

Affective Intuition and Rule Deployment: The Dénouement of Moral Judgment

Sharmistha Dhar
Centre for Cognitive Science
Jadavpur University, Kolkata, India

Abstract: What faculty of our mind is best suited to endow us with all that is required to carry forth our moral enterprise? In other words, what are the cognitive resources that subserve the moral mind? This is a core empirical question, raised much to the delight of the investigative inquisitiveness of the moral psychologists. But the philosophical connection to this problem can be traced back to as far in time as that of Plato the main tenet of whose tripartite theory of soul was that the rational element of the soul is like the charioteer who holds sway over his two horses – the manageable one, i.e. the spirited element and the unwieldy one, i.e. the vegetative, emotionally unruly element of the soul. And the era of reason-emotion debate begins, percolating into the field of moral beliefs that we inculcate and judgments that we pronounce. The mainstay of this short paper is a comparative analysis of two recently emerging theoretical frameworks claimed to be underlying moral judgments - one espoused by moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt claims that moral judgment is primarily elicited unconsciously by affect-driven intuition and the other put forward by philosopher Shaun Nichols attempts to highlight the conscious deliberation about moral rules. After a critical analysis of both the views, this work suggests that a syncretic approach to the aetiological theorization about moral judgment may provide some silver lining.

Keyword: moral judgment, moral dilemma, moral dumbfounding, Social Intuitionist Model (SIM) of moral judgment, moral intuition, moral rule.

1. Introduction

A considerable portion of our moral deliberations is expended by telling the right course of action from the wrong ones. A person is adjudged a morally robust person if she displays a sustained ability to not just determine what is right in a given situation, especially a trying one, but is also able to make a sharp line of demarcation between the right and the wrong. Unvitiated moral knowledge seems to be constituted by such ability. People with lesser claims to such moral robustness do, nonetheless, have to engage in moral deliberations and moral judgments. However, a question that continues to plague philosophically-oriented minds is: what is it that the sustainability of our moral judgment rests on? This calls into question the truth-aptness of our moral propositions. Meta-ethicists have two different theoretical claims in response to how to found the basis of our domain of morality. Cognitivists, for one, would claim that moral statements are truth-apt, while non-cognitivists would argue that moral

judgments are at bottom an assertion of individual sentiments and, nevertheless, not truth-apt. But the philosophical issue concerning what forms the basis of our moral enterprise has an unmistakable descriptive component and, therefore, is amenable to empirical investigation. Now, to put the initial question differently: what are the resources, cognitive or otherwise, that are to be credited with the property of being subservient to our moral judgments? No moral judgment would have been embraced and approved of if it were to be found that the judgment-giver did not draw upon a reliable source of knowledge for making the judgment; the process of moral judgment, however rapid it might be, must be well-informed and cognition-dependent, else where would our cherished moral ethos stand? This is common belief about the aetiology of our moral beliefs and practices. But, on raising the question, we gradually move towards the centre-stage of the reason-emotion debate, the debate between the controlled, conscious and deliberative cognitive apparatus versus the unconscious and automatic affective mechanism, both being top contenders for the judgment-maker's position. The remainder of this paper will concentrate on the question whether it is reason or emotion that underpins our moral judgments and contributes to our understanding of right and wrong. This comes through as a moral puzzle to us philosophers as is reflected in the questions asked in similar vein by Kennett and Fine:

“Which is the ‘real’ moral judgment? Is it the one based on the ubiquitous automatic attitude that ‘leaks’ into the agent’s socially significant behaviours, or that can become expressed verbally when the agent is unable to discount, cognitively elaborate, invalidate or disguise it? Or is it the attitude expressed in judgments at times when the agent is motivated and cognitively able to engage in self-regulatory control of automatic attitudes?”¹

2. Reason as the defence lawyer and intuition as the chief justice

For all the pot-shots critics have taken at Haidt’s ground-breaking yet discomfiting (as is indicated by a good number of critiques aimed at quashing the claims posited by Haidt’s thesis of moral judgment) SIM, short for the Social Intuitionist Model of moral judgment, it would, nevertheless, be an understatement of the SIM if it is assumed that Haidt does not lend any credence to the role of reasoning in the elicitation of moral judgment. All that he has been carefully pointing out is, conscious and deliberative process of reasoning hardly engenders moral judgment; the act of ratiocination with respect to moral judgment, on the contrary, is post-hoc, that is, people take recourse to it only to influence others’ intuitions about a particular moral stance once the judgment has already been delivered, so that this, in turn, shapes their judgments. The conscious deployment of reasoning, he argues, is thus limited to the context of what some label as a confabulation; we construct moral reasons to make people see reason, as it were, engaging thus in a web of socially-oriented moral argumentation. This brings out the rationally-oriented social component of the SIM. This is the role Haidt assigns to reasoning in the moral context:

“The social part of the social intuitionist model proposes that moral judgment should be studied as an interpersonal process. Moral reasoning is usually an ex post facto process used to influence the intuitions (and

¹ Kennett and Fine: 2009, p.80.

hence judgments) of other people. [...] when faced with a social demand for a verbal justification, one becomes a lawyer trying to build a case rather than a judge searching for the truth.”²

Again, Haidt avers that reasoning may not serve as a causal component of the initial moral judgment, but it definitely takes the cake as a spokesperson of our ingrained moral beliefs helping spread the belief through a web of social confabulation and thus hewing out the final moral upshot, something which actually happens in any moral discourse:

“[...] moral reasoning *does* play an important causal role once it is seen as a social activity rather than as a solitary activity. People engage in moral reasoning not so much to figure things out for themselves, in private, but to influence others. Other people’s reasons in turn can influence us, [...]. So reasons circulate between discourse partners and throughout the social network.”³

But what resources do we fall back upon when we respond to a morally germane situation? Haidt’s answer is, we need not make any conscious effort to come up with a moral stance. What draws out our moral stance is an automatic and effortless process engineered by our moral intuitions which are quintessentially cued by affective feelings. Haidt and Bjorklund define moral intuitions as:

“[...] the sudden appearance in consciousness, or at the fringe of consciousness, of an evaluative feeling (like-dislike, good-bad) about the character or actions of a person, without any conscious awareness of having gone through steps of search, weighing evidence, or inferring a conclusion. [...] This is the “finer internal sense” that Hume talked about.”⁴

A note of worry concerning the use of the term intuition by Haidt in the sense of a quick flash of affective feeling like aversion and disgust without any conscious awareness of it may be recorded here. Haidt’s intuition used in this specific technical sense of course enables him to explain certain cases when people sort of stutter (as will be discussed later under the section on moral dumbfounding) while asked to justify their moral stance, especially regarding their attitude of moral condemnation of incest or homosexuality. Haidt would argue that people fail to shore up their position due to the absence of a conscious, deliberative process preceding the moral judgment. Mikhail, however, points out that the use of the epithet “quick” in describing moral intuition is rather inappropriate. According to him, what makes a moral judgment intuitive is the absence of conscious deployment of moral principles, and therefore, moral intuition is rightly described as solely an unconscious process. As he puts it:

“Intuitive” is not a temporal notion, and does not mean the same thing as “immediate,” “impulsive” or “instinctive.” Intuitive moral judgments are those which meet a simple criterion: that they are not determined by the systematic and conscious use of ethical principles. An intuitive judgment may be made unhesitatingly, or after thoroughly examining whatever one thinks are the relevant facts of the case and assessing the predictable

² Haidt: 2001, p.814.

³ Haidt: 2004, pp. 284-285.

⁴ Haidt and Bjorklund: 2007, p.188.

consequences of different decisions. The important thing is simply that they not be made by consciously employing ethical principles.”⁵

To sum up the ABC-s of Haidt’s SIM, moral judgment is an outcome of the twin processes of affect-charged intuition and post hoc reasoning with the motivation and need to make private moral judgment a keystone of socio-moral discourse. But one may of course challenge Haidt’s thesis and raise two related sets of questions:

1. Are people really at their wit’s end to justify their position which is putatively an outcome of affective intuition?
2. Does affect always play a causally efficacious role in engendering moral judgment?

In response to the first issue, Haidt would advert to what he calls “moral dumbfounding” and as regards the second issue he has up his sleeve what philosopher Jesse Prinz later has referred to as the claim to emotion-sufficiency. Let us now present following Haidt the empirical findings relevant to the afore-mentioned questions.

Buttressing his claim that the aetiology of moral judgment at bottom is a non-rational process, Haidt shows in one of his experiments how people embrace certain positions regarding morally grave issues with vague justificatory ground at hand, which becomes all the more evident when people are asked to turn away from their stance or persuaded to see reason in the opposite party’s argument. In the experiments conducted by Haidt and his associates, participants were provided with a vignette which goes like this:

Julie and Mark are siblings. One night when they are all by themselves, they decide to make love. They make sure that they take adequate birth control measures before the act. Once they are done with it, they do not exactly feel guilty but decide to keep the incident as a cherished secret.⁶

The participants were then asked whether this incestuous act done by them was right. “Incest is so very wrong; it’s reprehensible!”- was the response of most participants on hearing this vignette. But Haidt observed that none of the rational grounds offered by the participants was applicable to the wrongness of incest. Their “rational” explanations disfavouring incest ranged from “Julie may become pregnant” and “Julie and Mark may have child with birth defects” to “It will be such a loss of face for both of them”. Haidt called this inability to figure out a rational underpinning of one’s moral belief “moral dumbfounding”. This could, however, also be termed as rational dumbfounding as people may not jettison their initial moral position despite their being made aware that they fail to support their position with plausible reason; the absence of an explicit and

⁵ Mikhail: 2000, p. 101.

⁶ For a detailed verbiage of the vignette and also the experiment vide, Haidt, J., Bjorklund, F., Murphy, S. (2000). *Moral dumbfounding: When intuition finds no reason*. Unpublished manuscript. University of Virginia.

deliberative process lies at the root of this “dumbfounded” state. Nonetheless, Haidt demonstrates that moral judgment is not a result of a rational analysis, one of which philosophers are capable. As Haidt avers:

“I do indeed minimize the causal efficacy of private moral reasoning, in which a person thinks about an issue and questions assumptions, beliefs, and intuitions without the benefit of a discourse partner. [...] in general, people other than philosophers are bad at such reasoning.”⁷

Now, coming to the second issue about whether Haidt’s SIM is broadly speaking an emotionist view of moral judgment, let us present the second category of evidence as is presented by Haidt and his collaborator Wheatley. In their experiment, subjects were prepared in such a way that every time they heard the morally and emotionally neutral words ‘take’ or ‘often’, there would be a feeling of disgust coming to the fore of their consciousness. They were then provided with two types of vignettes—one in which the chief agent was shown to be tainted and the other in which the acts described were morally neutral. The following is the vignette in which the agent’s acts are clearly blameworthy and even culpable:

Congressman Arnold Paxton frequently gives speeches condemning corruption and arguing for campaign finance reform. But he is just trying to cover up the fact that he himself [will take bribes from / is often bribed by] the tobacco lobby, and other special interests, to promote their legislation.⁸

And this vignette is one in which the agent’s act is intentionally brought under the cloud of suspicion (through insertion of the cue words ‘take’ or ‘often’), though actually the act is amoral, if not immoral:

Dan is a student council representative at his school. This semester he is in charge of scheduling discussions about academic issues. He [tries to take/often picks] topics that appeal to both professors and students in order to stimulate discussion.⁹

And confirming the investigators’ hypothesis, it was observed that participants were more likely to think that Dan was “up to something” while the Congressman’s acts were assessed more severely. This led them to come to the conclusion that moral disgust not just influences but also is an indispensable causal factor in helping our moral beliefs coming to the fore. Jesse Prinz thinks that:

“Such findings suggest that we can form the belief that something is morally wrong by simply having a negative emotion directed towards it. In this sense, emotions are sufficient for moral appraisal.”¹⁰

⁷ Haidt: 2004, p. 284.

⁸ Wheatley and Haidt: 2005, p. 781.

⁹ Wheatley and Haidt: 2005, p. 782.

¹⁰ Prinz: 2006, p.31.

But despite all these affect-driven intuitionist claims surrounding moral judgment, one wonders whether reason always does a follow-up job when it comes to explaining our moral questions and beliefs. If our system of moral appraisal is primarily backed by intuition, then the question may arise, how the humans built this sophisticated and complex moral edifice, a large chunk of which is occupied by moral norms? Nichols' rule-based approach moral judgment tries to supplement Haidt's intuitionist account of moral judgment, without actually disregarding it.

3. Can advertence to moral rule explain away moral dumbfounding?

Killing is wrong. If people were asked why killing is to be considered wrong and proscribed, they **were (omit were)** perhaps responded that physically harming someone is wrong. But on being challenged **further**, why harming someone is wrong, they would perhaps **retreat** into Haidt's "morally dumbfounded" state. Nichols, however, begs to differ. He has already proposed in one of his seminal works that:

"Core moral judgment depends on two mechanisms, then, a normative theory prohibiting harming others, and some affective mechanism that is activated by suffering in others. Core moral judgment thus implicates what I will call "Sentimental Rules", rules prohibiting actions that are independently likely to elicit strong negative affect. The set of rules or normative theory prohibits actions of a certain type, and actions of that type generate strong affective response."¹¹

Nichols and his associates in their later works on the philosophical psychology of moral judgment goes a step further and tries to gather evidence for what they call descriptive moral pluralism. As they put it:

"When making moral judgments, people are typically guided by a plurality of moral rules. These rules owe their existence to human emotions but are not simply equivalent to those emotions. And people's moral judgments ought to be guided by a plurality of emotion-based rules."¹²

In order to hammer home the existence of moral rules in the appraisal of a morally problematic scenario, Gill and Nichols focus on the famous Phillipa Foot's trolley problem that encapsulates certain intuitional anomalies when faced with a moral dilemmatic situation. There are two sorts of dilemmas presented by the trolley problem- the bystander case and the footbridge case. Here is a brief description of both the dilemmas. In both the cases, the agent needs to divert the train from its original track to save some lives. In the bystander case, one has to decide the rightness of diverting a train from its track by flipping a switch, in the net, allowing a person to be run over by the train ; but the catch is, if this action is not taken, five people will be killed. Now, most people, in line with philosophical intuitions claim that it is right to flip the switch. In the footbridge case, one has to decide the rightness of shoving an overweight man off a footbridge to stop the train running down the bridge, killing him thereby, but

¹¹ Nichols: 2004, p. 18.

¹² Gill and Nichols: 2008, p.143.

saving five lives in the process. Now, most people's verdict is against the act of pushing, although the respondents are clear about its dire consequences.

It would be interesting to find out how moral intuitionists like Haidt would explain why people in the bystander case decide to save the life of five people, granting that one has to pay the price with his life. The judgment is seemingly an outcome of a reasoned analysis, especially in comparison to the response given by people in the footbridge case, where the judgment seems to be based rather on a gut-feeling. Now Nichols points out that:

"[...] rule-based moral judgment maintains that we can explain the intuitions about the trolley cases in terms of what the rules do and do not forbid."¹³

In order to test the hypothesis Mallon and Nichols, conjure up a morally neutral dilemma analogous to the bystander and footbridge case. This they called the impersonal dilemma case where the victims were all replaced by teacups. The scenario was then divided into the impersonal bystander case and the impersonal footbridge case. Let us marshal the evidence following Mallon and Nichols that rules are an important contributing factor leading to moral judgment. Participants in this ingenuous experiment were given the following vignette:

Impersonal bystander case:

When Billy's mother leaves the house one day, she says "you are forbidden from breaking any of the teacups that are on the counter." Later that morning, Billy starts up his train set and goes to make a snack. When he returns, he finds that his 18 month old sister Ann has taken several of the teacups and placed them on the train tracks. Billy sees that if the train continues on its present course, it will run through and break five cups. Billy can't get to the cups or to the off-switch in time, but he can reach a lever which will divert the train to a side track. There is only one cup on the side track. He knows that the only way to save the five cups is to divert the train to the side track, which will break the cup on the side track. Billy proceeds to pull the lever and the train is diverted down the side track, breaking one of the cups.

Did Billy break his mother's rule? YES NO

Impersonal footbridge case:

When Susie's mother leaves the house one day, she says "you are forbidden from breaking any of the teacups that are on the counter." While Susie is playing in her bedroom, her 18 month old brother Fred has taken down several of the teacups and he has also turned on a mechanical toy truck, which is about to crush 5 of the cups. As Fred leaves the room, Susie walks in and sees that the truck is about to wreck the cups. She is standing next to the counter with the remaining teacups and she realizes that the only way to stop the truck in time is by throwing one of the teacups at the truck, which will break the cup she throws. Susie is in fact an excellent thrower and knows that if she throws the teacup at the truck she will save the five cups. Susie proceeds to throw the teacup, which breaks that cup, but it stops the truck and saves the five other teacups.

Did Susie break her mother's rule? YES NO ¹⁴

¹³ vide Mallon and Nichols: forthcoming. .

Now, supporting the hypothesis of Mallon and Nichols, most participants claimed that a rule was violated in the impersonal footbridge case, but fewer than half said that Susie acted in violation of her mother's rule. The upshot of this empirical finding for moral judgment is, the permissibility and impressibility of a given act is assessed, and intuition may not always give rise to judgments of wrongness; moral rules *a fortiori* play a causal role in eliciting judgments of wrongness, especially as grave as inflicting injury to life, which on Haidt's model would be conveniently explained first by automatic and unconscious intuition and then by conscious and controlled confabulatory reasoning. Nichols concedes that the evidence is indirect and does not imply that the same may apply to the actual moral dilemma, but it at least gives an indication that the rule-based model of moral judgment is worth some attention.

4. Epilogue

The foregoing analysis of the primordially intuitionist thesis of moral judgment proposed by Haidt and the predominantly rule-based **account of moral judgment** (the deployment of which requires some rational apparatus) may remind us of Hume's pronouncements regarding the domain of moral thinking. Philosophical tradition attributes to Hume the postulation of the epoch-making thesis that the motivation to act righteous and abstain from what is odiously injurious to a fellow human being is quintessentially grounded in moral sentiments of approbation and disapprobation "which nature has made universal in the whole species."¹⁵ A close reading of Hume's moral treatise *Enquiry concerning the principles of morals*, however, reveals that Hume was in no way blind to the crucial role rational deliberations do play and in fact ought to play. Towards the closing pages of his above-cited work, while trying to settle which of the two, the rational faculty or the emotional faculty, has an overarching influence on our judgment-making exercise, he remarked something to this effect:

"It is evident that Reason must enter for a considerable share in all decisions of this kind since nothing but that faculty can instruct us in the tendency of qualities and actions, and point out their beneficial consequences to society and to their possessor."¹⁶

Again, anyone sceptical about whether Hume would have favoured an advertence to socially-constructed moral norms may sample the view advocated by him as it appears to emanate from his following words:

"When a man denominates another his ENEMY, his RIVAL, his ANTAGONIST [...] he is understood to [...] express sentiments, peculiar to himself [...]. But when he bestows on any man the epithets of VICIOUS or ODIOSUS or DEPRAVED, he then [...] expresses sentiments, in which he expects all his audience are to

¹⁴ op. cit.

¹⁵ Hume: [1777] (1975), p. 173.

¹⁶ Hume: [1777] (2003), p.127

concur with him. He must here, therefore, depart from his private and particular situation, and must choose a point of view, common to him with others; he must move some universal principle of the human frame, and touch a string to which all mankind have an accord and symphony.”¹⁷

Perhaps a more mature take on the issue would be one as summed up by Salovey et al, a stance which is supposed to put to rest the raging conflict between reason and emotion over which of the two hold the normative authority and sustains our subliminal moral knowledge as well as public moral enterprise:

“Humans are not, in any particular sense, predominantly rational beings, nor are they predominantly emotional beings. They are both [...]. Success in life depends on one’s ability to reason about emotional experiences and other **affect**-laden information, and to respond in emotionally adaptive ways to the inferences drawn by reason about one’s situation, prospects, and past.”¹⁸

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¹⁷ Hume: [1777] (2003), p. 113.

¹⁸ Salovey, Detweiler-Bedell, Detweiler-Bedell, Mayer: 2008, p. 535.

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