

The nature of morality: The category of bad acts

Three types of questions about the nature of morality can be distinguished: (a) philosophical, (b) psychological and (c) epidemiological. The philosophical question asks whether (and in what sense) "goodness" and "badness" are real or objective properties that particular actions possess in varying degrees. The psychological question asks, what are the mental states and processes associated with the human classification of events as good versus bad? The epidemiological question asks, what is the actual distribution of moral judgments across time (developmental time and historical time) and across space (for example, across cultures)? With such questions in mind, I develop a limited critique of Kagan's "The Nature of Morality" (*Labey Clinic Medical Ethics Newsletter, Fall 2001*), while at the same time fully endorsing his central message that the study of moral psychology benefits greatly from the study of the emotions. Vice versa, I also suggest that an understanding of the cognitive side of moral judgment is a necessary precondition for a full understanding of the psychology of the emotions.

"Cognitivists" (Plato is perhaps the most famous) answer the philosophical question in the affirmative. They believe that any particular moral judgment, like scientific judgments, must thus be either true or false. They conclude, moral competence amounts to discovering the truth of the matter by means of either secular or theological modes of reasoning.

In contrast, philosophical "emotivists" (Hume is perhaps the most famous) argue that there really is no real property "out there" to be represented or described with such terms as "good" or "bad." According to the emotivists, moral judgments are neither true nor false. They are merely expressions of personal or collective choice. Judgments of "good" and "bad" just express likes and dislikes, positive and negative feeling states, tastes and aversions. What you should not do, say the emotivists, is ask whether likes, preferences or tastes are accurate estimations of what is truly "good" (or "bad"), because those moral terms are merely labels for our feelings.

Kagan suggests answers to the epidemiological and psychological questions.

1) The moral sense is unique to our species and universal across cultures and history. 2) Doing harm to others without reason is the only action considered immoral in all societies. 3) Moral judgments about particular actions do not converge over time or space. 4) In contemporary Western society a morality emphasizing autonomy (having the things you want, preference maximization) is superceding a morality emphasizing duties and obligations related to membership in social categories. 5) Adults experience their moral judgments both as "cognitive" judgments and "emotive" judgments; both reason and feeling play their part in moral psychology around the world. Nevertheless, Kagan believes, moral judgments are motivators of action primarily to the extent that they produce in human beings feelings of repugnance, guilt, indignation and shame; and he doubts the cognitive side of our moral nature is sufficient to motivate moral action.

He also tells this story about moral development. "Good/bad" categories, mostly devoid of meaning, are already (innately?) available to the neonate and then get "imposed on" experience and filled in with content. This happens once the child has the intellectual capacity to notice and remember connections between actions and their consequences, negative subjective states (uncertainty, feelings of tension, unpleasant emotions) and parental disapproval. With the exception of "arbitrary assault," Kagan seems to suggest that the connection between any action and its classification as "bad" is almost entirely mediated by parental reactions and the experience of negative feeling states. Here his fondness for emotivism seems most apparent.

My admiration for Kagan's research on morality and emotion is great and some of my own work^{1,2,3} is strongly supportive of his observations about cross-cultural variability in moral judgments. In the places in India where I do research the category of "bad acts" includes a widow eating fish, a woman having a conversation with her husband's elder

brother, and parents refusing to sleep in the same bed with their children.

I have also proposed that on a worldwide scale there is a "big three" of morality. There is an "ethics of autonomy" based on moral concepts such as harm, rights and justice, which is designed to protect individuals in pursuit of the gratification of their wants. There is an "ethics of community" based on moral concepts such as duty, hierarchy and interdependency, which is designed to help individuals achieve dignity by virtue of their role and position in a society. There is an "ethics of divinity" based on moral concepts such as natural order, sacred order, sanctity, sin and pollution, which is designed to maintain the integrity of the spiritual side of human nature. These ethics vary in their centrality and distribution both across and within groups.

I offer the following limited critique of Kagan's position: First, the prohibition on arbitrary assault is not the only "natural" or universal moral standard. There are many others, including the moral imperative to "treat like cases alike," to protect the vulnerable, to avoid incest, to reciprocate in social exchanges, to be grateful for gifts, to honor promises. I would add to the list many of the "virtues." Of course, as Kagan well knows, the rub with all such universal standards, including the norm against hurting others "without a reason," is that they are too abstract to determine moral decisions about particular cases. For example, even in cases of genocide or acts of "martyrdom" by terrorists, the killers typically believe they are acting in "self-defense" (that is, *with* reason) against some perceived threat to their group or way of life.

Secondly, a question arises. Is Kagan a soft cognitivist who believes, as I do, that human reason has limits and leaves room for fully rational and morally decent people to disagree in their moral judgments? Or is he an emotivist who believes that the experience of a negative feeling state is sufficient reason to classify almost anything as morally bad? One tenet of soft cognitivism is that normal human beings are intuitively philosophical cognitivists.

As Arthur Lovejoy has noted,⁴ when someone says, "The conduct of Adolf Hitler was wicked," they "do not in fact conceive of themselves merely to be reporting on the state of their emotions." They mean to be saying something more than "I am very unpleasantly affected when I think of it." Any viable cultural system provides its members with "good reasons" for seeing this or that event in such a way that it can be locally experienced as a concrete instance of some abstract moral standard. This process of filling in with "good reasons" the gap between abstract universal moral standards and concrete local actions may involve many parochial concepts and beliefs, but it is very cognitive. I also suggest that one reason there is disagreement across cultures about which actions are good is because there are so many universal abstract moral standards (justice, loyalty, benevolence, duty, respect, liberty) that they are in conflict and cannot all be maximized simultaneously. A choice must be made about which "goods" take precedence. Hence one can be a soft cognitivist while granting that emotional experiences in childhood may play a big part in signaling which of the virtues is most important on the local cultural scene.

Thirdly, "Western society" is big enough to accommodate many different types of groups with many different types of ethics. Lene Jensen discovered that liberal and fundamentalist Protestants in the USA both endorse an ethics of community, despite Robert Bellah's concerns about excessive individualism.⁵ The liberals also accept an ethics of autonomy while the fundamentalists don't. How these ethical ratios are playing themselves out is more complex than some of the critics of Western individualism and hedonism have suggested.

Finally, it seems to me that reason and feeling have never had symmetrical parts to play in moral psychology. Reason can justify our moral reactions (and if you are a fully rational person, motivate them as well) while feelings can only motivate behavior, but never justify it. Upon analysis, many emotions seem to contain within themselves a moral core. "Fear" is associated with issues of safety and harm and motivates us to eliminate the conditions that produce it. "Anger" and "indignation" are associated with issues of fairness, equity and just dessert and

motivate us to eliminate injustice from the world. "Love" and "compassion" are associated with protection of the vulnerable and motivate us to take care of others. In each case, our emotional reactions can be justified by the good reasons (the "cognitive appraisal conditions," e.g., the threat to safety, the injustice, the vulnerability) that produced them. They can't be justified by simply pointing to the motivating feeling states (e.g., the heat or tension or uncertainty) that "drive" us to act. It would be quite insufficient to translate "I am angry at him" as only meaning "I have been unfairly treated by him." "I have been unfairly treated by him" is in the domain of reason. It is a proposition about a state of the world that can be judged true or false. If it is false, one should not be angry if one is a reasonable person. Yet, "anger" is more than its cognitive core. It is also the feeling state. And, of course, human societies have never been entirely populated by fully rational persons — those who are motivated to do all things only for good reasons. Which is why one suspects Kagan is right that without the feelings

that go with guilt, shame, disgust, righteous indignation and the anticipation of stigma we would live in a less moral world. □

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¹ Shweder RA, Mahapatra M, Miller JG, Kagan J, Lamb S eds. Culture and Moral Development. In *The Emergence of Morality in Young Children* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987:1–83.

² Shweder RA, Jensen L, Goldstein W. Goodnow JJ, Miller P, Kessel F eds. Who Sleeps By Whom Revisited: A Method for Extracting the Moral "Goods" Implicit in Praxis. In *Cultural Practices as Contexts for Development* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995.

³ Shweder RA, Much NC, Mahapatra M, Park L, Brandt A, Rozin P. eds. The "Big Three" of Morality (Autonomy, Community, Divinity), and the "Big Three" Explanations of Suffering. In *Morality and Health* New York: Routledge, 1997.

⁴ Lovejoy A. *Reflections on Human Nature* Johns Hopkins University Press, 1961:253,255.

⁵ Jensen L. Different worldviews, different morals: America's culture war divide. *Human Development* 1997;40:325–344.

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— the public could quickly accommodate itself to fabricated humans and near-humans, organisms that previously existed only in the realm of speculative fiction. With commercial interests continually touting the benefits of such "breakthroughs," the production of quasi-humans for research or therapy, using our technique or different ones, cannot be too far behind.

As it attempted with the Chakrabarty patent application, the PTO rejected our chimera patent in its initial reviews. Of course, the major difference between the *Chakrabarty* case and ours is that the PTO no longer opposes patents on organisms. Instead, it would like to draw a line between obviously troublesome inventions of the sort we propose and other life forms they have allowed to be patented, such as human bone-marrow cells and pigs containing human genes. Given the common evolutionary heritage and biological continuity of all organisms on Earth — we share more than 98 percent of our DNA sequence with chimpanzees, for example — this may be an impossible task. Ultimately, the patentability of part-human organisms may have to be resolved by the courts or Congress. But concealed within the patent issue is the deeper one of how far we as a society will go in permitting technology to blur the lines between human and non-human, person and artifact.^{5,6} □

¹ Congressional Record: July 31, 2001 (House) Pages H4916-H4945.
<http://energycommerce.house.gov/107/action/107-41.pdf>

² 206 U.S.P.Q. 193.

³ Fehilly C B, Willadsen S M, Tucker E M. Interspecific chimaerism between sheep and goat. *Nature* 1984;307:634–6.

⁴ Meinecke-Tillmann S, Meinecke B. Experimental chimaeras-removal of reproductive barrier between sheep and goat. *Nature* 1984;307:637–8.

⁵ Magnani TA. The patentability of human-animal chimeras. *Berkeley Tech Law Journal* 1999;14:443–60.

⁶ Lee K. *The Natural and the Artefactual*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 1999.