

A Cognitive Model of Moral Judgments

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Abstract

New findings in moral psychology strongly indicate that ethical assessments stem from rapid, involuntary, and unconscious mental processes (Damasio, 1994; Shweder and Haidt, 1994; Greene and Haidt, 2002; Hauser, 2006; Mikhail, 2011). This perspective challenges the long-established cognitive developmental theory championed by Kohlberg (Piaget, 1965; Kohlberg, 1963; Turiel, 1983), which posited that moral judgments arise from purposeful, effortful contemplation. Yet, significant debate persists regarding the essence and mechanisms of moral intuitions. What exactly are the underlying cognitive processes of these judgments that “operate quickly effortlessly and automatically, such that the outcome but not the process is accessible to consciousness?” ([Haidt, 2001](#), p. 818). How are moral situations represented in our minds? What cognitive processes intuitively glue together different moral situations to one category? In particular, moral judgments present the mind with a unique challenge. In any given moral situation we must decide: 1. Was there a moral failure? 2. On whose side was the moral failure? 3. What is the severity of the moral failure? How do we judge so quickly and efficiently and on such different and varied topics? This research integrates numerous studies in moral psychology and the social sciences to establish a new theory of moral judgment. This lecture will show a hidden layer of information that hovers ghostly above all right/wrong judgments: we unconsciously and effortlessly arrange and order the moral situation around the central theme of “child” and “adult”. Through early interactions with the caregiver, the child acquires an internal representation of a system of rules that determine how right/wrong judgments are to be construed, used, and understood. By breaking moral situations down into their defining features, the lecture outlines a framework for a moral faculty based on a universal, innate, deep structure that appears uniformly in the structure of almost all moral judgments regardless of their content.

Keywords: moral judgment, moral intuition, intuition, unconscious mental processes, moral development, universal morality