

Symposium title: Human nature and morality

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Symposium abstract

A growing number of moral philosophers and scientists draw on scientific knowledge concerning 'human nature' to readdress meta-ethical and normative questions. In this symposium, we investigate our 'evolved moral nature' and we consider the impact of this knowledge on moral philosophy. First, we explore the building blocks of moral behaviour; second, we focus on individual differences in moral psychology.

Several key aspects of our moral sense are shared with other primates. But are these shared moral sentiments sufficient to speak about a moral sense? We discuss differences between primate and human moral behavior. Further, we describe and evaluate some of the proposed building blocks of morality in primates, such as a sense of fairness, social norms, moralistic aggression or altruism.

With regard to altruistic motivation, the 18th century conflict between reason and affect seems to be replaced by a more nuanced opposition between top-down and bottom-up pathways. In this context we explore recent findings on children's development of prosocial behavior. Then, we discuss whether and how this opposition is taken into account in current moral philosophy.

Evolutionary theory predicts that individual differences occur with regard to our moral intuitions, depending on the sex, age and ecology of the actor. Specific predictions have been corroborated by psychological studies. This contrasts with the classic moral philosophers' ambition to build universal normative systems instead of collecting actor-dependent moral rules. The implications of this conflict for normative ethics are explored. Are we heading for a 'relativistic turn' in ethics?

Talks: titles and abstracts

What can our closest living relatives tell us about the evolution of morality?

Adrian V. Jaeggi & Claudia Rudolf von Rohr

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Apes have been suggested to have some of the basic prerequisites of human morality. The aim of our studies was to describe the exact nature of such proposed prerequisites, in particular altruism and social norms. Altruistic acts among humans are characterized by a desire to help others according to their needs. Altruistic behavior among chimpanzees and bonobos was investigated in the context of food sharing. We tried to assess the psychological mechanisms behind this apparently altruistic behavior and the biological conditions under which it may evolve. The presence of social norms among humans can be inferred when unaffected bystanders react negatively towards their violation. Chimpanzees protest when becoming themselves victims of norm violations. However, such protests are primarily based on “egoistic” norms. To establish the presence of social norms among chimpanzees, we investigated whether they, like humans, also show reactions as unaffected bystanders. The results show that (1) apes rarely share food in an altruistic way and may respond to others’ solicitations only if their sharing is likely to be reciprocated and (2) that chimpanzees differentially perceive and evaluate social events as completely unaffected bystanders and therefore satisfy a basic prerequisite for the presence of social norms. In sum, such studies may help to explain the evolution of human morality and the related psychological mechanisms. Thus, it may be interesting for moral philosophers to think of morality as the product of cultural but also evolutionary history, which may have implications for moral philosophy.

Sympathy and moral evaluations as mediators of young children’s prosocial behavior

Amrisha Vaish

Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology, Leipzig

Young children behave prosocially, but do they do so discriminately, that is, based upon the other’s circumstances or moral behaviors? To test this, we examined children’s prosocial behavior toward victims and perpetrators.

Study 1 assessed whether, in the absence of distress cues from a victim, children can nonetheless sympathize with the victim. We showed 1.5- and 2-year-olds a ‘perpetrator’ either harming a ‘victim’ by destroying or taking her possessions (Harm condition) or doing something similar but not harming her (Neutral condition). The victim expressed no emotions in either condition. Nevertheless, more children showed sympathy ($p=.011$) and prosocial behavior ($p=.024$) toward the victim in the Harm than the Neutral condition, and children’s sympathy correlated with their prosocial behavior, $p=.036$. Thus, despite the lack of emotional cues from the victim, children sympathized with and showed greater prosocial behavior toward her, perhaps through affective perspective-taking.

Study 2 examined children’s prosocial behavior toward perpetrators. After 3-year-olds witnessed the Harm condition (as in Study 1 except the victim displayed sadness), they had to decide between helping the perpetrator or a neutral person (i.e., not the victim but a third adult).

Fewer children helped the perpetrator than the neutral person, $p < .0005$. Moreover, when the perpetrator intended to but could not harm the victim, 3-year-olds still helped the perpetrator less than the neutral person, $p = .008$, whereas when the perpetrator accidentally harmed the victim, children did not help differentially, $p = .204$.

In conclusion, young children's prosocial behavior is mediated by their sympathy for and moral evaluations of the beneficiary.

Empathy and the nature of altruistic motivation: the rationalism-sentimentalism debate revisited?

Jelle De Schrijver

Ghent University, research group 'The Moral Brain'

Converging evidence from evolutionary sciences, developmental, moral and social psychology and cognitive neuroscience allows us to see the nature of altruistic motivation in a different light. Empathy - which is often regarded as a multipolar construct with both affective and cognitive aspects - is ascribed a central role in this mechanism of altruistic motivation. It is the aim of this paper to explore the processes allowing empathy to elicit altruistic motivation. Recently, two types of models have been developed. Whereas bottom-up models emphasize the role of the affective aspects of empathy, top-down models stress, in addition, the role of higher cognitive processes such as theory of mind and emotion regulation. The former conflict between reason and affect as was fought out among 18th century rationalists and sentimentalists seems to be replaced by a more nuanced opposition between top-down and bottom-up approaches.

Is it time for a relativist turn in ethics?

Katinka Quintelier

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Recent developments in moral psychology and in evolutionary theories of moral behavior focus on individual and group differences in morality. Moral intuitions may differ depending on sex, age, ecology and evolutionary strategy of the individual. Within the individual, different and mutually incompatible moral intuitions are triggered depending on specific aspects of the situation (see, e.g., Haidt, 2007; Greene et al., 2004). Thus there exist interindividual and intraindividual differences in moral intuitions.

This diversity of our moral intuitions has led naturalistic and evolutionary ethicists to question normative theories that articulate universal and mutually consistent moral principles. For example, E.O. Wilson has suggested that we cannot impose a single set of moral standards on all human populations or sex-age classes, for this would "create complex, intractable moral dilemmas" (Wilson 1975, p. 564). On the other hand, if we are not all in the same game, living together may not work very well (see, e.g., Ruse, 2008), especially if we conceive of moral principles as universally valid. There seems to be a trade-off between moral principles that are intuitively acceptable and moral principles that are universally valid.

The literature on naturalistic and evolutionary ethics discusses which implications scientific data can and cannot have on normative questions. I critically apply this discussion to the topic of normative implications of inter- and intraindividual differences in moral intuitions.