

The Normative Insignificance of Neuroscience Handout

I. Berker points out several methodological problems with Greene's view.

First, Greene makes the distinction between “alarmlike” and “currency-like” emotions that pervade moral judgment. The former involve a phenomenological immediacy whereas the latter do not. Greene needs this distinction because emotions figure into both deontological and consequentialist judgments. However, the distinction is mainly phenomenological, and not everybody shares Greene's intuitions about the phenomenology of moral emotions.

Second, Greene's statistical evidence is damaged by the fact that he adds up the response times to various vignettes and then figures out the average response time. The vignettes that the subjects' response times of appropriate/inappropriate were measured for involved many that nobody would call *moral dilemmas*, such as the hired rapist case and the architect case. This is not the correct way of proceeding; rather, he must figure out the average difference in response times between vignettes and then calculate the overall average from those numbers. Further, those vignettes need to be *moral dilemmas*. As it stands, the evidence doesn't support his hypothesis.

Third, Greene runs several normative distinctions together. He conflates the distinction between up close and personal harm and impersonal harm, dilemmas that elicit deontological or consequentialist judgments, and the dilemmas that satisfy Greene's ME HURT YOU criteria and those that don't. Kamm's lazy susan example shows that these distinctions are distinct.

II. Three bad arguments.

First, The emotions bad, reasoning good argument:

P. Deontological intuitions are driven by emotions, whereas consequentialist intuitions involve abstract reasoning.

C. So, deontological intuitions, unlike consequentialist intuitions, do not have any genuine normative force.

This argument is bad because one needs reasons why one ought not to follow one's intuitions when they're driven by emotion. One needs to point to morally irrelevant factors about intuitions driven by emotions. However, this assumes that we already know the answers to moral questions and then use them to judge which processes are reliable.

Second, The argument from heuristics:

P1. Deontological intuitions are driven by emotions, whereas consequentialist intuitions involve abstract reasoning.

P2. In other domains, emotional processes tend to involve fast and frugal (unreliable) heuristics.

C1. So, in the moral domain, the emotional processes that drive deontological intuitions involve fast and frugal (unreliable) heuristics.

C2. So, deontological intuitions, unlike consequentialist intuitions, are unreliable.

This argument is bad because claiming that X process is a heuristic presumes we know what the appropriate outputs of X process are. We need a way to independently verify the resultant outputs of those heuristics, which is possible in non-moral cases such as statistical judgments. But that's because we have antecedent reasons to believe some statistical judgments produced by fast and frugal processes are unreliable. In the moral case, we would need antecedent reason to believe that consequentialism or deontology is correct. Furthermore, some have argued that in the nonmoral domain, fast and frugal heuristics are more reliable than slow but flexible processes.

Third, The argument from evolutionary history:

P. Our emotion-driven deontological intuitions are evolutionary by-products that were adapted to handle an environment we no longer find ourselves in.

C. So, deontological intuitions, unlike consequentialist intuitions, do not have any genuine normative force.

This argument is bad because consequentialist intuitions are just as much a product of evolutionary forces as deontological intuitions are. So, the argument cuts both ways.

III. A better argument that still fails.

The argument from morally irrelevant factors:

P1. The emotional processing that gives rise to deontological intuitions responds to factors that make a dilemma personal rather than impersonal.

P2. The factors that make a dilemma personal rather than impersonal are morally irrelevant.

C1. So, the emotional processing that gives rise to deontological intuitions responds to factors that are morally irrelevant.

C2. So, deontological intuitions, unlike consequentialist intuitions, do not have any genuine normative force.

What is interesting about this argument is that premise two isn't the sort of thing that can be directly (or even indirectly) supported by facts from neuroscience. So, neuroscience isn't pulling any argumentative weight in this argument. Rather, one needs to rely on moral intuitions about which factors are morally relevant/irrelevant. So, this isn't really an argument from neuroscience (is) to moral facts (ought). The argument still relies on substantive moral judgments to get off the ground.

Furthermore, the way that Greene characterizes "characteristically deontological/consequentialist judgments" casts doubt on premise one. It isn't obvious that deontological judgments characteristically involve factors that make moral dilemmas personal. An example is the lazy susan trolley problem. There is a trolley headed towards 5 people attached to a lazy susan. You can spin the lazy susan around so that the train smashes into just 1 person, thus saving the 5. Spinning a giant lazy susan that a person is attached to so that a train smashes into her is clearly a personal element in the dilemma, but it elicits consequentialist judgments. People think we ought to spin the lazy susan and save the 5.

Also, a deontologist could merely point out that, even if she grants the argument up to C2, C2 doesn't follow, because consequentialist judgments also respond to morally irrelevant factors (e.g. factors that don't respect the separateness of persons).

IV. Berker points to a possible role neuroscience *can* play in moral dilemma debates.

Neuroscience can establish which parts of the brain respond to various factors present in moral dilemmas (e.g. intentional/non-intentional actions/events). However, once that is established, the work is done by substantive moral judgment when figuring out which factors are morally (ir)relevant.