



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Cognition

journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/COGNIT](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/COGNIT)

Original Articles

## Learning from moral inconsistency

Richmond Campbell

Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Received 19 January 2016

Revised 27 April 2017

Accepted 3 May 2017

Available online xxx

#### Keywords:

Learning  
Moral  
Inconsistency  
Consistency  
Emotion  
Reason

### ABSTRACT

Moral inconsistency is an understudied phenomenon in cognitive moral psychology and deserves in depth empirical study. Moral inconsistency, as understood here, is not formal inconsistency but inconsistency in moral emotion and belief in response to particular cases. It occurs when persons treat cases as morally different that are really morally the same, even from their moral perspective. Learning to recognize and avoid such moral inconsistency in non-trivial but is a form of moral learning that complements and enhances other psychological and social mechanisms through which persons learn how to apply shared moral norms when their applications are uncertain and threaten to lapse into moral inconsistency. The same psychological process also can function to revise current moral norms when their straightforward applications are morally inconsistent with more basic moral commitments. Through this moral learning and related kinds, people can learn how to identify issues of moral priority when moral norms conflict and, when necessary, how to revise their moral norms. The recent revolution in dominant moral norms around gay sex and gay marriage in Europe and North America provides a possible illustration. When coupled with other modes of moral learning in the context of ambiguous but deeply rooted moral norms, such as those of sanctity and authority, reflection on moral inconsistency can help to justify this large-scale moral change, even among those who find gay sex, by its nature, morally repugnant.

© 2017 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

### 1. Introduction

We are morally inconsistent when we make opposite moral judgments about cases that are not relevantly different. Discovering moral inconsistency often occasions moral censure: “You condemn her behavior but not your own when there is really no relevant difference.” It can also occasion moral learning. In this essay I focus on moral learning that occurs because we discover that we cannot sustain some of our moral judgments that are inconsistent with other moral judgments that we are unable or unwilling to give up.

Moral learning of this kind has two complementary normative functions. Our moral judgments in specific cases reflect how we interpret and apply moral norms. Learning to be more consistent in these moral judgments makes our interpretation and application of moral norms more consistent. This learning complements other psychological and social learning mechanisms through which we interpret and apply these moral norms. Those mechanisms include reinforcement learning (Crockett, 2013; Cushman, 2013), social learning (e.g. in contact theory: Paluck, 2012; Pettigrew, Tropp, Wagner, & Christ, 2011), Bayesian reasoning (Nichols, Kumar, Lopez, Ayers, & Chan, 2016; Kleiman and Tenenbaum, this issue),

moral development (Bloom, 2013; Tomasello, 2009), and the acquisition of moral heuristics through natural and cultural selection (Boehm, 2012; Greene, 2013). The discovery of moral inconsistency, on the other hand, can promote the critical assessment of current moral norms, when we discover, as we reason together, that we cannot sustain some of them because of their inconsistency with more deeply held moral norms (Kumar & Campbell, 2012; Kumar, in press).

The latter function is obviously normative, since it purports to tell us what moral norms we *ought* to have, not merely what moral norms in fact already guide us. I will argue, however, that the first function is also robustly normative, since moral norms are inevitably open ended in many applications. (For example, I may feel morally bound to remain loyal to my friend but now I am faced with a situation in which to protect him from harm I must break a solemn promise I made to him. Which act is more consistent with my loyalty to him? Do I protect him or keep my promise?) Through sensitivity to inconsistency we can, when reasoning together, become better able apply the norms we share by learning, together with those affected by the norms, how we can apply them with greater moral consistency, given our other mutual moral commitments. We learn, in effect, how one application of moral norms is more rationally justified than another because it is more consistent with applications where we are not in doubt.

E-mail address: [richmond.campbell@dal.ca](mailto:richmond.campbell@dal.ca)

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.cognition.2017.05.006>

0010-0277/© 2017 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

The process of learning how to better justify the applications of our moral norms by removing potential inconsistencies is normative for those engaged in the process and can be studied empirically as a mechanism of moral learning. On the other hand, questions about how we ought to revise moral norms may seem clearly philosophical and beyond the realm of psychological study. But the learning process of finding a consistent way to apply a norm like loyalty in a particular case is not fundamentally different from critically assessing current moral norms when they are subject to revision based on their inconsistency with more deeply held moral norms. These dual functions, though separable in theory, both operate through sensitivity to possible moral inconsistency. It is easy, then, to understand how the second evolves from the first and how a revision in norms that we deem to be morally justified can be a natural product of the same kind of moral learning. The thesis of dual normativity is that there is no fundamental moral difference in kind when we reflect on consistency to learn how to become more rational in applying our current moral norms to particular cases and when at other times we reflect on consistency to learn what moral norms we ought to have. Moral learning through reflection on moral consistency is in each case the same process.

In reflecting on moral consistency, many persons can address the same moral issue in different contexts. Over time this process can help to facilitate large-scale progressive moral change in which the circle of those who take each other to be moral equals expands (Singer, 2011). Examples are the British and later American abolition of slavery, improvements in the civil status of women in America and Western Europe over last two centuries (e.g., in the right to vote and hold public office), and the fairly recent dramatic shift toward more tolerant judgments about gay marriage in North America and Western Europe (Kitcher, 2011, 145–65). What then constitutes *progressive* moral change, as opposed simply to change in moral judgments? This large important philosophical question need not be taken up here. The last three examples, since they are instances of moral learning facilitated in part by reflection on moral consistency, illuminate the relevance and importance of moral learning in the form examined here, however we choose to understand moral progress. For recent work on moral progress and how moral consistency bears on these and other examples, see Buchanan and Powell (2016), Campbell and Kumar (2012, 2013), Kumar (in press), Kumar and Campbell (2012, 2016, and in preparation).

In the following I will not digress to take up underlying meta-ethical issues, since I believe the thesis of dual normativity does not depend on how they are settled. To see this thesis in larger context, however, the reader should know that the meta-ethical perspective that motivates it is a thoroughgoing moral naturalism that allows the possibility of objective moral progress (Campbell & Kumar, 2013). Human morality, following Kitcher (2011), is a flexible social technology designed for interdependent living that has continued to evolve for hundreds of thousands of years. Certain aspects, such the capacities for empathy and loyalty, are rooted in our mammalian ancestors, while others, such as the capacity to recognize inconsistency in moral judgments evolved much later, but perhaps before human language was fully developed. The same may be true of the related capacity to treat in-group members as equals (Tomasello, 2016). This conception of the origin and point of morality motivates my view of dual normativity but is not essential to its defense.

I review in Section 2 the concept of moral consistency in response to particular cases and discuss how it differs from related concepts like reflective equilibrium that could be confused with it. Then I illustrate in Sections 3–7 how three elements of moral consistency complement other mechanisms of moral learning. Moral consistency (1) resists bias in the application of moral norms, (2) tests assumptions about morally relevant difference among cases,

and (3) assists in setting moral priorities and revising moral norms. In large-scale moral change, these key elements can interact with each other and with other forms of moral learning and shared, deeply rooted moral norms. To illustrate the last point, I conclude by sketching a possible scenario, consistent with what we know, where recent changes in moral judgments about gay marriage could be driven by the need for consistency in moral feeling and thinking in conjunction with other forms of moral learning and evolved foundational moral norms that appear to be universal. My general aim is to reveal the need for empirical research on this neglected form of moral learning.

## 2. What is moral consistency?

Moral consistency is responding morally in a similar way to cases that are morally alike—treating like cases alike from a moral perspective. Moral inconsistency is responding in morally opposed ways to cases that are morally alike. I will take for granted that we can usefully distinguish norms that are generically moral from other kinds of norms, such as norms of law, etiquette, and prudence, though they often lead us to the same action, as when legal and moral norms prohibit cheating on income tax. Roughly, moral norms regarding behavior, motive, character, and institution share distinctive features that collectively set them apart from other norms (Kumar, 2015; Kumar & Campbell, 2016; Nichols, 2004). For example, they are thought to have authority, when they are justified, that transcends conventional authority, to have sufficient seriousness that they take precedence over the demands of prudence, etiquette, and even law in cases of conflict, to require sanctions of various degrees when they are violated even if sanctions are not required by law, and to be worth following just for their own sake, whether or not doing so would lead to approval or peace of mind or advantage in some other way. What moral consistency requires is that moral norms be applied in the same way to distinct cases unless they are different in ways that are morally relevant. If a moral norm is applied differently to two cases that are not different in any moral respects, then that application of the norm cannot be justified in both cases. Either the application is unjustified in one case, or it is unjustified in the other. If there is no morally relevant difference between the cases, the moral norm must be applied the same way to both cases for its application to be justified.

What does it mean to speak of “a morally relevant difference”? Suppose both John and Mary appear to be badly in need of help and I help just John. My son may question why I apply the norm of helping those badly in need to the case of John but not Mary. If I am to defend my moral consistency by pointing to a morally relevant difference between the cases, two conditions need to be met. First, I need to cite a difference that can be ascertained without assuming beforehand that my judgments are justified; otherwise I would be arguing in a circle. For example, I might point out that although Mary appears to need help, actually she does not, and give non-moral evidence that can be verified without assuming that I am justified in not helping her. Or I might defend my position by arguing that she is a bad person who does not deserve help. While the latter claim may be contentious, it is still possible that I can defend it by describing non-moral facts about her past behavior that are relevant to her being a bad person but are verifiable whether or not I am justified in not helping her. The second condition that needs to be met is that the difference cited must be morally relevant to my being justified in not helping her. Suppose I point out that John has blue eyes and Mary does not. I may be right and this fact is easily verified without first assuming that I am justified in not helping Mary, but the difference is morally irrelevant to the issue at hand and the second condition is not satisfied.

متن کامل مقاله

دریافت فوری ←

**ISI**Articles

مرجع مقالات تخصصی ایران

- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه تمام متن مقالات انگلیسی
- ✓ امکان دانلود نسخه ترجمه شده مقالات
- ✓ پذیرش سفارش ترجمه تخصصی
- ✓ امکان جستجو در آرشیو جامعی از صدها موضوع و هزاران مقاله
- ✓ امکان دانلود رایگان ۲ صفحه اول هر مقاله
- ✓ امکان پرداخت اینترنتی با کلیه کارت های عضو شتاب
- ✓ دانلود فوری مقاله پس از پرداخت آنلاین
- ✓ پشتیبانی کامل خرید با بهره مندی از سیستم هوشمند رهگیری سفارشات