Moral vindications

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ABSTRACT

Psychologists and neuroscientists have recently been unearthing the unconscious processes that give rise to moral intuitions and emotions. According to skeptics like Joshua Greene, what has been found casts doubt on many of our moral beliefs. However, a new approach in moral psychology develops a learning-theoretic framework that has been successfully applied in a number of other domains. This framework suggests that model-based learning shapes intuitions and emotions. Model-based learning explains how moral thought and feeling are attuned to local material and social conditions. Philosophers can draw on these explanations, in some cases, in order to vindicate episodes of moral change. Explanations can support justifications by showing that they are not mere rationalizations. In addition, philosophical justifications are a fertile source for empirical hypotheses about the rational learning mechanisms that shape moral intuitions and emotions.

1. Introduction

Human beings need explanations. We’re especially motivated to seek explanations for the behavior of other human beings around us, a trait that emerges early in development. You don’t need to be a parent to know that children as young as two incessantly pose the question “why?” Children are even known to seek explanations for this very tendency. One three-year-old is recorded to have said to her mother: “Mommy, I always ask why. Why do I always ask why?” (Callaman & Oakes, 1992: 222; cited in Nichols, 2015: 17).

A few curious children grow up to become more serious students of human behavior. Both psychologists and philosophers wonder why we make the moral judgments and decisions that we do. In a moral context, however, “why questions” are ambiguous—between questions of explanation and questions of justification. When we ask why someone donated her hard-earned money to charity, we might be wondering what reasons caused her to do so, or we might be wondering what reasons justify her choice. The “reason” for a moral judgment or decision—the answer to a “why question”—may be a causal explanation or it may be a normative justification.

Explanations and justifications often diverge. Imagine someone who donated to charity because she was moved to imitate a celebrity. This explains her choice but does not justify it. However, when we ask the same person why she donated, she cites a duty to help those in desperate need. This is a perfectly good rationale but does not reveal the actual cause of her choice. We have a justification, but we lack an explanation. The distinction at hand suggests a natural division of labor between psychologists and philosophers who study morality. Moral psychologists seek explanations for moral judgments and decisions; moral philosophers seek justifications.

Some interdisciplinary work on moral thought, however, blends science and philosophy, weaving empirical and normative threads into the same cloth. Sometimes an answer to a “why question” yields both an explanation and a justification—both a cause and a rationale. For example, if research suggests that heterosexuals become more accepting of gay people by empathically appreciating the harms that certain friends and family members suffer, and then generalizing their empathic insight to other gay people whom they don’t know personally, the cause of this attitude change also justifies it (Kumar, 2017a). When one and the same account of moral change combines explanation with justification, it is what we shall call a “vindication” (Kumar & Campbell, 2017).

Vindications of moral change can be found in the field of moral learning. In general, learning theory in moral psychology studies the implicit and explicit learning mechanisms that shape moral judgments and decisions (along with other attitudes). Learning mechanisms typically effect stable moral change by reorganizing underlying intuitive and affective structures (Campbell & Kumar, 2012). Moreover, learning can attune moral attitudes in ways that are sensitive to morally relevant aspects of the material and social environment. Under these conditions, moral change is progressive.
Traditionally, moral philosophers seek ethical theories—like utilitarianism—that explain why any action is right or wrong, in any and all conceivable circumstances. However, one might reasonably worry whether such “ideal theories” are genuinely knowable. A similar epistemological worry has led some political philosophers to be skeptical about theories articulating the structure of an ideally just state (Anderson, 2011; Sen, 2009). Relinquishing an ideal ethical theory, philosophers might instead focus on something more accessible: moral progress (see Buchanan & Powell, 2016). We stand a better chance knowing which remote and recent moral changes have been morally progressive (or regressive) than we do of knowing any complete and definitive moral code. Empirical work has the potential to inform non-ideal theory if it can support generalizations about how moral progress occurs, and thus help to formulate methods for achieving further moral progress (Kumar, in press–a). Furthermore, as we’ll see, empirical work offers valuable constraints for non-ideal theorists pursuing philosophical justifications of moral change. Explanations can support justifications by showing that they are not mere rationalizations.

Scientists and philosophers who study moral learning can profit from one another. On the one hand, investigating why moral attitudes change can shed light on their rationale. On the other hand, exploring why moral change is rational can offer clues about the psychological mechanisms that lie behind it. The aim of this essay is to show how explanation and justification of moral change are mutually informative.

2. Debunking

My principal topic in this essay is learning mechanisms that vindicate moral change. I will begin, however, by surveying adjacent and more familiar terrain at the intersection of cognitive science and moral philosophy: arguments that attempt to debunk (rather than vindicate) moral attitudes. Later on, I will describe a new approach in moral psychology and the vindications of moral change that it promises.

According to some researchers, moral intuition is a psychological module designed by natural selection: a fast, automatic, unconscious system, relatively isolated from the rest of the mind (cf. Fodor, 1983; Sperber, 1994). Moral intuition, on a nativist view, is relatively inflexible: much of its contents are fixed either innately or in a critical developmental window. For example, Mikhail (2011) and Dwyer (2006) argue for the existence of an innate and universal moral grammar, triggered by social cues in early development and capable of producing only a limited variety of local moral languages.

Greene (2008, 2013, 2014) has developed a theory of moral intuition that blends nativism and empiricism. According to Greene, morality is fundamentally a biological adaptation for living in small hunter-gatherer groups that were in severe competition with one another. Moral intuition is a set of simple heuristics that are useful for coexistence within tribal groups. Intuition, Greene says, is like the “point-and-shoot automatic settings” on a digital camera: “highly efficient, but not very flexible” (Greene, 2014: 696). However, Greene also says these “automatic settings...can be acquired or modified through cultural learning...[and] individual experiences” (698).

Greene thinks that this view of moral intuition has important philosophical implications. He argues that moral heuristics often lead us astray in contemporary, large-scale, technological societies. For example, Greene’s own experimental work suggests that intuition produces an emotional aversion to harm inflicted by “personal force,” roughly, the use of direct, muscular force to inflict violence upon people. In the Pleistocene environment of evolution-
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