Where Does Morality Come From?

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A Little Tale of Moral Confusion

Moral Trouble in the Heartland
1. The Problem of the “3 Zones”
2. The Problem of the Vietnam War
Two Views of the Origin of our Moral Values

1. **Transcendence View:** Values have some transcendent source that allows them to be brought to bear on particular cases from above or beyond our finite experience.

2. **Naturalistic View:** Values have to arise within and from the character of our embodied, social, cultural experience.
The Moral Law Folk Theory

- Humans have a split nature – a unique conjunction of a mental (or spiritual) dimension and a physical (bodily) dimension.

- We are driven by our bodily needs and desires to seek satisfactions and pleasures. Because our desires and passions are not intrinsically rational, there arises a fundamental moral tension between our “higher” (rational) selves and our “lower” (bodily) selves.

- The problem of morality arises only for beings like us who have a “free” will (which is part of our higher self), by virtue of which we can override our bodily impulses, can control our actions, and can therefore be held responsible for them.
Moral constraint (obligation) comes from a set of universally binding, literal moral principles supplied by either Divine revelation, universal human reason, or some other transcendent or supernatural force.

Morally right conduct thus requires (a) discerning what some moral law requires in a specific situation, and (b) having the strength of will to do what the moral principle requires, no matter what temptations might make us disinclined to obey the law.
2 Founding Assumptions of The Moral Law Folk Theory

- (1) A Fixed and Finished Moral Universe

It is assumed that our moral task is to find some set of ultimate constraints (ends, principles, virtues) that define ethical living and that are given to all humans in advance of the particular moral decisions they have to make. Such a view posits that we live in a fixed and finished moral universe, where the values and constraints are pre-given and we merely have to investigate what those ultimate principles are, and then muster the strength of will to obey them.
2 Assumptions of The Moral Law

Folk Theory

- (2) We come to recognize these moral values and principles through a process of rational, conscious reflective thinking. In other words, it is assumed that moral cognition is fundamentally an exercise of *rational* decision-making.
There is considerable evidence that both of these founding assumptions of traditional moral theory are seriously mistaken!

(1) Our world is always in process, and so moral deliberation is about transforming the world for the better, rather than returning to some illusory pre-established moral universe.

(2) Most of our moral cognition is intuitive, unreflective, and not what we think of as a rational procedure.
Cognitive Science Challenges the Moral Law Folk Theory

1. There is no pure practical reason
   a. There is no single site in the brain where reasoning is done.
   b. Abstract conceptualization and reasoning are grounded in our sensory-motor systems.
   c. Practical reasoning is inextricably tied to an intact emotional system (Damasio).
Cognitive Science Challenges the Moral Law Folk Theory

2. There is no single faculty of will.

   All of the mounting evidence about cognition and action points to the absence of any single, unified center from which action springs. (Flanagan, The Problem of the Soul)
Cognitive Science Challenges the Moral Law Folk Theory

3. There is no radically free will.
   - All human freedom is constrained and very limited.
   - Freedom of choice is not merely about our so-called inner resolve, but includes the objective conditions of our current situation and our past history.
   - Dewey saw that what we call our “will” is really a collection of habits of thought and action.
   - The so-called “self” and our “character” is simply an “interpenetration of habits” that define who we are at this very moment.
Cognitive Science Challenges the Moral Law Folk Theory

4. There are no universal univocal (literal) moral concepts.
   - The literalist, objectivist theory of meaning that requires that all meaningful concepts be literal is wildly false.
   - Research in Cognitive Linguistics over the past 25 years has revealed that virtually all our abstract concepts are defined by multiple, inconsistent sets of conceptual metaphors.
Cognitive Science Challenges the Moral Law Folk Theory

5. Moral concepts are not classical categories.
   - Most key concepts in moral systems appear to have radial (not classical) category structures.
   - This means that moral reasoning is inescapably open-ended, context dependent, and relative to the internal structure of our key moral categories, some of which change over time.

If this is true, then Moral Literalism, Moral Fundamentalism, and Moral Absolutism are false.
Moral Psychology as **Naturalistic & Experimental**

1. It is **naturalistic** insofar as it claims that all our moral values have to come from our embodied transactions with our environments – environments that are at once physical, interpersonal, and cultural. There is no pure reason, no disembodied moral ego, no transcendent source of absolute values. Everything emerges from organism-environment interactions through both evolutionary and ontogenetic processes.
Moral Psychology as Naturalistic & Experimental

(2) It is experimental insofar as it claims that we can find out experimentally how moral cognition works, what role emotions play in moral appraisals, whether we are reflectively aware of our deepest values, what prejudices we tend to have, and how we are motivated to act. The relevant evidence comes from biology, neuroscience, psychology, anthropology, evolutionary theory, and other cognitive science disciplines.
The Challenge to the Rationalistic Conception of Moral Cognition

The Two Tracks of Moral Cognition

**Track 1:** Most of our moral cognition is intuitive, unreflective, automatic, fast, and beneath our conscious awareness. It consists of habits of thought and feeling over which we have little conscious control.

**Track 2:** There is a second track, which does involve rational reflection. However, that reasoning process consists mostly in after-the-fact rationalization or justification of what we have already decided intuitively, via track 1.
The Elephant & Rider: Haidt’s Metaphor of the 2 Tracks

- Jonathan Haidt has analogized these two processes to an elephant and its rider. The elephant is Track 1 cognition that wants what it wants, goes where it will, and does what it chooses, while the rider is Track 2, mostly along for the ride, but pretending to be in control, and often making up nice stories to justify what the elephant has done.
Automatic emotional response patterns are the body's ways of making the necessary adjustments to our body state (and, indirectly, to the environments that sustain that body state) so that we can survive and grow.

Brain and body mechanisms for monitoring and assessing our current body state are connected with systems for inducing changes in those body states to restore and maintain a requisite homeostasis, or dynamic equilibrium, within the bounded organism that is necessary for life maintenance and enhanced well-being.
Emotions as Key to Moral Well-being

- Emotions are thus bodily responses to our mostly nonconscious, automatic, ongoing appraisal of how things are going for us as physical and social organisms. This ongoing quest for well-being (for ourselves and others) is the very core of morality.

- Damasio speculates that homeostasis is not just the fundamental or ur-value required for physical organism flourishing, but extends all the way up to our interpersonal, communal, cultural, and global need for harmonious balance of competing ends and values.
Our evolutionary history has defined for us a set of universal life challenges that have given rise to a small set of considerations and values that underlie moral systems the world over.

Moral foundations Theory claims that our evolutionary history has produced, via these foundations, something like a “first draft” of basic values that are shared by all humans, but each of these foundational concerns is then developed and elaborated somewhat differently in different cultural settings.
Haidt’s Six Foundations

- **Care/Harm** – All human offspring need extensive, long-term nurturance and protection for a broad range of physical, psychological, economic, and political harms. This starts with our families, but has been extended to non-kin.
- **Fairness/Cheating** – All social animals engage in non-zero-sum exchanges and relationships, so we develop a strong sense of fairness and a disdain for cheating.
- **Loyalty/Betrayal** – We are group-dependent animals that recognize the value of loyalty to our common causes and the destruction of social bonds caused by betrayal.
Haidt’s Six Foundations

- Authority/Subversion – Many primates live in dominance hierarchies. We find ways to navigate these natural and artificial hierarchies for our own perceived good.

- Sanctity/Degradation – We have developed disgust reactions and other ways of detecting impurities and pathogens. These tendencies are often developed into a strong sense of sanctity and holiness, coupled with the corresponding desire for purity (not just physical, but moral and spiritual).

- Liberty/Oppression – We have an innate desire for freedom to pursue our legitimate ends. We experience oppression when we are not allowed to exercise our most human capabilities (Sen and Nussbaum), which keeps us from growing and flourishing.
Universal Foundations Differently Elaborated in Cultural Systems

- Moral Foundations Theory claims that we have inborn, evolutionarily developed tendencies to need and want care and freedom from harm, justice and rights, recognition of authority, and so on.

- However, from these basic value structures, cultures have found a plurality of ways to elaborate core values. For example, every moral system will have some notion of appropriate care of oneself and others, but some cultures will have a **Strict Father** conception of what this care entails, while others will have a more **Nurturant Parent** conception of what care requires (Lakoff & Johnson 1999).
The Challenge to the Fixed-Moral-Universe Conception

- John Dewey argued that we encounter moral problems precisely because our pre-given values and standards do not allow us to deal adequately with the newly emerging complexities of our lives.
- Therefore, we cannot simply fall back on what is supposedly already given, as if it constituted an absolute and eternally valid moral framework.
Human beings are complex, multi-functional organisms who seek to survive and grow through continual interaction with their environments.

We are thus a blending of biological, interpersonal, and cultural elements, with all of the values embedded at each of those levels of organization that define who we are.
Dewey’s Ethical Naturalism: Four Levels of Human Values

1. **Biological Values** -- Many of our deepest values are tied to what is required for the mere survival of the organism, such as the goods of food, water, shelter from the elements, and protection from physical harm.

2. **Interpersonal Values** – We grow and develop only through our intimate interpersonal relations with others; therefore, we have values relating to care, nurturance, sharing, responsibility, competition, cooperation, and altruism.
4 Levels of Human Values

3. **Larger Communities** – We are naturally part of larger social communities and institutions, and so we develop values related to how we can get along together – notions such as property, rights, justice, duties, freedom.

4. **Meaningful Lives** – We are meaning-seeking and meaning-making creatures, so our sense of well-being and well-doing (*eudaemonia*) involves values tied to our development of virtues and skills that help us lead meaningful lives.
Dewey: Morality as Ongoing Problem Solving (No fixed moral universe)

- Most of the time we think and act on the basis of clusters of habits of which we are hardly ever aware (our intuitive values). Our current self is just a complex interpenetration of these habits that carry us through the day.

- Sometimes, however, we encounter problematic situations which frustrate and unsettle our habits (our intuitions), such as when we encounter competing goods or virtues. If we hope to resolve the tensions and conflicts – the problems – that we have encountered, we can’t just retain the very habits that arose under other conditions but that are now not adequate to the complexities of our current situation.

- In such cases, we have a moral problem confronting us, just because our developed habits of thought, judgment, and action (the intuitions that those represent) were not adequate for dealing with new complexities arising in our lives.
The Third Track: Dewey’s Imaginative Dramatic Rehearsal

- Deliberation as Dramatic Rehearsal
- Confronted with a moral problem, we have to try out in imagination various possible courses of action to find out which is most likely to harmonize our currently conflicting values, ends, and goods.
- And the point is that this is a qualitative assessment, for which there is no algorithm, rule, or law for determining how we ought to recompose our present situation for the better.
Imaginative Dramatic Rehearsal

“... deliberation is a dramatic rehearsal (in imagination) of various competing possible lines of action. It starts from the blocking of efficient overt action, due to that conflict of prior habit and newly released impulse... Then each habit, each impulse, involved in the temporary suspense of overt action takes its turn in being tried out. Deliberation is an experiment in finding out what the various lines of possible action are really like. It is an experiment in making various combinations of selected elements of habits and impulses, to see what the resultant action would be like if it were entered upon. But the trial is in imagination, not in overt fact.” (Dewey, 1922, 132-33)
Moral Deliberation as Art

- Imaginative moral deliberation is more like composing a work of art than it is like applying a rule to a situation.
- Through our thinking and action, we are composing both our developing situation and simultaneously our self identity.
Moral Imagination is a Qualitative, not a Quantitative Process

- It is NOT a matter of quantification, that is, of calculating which of various possible actions would produce “more” pleasure, happiness, or some other quasi-entity.

- Rather, it is an irreducibly qualitative process of judgment, because it concerns the kind of life we ought to live, and the kind of person we strive to be, and these are qualitative concerns.

- It requires an intuitive assessment of which imagined course of action would be better or worse in light of present conditions.
Aesthetics of Moral Deliberation and Selfhood

- I use “aesthetics”, not in the Enlightenment sense of a particular type of feeling-based judgment of beauty, but rather, much more broadly, to refer to everything that goes into the meaning and significance of any situation, including form, qualities, feelings, emotions, images, schemas, conceptual metaphors and metonymies, and even narrative structure.

- So, the kinds of considerations we have traditionally brought to bear in understanding our creation, experience, and evaluations of artworks are now seen to be relevant and even crucial for understanding moral experience.
The term “art of living” is not a quaint sentimental notion, but rather a profound recognition that living well is an artistic, aesthetically grounded activity by which we pursue lives and selves that are meaningful and praiseworthy.
Moral Fundamentalism is Immoral!

- Moral fundamentalism is the belief that there are absolute values and principles of moral living and that we have rational reflective access to them.
- On the contrary, what the sciences of mind are teaching us about the nature of human conceptualization, reasoning, communicating, and valuing leads to a pluralism of values that can be differently elaborated in different cultures.
- It shows that we employ multiple body-based metaphors for any given moral concept, and it shows that there is no such thing as a pure, emotion-free rationality.
Moral Fundamentalism is Immoral

- The very worst thing for morally sensitive action is a person who thinks she has God, or Pure Practical Reason, or any other form of absolute certainty about anything moral, on her side.

- This is the very opposite of moral intelligence, because this sort of unjustified arrogance blocks the very notion of intelligent moral inquiry and conscientiousness that is our primary hope for enlightened, perceptive, and caring lives.
How to Understand Principles, Ends, and Virtues

- **Principles** are just useful summaries of considerations some culture has found important for helping them deal with recurring moral problems.

- **Ends and Goods** are not absolute, unchanging, ends-in-themselves; rather, they are just what Dewey called ends-in-view – tentative and perhaps temporary pivots of our valuing, which may get altered in light of changing conditions.

- **Virtues** are developed habits of valuing and thinking that have proven useful to help us realize our ends-in-view, with a view toward our growth and flourishing.
Conscientiousness (Instead of Conscience)

- Having rejected the notion of a moral faculty called conscience, which was supposed to be an innate source (implanted by God or Reason or evolution) of absolute principles, values, and moral motivations, Dewey argues that what we need, instead, is conscientiousness—a cultivated capacity for engaging in the most sensitive, perceptive, self-critical, expansive, open, and imaginative moral inquiry in all matters of moral import that you encounter.
Some relevant readings:

- Jonathan Haidt, The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion (Pantheon 2012)
- Mark Johnson, Morality for Humans: Ethical Understanding from the Perspective of Cognitive Science (Chicago 2014)
- Robert Hinde, Why Good is Good: The Sources of Morality (Routledge 2012)