Ethics // Spring 2022

Handout 19

Ethics and neuroscience: Greene II

BABY INTUITIONS. Greene claims support for his theory from other dilemmas as well. People were ambivalent about the *crying baby dilemma* (no uniform answers). But there was a consensus about the *infanticide dilemma* where they quickly judged that killing the baby is not permissible. Greene's model predicts that that in both cases there is an emotional aversion to killing babies (i.e. aversion to up-close violence). Yet in the in the cb-dilemma there is also a strong cost-benefit, cognitive response going against the emotional response. Thus we have a 'response conflict'. In some people the cognitive response dominates, in other the emotional response does. [44] [45]

This claim can be empirically tested (generally, Greene claims the neuroscientific testability as a major virtue of his account). Indeed, the areas of the brain (the anterior cingulate cortex) associated with the response conflict have lit up when people were asked about the cb-dilemma. Also, these people's brains showed increased activity in the areas associated with cognitive responses (in contrast to the people who were asked about infanticide). [45]

SINGER'S CHALLENGE. As we saw earlier, Singer's effective altruist posits that we have concrete obligations to alleviate suffering wherever it is (this is in contrast to Mill's or Sidgwick's utilitarian). In fact we have a pair of dilemmas here: [46]

Proximate suffering: Are we obligated to help a drowning child (or adult!) here now? The consensus, hopefully, is that we are.
Remote suffering: Are we obligated to help a starving child in India? At best there is no consensus, or likely there is a majority that we aren't.

Singer's challenge is that our responses in Remote suffering are untenable. The same grounds holding in Proximate suffering should hold in Remote suffering. Indeed, perhaps they are more convincing in the latter case, since saving a drowning child may involve a risk to yourself, but no such risk exists if you adopt the effective altruist policies (as described by Singer).

Greene's model explains the two cases by the same appeal to the 'up close and personal' features of the situations. We have emotionally charged, deontological intuitions that we must save the drowning child. But we have no such intuitions that we must save an Indian child. Absent these intuitions, the effective altruist finds it hard to convince his audience. It should be noted, however, that nothing in what is said so far justifies or undermines effective altruism from a logical point of view. [47]

APPROACHES TO PUNISHMENT. Greene's lengthy discussion of punishment may be summarised rather quickly. The deontological idea of punishment is based on retribution, a kind of compensation for the wrong already done. The consequentialist idea is based on future effects, like promoting future obedience to law. Experiments show that people have predominantly deontological, emotionally charged ideas of punishment. Curiously, in one study people were instructed *explicitly* to think of punishment in a consequentialist way. But the subjects slapped punishments based on retribution, then added some more for deterrence (thus ostensibly complying with the consequentialist instructions)! [50] [51] [53]

Other than showing that deontological responses are driven by emotion (specifically, outrage), Greene's model also predicts that the responses should vary when the subjects consider general policies of punishment, and when they consider concrete situations and individuals. In the former case emotional responses are triggered less or not at all. In the latter case emotions (outrage) rule, since these are cases of 'up close violence'. This is indeed confirmed by empirical studies. [53] [54-55]

HARMLESS ACTIONS. From the analysis of punishment it follows that the presence of harm is not a factor (or a decisive factor) in the deontological responses of the subjects. What of the absence of harm? Here, too, emotional responses to such actions were aligned with the weakened cognitive response. This is borne out further by looking at the differences among the populations. More Westernised populations were more reluctant to condemn these actions. [55] [56]

Evolutionary roots of ethics. Having surveyed the empirical grounds of deontology and consequentialism, Greene turns to broader questions. Why should deontological judgements and emotions go together? Well, why should there be moral emotions at all? Greene endorses an evolutionary premiss, that moral responses are evolutionary adaptations formed to deal with various situations of social life. Morality as a whole, as an institution, is an evolutionary adaptation. And we need emotions, rather than 'cognitions', because they are quick and reliable.

Now, supposing that there are such moral emotions, why do they elicit specifically deontological philosophy? Greene embraces Haidt's approach, that this philosophy is a rationalisation of the pre-loaded emotional responses. Such rationalisations, indeed, are observed in a wide variety of cases.

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