

ETHICS AND PSYCHOLOGY

Jesse Prinz

Historically, philosophers have had a great deal of interest in science. Thinkers as diverse as Aristotle, Descartes, and Berkeley made important contributions to a range of scientific fields. In more recent times, however, philosophers have often had an anti-scientific (or perhaps trans-scientific) orientation. Nowhere is this attitude more keenly felt than in moral philosophy. Here, it is sometimes suggested that the very nature of the subject matter defies empirical inquiry. Morality is normative. It describes how things should be, not how they are. And moral rules, like rules of logic, are necessary, unlike the contingent regularities with which scientists are typically preoccupied. Kant (1998/1785: Preface) expresses this attitude in an influential passage:

Now it is only a pure philosophy that we can look for the moral law in its purity and genuineness. ... That which mingles these pure principles with the empirical does not deserve the name of ... moral philosophy, since by this confusion it even spoils the purity of morals themselves, and counteracts its own end.

Despite this widespread view, social scientists have recently taken a serious interest in morality. Whatever one wants to say about normativity, there are obviously aspects of human behavior that issue from the moral values we hold dear, and these can be empirically investigated. Philosophers who study this work (and, at times, contribute to it) are coming to realize that psychological findings may actually bear on philosophical theories (Flanagan 1991; Doris 2002; Nichols 2004; Sripada and Stich 2005; Prinz 2007; Sinnott-Armstrong 2009/2008). That will be the claim defended and illustrated in this chapter.

The subject of moral philosophy has traditional subdivisions. Some study moral psychology (the way people think about the moral domain), others study meta-ethics (the ultimate metaphysical basis of our moral claims), and others study normative ethics (the question of what we ought to do or how we ought to be). Now it might be taken as obvious that scientific psychology can contribute to moral psychology. But even here there is some resistance, as we will see. Less

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obvious is the contention that scientific psychology can contribute to meta-ethics, since meta-ethics concerns what, if anything, makes our moral convictions true, not the convictions themselves. And equally controversial is the claim that scientific psychology can contribute to normative ethics, because psychology is in the business of description, not prescription. I will try to show that scientific psychology contributes to all three subdivisions, though I will spend most of the discussion on the first. My claim will not be that philosophy should be replaced by psychology. Rather, I think the two work in concert. To echo Kant in another context, theory without data is empty, and data without theory are blind.

Internalism, externalism, and empirical inquiry

Moral psychology is the study of psychological states associated with morality. Broad topics include moral motivation, emotion, deliberation, and development. Many of these are studied in psychology. For example, there is a massive literature on moral development, which has clear connections to philosophy: Aristotle writes about moral development, and the most influential psychologist in the area, Lawrence Kohlberg (1984), argued that children progress through a series of developmental stages that mirror major theories in normative ethics (from Aristotle to Mill to Kant). But there are also some topics in moral psychology that have been dominated by philosophical discussion, and, in some of these cases, there is an implicit assumption that empirical psychology may not be especially helpful. This is especially the case when issues in moral psychology turn on conceptual claims. It is philosophers, not psychologists, who purport to specialize in conceptual analysis. Claims in moral psychology that have a conceptual dimension have, therefore, been approached without drawing heavily on empirical evidence. I think this is a mistake.

To make this case, I will focus on a central controversy in moral psychology: the debate between motive externalists and motive internalists. A motive externalist says that motivation is independent from moral judgment, so that when one makes a moral judgment one is not, thereby, motivated to act in accordance with that judgment. Motive internalists, on the other hand, say that there is a necessary connection between moral judgment and motivation. Sometimes this connection is presented as the view that moral judgments are intrinsically motivating: if I judge that charity is good, I am thereby in a motivational state that disposes me to give to charity. This link may be defeasible, because there may be countervailing interests that prevent one from acting on or even experiencing one's moral motivations. But, barring weakness of will or other forms of practical irrationality, moral judgments compel action, according to the internalist (Smith 1994).

On the face of it, this may look like a straightforward empirical debate. Either moral judgments motivate, or they do not, and whether they do can be tested in

a psychology lab. But philosophers who have weighed in on the debate have rarely looked at empirical psychology. Let's put aside the possibility that philosophers are lazy, methodologically reckless, ill-equipped to understand psychology, or irrationally biased against other fields. Philosophers think there are two good reasons to approach the debate from the armchair. First, they note that the debate is conceptual. Internalists claim that there is a *necessary* connection between morality and motivation; one *could not* make a moral judgment without being disposed to act. This modal claim is supposed to derive from a conceptual truth – something about our moral concept. The concept of moral goodness is supposed to entail something relating to motivation, and conceptual truths are best discovered using conceptual analysis, rather than empirical observation. Call the view expressed in the last sentence the conceptual thesis.

The second reason for resisting empirical approaches is that the opposing views may make similar empirical predictions. Externalists admit that moral judgments are typically associated with motivational states. Most of us desire to act in accordance with morality, so when we make moral judgments we are motivated. They simply claim that this link is causal rather than constitutive. Likewise, internalists admit that we are not always practically rational. As a result, the motivational states that should come along with moral judgments can fail to arise. The connection is dispositional and the dispositions are not realized in every case. Thus, empirical evidence showing that motivations arise in the context of moral judgment would not entail internalism, and evidence to the contrary would not entail externalism. Call this the empirical intractability thesis. The conceptual thesis relates to the empirical intractability thesis in the following way. According to the conceptual thesis, the debate between internalists and externalists is a conceptual or semantic debate, concerning the meaning or moral concepts. Psychology tells us about causes and correlations, not conceptual constituency. Therefore, psychological findings just can't settle the debate.

Let me address these two concerns in turn. First, consider the conceptual thesis, which says that the debate in question should be investigated using conceptual analysis rather than empirical methods. This is problematic for two reasons. First, the contrast between conceptual and empirical matters is a version of the analytic/synthetic distinction. To say that a debate is conceptual is to say that it is a debate about the analytic entailment of a concept. Since Quine's (1953) critique, the notion of analyticity has been called into question. While it is often the case that people understand one concept by appeal to another, these associations are characteristically revisable in light of empirical evidence. Thus, scientific discoveries might lead me to believe that aardvarks are not animals (perhaps they are robots sent to spy on us from another planet), red is not a color (rather it is an experience caused in me by a colorless world), and some bachelors are not male (there may be people with XX chromosomes who look and act male, but are really women). Concepts are something like mini-theories that correspond to our best guess about how the world is, and they are subject

to revision. If not revising, this is not about morality, conceptual analysis.

Now suppose a problem with the conceptual truths is that, in contrast, that conceptual concepts (according to science) are empirically studied. Studies concepts methods can't be concept entails, when those concepts.

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to revision. If my theory of morality specifies that moral judgments are motivating, this is not an analytic truth, but a conjecture that, like any other belief about morality, might be empirically challenged. If this view of concepts is right, conceptual analysis cannot resolve the debate about internalism.

Now suppose Quine was wrong and there are analytic entailments. The second problem with the conceptual thesis is that it mistakenly presupposes that conceptual truths should be studied using non-empirical methods. I claim, in contrast, that conceptual questions *are* empirical questions. The reason is simple: concepts (according to the majority view in the philosophy of mind and cognitive science) are mental representations, and mental representations can be empirically studied. Indeed, there is a massive research area in psychology that studies concepts, and there is absolutely no reason for thinking these research methods can't be applied to moral concepts. If we want to discover what a given concept entails, we can ask ordinary concept users or we measure their behavior when those concepts are being used.

Someone might object that pure philosophical methods are *better* for studying concepts than psychological methods. Philosophers are adept at devising carefully constructed thought experiments, and these can be used to distinguish those features that are merely associated with a given concept and those that are really essential to it. Against this move, I offer three remarks: first, philosophical methods *are* a form of empirical psychology, namely introspective psychology. Philosophers report their intuitions about cases, and intuitions are arrived at by observing one's own psychological states. Second, philosophical thought experiments can be given to untutored subjects and doing so has some advantages over philosophers reporting their own intuitions. Philosophers' intuitions are not theory neutral, which is one reason why philosophers seem to have different intuitions about the same cases, and, even if philosophers can miraculously free themselves from bias, they will be reporting a sample of one, rather than attaining statistical significance by measuring responses in a population. Third, reporting intuitions about what a given concept entails is a measure of our *beliefs* about conceptual entailments, rather than the entailments themselves. To know what a concept entails, the real question is not what I believe it entails, but what features are necessarily applied when the concept is actually used. One can think about concepts as structured entities that contain other concepts (or "features") as parts. My beliefs about what features are part of a given concept may be mistaken. A measure of what features get deployed when the concept is used (rather than reflected upon) would be informative. Psychological methods are useful for that.

Let me turn, now, to the empirical intractability thesis. Psychological research is best equipped to study correlations and causal relations. Now suppose that psychology discovers that people enter motivational states when they make moral judgments: this would not entail internalism. And the opposite discovery would not entail externalism. Is there a way out of this impasse? One thing to

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Second of all, there may be a couple of ways to tease the two accounts empirically apart. For one thing, suppose that the induction of motivational states that have no connection to morality actually influence a person's judgment about what is morally good or bad. This is consistent with internalism, for internalists say that moral judgments essentially involve motivational states. Influencing such states might, on such a view, influence emotions. By comparison imagine an internalist view of humor judgments according to which such judgments essentially involve states of amusement. If such views are correct, then tickling someone should influence their assessment of how funny something is, because it amplifies feelings of amusement. Now suppose that externalism is true. If so, assessments of moral goodness and badness are independent of emotion. Most of us are motivated to act on such judgments, but that motivation is not part of the judgment. Thus, induction of motivational states should affect willingness to act, not the content of evaluation. Likewise, if an externalist theory of humor judgments is correct, then tickling should not influence how funny things seem, only how much we laugh.

Another way to empirically tease apart externalism and internalism is to consider what happens in cases of motivational impairment. If externalism is true, a profound deficit in motivation should not undermine the capacity to make moral judgments. If internalism is true, such a disruption is not entailed (the link between judgment and motivation is defeasible), but it would be predicted (motivational dispositions are part of conceptual competence).

In summary, even if some empirical findings can be accommodated by both internalists and externalists, one of these accounts may offer the better overall explanation. In addition, some empirical findings may be extremely difficult for one of the two accounts to accommodate. One of these accounts could turn out to provide the *only* explanation.

Empirical evidence for internalism

To empirically investigate the debate between internalism and externalism, it is important to gain some clarity on the notion of "motivation." How, according to internalists, do moral judgments motivate? The standard answer is that they

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demands would lead to emotional responses in cases where morality demands nothing of us – passive reflection on imaginary situations. The results are even difficult to square with some forms of internalism. Consider internalist theories that posit a rational as opposed to causal relationship between moral judgments and emotions; such theories say moral judgments *warrant* or *merit* emotional responses (McDowell 1985; Smith 1994). It's far from clear why a hypothetical scenario should warrant an emotion, given that emotions are primarily useful in orchestrating actions. The empirical results may be best explained by those theories that posit a *causal* or *constitutive* link between moral judgments and emotions (Hume 1978/1739; Prinz 2007). Such theories entail that moral judgments will result in emotional responses even when we consider hypothetical cases, just as the evidence suggests. The fact that emotions arise when considering cases that don't rationally require emotions, because they are merely hypothetical, may be taken as evidence for the conclusion that the deployment of moral concepts causes or contains emotions. Thus, empirical findings can help adjudicate between competing versions of internalism.

At this point the externalist might cry foul. Surely the fact that emotions arise when people make moral judgments in hypothetical cases is not *sufficient* to refute externalism. The externalist can introduce theory-saving auxiliary assumptions. For example, ordinary people care about morality, as, consequently, through heavily practiced associations, we tend to get emotional when we consider moral cases, even in the abstract. Alternatively, we may even be the kind of people who like to exhibit moral concern; getting bent out of shape in these hypotheticals conveys how much we care about morality. I think such moves border on being *ad hoc*, but, even if they can be used to block the empirical results mentioned so far, others may be more damaging.

First consider the fact that emotions can influence moral judgment. On the auxiliary hypothesis just considered, emotions are a consequence of moral judgment, not a cause. But the causal arrow can go the other way. For example, Schnall et al. (2008) conducted a study in which they induced disgust in a number of ways: recalling disgusting events, showing disgusting films, and sitting subjects down at a filthy desk, or spraying fart spray in a nearby trash can. In all these cases, some subjects rated moral vignettes as more wrong than subjects in non-disgusting control conditions. This outcome is predicted by internalist views that say emotions are component parts of our moral concepts. If tokens of the judgment that ϕ -ing is wrong contain a negative emotion toward ϕ -ing, then prior induction of negative emotions should amplify one's judgment that ϕ -ing is wrong. Not so if emotions are mere consequences of moral judgment as externalist and some internalist theories would have it.

In response, externalists might concede that emotions are components of some moral judgments in ordinary folks, while insisting that there *could be* moral judgments in the absence of emotion. This modalizing move makes an empirical prediction. If we remove emotions, somehow, the capacity to make

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would clearly be very different in their cognitive significance from ordinary moral concepts, and on most accounts, two concepts that differ in their cognitive significance are conceptually distinct. If externalism amounts to the view that there are possible concepts distinct from ordinary moral concepts that lack a link to motivation, then the thesis loses much of its interest.

I conclude that the prospects for empirically settling the internalism/externalism debate are quite high. Current evidence favors internalism, and compensatory refinements to the theories or novel interpretations of the data can be used to generate new empirical predictions and new tests.

Meta-ethics and normative ethics

I have been arguing that a central debate in philosophical moral psychology can be advanced by looking at empirical research. This flies in the face of standard philosophical practice, but, on reflection, it may not seem very surprising. The internalism/externalism debate concerns the nature of moral judgments and moral judgments are real psychological events that can be empirically investigated. Much harder to defend is the claim that empirical research bears on meta-ethics and normative ethics. Before concluding, I want to briefly indicate how these subfields may have empirical dimensions as well.

First consider meta-ethics. This is the study of what sorts of facts our moral judgments refer to, if any. I have argued that moral concepts are linked to the emotions. More specifically, I suggested that moral concepts contain emotions, which means judgments are felt attitudes towards actions. When we verbally express our judgments, we are expressing how we feel. This sort of position has been traditionally associated with a particular meta-ethical view, expressivism, according to which moral statements do not have truth conditions; they simply express feelings (Stevenson 1937; Ayer 1952; Blackburn 1984; Gibbard 1990). But there are other meta-ethical positions consistent with the discovery that moral judgments contain emotions. Another possibility is that these emotions track mind-independent objective moral properties, just as physical disgust might track the objective property of being a noxious contaminant. A third possibility is that moral emotions represent mind-dependent subjective properties. By analogy, the concept of deliciousness uses gustatory pleasure to track things that are pleasing to the taster, even if no things are delicious to all. The idea that moral concepts represent such subjective properties has been defended by philosophers such as Wiggins (1987) and McDowell (1985). A fourth possibility, put forward by Mackie (1977), is that moral concepts aim to refer to objective properties but fail, because no objective properties fit the bill.

How can we settle this debate in meta-ethics? One answer is that we can use empirical methods. Do people take their moral concepts to be referring? Why not ask them? Positive answers to this question would tell against expressivism.

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Are there objective properties that moral concepts refer to? Why not look? Failure to find a common essence unifying the things we regard as moral or as immoral would tell against objectivism. Do moral concepts fail to refer if there is no objective essence to morality? Why not see whether ordinary people are committed to objectivism? If not, the Mackie's error theory does not follow. Do moral concepts refer to responses-dependent properties? Why not see if people use moral concepts in ways that parallel concepts that seem to designate response-dependent properties, such as beautiful, delicious, or funny? Parallels would favor a subjectivist meta-ethics. Research relevant to all these questions has been conducted. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to review that research here, but I hope these questions have made it clear that meta-ethics can be approached in an empirical way. What our concepts refer to depends on (a) our semantic policies in using them, and (b) what exists out there in the world. Both of these issues can be addressed empirically.

Finally, what of normative ethics? Is Kant right that descriptive psychology cannot contribute to prescriptive morality? Here, again, the answer may be negative. Consider three examples. First, Flanagan (1991) endorses the dictum that ought implies can, and he argues that empirical psychology can constrain normative ethics by studying what we can in fact do. For example, if we are psychologically incapable of impartiality, an ethics that requires impartiality can be rejected. Second, normative theories sometimes postulate capacities that do not, in fact, exist. Doris (2002) and Harman (1999) reject standard virtue ethics on this ground. Virtue ethicists say that the proper subject of morality is the cultivation of good character traits, but Doris and Harman argue on empirical grounds that character traits do not exist in the sense required. Social psychologists have shown that circumstances drive behavior, not enduring, broad-based, causally robust inner traits. Thus, they try to rule out a normative theory by exposing false empirical assumptions. Similarly, one might try to undermine Kantian ethics by arguing that the will is not capable of autonomy in the sense Kant requires, or one can criticize Millian ethics by arguing that Mill misconstrues the nature of happiness. Millgram (2000), for example, argues that happiness registers an upward change in status rather than overall well-being, and, thus, actions that maximize happiness might paradoxically lead to diminished happiness as goals are achieved. Third, if subjectivist meta-ethical theories can be empirically defended, then it follows that the good is that which a moral judge takes to be good. When asked what should I do, morally speaking, the answer given by subjectivists is that I should do what I take myself to be obligated to do. One might also alter a person's subjective sense of what morality requires by presenting empirically informed genealogical studies of that person's deeply held values (Prinz 2007). If subjectivism is true, then such empirical critiques literally alter normative demands.

These examples are controversial, of course, but they illustrate a wide range of ways in which empirical findings could have an impact on normative ethics. A philosophical purist, like Kant, might argue that empirical findings cannot

deliver a complete normative ethical theory. Kant tries to move outside the empirical sphere by offering an armchair analysis of the concept of the good. I have already argued that conceptual analysis is best construed as an empirical enterprise, so Kant's conceptual move does not forestall more empirical approaches. It's hard to imagine any aspect of normative ethical theory that is immune to empirical assessment.

Conclusion

I tried to show that empirical psychology is highly relevant to philosophical ethics. I focused on a debate in moral psychology, but the points made in addressing that debate expose a broader role for empirical findings, and I concluded that meta-ethics and normative ethics may benefit from psychological research as well.

Does this mean that philosophy will eventually give way to psychology, and science will solve all moral problems? Such a conclusion would be gravely mistaken. For one thing, science needs philosophy, just as philosophy needs science. Philosophy poses the questions that science investigates; philosophy generates theories, and systematizes evidence. Experiments are essentially arguments with empirical premises, and philosophers are trained to assess how good these arguments are. Moreover, even if science can reveal what our moral values are and what their metaphysical basis is, we use those values to make decisions and guide action. Figuring out what follows from our values involves the kinds of reasoning that philosophers, above all others, are in the business of carrying out. Construed as the study of what existing moral values demand of us, pure normative ethics retains an important place in moral deliberation. But it would be grotesquely misguided to infer from this important fact that empirical psychology has no bearing on morality.

See also Ethics and sentiment (Chapter 10); Hume (Chapter 11); Adam Smith (Chapter 12); Contemporary Kantian ethics (Chapter 38); Virtue ethics (Chapter 40).

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Further reading

Doris, J. M. (1998) "Persons, Situations and Virtue Ethics," *Notis* 32: 504-30. (An engaging and careful defense of the view that social psychology refutes standard versions of virtue ethics. The case is developed in Doris's book, cited above, but the core argument is here, and the paper launched a sizeable secondary literature.)

- Doris, J. M. and the Moral Psychology Research Group (eds) (Forthcoming) *The Oxford Handbook of Moral Psychology*, Oxford: Oxford University Press. (Some of the key practitioners of empirical approaches to ethics teamed up to write new papers for this state-of-the-art anthology. Highlights include a compendious paper by Stephen Stich, John Doris, and Erica Roedder reviewing psychological research on altruism: Do people ever really act altruistically or do we always have ulterior selfish motives?)
- Nichols, S. (2004) "After Objectivity: An Empirical Study of Moral Judgment," *Philosophical Psychology* 17: 5–28. (In addition to his groundbreaking book, *Sentimental Rules*, Nichols has numerous articles that illustrate how philosophers can use experiments to answer philosophical questions. Here Nichols devises a study to show that people are less inclined to believe that morality is objective than many philosophers have supposed.)
- Prinz, J. J. (2007) "Can Moral Obligations Be Empirically Discovered?" *Midwest Studies in Philosophy* 31: 271–91. (In this paper I consider the widely accepted thesis that normative conclusions cannot be derived from merely descriptive premises. I argue that there is a sense in which this conclusion is false, and this gives ethicists another reason to take psychology seriously.)
- Roskies, A. L. (2003) "Are Ethical Judgments Intrinsically Motivational? Lessons from Acquired Sociopathy," *Philosophical Psychology* 16: 51–66. (Discussing the central theme in this chapter, Roskies argues that research on brain-damaged patients shows that moral judgment can occur without moral motivation. Her position differs from the one offered here and serves as an informative, well-argued counterpoint, reminding us that much philosophical work is needed to interpret empirical results.)
- Sinnott-Armstrong, W. (ed.) (2008) *Moral Psychology*, vols 1–3, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press. (A massive three-volume anthology on empirical approaches to ethics. The volume includes a heretical paper by philosopher-turned-neuroscientist Joshua Greene, who uses brain science to argue that Kantian ethics hinges on emotional intuitions, despite Kant's admonition to extirpate emotions from moral judgment. It also includes papers by Susan Dwyer, Marc Hauser, and John Mikhail on the question of whether morality is an innate capacity.)

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