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Moral Psych: S 19

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Handout #1: In Search of Moral Universals

1. The Philosopher's Project: Defining Moral Cognition

MacIntyre, "The central task to which contemporary moral philosophers have addressed themselves is that of listing the distinctive characteristics of moral utterances" (1957, 26).

Stich: If we replace "moral utterances" with the more general notion of "moral cognition" (which includes, judgments, beliefs, patterns of inference, etc.), then what MacIntrye says above is an essentially correct characterization of analytic moral philosophy from 1952-1990.

In many contexts in daily life, we use "moral" to compliment people and we use "immoral" to criticize them. We also use these terms to evaluate people's behavior, and the laws and institutions under which we live. If we discuss whether someone is a moral person or whether a politician did something immoral we first describe their behavior and then evaluate that behavior and make some judgment as to whether or not the people we're discussing did things they shouldn't have done. When we use "moral" and "immoral" in these ways our discussions and the judgments, beliefs and assertions that emerge from them are not parts of any contemporary science. The sciences (e.g. biology and psychology) are relevant to determining what someone has done and why she has done it, but to **evaluate** these behaviors and **assess them in normative terms** (as actions that were right or wrong) we must go beyond the sciences we currently recognize as such. Our conversations in courts of laws and public opinion involve the use of "moral" and "immoral," where these terms function as non-scientific or extra-scientific terms of evaluation and judgment. There is more to life than science.

But there are other uses of "moral" and "immoral" that are scientific in the intended sense. We can seek to describe "the morality" of a particular feudal lord in 17th century France or a slave owner in the Confederate South without making a judgment as to the accuracy or value or validity of this morality. **Here we do not speak *from* a morality; instead, we speak *about* that morality**.

X is **speaking from a morality** if she evaluates another person Y's actions as immoral or wrong.

X is **speaking about a morality** if she describes herself or another person Z as evaluating or thinking of Y's actions as wrong.

To speak from a morality is to engage in evaluative, normative or moral discourse. To speak about a morality is to engage in descriptive, predictive, explanatory or scientific discourse.

Different countries have different laws written into their constitutions, judicial decisions and other official documents. Similarly, different communities enact different moralities, where these are social norms that are more or less shared by the individual people who live in those communities. When we describe these moralities and the manner in which they change over time we are engaged in a scientific activity. The science in question is **sociology**.

Similarly, different individuals (within a linguistic or cultural community) will have different moral codes to which they ascribe. The science we are engaged in when we describe these

codes and explain their effects on people's thought, talk and actions as they unfold over time is **psychology**.

Stich's way of drawing the relevant distinction relies on two different "projects":

(1) **The common person's project**: figuring out which actions are *moral* and which are *immoral*. This is more or less equivalent (if less sophisticated from a psychological point of view) to determining which moral principles are valid and which are invalid or which moral claims are true and which are false, or something similar. When you judge that an action is immoral, we can often say this is because it violates a rule you would invoke to justify your judgment if pressed to do so and that you treat this principle as valid in assuming it as the basis for your judgment.

For example, it is common to try to figure out whether it is morally ok to abort a pregnancy or lie to protect someone's feelings. Everyone with a conscience wonders what its ok to do and what is not ok. This is not a scientific or distinctively philosophical project. It's the common person's project.

(2) **The philosopher's project**: figuring out which principles or beliefs or claims or judgments or patterns of inference are *moral* ones and which are *non-moral* ones. This is more or less equivalent to distinguishing the distinctively "moral" component of human psychology.

For example, Stich reports philosophers trying to identify what precisely distinguishes moral judgments from aesthetic judgments or what distinguishes moral rules from rules of etiquette. Other philosophers asked whether every society has a morality or not - whether, e.g., the Navajo might live without a moral code. Stich shows that this was a common project, though he doesn't show that more scholarly literature was devoted to it than to other philosophical and scientific questions.

2. Why Pursue the Project?

Stich tries to explain why philosophers would want to distinguish moral judgments, laws and principles from non-moral ones. He uses Joyce and Haidt as examples:

First Example: Richard Joyce on the evolution of morality.

Joyce's question: How did our moral sense evolve?

Question: What is the moral sense? (How can we trace its origins if we don't know which thing's origins we're looking for.)

Joyce: The moral sense is just our faculty (or capacity) for making moral judgments.

Question: Which of the judgments we make are the moral ones?

Stich: Answering that question is the Philosopher's Project.

Second Example: Haidt's argument that scientists who study morality are biased against social conservatives.

Haidt: Moral psychologists focus on judgments of fairness and harm, but lots of traditional and religious cultures moralize dress, diet, comportment, sexual practices and other behaviors that have little if anything to do with harm and fairness.

Liberal response: We know this, but these rules aren't genuinely moral rules. They're mere conventions wrongly lumped in with the genuine moral rules that prohibit rape, murder, theft and so on.

Haidt's response: These other rules are still moral rules, even if they're rules you disagree with.

Stich: We cannot resolve this disagreement without completing the Philosopher's Project.

3. Methodological Concerns: How Can we Pursue the Philosopher's Project?

Conceptual Analysis: Consult our intuitions about which judgments "we" would call "moral" and which we would not (or look at which judgments we call "moral" and which we don't in ordinary life or discourse). Evaluate general proposals on the basis of their fit with these intuitions or customs of usage.

Conceptual Engineering: Maybe ordinary usage isn't the best guide for distinguishing moral judgments from non-moral judgment. Maybe it's better to consider the various ways we might distinguish moral cognition from non-moral cognition, set out the pros and cons of conceptualizing moral cognition in these ways and select the best conceptualization of moral cognition all things considered for the purposes of theory construction.

Frankena says the conceptual engineering approach is particularly attractive when conceptual analysis reveals that our ordinary practices are conflicted or internally incoherent.

Question: If we engage in conceptual engineering of this kind, have we left science behind for religion or philosophy? Frankena certainly suggests this when he is quoted by Stich as asserting,

"Defining terms like 'moral judgment' may be part of an attempt to understand, rethink, and possibly even revise the whole institution which we call morality, just as defining 'scientific judgment' may be part of an attempt to do this for science" (1958, 45)

4. The Distinction between Morality and Normativity

Traditionally, morality is thought to be just one component of a more general phenomenon: normativity. The idea here is that we have lots of rules and make lots of evaluations that have little if anything to do with the morality or immorality of people and their actions as we ordinarily think of these things.

One possible example is, again, norms of prudence: it is imprudent not to wear your seat belt or fail to save for your retirement. But if these actions don't harm anyone besides the agent, many people will balk at describing them as immoral. Of course, this is not uncontroversial. Those who believe we have genuinely **"moral" duties to ourselves** will reject this way of conceptualizing the **moral/prudential distinction**.

More common examples are rules of etiquette and comportment. If someone stands too close to you while speaking, she is breaking a tacit norm or social rule. (Those of us who have internalized this rule will think—or even say—that the "close talker" we've imagined **ought** to back up a bit.) But close talking isn't commonly described as immoral.

Another example might be driving regulations. The British drive on the left while we drive on the right. There is no pressure to think one of these rules is "better" than the other. We need to have uniformity in practice so we don't run into one another, and this uniformity is enforced with a rule. But either the drive-on-the-left-side-of-the-road uniformity or the drive-on-the-right-side-of-the-road uniformity is as good as the other. This is supposed to mark the rule out as a **"non-moral convention"** rather than a **"moral rule"** even if our reasons for imposing one of these traffic rules or the other are partly moral in content (i.e. the duty to protect innocent life).

Questions: What about religious traditions and rituals? Is the norm of resting on Saturday or Sunday conceptualized as a moral rule or a non-moral convention by the religious Jew or Christian? How about prohibitions on eating pork? Do Muslims and Jews think of their dietary commands as moral rules or conventions? These are the questions that divide Haidt from some of his liberal critics.

Turiel and several of Kohlberg's other students argued that children draw a distinction between moral norms and non-moral conventions at an early age. We will look at some of their evidence below and again later in the quarter when we read Haidt. Skeptics of the distinction, like Steve Stich, argue that the moral/convention distinction is an artifact of Western, educated, liberal societies. Different people draw the distinction differently and some cultures (those where all aspects of life are "moralized") don't draw it at all.

Skepticism about the Moral/Conventional Distinction: Skeptics argue that *there is no good distinction to be drawn between moral rules and non-moral rules*.

Skepticism about the Objectivity of the Moral/Conventional Distinction: Others theorists may utilize a distinction between moral norms and mere conventions while admitting that any way of drawing the distinction incurs substantive moral commitments (e.g. the liberal idea that social and legal punishment should be limited to preventing harm and enforcing justice).

Questions: If we incur substantive moral commitments when drawing a distinction between moral norms and mere conventions, does that entail or provide evidence that the distinction we employ is: (i) parochial rather than universal, and/or (ii) something beyond science that must be defended or rationalized in partly moral terms? If adopting the moral/conventional distinction commits a psychologist or philosopher or cognitive scientist to liberal political philosophy, does that make the distinction unscientific?

Stich is skeptical of the objectivity of the moral/conventional distinction insofar as he thinks this distinction is parochial rather than universal.

Substantive Proposals for Defining the Moral/Conventional Distinction

Hare: Moral Principles are universalizable (they must be stated in general terms and apply to everyone) and prescriptive (they are used to enjoin behavior on pain of punishment or self-enforced through conscience).

Frankena: Moral principles are overriding (thought to provide a compelling reason to act against immediate self-interest or even prudence) or supremely important.

Gewirth: Moral principles are categorical. They are used to issue commands or insist on behavior irrespective of the desires of the person at whom they are directed. You must do what's right or obligatory whether you want to or not.

Supervenience Principles: There is a cognitive principle that governs use of "moral." You cannot judge that x is immoral and y not unless there is some descriptive or "factual" difference between x and y that can be cited to justify this difference in judgment. We do not have to justify our aesthetic preferences in this way.

Sociality and Empathy: Stich quotes Frankena as asserting that all moral rules hold between people (ruling out by definition duties to self), and that moral thinking necessarily involves consideration of others by thinking of things from their points of view. Baier proposed that distinctively moral rules must be justified by appeal to the good of all and Toumlin proposed that concern for social harmony is definitive.

Wittgenstein: "Moral" cannot be defined in the manner proposed. There is nothing more than a "family resemblance" between the judgments, principles, etc. we group together as "moral."

5. The Philosopher's Project and The Science of Morality

Stich 1: Fodor, channeling Wittgenstein, says that we can't define "moral" even as it's applied to something psychological like judgments rather than actions we want to condemn. The Philosopher's project cannot be completed.

Stich 2: Maybe different people define "moral judgment" differently and we can uncover this with science.

Levine, et al report that people of different faiths conceptualize morality differently. There is even variation among college students.

Moral psychologists are not primarily interested in moral language, which has been more extensively discussed by philosophers (including those pursuing what Stich calls the "Philosopher's Project"). Instead, they study two somewhat distinct interacting components of our minds.

(1) **Moral Sensibility**: Each one of us has a different conscience or what Darwin, following Hutcheson and Hume, called a "moral sense." This is a complex part of your psychology that plays a central role in generating and modifying your emotions of blame and praise, regret, remorse or pride. Of course, your experience of these emotions is affected by your "moral ideology." (For an analysis of this concept see below.) And moral sensibility is both more complex and more heavily influenced by ideology than the traditional senses of taste, smell, touch, hearing and sight. For this reason I am labeling this component of your moral psychology "moral sensibility" rather than moral sense. But this is a largely terminological advance over Hutcheson and Hume. For I agree with Hutcheson and Hume that our moral sensibilities place constraints on the kinds of moral ideologies we will accept. Components of your moral sensibility are in this sense "pre-political" though they are not pre-familial. Hume placed sympathy in this class of "natural" or pre-political components of moral psychology and posited that sympathy is closest between kin. Kant also described a number of emotional

capacities as pre-conditions for susceptibility to ideas of duty or obligation which can be familial or even more general (as Kant supposed distinctively moral duties must be).

> There are such moral qualities that if one does not possess them, there can be no duty to acquire them. These are moral feeling, conscience, love of one's neighbor, and respect for oneself (self esteem). There is no obligation to have these, because they are subjective conditions of susceptibility to the concept of duty and are not objective conditions of morality. They are all sensitive [ästhetisch] and antecedent but natural predispositions [praedisposito] of being affected by concepts of duty. Though it cannot be regarded as a duty to have these predispositions, yet every man has them, and it is by means of them that he can be obligated. (Kant, MM: 399).

It is important to recognize that your moral sensibility is probably not something you fully control. Unless you are uncommonly reflective and deliberate in your social life you will regularly evaluate the actions of your family members, friends, roommates, coworkers and celebrities in a more or less "automatic" fashion. This is your moral sensibility at work, though again it is constantly influenced by your more articulate opinions about right and wrong and the rest of your moral ideology. Darwin emphasized the functioning of your moral sensibility when you evaluate your own past actions. Perhaps in response to the praise or criticism of others, you think about what you have done, and experience pride or remorse depending on your evaluation of that past behavior. Hume says sympathy typically enters into moral sensibility at this point in your thinking as you'll feel pride if you're affected by the happiness you've caused and the bump to your reputation or remorse if you're reflecting on the pain and suffering for which you're responsible and the people who think ill of you as a result. But if you're a psychopath you won't have appropriate emotional responses of these kinds. Sympathy is species typical but not universal.

(2) **Moral Ideology**: In addition to your moral sensibility as described above, you also have a moral ideology. The moral ideology of the USA is pretty much Locke's theory of natural rights to life, liberty and the acquisition of property in the pursuit of happiness. If you were raised in China or Russia you would have a different moral ideology, which placed greater emphasis on the good of the community or the value of maintaining its traditions over time. If you were raised a Christian and exposed to the morality articulated by Jesus and the apostles, that probably informs your moral ideology. If you were raised a Muslim and exposed to the morality articulated in the Koran, you probably have a somewhat different ideology. Of course, these examples are overly simple. Any particular person (like you) will have a mix of various ideologies reflecting the mix of people to whom they've been exposed. But religions and philosophies (including accounts of human nature and economic doctrines anchored in those accounts) are the clearest examples of ideologies.

Your moral ideology interacts with your moral sensibility to produce your moral psychology. The study of our moral psychologies is a more scientific than philosophical matter. We need to integrate moral psychology in this sense with the sociological study of the shared moralities we find in various communities to generate an overall account of how moralities are formed, how they change over time and how they interact with other aspects of our psychologies and social lives.

Initial questions: Can you articulate or verbally express or describe your morality? What does your moral sense look like? When do you feel proud? When are you ashamed? Who do you criticize as immoral and why? Who do you admire as moral and why? How do these emotions interact with your moral ideology? Do you have rules by which you live? Which of these do you consider moral rules?

Task: Separate into groups and see if you can articulate some shared moral rules or norms that play a role in your lives. Write them down. Then see if you can find some moral rules or norms that some in the group endorse and others reject. Write them down. Finally, try to explain the respective roles played by (i) moral sensibility and (ii) moral ideology in the genesis of these rules or norms.

In addition to describing and explaining various features of moral sensibility and moral ideology, many psychologists and sociologists turn their attentions to "moral cognition."

(3) **Moral cognition** is the kind of moral thought, inference, reasoning and "processing" that issues in "moral" judgments, evaluations, emotions and actions.

Notice, again, that in calling these judgments "moral" the moral psychologists must take herself to be **describing** rather than **evaluating** the cognition in question or she will bake her morality into her supposedly scientific account of people's moral psychologies.

Revisiting our Question about the Prospects of a Science of Distinctively Moral Cognition: Is it okay for those employed as cognitive scientists (e.g. developmental psychologists) studying morality to bake their morality into their classification of judgments as moral rather than non-moral?

The Humean Principle: We must always distinguish claims of "is" (or description, prediction and explanation of observation) from claims of ought (or evaluation, prescription, commendation, etc).

The Autonomy of Morality: Claims of "ought" (so understood) are not themselves among the results or data of the sciences, nor are they deducible from claims that are scientific in this sense.

Questions: Do you agree with these two principles? Apply them to the science or morality. Should moral cognition which is "bad" or grossly mistaken and pernicious according to the lights of the researcher be counted just as much "moral cognition" as moral cognition she judges good or valid?

6. Kohlberg, Turiel and The Moral/Conventional Distinction

In the 1970s, Lawrence Kohlberg became famous by advocating a Kant-inspired developmental account of moral cognition, which posited different stages in our moral thinking from childhood to adulthood. Kohlberg's philosophy was a science insofar as he inspired a large number of students to assess the validity of his developmental theory with tests and measures of various sorts. We will discuss Kohlberg's theory later in the course.

As Stich notes, Kohlberg's student Eliot Turiel, broke with Kohlberg over the moral thinking of young children. Turiel argued that it was authority-independent and general in scope whereas Kohlberg had proposed it was conceptually linked to fear of punishment and more particular. The Kantian idea that we are supposed to follow moral principles even when we can get away with violating them was supposed to arrive at later stages of moral development. To test this, Turiel designed the moral/conventional task.

The Moral Conventional Task: Religious subjects (Amish children) were asked whether working on the Sabbath is wrong (prohibited), why it's wrong (justification for prohibition) and then whether working on the Sabbath would still be wrong even if God said it was ok (authority

independence). They were then asked whether everyone is supposed to rest on the Sabbath (universality). Or subjects are asked whether chewing gum in class is wrong, why it's wrong and whether it would still be wrong if the teacher said it was ok. They are then asked whether no one should chew gum in class ever. The Amish children were similarly asked if hitting people is wrong, why it's wrong and whether it still would be wrong if God said it was ok and then whether everyone should refrain from hitting others. They were similarly asked whether pulling Sally's hair is wrong, why it's wrong, and whether it would still be wrong if the teacher said it was ok. They are then asked if everyone should refrain from hair pulling. Etc.

Stich: The M/C task assesses whether the relevant judgments are conceived of as universal, authority independent and justified by appeal to harm and rights. When the test suggests that subjects conceive of a prohibition in these terms, Stich calls this the UIH response.

Turiel's Thesis: The results of applying the test were supposed (by Turiel and others) to establish that moral judgments (so understood) emerge at a much earlier age than Kohlberg had proposed. Young children distinguish moral norms from mere conventions in terms or authority independence, universality and justification. They said it would be ok to work on the Sabbath if God said so, but that it would still be wrong to hit people even if God said it was ok.

Stich's critique: Turiel's experiments only establish that children distinguish moral norms from mere conventions on the basis of justification, authority independence and universality if "moral norms" are defined in terms of these qualities. But that assumes that the Philosopher's Project was completed and that a definition of distinctively moral cognition was agreed to by those party to the discussion. But the history shows that no such definition was ever agreed to and many philosophers were skeptical that agreement could be reached.

Stich's Essentialist Proposal (following Kripke and Putnam on so-called "natural kinds"): Perhaps "moral judgment" is like "water." Chemists didn't come to an analysis of water by defining the term, instead they analyzed prototypical instances of water and discovered a microscopic chemical essence. All water contains impurities but at the heart of these samples are molecules composed of two hydrogen atoms bonded to one oxygen atom in a certain arrangement, which we represent as H_2O. Similarly, perhaps we cannot defined "moral judgment" or "moral rule" or "moral thinking" but we can test and manipulate prototypical examples and uncover their underlying essence.

"One way to do this would be for psychologists to discover a cluster of nomologically linked properties that are shared by many (but perhaps not all) cases of what they would intuitively take to be prototypical moral judgments and that are missing in many (but perhaps not all) cases of what they would intuitively take not to be a moral judgment" (Stich, 25).

Question: How different is this in reality from the methods of analysis used by those pursuing the Philosopher's Project from 1970-1985?

Stich's Question: Do universality, authority-independence and justification in terms of harms and injustice "cluster"? Are they positively correlated with one another, and is the absence of one of these characteristics good evidence of the absence of the others?

Stich's answer: No: though many studies indicate as much, several do not. Nissan (1987): Israeli Arab children said mixed-sex bathing and addressing a teacher by his first name are universally bad and authority-independent even though they're harmless. Nucci and Turiel (1993) found Orthodox Jewish children said harmless violations of religious traditions were authority-independent. Haidt replicated these negative findings. (We will discuss Haidt's

experiments further later in the quarter.). Kelly, et al found that many prohibitions on violence are thought of as authority dependent, including a captain's whipping a sailor for drunken disobedience, and many such prohibitions are considered non-universal in scope. (Subjects judged that whipping the drunken sailor is not ok now, but it was many years ago.) Fessler's larger study also challenges Turiel's thesis.

7. A Contemporary Alternative

Kumar's Thesis: Turiel just uses the wrong characteristics to identify the class of moral judgments. We should drop the claim that moral judgments are essentially linked to harm and injustice. Instead, a wrong is conceptualized as a moral wrong just in case it's thought of as (1) serious, (2) general, (3) authority-independent, and (4) objective.

Objectivity: A claim X is conceptualized as objective if it is thought **not to allow** for **faultless disagreement**.

Faultless disagreement: X is the subject of faultless disagreement if A asserts, endorses or agrees with X, B denies, rejects or disagrees with X, but neither A nor B is mistaken in her attitude toward X.

Examples of Subjective Statements Amenable to Faultless Disagreement: "Cilantro is delicious." "Pollock's paintings are beautiful."

Stich's Reply to Kumar: (1) Kumar overstates the evidence that people think of prototypical moral judgments as objective. The evidence is mixed. (2) No evidence has been provided that objectivity clusters with the other three characteristics Kumar suggests are constitutive of moral judgment. (3) Seriousness is not an essential characteristic of moral judgments. According to Stich, stealing an eraser is typically thought of as immoral and showing up to your grandma's funeral is merely flouting convention, but the latter is much more serious than the former. According to Stich, Kumar's Thesis is even less plausible than Turiel's.

Question: How convincing is Stich's critique of Kumar?

8. Stich's Conclusions

Philosophers and psychologists have failed to identify distinctively moral cognition, distinctively moral judgments, or distinctively moral principles. It seems that different people conceptualize morality differently and have different conceptions of moral judgment. People may not even have internally consistent conceptions of morality. It is a consequence of this that there is "no fact of the matter" as to whether Haidt or his liberal critics are right about whether judgments grounded in nothing more than disgust are really moral judgments. This depends on how we define the term and there is no neutral body of evidence to force the participants in this disagreement to settle on a common definition. Theorists (especially scientists) may want to drop talk of moral judgments and focus instead on a class of judgments, principles or inferential mechanisms that is more "natural." This is what our next authors do when moving from talk of "moral judgments" to talk of "normative judgments" for the purposes of ethological investigation of animal societies.