

よりよい世界を作るためなのに、なぜ常識が邪魔をするのか

Why Common Sense Will Not Take Us Far When Making a Better World

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ABSTRACT

本研究は、多くの場合常識的道德が偏っている結果をもたらすこと、さらに一般に人間は自らの道徳的直観を信じすぎることを示した。まず常識的道德や「よりよい世界」について説明し、近年行われている道徳心理学の研究をレビューした。次に、哲学的な観点から道徳心理学が明らかにした知見の意義を論じた。最後に、常識的道德に関して強調されすぎてきた点や無視されてきた点を指摘し、「悪い結果」、「悪い行動」、「非難に値する行動」の概念間の重要な相違について論じた。本研究は、人間の道徳的思考を向上させるにはどのようにすべきか実際的な示唆を与えている。

In this article it is argued that common sense morality in many cases, leads to suboptimal consequences and that human beings, in general, place too much faith in their moral intuitions. In the first section an explanation of common sense moral is offered. In the second section a working definition of a “better world” is presented. In section three, contemporary psychological research concerning human moral thinking is reviewed. In section four the article addresses philosophical issues and discusses possible normative implications of these psychological findings. In section five, some overemphasized areas as well as some neglected areas of common sense morality are presented. In section six, an important distinction between the concepts bad, wrong and blameworthy is explained. Finally, some practical suggestions on how to improve human moral thinking are offered.

1. Common sense morality

In order to understand common sense morality (henceforth CSM), it might be useful to first take a look at its opposite - systematic normative ethical theories (henceforth SNET). Any SNET is based on a more or less straightforward theory about right and wrong, and does not allow for internal inconsistencies. Some famous SNETs are Kant's Deontology (1785/1966), Bentham's Utilitarianism (1785/2005) and Nozick's Libertarianism (1974). All of these theories are very consistent and systematic, but they occasionally lead to counterintuitive conclusions.¹ As all SNETs seem to render at least some counterintuitive situations, many people instead settle for a morality that feels intuitively right. This is what I call CSM. The merit of CSM is its intuitive appeal; the weakness is that it will lead to internal inconsistencies that are difficult to rationally justify. There are individual differences in peoples intuitions, but CSM conventionally refers to norms or attitudes that most people within a certain culture would consider prudent and of sound judgment without reliance on esoteric knowledge or research, but instead based upon on what people in general see as obvious. There are several SNETs available, but the forthcoming discussion will focus on consequentialistic SNET (henceforth C-SNET) and refrain from discuss deontological and libertarian SNETs.²

2. What is a "better/worse" world?

The presupposition in this paper is that suffering and pain has an intrinsically negative value and that happiness and pleasure has an intrinsically positive value (See Loewenstein & Ubel 2008) for a discussion about this "Bentamite" conception of welfare and its alternatives). Intrinsic values are important in themselves while the instrumental values are strived for because they will increase or

improve something else (Batson, Ahmad, & Tsang, 2002; Glover, 1977; Rokeach, 1973). Many moral disagreements have their origin in not properly separating the intrinsic/instrumental values. For example, democracy can be seen as an intrinsic value (democracy is important – period!), an instrumental value (democracy leads to better consequences than all alternatives), or both. It is possible to claim that there exist more than one intrinsic value, but in this article the only assumption is that the absence of mental and physical suffering is an important intrinsic value. In line with Sunstein (2005, p.534), I consider a theory that does not value consequences at all, to be unfeasible. The reader, who believes that future suffering is of small or no importance when making moral judgments, will probably find my argument unconvincing. Concurrently I do not beg the question by claiming that hedonic consequences are the only things important. The reader only needs to accept that the reducing of suffering is one very important part of morality.

3. Moral Psychology and common sense

Recent research shows that quick and emotion-based intuitions play a large role in many moral judgments. (Haidt 2001, Greene et al. 2001). Conscious reasoning on the other hand, tends to come after the judgment, and often simply be a rationalization of the intuitive response (Haidt, 2001). The power of the intuitive response is illustrated in cases where the person cannot come up with a rationalization (Haidt & Björklund, 2008). Instead of realizing that the intuitive response might be wrong, people then express "moral dumbfounding" and stubbornly keep their initial judgment without justifying it. Brain imaging (Greene, et al., 2001, Greene et al., 2004), reaction-time studies (Greene et al., 2008), and research on people with emotional deficits (Koenigs, et al., 2007) suggest that it mainly is quick emotional responses

that drive people to disapprove of actions that go against CSM but are in line with C-SNET (such as sacrificing one to save five, or actively harming in order to prevent more severe future suffering, see Thomson, 1976). In contrast, some behaviors that in reality give rise to even more total suffering (not donating money to the poor), are generally tolerable by CSM because they do not give rise to the same kind of emotional responses, (Jenni & Loewenstein, 1997; Greene, 2007).

The content of our CSM can in large be explained by evolution (Greene 2007, Singer 2005). For most of our evolutionary history, human beings have lived in small groups. In these groups, the only suffering people knew and learned to feel an aversion against, was the suffering that took place close to one self. Therefore, nature equipped us with immediate, emotionally based responses to problems involving close, personal and harmful interactions with others. Compared to the moral intuitions, the ability to reason about moral in an abstract and objective way developed in human frontal cortex much later in our evolutionary history (Greene, 2007). This makes our CSM the most accessible moral system for humans while C-SNET demands time, energy and conscious reasoning. Experiments have shown that adult people use their CSM (following intuitions) more in cases where the alternatives are presented in isolation, but focus more on future consequences when alternatives or possible choices are presented together (Kogut & Ritov, 2005; Paharia, et al., 2009).

4. Normative Implications

“Science is about what is, while morality is about what ought to be and never the twain shall meet”, David Hume claimed as early as 1740. Despite this, a common way to argue against a certain SNET is to show that it leads to judgments that goes against our common moral intuitions (Fisher & Ravizza 1992; Rachels, 1999; Singer, 2005). Philosophers have

traditionally taken our moral intuitions as a sign of correctness and tried to create moral theories that find a balance between intuitions and consistency (Reflective Equilibrium Theory; Rawls 1971). If however, our moral intuitions are traces of our evolutionary history, it is not clear why we should regard the intuitions as having any normative force at all (Singer, 2005). Evolution can explain much of our common morality on a descriptive level, including the supposed central role of duties to our kin and absolute taboos, but they do not in any way justify these elements of morality. The fallacy of reading a moral direction into evolution has been pointed out several times but people and even philosophers still commit it (Greene, 2007). For example did Social Darwinists argue that state interference with the free market was wrong on the ground that protecting the poor and weak was interfering with the natural selection (Spencer, 1894). Most people will criticize the premise that “protecting weak is interfering with the natural selection”. What is less attacked is the premise that the “natural” has any normative positive value. Even if it would be unnatural and going against evolution to help the weak and poor, we need more premises to show that we shouldn’t do it. By observing modern humans’ moral intuitions, we can understand plenty about our evolutionary history, and describe how we think about morality and how to influence others in effective ways. However, to use our current intuitions as building-blocks when trying to reach a moral system that leads to the best consequences would be to commit the “is → ought fallacy” (Hume, 1740).

Our intuitions are certainly not automatically wrong and will not always lead to worse consequences. However, until recently the best available explanation for our very strong moral intuitions was that they reflected something morally important. Now, when we know more about the causal forces behind evolution and the origin of our moral intuitions and physiological drives better,

the best possible explanation is no longer the moral importance, but that our intuitions are “evolutionary residual” in our brains. This “residual”, might or might not, depending on the situation, be useful tools when reaching sound moral judgments.

5. When does CSM and C-SNET reach different conclusions?

Our evolved emotions have without doubt been helpful to keep our species alive. Nevertheless, to use simple emotions as the only justification for ones judgments is not seen as very rational by most adults. Instead CSM is the public and academically wrapped outlet of these emotions (Wilson, 1997). However, the world does not look like it did a half million years ago, and if the emotions useful then, still are useful today, is a separate and empirical question (Cosmides & Tooby, 2005). It should be noted that there are several areas where our moral intuitions do a good job. Humans are often intuitively prepared to sacrifice personal convenience in order to help even unknown others and most humans have a strong automatic aversion against others suffering (Haidt & Kesebir, 2010). However, in this chapter I will focus on the areas where CSM and C-SNET often reach different conclusions about the morally right conduct.

5. 1 Emotional reactions

The more intense emotions a situation elicits, the higher our tendency to react will become (Batson, Ahmad & Tsang, 2002). For example, degree of anger almost perfectly predicts preferred punishment (Kahneman, Schkade & Sunstein, 1998) and dilemmas with high vividness and disgusting details make people much more negative, even when the actual consequences are held equal (Haidt & Björklund, 2008). There are many ways to elicit higher emotional reactions. One is to make people identify with the victim (Loewenstein, Small &

Strand, 2004). A single identified victim will produce much more intense emotions than statistical victims (Schelling, 1968). This identifiability-effect applies even when controlling for knowledge about the victim (Small & Loewenstein, 2003).

Novelty and vividness also predict our reactions (Frederick & Loewenstein, 1999). People tend to react stronger towards world-dangers that are new and spectacular (such as the swine-influenza or airplanes flying into tall buildings) compared to every day dangers such as Malaria or car-driving (Loewenstein & Small, 2007). Due to the availability-bias (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973) people base their moral thinking to a large extent on what they hear about, and in our era, media is a major culprit in making our CSM skewed (Slovic, 2007).

Personal experience is another factor that predicts both emotional reactions and subsequently moral behavior (Small & Simonsohn, 2008). From a CSM-perspective, this is acceptable and even desirable. From a consequentialistic perspective this involves problems as absolute freedom to choose whom to help will render uncomfortably skewed rescue operations and not efficiently reduce the suffering in the world.

As stated before, people show an aversion towards harm, but this aversion diminishes with increased temporal or geographical distance (Loewenstein & Small, 2007; Liberman, Trope & Stephan, 2007). Harm that occur at the present moment just before one’s eyes create a huge emotional reaction while an equally big harm that will occur in five years’ time on the other side of the earth does not.

As a result of understanding the origin of our emotions, we should not have too much confidence on CSM as it will focus excessively on world-suffering that triggers our emotional reactions and inadequately on the massive amount of suffering that fails to do so.

5.2 Loyalty

Loyalty might possibly be the aspect that most clearly distinguishes CSM from a C-SNET. Loyalty can be applied in different contexts, but basically involves one in-group and at least one out-group. According to moral theories that put moral value on loyalty, our duties towards the in-group are different from our duties towards the out-group (Haidt & Graham, 2007). Common usage of the term is loyalty towards ones country, or towards ones family. There are naturally individual and cultural differences in attitudes towards loyalty, but it is obvious that CSM is far more positive towards loyalty than C-SNET (Graham, Haidt & Nosek, 2009). For the sake of simplicity, I will focus on loyalty towards ones kin in this discussion. According to CSM, “unconditional love” towards ones children is a major virtue and to be prepared to “do anything” for one’s offspring is seen as something sympathetic and admirable. Sometimes this line of thinking swings over to the degree that the parent who is not prepared to inflict much more suffering for unknown persons in order to reduce the suffering for one’s child, is considered blameworthy. According to this view, it is not only acceptable but also obligatory to act partially.

There are consequentialistic reasons for some degree of partiality, basically suggesting “rules of thumbs”, that say that the total consequences will be better if each parent put her main focus on her own children rather than trying to help all children equally much. However, to admit this, as well as to admit that human nature will not be easy to change, is not equivalent to proposing loyalty as an intrinsic positive value (Singer, 1972). A mother who believes it to be morally obligatory to sacrifice millions of lives in order to protect her own child, clearly has an intuition that is incompatible with the idea of minimization of suffering as an intrinsic value.

5.3 Number of helped victims

If we use CSM as our main moral theory, we

will be good at detecting qualitative differences (good or bad), but we will be less able to detect quantitative differences (bad or worse). When looking at peoples intuitions and behavior, number of victims stands out as a remarkably bad predictor of sympathy and helping behavior (Slovic, 2007). If we compare an incident with no causalities with an incident where one person died, our moral intuitions will easily detect the moral difference, but when comparing a disaster with 2400 casualties and one with 2450 casualties, our intuitions will be indifferent (Kahneman, Ritov & Schkade, 1999). This illustrate that human emotional reactions at best are incomplete, and at worst are directing our moral motivation in non-ideal directions. While actual number of victims and help-efficiency are factors severely neglected, the proportion of saved victims is a good predictor of helping behavior (Loewenstein & Small, 2007; Ritov & Baron, 1990). A 1% chance to rescue each one of 10000 potential victims would statistically lead to 100 saved victims, but this situation lead to less motivation to help compared to a 100% chance to save only 10 victims. This is a cognitive bias from a C-SNET standpoint, but a nugget of moral wisdom according to CSM.

5.4 Side effects

The C-SNET theory presented so far might be seen as totally ignoring human’s emotional reactions and personal attitudes (see for example Williams, 1972 and Wolf, 1982). This is a common misunderstanding. A well-developed C-SNET will respect human reactions and emotions highly. The difference is that strong emotional reactions downright decide the judgment for CSM (i.e. work as an alarm-bell), while it only partly affects the judgment for C-SNET (i.e. work as a currency, Baumeister, DeWall & Zhang, 2007). The emotional reactions that people will experience in counter-intuitive situation will be seen as side-effects by C-SNET, but note that “side-effect” does not imply

unimportance. Even if the causes of suffering are illusory or irrational (such as fear of ghosts), the suffering is real and need to be taken into account (Baron, 2007; Loewenstein & O'Donoghue, 2006; Slovic, Fischhoff, Lichtenstein, 1980). The emotional reactions our human nature gives rise to will play a role when deciding about right and wrong even in C-SNET; not because these reactions tell us something about the truth, but because they often involve suffering, and this suffering needs to be included in the total calculus.

6. Bad, Wrong and Blameworthy

One reason C-SNET is unpopular is that it appears too demanding. It seems perverse to scold a person that help other people, but fails to do so efficiently, or a person that behave slightly partial towards his children. This argument does however overlook one important distinction between what is morally bad and what is morally blameworthy (Sidgwick, 1907). C-SNET claims that the best (preferable) action is the act that minimizes the total suffering (and maximizes the total happiness). However, that does not imply that we should punish or even blame the person who does not commit the best (preferable) action. In order to blame, the agent doing the act must either have been able to behave in a different way³, or alternatively the blame must have positive societal consequences (such as deterrence). One analogy might be helpful here: Imagine a paraplegic woman observing a child playing with some matches and accidentally putting fire to her dress. The paraplegic cannot help the child because of her physical limitations. In this case we can without doubt say that it would have been much better if the paraplegic could have been able to rescue the child, without saying that she is too blame. However, if the paraplegic woman claims that her inability to help is morally superior, we would quickly discard her opinions. In this extreme example the distinction

between good/bad and praiseworthy/blameworthy is obvious. Nevertheless, it might be close to impossible to motivate people to help the statistical victims as much as the identified victim, or to make people totally impartial. These mental limitations do not affect the consequentialistic verdict about good and bad, but they strongly affect the verdict about what is blameworthy and praiseworthy.⁴ Our human limitations do not justify our moral behavior (that would be the same as the paraplegic woman claiming that her inability to help is morally preferable). However, our human nature can explain and sometimes even excuse our non-ideal moral behavior.

7. Suggestions for the future

I am not suggesting abandoning CSM altogether. Most people that try to go against their moral intuitions before acting, do help the identifiable victims less, but perversely does not help the statistical victims more (Small Loewenstein & Slovic, 2007). Our automatic emotional responses are the greatest and quickest source to moral motivation, and therefore C-SNET should recruit and exploit, rather than ignore, emotions.

These suggestions might seem unappealing as they go against our current CSM. We should however be aware that CSM is not static. Not long ago our intuitions told us that race, sex or sexual preferences were relevant factors when making moral judgments, but at least in developed nations this has changed thanks to critical consequentialist thinking and our CSM slowly but steadily followed. To believe that our current intuitions about rights, duties, absolute rules and taboos would be something fundamentally different from the intuitions concerning race or sex seems unlikely. No matter how strong or absolute our current intuitions may be, they should be theoretically open for revisions or even abandonment in the future. The pressing question is which parts

of our CSM that should be retained, which parts that should be modified, and which parts that should be discarded in order to minimize future suffering.

7. 1 No victimless wrongdoings

The first thing to answer when claiming that something is “morally wrong”, is who the victim is? In most cases this will be easy, but there still exist some “victimless wrongdoings” in current CSM. Some examples of this are adventurous but informed and consensual sexual behavior, strange eating and living habits, or indecent unrealized fantasies. All these things can naturally create negative side-effects if realized in public (and would hence not be victimless anymore), but as long as no short-term, long-term, direct or indirect harm is made, C-SNET will accept anything. A CSM that blames and punishes “victimless wrongdoers” is obviously not very concerned with minimizing suffering, and in case we do not have any additional reasons to retain that CSM, it should be abolished or at least improved.

7. 2 Political system

The CSM as it looks today, often stresses that attempt to reduce suffering must start from within the individual. Moral feelings such as love or empathy are given a big importance and are promoted as the most important to cultivate among humans. The underlying theory is often that if you feel a lot of love or empathy towards people close, these emotions will eventually spill over and affect even distant strangers. From a consequentialistic point of view, this is a non-ideal method to reduce suffering. The problem is not that humans feel too little love or empathy, but that these moral emotions have a seriously biased direction (Loewenstein & Small, 2007). For this reason, it seems better to focus on changing the laws and the social system instead.

For example, an increased tax-rate in all developed countries in order to help the nations

worst of would reduce suffering on a large scale (diminishing marginal utility – Bentham, 2005; Easterlin, 2005). Taxing – especially hidden taxing – is psychologically preferable to forced charity, as we avoid the sense of loss to a much higher degree (Loewenstein, Small & Strand 2004). It feels subjectively worse to gain 1000 dollars and later be forced to pay 200, than it feels to gain 800 in the first place (loss aversion; Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). For the suffering people being helped, the question whether the money was given “from the heart” or not, is of very limited interest.

In a similar fashion, changing the default in the society can be a very influential way to change human behavior without imposing any formal restrictions (Madrian & Shea, 2001). For example, nations differ in the laws concerned with organ donations after death. Many nations (including Japan) opt for an “opting in-system”, meaning that people who want to donate must register. Other nations use an “opting out-system”, meaning that the default is to donate organs and people that don’t want to donate need to unregister (Randhawa et al. 2010, Spital, 1999). As “opting out” leads to higher donation-rates without sacrificing people’s freedom, this default should be preferable if we want to minimize suffering for people in need of organs. This method is not limited to organ donating, but could also be used when it comes to other forms of helping and prosocial behavior. If politicians change the defaults in society, the chances that CSM will follow are pretty good (Loewenstein & Ubel 2008).

The juridical law should also focus more on consequences and less on intentions. Greene & Cohen (2004), argue that much of our punitive system today rest on a questionable assumption about a casual free will, and they suggest forward looking punishments instead of backwards looking, retributive, punishments. In a similar fashion, when it comes to our inclination to support kin before strangers, the inheritance laws as they look today are

unnecessarily partial. Even if we cannot eliminate the human tendency to uncompromisingly support ones owns children, it does not need to be supported, maintained and incorporated by the law.

7.3 Value education

While it is difficult to change already established intuitive reactions in adults, it is easier to create new moral intuitions in children. This “value education” occurs in different shapes in most nations (Maddock, 1972). For future value education, my suggestion is to focus less on the emotional input or “moral character” often stressed by the CSM, and more on the objective output of different acts. In other words, instead of teaching children to feel an automatic aversion towards lies and breaking social norms, it might be possible to teach children to feel an aversion towards other people’s suffering. To use the aversion towards suffering as the foundation of value education, could possibly narrow the gap between CSM and C-SNET in future generations. As I am neither a developmental psychologist nor an expert in education, my suggestions are very humble and tentative. However, my modest claim is that we should not take human nature as it looks today as a benchmark of what values future generations should embrace.

7.4 Slow changes

The final advice is different and conservative by nature. Consequentialism (C-SNET) is often accused with negative proverbs such as “the end justifies the means” (Williams, 1973). This is an incorrect and unfair culpability. C-SNET in contrast to other SNET or CSM takes both the end and the means into account when making a judgment, and is by definition aggregative and calculating. Even if a certain end would be the ideal state, the negative side-effects that it takes to go there, might be enough for a C-SNET advocate to abandon that certain end, and settle for something else. Changes to our

CSM need to be approached with care. Quick and immense changes in a society, will lead to anxiety, fear and several problematic side-effects, even if the changes are in a preferable direction. To say this does not indicate that the status quo is ideal, only that we need to understand the human nature when making reforms in the society in order to find a balance between means and ends (Singer, 1999).

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Notes

1. This can be illustrated with Kant's conclusion that it would be wrong to lie to a murderer in order to help a hiding victim, Utilitarian conclusions about that it in theory is acceptable to sacrifice one innocent person to save five, and libertarian conclusions that we only have negative (but no positive) duties towards other people. An advocate of any of these theories can either adjust the theory to be less counter-intuitive, or "bite the bullet" and accept the counter-intuitive conclusion.
2. Bartels (2008) and Greene (2007) compare Deontological SNET with C-SNET and suggest that modern Deontology is a philosophical outlet of moral intuitions.
3. This reflects the well-known discussion about the existence of a free-will and morality. See Greene & Cohen (2004)
4. See Tännsjö (1995) for a deeper philosophical discussion.