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Moral Development

I would like to present an overview of the dichotomy in the moral psychology literature and also present part of my research conducted for my PhD. I will argue that attempts to look for infant moral determinism is problematic and a shallow way of understanding human morality.

One side of the moral psychology literature dominated largely by the lab of Marc Hauser at Harvard University argues that moral judgements result, in part, from the operation of an inherent, intuitive universal moral faculty. Hauser suggests human morality has an innate and intuitive structure. Thus, we can detect moral wrongness in the world much like we can detect grammatical wrongness in a sentence.

Moral psychology became an increasingly popular field after the influential paper by Jonathan Haidt in 2001 titled 'The Emotional Dog and His Rational Tail'. Similar to Hauser, Haidt argued for a model of moral judgments that suggests people make moral judgements on the basis of an emotion or intuition, much like the feeling of something 'just being wrong'. Any rationality, Haidt argues, comes after this initial snap-judgment and is a post-hoc construction. Some of the evidence Haidt uses to make this claim is a phenomenon referred to as moral dumbfounding. Moral dumbfounding is used to capture the experience of judging an action as wrong, but not being able to justify why that action may or may not be wrong.

One of the classic examples of this phenomenon comes from the philosophical thought experiment known as the trolley problem. People who encounter this problem will judge the act of diverting a runaway trolley from killing 5 people to a track that will kill only 1 person as morally permissible. They will, however, judge a similar scenario with the same outcome (1 dies to save 5) as morally impermissible when killing the 1 person involves pushing the man to his death to stop the trolley to save the five people on the track. When asked to justify this switch, people find it very difficult to not engage in a circular reasoning along the lines of 'it's just wrong in case a, because it just is'. The bottom line argument for Hauser and Haidt is that people's morality is driven by a natural intuition which is largely based in our biology.

The argument for innate moral grammar has led to more recent research with infant humans using a technique that tracks infants' eye-gaze. Renee Baillargeon at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champagne has found interesting patterns in infant eye-gaze in response to a puppet show that depicts puppets performing 'helping' or 'harming' actions followed by the puppet being 'punished' or 'rewarded'. Infants will typically gaze longer at incongruent situations where the 'naughty' puppet is rewarded or the 'good' puppet is punished. The longer gaze of the infant is thought to represent a 'violation of expectation' on behalf of infants. Baillargeon and others have used research findings like these to suggest an early emergence of morality in the first few years of life. Often these findings are described in papers and conference presentations as demonstrating that the infant 'knows' the naughty puppet was naughty and therefore does not deserve to be rewarded. If the naughty puppet

is rewarded, then the infants 'think' this is wrong. The problem with this interpretation is that an infant's ability to 'think something is wrong' requires quite a sophisticated cognitive structure. Essentially, infants have to hold a mental representation of the puppets' actions in mind, remember their negative or positive behaviour and simultaneously hold a representation of the reward and punishment that is attributed, all the while making judgments of congruency.

I'll return to these points later on in the talk.

The other side of this moral coin is one that focuses on the stage-like development of morality. Piaget and Kohlberg have been the leading researchers arguing this position. Some of Piaget's research has shown that an understanding of intentionality as being a factor in making a moral judgment is not something children consider until around 5-6 years of age. Until this age, children are largely outcome focused and don't consider whether an actor meant to do harm or whether the harm occurred as a result of an accident. Kohlberg's stages of moral development also suggest that morality becomes more sophisticated with age. For instance, Kohlberg suggests that morality is largely punishment and obedience driven at first, and moves throughout the lifespan towards being driven by social roles and conformity. Many argue that an understanding of morality cannot exist independent of the development of theory of mind. This includes the development of an understanding of others' emotions, the ability to recognize others' as having separate emotions from one's self, the ability to reason about what might have been and the emotions that follow from what might have been (referred to as counterfactual thinking), as well as the development of empathy and the understanding that someone can hold beliefs separate from your own.

Typically, these components of theory of mind develop no earlier than the age of 5, and at the age of 5 are not necessarily sophisticated. Some of the more nuanced aspects of theory of mind that play a role directly in making moral judgments have been found to emerge a bit later on. For instance, the development of a cost-benefit understanding that is necessary for responding to the trolley problem (permissible to harm one to save five) begins to show up around the age of 7. Prior to 7, children are solely focused on the fact that harm occurs, not on the fact that a benefit results as a by product of the harm, and judge the action to be very wrong. The omission bias, a strong mediator in adult moral judgments, shows up around the ages of 8/9 years old. For those of you who are unfamiliar with the omission bias, people tend to judge harm resulting from an indirect and passive means (throwing a switch) as less harmful than active and direct harm (throwing a person in front of a train). We see evidence of this effect in law; there's less harsh sentencing for a failure to intervene in a transgression (bystander offences) than for someone who commits a transgression (directly causing harm). Following on from the omission bias is an understanding of how things might have been, or thinking counterfactually. The ability to reason counterfactually about how someone else might feel if something good could have happened but didn't emerges around 8/9 years of age.

Some research conducted as a part of my PhD has looked further into counterfactual reasoning in children and specifically how that ability coincides with moral reasoning. Simple counterfactual reasoning begins around the age of five, but the ability to reason counterfactually about someone else's or even one's own resulting emotion develops later. Counterfactual emotions typically thought of as either regret or relief, are a part of the

complex emotions that develop at the very earliest around 7 years of age. Other complex emotions include guilt and shame.

The small area of research looking at the development of these complex emotions, specifically counterfactual emotions, looks at responses to highly mutable or changeable events. The reason for using highly changeable events is that it if someone can imagine the event as potentially different, then it increases the feelings of regret or relief. These events involve doing something atypical from what one normally does (for example, taking an atypical route to work and having a car accident) or events involving commission (for example, buying stock instead of not selling stock and losing money). Adults will reason that the person who was in the car accident and went an atypical route to work feels worse than the person who was in a car accident and went the typical route to work. The person behaving atypically feels regret because they should've gone the normal route that they always take. Likewise, adults judge the person who lost money as a result of buying stock as feeling more regret than the person who lost money as a result of not selling stock. Children do not make this distinction when reasoning about others' emotions in the way adults do until at least age 7.

Our research looked specifically at whether or not adults and children blame the person who acted atypically or made a commission that led to a bad outcome. We believed that if adults and older children can detect that someone feels regret for a bad outcome, they might be perceived as being at fault or blameworthy for that bad thing happening. Children before the age of 8 did not make a distinction between the two types of characters being more or less blameworthy. Children at age 8 and 9, however, did blame the person who acted atypically or made a commission more so than the person who acted typically or made an omission for the bad thing that occurred. Interestingly, adults did not make a distinction between the characters similar to the pattern found with the younger children. When we examined this closer, we found that adults were making a rational correction when justifying the lack of distinction. Adults said things like 'it's just a chance event' or 'it's not really anyone's fault because it could've happened to anyone'. The children before age 8, however, did not make this rational correction. They were simply focused on the bad outcome being exactly the same regardless of the means through which the outcome occurred. This suggests a cognitive deficiency for reasoning about others' counterfactual emotions before age 8, but also for the older children who blamed the characters irrationally without correcting for the fact that the harm was a chance event and wasn't really anyone's fault, per se.

So, we have evidence of late emerging cognitive ability when making moral judgments with respect to factoring in someone's intent, factoring in a cost-benefit situation, and factoring in the means through which bad things happen. We also know that reasoning about others' emotions, a part of understanding morality, is limited until late childhood.

So who is right? Is morality innate and biological, or is morality social and developmental?

To an extent, it is both. Moral thinking requires the unfolding of psychology and biology. But that is not the same as saying morality is there from birth. Crudely, we need a brain, but brain is not enough. We also need psychological development.

While it is tempting to see our understanding of right and wrong as being a natural born human asset, we can't negate the development of theory of mind which is how we come to understand any complex concept, like morality. Looking for early innate morality negates the whole of psychological development as not being important for how we come to understand morality.

Additionally, human morality is not a fixed, universal thing. Human morality is constantly being negotiated through society and history. Relocating morality into the mind of an infant is to mislocate it and to misunderstand it.

Morality and our understanding of morality are unfolding all of the time. There is no reason to believe it is coherent or developed within the first five years of life. Even morality after the sophistication of necessary cognitive mechanisms is being negotiated. The findings from one of my studies is one small example of how even cognitively 'mature' children lack the ability to rationalise certain moral decisions so they fall in line with how we understand what is and is not appropriate cause for blaming another person.

Morality is about the social world. You have to be a part of the world you live in to understand morality and from 0-3, you're not a part of the social world which is indistinguishable from the moral world. In other words, you're not a moral agent.

Baillargeon's and others' argument for innate morality diminishes morality and reduces it to an expression of biology. What Baillargeon is focusing on during infancy is not morality. It's some crude detection of anomaly. We're not sure what it is entirely, and it remains a phenomenon. But it has nothing to do with morality because the detection of anomaly is not the detection of immorality.

In order for the child to have a grasp of morality, they need to have a suitably sophisticated cognitive system. The sophisticated system is not there until at least age 6/7/8 years of age. This is in part to do with brain and biology, but grounded in psychological development, which is grounded in being a part of the world we live in and being a part of a social network.

In sum, the idea that you could create a morally complete human being by age five is incorrect because the foundation of morality is not in 0-5, it's later and it's continuous.

The implications for parenting are such that I would assert morality is about a social network not just a nuclear setup. Parents are a part of a developing child's social network but they're not the be-all and end-all of that network, and are arguably not even the most important part of that network.

Deciding what's right and wrong is difficult and complicated. Developing an understanding of social roles, both peer and parent roles, and an understanding of social norms and consequence are essential for being able to consider the different facets of what we consider right and wrong. For example, deciding that a drunk driver who has a car accident that results in the death of another person is punished more severely than a drunk driver who has a car accident that results in hitting a tree is something that requires considerable consideration – and we might still not fully agree. We can't base our judgment solely on the immoral behaviour (drunk driving); we have to consider the meaning of the outcome (taking a human life). We wouldn't want a system of morality that was so crude that it expressed itself as person A (or in the case of Baillargeon's work, puppet a) – good, person/puppet B – bad. Having a crude system of morality would lead to unfair and unreasonable punishment and condemnation.

To close, I'd like to argue that given the psychological evidence for the development of theory of mind and continually developing understanding of morality, it would be incomplete and incorrect to interpret the responses of infants and children younger than five as expressing morality. In doing so, we neglect what the social construct of morality means, it's ever changing nature, and the sophisticated cognitive mechanisms that are intimately involved.