

Discussion of:
**The moral mind by Michael
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Are there neuroanatomical correlates for moral propositions?

‘Moral propositions’ are not a natural kind that one can pin down in a simple analysis or definition.

– ‘Right or wrong’ doesn’t help:

cf. wrong not to play a let.

– Emotion doesn’t help:

cf. disgusting lapses in etiquette.

– “... rightness or wrongness of acts that knowingly cause harm to people other than the agent” (Borg et al., 2006):

cf. suicide, substance abuse, self abuse, criticism.

Contrast with deontic propositions, which are easy to characterize: they concern what's permissible or obligatory (and their negations). Moral propositions are subcategory thereof.

No clear boundary between moral and non-moral, e.g.,
You shouldn't insult your adviser/parents/ancestors.

Frankfurt: “the truth of moral propositions, unlike those of etiquette, is not a matter of convention but of reason”.

Do the parallel processing of the
brain produce an organism
morally coherent ?

Most of us have no single coherent set of
moral beliefs.

Individuals can create irresolvable dilemmas
(Bucciarelli, Khemlani & Johnson-Laird, 2008)

Consider the dilemma: *Taking a girl off an artificial lung to save her brothers. Authorizing the doctors to do so.*

Individuals create irrisolvable versions:

“The sister will die soon, but has explicitly said that she does not want her kidneys removed from her body, because she fervently believes that her kidneys house her soul.”

“The two brothers will also likely develop the same degenerative disease as their sister since both parents died from the same disease.”

Experimental data contrary to moral grammar (see Hauser): a grammar is a consistent set of principles that allows you to solve conflicts in a rapid and intuitive way.

Does *brain activity* exhaust *unconscious processes* ?

Assumption of the talk: since much of mental activity is unconscious, in order to comprehend human behavior is necessary to look at brain activations

But understanding of mental behavior depends on studying all three:

what's computed, how it's computed, and its implementation in the brain.

Conclusions

Are there neuroanatomical correlates for moral judgments?

Not easy to distinguish between moral from other deontic propositions (contrary to the possibility to identify a ‘moral brain circuit’, but also contrary to moral grammar, see Hauser).

Do the parallel processing of the brain produce an organism that is morally coherent ?

Individuals can create irresolvable dilemmas (contrary to moral grammar, see Hauser).

Does brain activity exhaust unconscious processes ?

We need cognitive theories of mental processes to guide our observations of brain activity

An alternative

(Bucciarelli, Khemlani & Johnson-Laird, 2008)

Our moral judgments rely on our specific knowledge of our culture: we know what is and isn't a moral issue.

Reasoning about moral propositions is unlikely to depend on a special process: it is merely normal deontic reasoning that sometimes engages emotional responses (Bucciarelli & Johnson-Laird, 2005).