

**Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, ed.**

*Moral Psychology (vol. 3). The Neuroscience of Morality: Emotion, Brain Disorders, and Development.*

Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press 2008.

504 pages

US\$60.00 (cloth ISBN 978-0-262-19564-5)

US\$30.00 (paper ISBN 978-0-262-69355-4)

For those who have great confidence in the ability of ethics to supply a strong foundation for moral judgment, the growing literature on the psychology of morality will be largely irrelevant to the philosophical enterprise. On the view of ethics as an autonomous enterprise, philosophy can by itself define the nature of morality, settle debates as to its objectivity, and determine the right answer to moral dilemmas. However, it is hard to have much confidence in philosophy's ability to settle any major ethical questions given the sustained disagreements that persist among ethicists and the speculative nature of ethical argument.

Ancient Greek philosophy contains many examples of claims about our nature which would now be considered in the domain of psychology. In 1960s and 1970s, the Milgram obedience to authority experiments and the Zimbardo Stanford prison experiment raised questions about moral courage and character. However, it has been the recent psychological studies of our moral intuitions, our moral decision-making and the brain events occurring when we deliberate about moral questions that have more profoundly suggested that ethics needs to pay attention to empirical work on morality. The three volume set of collections of articles on moral psychology, edited by Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, in which this book appears, has done a wonderful job of bringing together work demonstrating the relevance of psychology to ethics. This third volume in particular, with papers on the cognitive neuroscience of moral emotions, psychopathy, autism, and developmental morality, is a rich resource for anyone working in ethics.

This is a large book with eight main target papers; each of these has two or three commentary papers, and then the original authors write a reply. Some of the target papers are excessively long: Joshua Greene's piece is 45 pages, with another 14 pages of reply to his commentators, and greater editorial insistence on economy would have probably been in order, although arguably the paper needs to be as long as it is to spell out its argument. Further, as Greene points out, John Mikhail's commentary is not really a commentary on the target piece, but is instead a discussion of earlier work; and again, the editor would have served readers better by requiring a commentary on the work at hand. Given the length of the book, most readers will want to be selective about which parts they read. Some of the papers are more scientific and others are more philosophical, and this is an obvious divide which will help readers decide on which parts to focus. In this review, I restrict my attention to the more philosophical papers. These are Greene's

aforementioned ‘The Secret Joke of Kant’s Soul’, Jeanette Kennett and Cordelia Fine’s ‘Internalism and the Evidence from Psychopaths and Acquired Sociopaths’, Victoria McGeer’s ‘Varieties of Moral Agency: Lessons from Autism (and Psychopathy)’, and Richard Joyce’s ‘What Neuroscience Can (and Cannot) Contribute to Metaethics’. The other papers address the cognitive neuroscience of moral emotions and psychopathy, developmental morality, and adolescent moral reasoning. I’m not able to judge the strength of those papers with regard to the scientific literature to which they refer, but they are helpful as guides to their topics for non-specialists.

Greene argues ironically that deontology, far from being a paradigm of rationality, is based on emotional responses, and that consequentialism is much more driven by rationality. These are empirical claims about how people reason. Greene further speculates that both deontology and consequentialism are best understood as psychological natural kinds rather than philosophical theories. The empirical argument is relatively complex, but at its heart are studies that show that people take longer to make judgments and use parts of the brain more associated with cognition when presented with moral dilemmas that leads them to give consequentialist answers. To give one example, consider the case of the crying baby. During wartime, you and your fellow villagers are hiding from enemy soldiers. You know they will kill all of you if they find you. Your baby starts to cry, so you cover its mouth. If you remove your hand, the baby will cry more loudly and alert the soldiers, so you will all be killed. If you do not remove your hand, the baby will suffocate and die. What should you do? People take a relatively long time to decide and while they are thinking about it, they have increased brain activity in the parts of the brain recognized for their specialization in cognition. Furthermore, people who give the consequentialist answer (suffocate the baby because it results in the overall better outcome) show more cognitive activity than those who give the deontological answer (we should never violate the rights of a person, whatever the outcome).

On the assumption that deontological beliefs are typically driven by ‘alarm bell’ emotions, Greene then argues that the ‘justifications’ of those deontological beliefs are more post hoc confabulations, while consequentialist beliefs are genuinely a result of reasoning. He concedes that all moral judgment has a component of emotion, but insists that the difference between deontology and consequentialism is enough to draw a major philosophical conclusion. He asks how rational deontologists can explain the coincidence between our alarm-like emotional reactions and their ethical views. As rationalists, they cannot say that their moral beliefs are based on their emotions. Further, Greene argues that ‘it is unlikely that inclinations that evolved as evolutionary by-products correspond to some independent, rationally discoverable moral truth’ (72). In his commentary, Mark Timmons concedes this point, but argues that this is not the only metaethical position available to the deontologist: one can defend a constructivist position, in the kind of metaethics defended by Tim Scanlon. Then it would be no coincidence that our constructed ethics corresponds to our emotional responses. Greene replies briefly that if emotions do play a role in the creation of the ethical view, as constructionists say, then

the view we end up with will be weaker as a result, because there is independent reason to doubt that the emotional responses to ethical dilemmas we have from our evolutionary history actually provide good answers.

The papers by Kennett and Fine, McGreer, and Joyce, and the commentaries on them, all centrally address the debate concerning what the evidence from psychology and neuroscience tells us about the connection between believing an action is right and being motivated to perform it. The debate is complex because it requires considering different formulations of the supposed connection, sifting through a great deal of psychological data, and then defending a particular interpretation.

Kennett and Fine consider and reject the claim that the existence of psychopaths shows that there no internal connection between moral belief and moral motivation. In short, they argue that psychopaths are not able to make moral judgments, so their lack of moral motivation does not prove externalism—the view that judgment and motivation are not connected in a relevant way. They argue that the evidence shows that, even when psychopaths have an ability to use moral language, their understanding is so superficial that it is only in the ‘inverted commas’ sense. They then examine a parallel argument by Adina Roskies that patients with ventromedial frontal lobe (VM) damage are counterexamples to internalism. The discussion focuses on a particular patient, and they argue there is no strong evidence that the patient either has genuine moral beliefs or lacks moral motivation. They conclude that their version of internalism is left standing.

Roskies defends her original argument for externalism with gusto. She argues that the only version of internalism worth defending is one that makes a strong claim about the connection between belief and motivation, and that her evidence does show that the strong claim is false. There is evidence that patients with VM damage are able to understand moral claims, even claims concerning what they personally should do, and Roskies argues that the evidence shows that despite their understanding, they are not motivated to act morally.

Michael Smith, in a move parallel to that of Richard Joyce, argues that empirical evidence could not disprove internalism, because internalism posits a conceptually necessary relation of some sort between moral judgment and motivation. Kennett and Fine in their reply do not explicitly disagree with this, but they do argue that examining how people use moral language and its relation to their actions is relevant to judging what concept of moral judgment we should embrace. They argue, for example, that if it turned out that, on a certain supposed analysis of our folk concept of moral judgment, very few people ever made one, this would be a good reason to judge that the concept had not been correctly analyzed. They go on defend their claims that the most plausible interpretation of the available evidence about psychopaths and people with certain sorts of brain damage does not falsify the claim that there is an internal connection between moral judgment and moral action; thus they apparently leave it open as a possibility that the

evidence could go the other way, and a falsification of the conceptual claim could be made.

McGeer discusses autism, psychopathy and what it takes to have a genuine understanding of morality. She argues, against an earlier paper of Kennett, that the heart of morality is sentiment. Autistic people generally find it very difficult to understand other people's internal mental states, and feel little or no intuitive empathy for others. Kennett has argued that on a sentimentalist account of morality, people with autism thus lack the ability to understand morality. However, they do have the ability to understand fairness and rules, and Kennett used this fact to argue for a Kantian conception of morality. McGeer argues that, far from deriving a Kantian rationalist conception of morality, the morality of people with autism derives from a deep caring or need for order. She proceeds to outline an alternative approach to what it is to be a moral person, and argues that autistic people do meet the criteria of this new model. In response to the three commentaries, McGeer clarifies her position, explaining how it combines both Humean and Kantian elements, elaborating and defending her view.

Joyce spells out problems for any attempt to establish metaethical results about the status of morality or the truth of internalism through experimental results. Largely, his point is that experiments can show the co-occurrence of different kinds of mental states, but they cannot show necessary or conceptual connections. It may be possible to show that emotions play a role in moral judgment, but it does not follow from this that moral judgment is inherently a matter of emotion. Experiments in the moral domain can at best establish psychological rationalism, but they cannot confirm or deny the Kantian theory of justificatory rationalism. Shaun Nichols comments that while it is no simple matter to confirm or deny philosophical theories by experiment, it is possible to do research on the folk meanings of words, and to find out whether ordinary people think for instance that psychopaths are capable of making moral judgments, and this will be relevant to settling philosophical debates. Joyce counters that normal people's intuitions about moral terms will be highly dependent on context. Further, he doubts that the moral concepts used by justificatory rationalists need to be tied to those that are used in everyday discourse. The whole point of justificatory rationalism is to build a theory that is not dependent on ordinary intuitions, but rather to show that morality can, when properly appreciated, be given a careful rational justification. So the results of experiments on moral intuitions would be irrelevant to the rationality project.

This third volume of *Moral Psychology* leaves it uncertain whether work in cognitive neuroscience, abnormal psychology, and experimental philosophy really will help us make progress on long standing debates in ethics, but it makes a strong case for examining this possibility further. This collection, along with the literature referred to in the papers, provides a great starting point for those wanting to pursue this project.

**Christian Perring**  
Dowling College