just such a healthy person is in Room 306, awaiting routine tests. If Dr. Brown cuts up the person in Room 306 and gives her organs to the other five patients, he will save the other five patients but kill the person in Room 306 in the process. If Dr. Brown does not cut up the person in Room 306, the other five patients will die.

Is it morally permissible for Dr. Brown to cut up the person in Room 306?

Why?

Principle 2: Do no harm (killing vs. letting die)
Killing vs. letting die?
Denise is a passenger on a trolley whose brakes have failed on a steep slope and whose driver has fainted. On the track ahead are five people; they do not see the trolley and cannot get off the tracks in time. The track has a side track leading off to the right, and Denise can turn the train onto it. Unfortunately, there is one person standing on the right hand track. Denise can turn the train, killing the one; or she can keep the train on its current course, letting the 5 die.

Is it morally permissible for Denise to turn the train to the side track?
Why?
What’s different from the surgeon case?

Surgeons vs. bystanders?
Nancy is taking her daily walk near the train tracks when she notices that the train that is approaching is out of control. Five men are standing on the tracks. The train is moving so fast that they will not be able to get off the track in time. Nancy is standing next to a man with a heavy backpack, whom she can throw in front of the train, thereby stopping the train and preventing it from killing the men. Nancy can throw the man, killing him but saving the five men, or she can refrain from doing this, letting the five die.

Is it morally permissible for Nancy to throw the man in front of the train?
Why?
What’s different from the side track case?

Some features that do not distinguish the side track case from the man w/ backpack case:
Beliefs: Both actors believe that their action will kill one man.
Desires: Both actors want to save the 5; that desire motivates their actions.
Outcomes: 1 killed, 5 saved in each case; same mode of killing.
Actions? pulling lever vs. pushing man; not known if intuitions would change if the actions were equated
Perhaps we can learn the syntax of moral judgments
By studying many different scenarios
Currently being studied by John Mikhail at Georgetown

Insights from brains
fMRI studies of moral reasoning (Greene et al, 2001):
Superior Temporal Sulcus (STS): person representations, biological motion
Insights from babies

--goal of pushing: to get the man w/ backpack on the tracks. Nancy’s action is to kill the man.

--goal of pulling lever: to get the train turned away from the 5 people on the tracks. Denise’s action is to turn the train.

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Insights from babies

1. Infants represent actions as goal-directed only if they are intentional.

We have different moral intuitions about intentional vs. unintentional actions.

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Insights from babies

2. Infants represent actions as goal-directed if they are performed by humans but not if they are performed by inanimate objects.

We have different moral intuitions about actions performed by persons vs. machines.

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Haidt’s account of moral reasoning

When we are asked to justify our emotional reactions, we grasp at reasons that are post-hoc, even wrong.

When we engage in moral reasoning, we do so to justify our already-made moral judgments.

Haidt:
“The reasoning process is more like a lawyer defending a client than a judge or scientist seeking truth. It constructs justifications of intuitive judgments, causing the illusion of objective reasoning.”

William James:
“A great many people think they are thinking when they are merely rearranging their prejudices.”

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