**The Cognitive Basis of Commonsense Morality[[1]](#footnote-1)**

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Abstract:

The established two tracks of neuroenhancement, moral and cognitive enhancements, rest on the characterization of commonsense morality as a set of static psychological dispositions. In this paper, I challenge this way of describing commonsense morality. I draw a parallel between commonsense psychology and commonsense morality, and I propose that the right way to characterize commonsense morality is as an empirically evaluable theory, with a structure similar to a scientific theory. I argue further that psychological dispositions to react in certain ways require the tacit endorsement of a commonsense moral theory. By adopting this view, I argue that the way to change our psychological dispositions is by changing the background theory that produces them. I conclude that when commonsense morality is construed as an empirically evaluable theory, the cleft between the abilities that support scientific progress and the abilities that promote moral progress closes and it becomes evident that the way to promote both types of advancements is through cognitive enhancement.

Section 1: Introduction

Within the debate on neuroenhancement, cognitive and moral enhancements have been discussed as two different kinds of improvements achievable by different biomedical means. Pharmacological means that improve memory, attention, decision-making, or wakefulness have been accorded the status of cognitive enhancers, while attempts to improve altruism, empathy, impart a sense of justice, or diminish aggression have been categorized as moral enhancements. These two distinct tracks of enhancement were established in an article by Persson and Savulescu (2008) warning of the perils of cognitive enhancement, where they argue that cognitive enhancement needs to be coupled with moral enhancement to prevent the negative impact of rapid scientific progress.

 The argument for the two tracks of enhancement has spurred a debate about the types of interventions that could qualify as moral enhancement where judgments about the efficacy of biomedical moral enhancements depends on what view one adopts about what makes people moral. One can see this revealed in the enhancement literature, where some argue that the ability to reason and make judgments is required for morality, and that it is those cognitive abilities that enable us to experience feelings of empathy or altruism at the appropriate moments (Harris 2011). Thus, increasing feelings of empathy, for example, will not suffice because those feeling are appropriate only in some situations. Others argue that it is emotional deficits, or the inability to feel certain emotions, that drive some individuals to do immoral things (Douglas 2013).

Persson and Savulescu (2012) acquiesce that a morally enhanced person might need cognitive enhancements to make judgments about what is right or wrong, but they also emphasize that altruism, empathy, and a sense of justice are preconditions for an individual to act on her moral judgments. Persson and Savulescu (2012) ground their argument for moral enhancement on their characterization of commonsense morality as static and as best suited for parochial lives. In this paper, I plan to focus on this characterization of commonsense morality and to challenge their view of it as a set of psychological dispositions to react in certain ways. To do that, I rely on the view I proposed in Gligorov (2016), where I drew a parallel between commonsense psychology and commonsense morality, and I proposed that the right way to characterize commonsense morality is as an empirically evaluable theory, with a structure similar to a scientific theory. Based on this view, I argue that psychological dispositions to react in certain ways require the adoption of a commonsense moral theory. I further argue that the way to change our psychological dispositions is by changing the background theory that produces them. I do this to counter the claim made by Persson and Savulescu (2012) that our background beliefs have minimal influence on our moral attitudes. I conclude that when commonsense morality is construed as an empirically evaluable theory, the cleft between the abilities that support scientific progress and the abilities that promote moral progress closes and it becomes evident that the way to promote both types of advancements is through cognitive enhancement.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Section 2: Commonsense Morality as a Folk Theory

Persson and Savulescu characterize commonsense morality in the following manner:

“By ‘common-sense morality’ we mean a set of moral attitudes that is a common denominator of the diversely specified moralities of human societies over the world. We take it that the explanation of why there is a set of moral attitudes that is a common feature of culturally diverse moralities is that it has its origin in our evolutionary history. However, it should not be thought that we regard common-sense morality to be sacrosanct and beyond criticism” (Persson and Savulescu 2012, 12).

Based on this view, commonsense morality is a set of psychological dispositions to react in particular ways in certain types of situations. Moreover, although Persson and Savulescu do argue that cognition plays a role in our moral attitudes, the reason they argue for moral enhancement is because they highlight the limited impact of cognitive background in our moral assessments in some cases. They argue our moral emotions are much more effective in molding our reactions than reason.

Furthermore, their argument, although not entirely unfriendly toward commonsense morality, is that commonsense moral attitudes are best suited to parochial lives in small communities where our obligations are to those closest to us. Those moral attitudes include prioritizing negative rights over positive ones, attributing responsibility to actions rather than omissions, altruism towards those who are our kin, a sense of reciprocal justice (Persson & Savulescu 2012; 2017). According to Persson and Savulescu, some of these tenets of commonsense morality fail to accommodate our increasingly globalized world; moral enhancement is required to help us diminish the potentially deleterious effects of rapid scientific progress. Moreover, because they argue that our moral attitudes are the result of evolutionary development, we are limited in our ability to further adjust or naturally enhance our morality. This limitation in progress is then contrasted with the rapid and unbounded progress in science, which then leads to the conclusion that scientific development is outpacing human abilities to be moral. The solution to this problem according to the authors is moral enhancement that would potentiate our moral emotions, such as empathy, sympathy, and our sense of justice. Although the choice of commonsense moral tenets is not uncontroversial,[[3]](#footnote-3) I will limit my discussion on the general depiction of commonsense morality as a set of psychological dispositions to react in certain ways.

There are alternative ways of characterizing commonsense morality that would eliminate this schism between cognition and moral attitudes and reduce the two tracks of enhancement to one. To redefine commonsense morality as a folk theory, I will utilize some established views about commonsense psychology and then apply them to commonsense morality. Commonsense psychology can be understood as an empirically evaluable folk-psychological theory that seeks to predict and explain human behavior by attributing psychological states, such as beliefs, desires, and sensations, to individuals (Sellars 1977; Churchland 1992). Commonsense psychology is a folk psychology (FP), with all the features of a scientific psychology. Just like a scientific theory, FP introduces unseen entities or processes to explain and predict observable phenomena. For example, FP introduces psychological states, which are not directly observable, to account for overt behavior. Additionally, similar to a scientific theory, FP explains and predicts human behavior by specifying law-like relations between psychological states, external stimuli, and overt behavior (Churchland 1992). For example: Alex believes that the dog will stop barking if she gives him a treat, so she reaches for a treat and places it in front of the dog. Here Alex perceives a bothersome auditory stimulus, which causes her to believe that the dog will be assuaged by the treat; this explains why she reaches for the treat and puts it in front of the barking dog. According to Churchland everyday psychological explanations contain law-like generalizations that mirror the structure of scientific generalizations. For example:

(1) (x)(p)[(x hopes that p) & (x discovers that p)>(x is pleased that p)];

is like the statement

(2) (x)(f)(m)[((x has a mass of m)&(x suffers a net force of f))>(x accelerates at f/m)].

The relationship between “x hopes that p” and “x discovers that p,” which yields the conclusion “x is please that p,” is the same as the one contained in the expression “x has mass of m” and “X suffers a net force of f,” which results in the conclusion “x accelerates at f/m” (Churchland 1992).

An alternative method for identifying folk-psychological generalizations is proposed by Lewis (1972), who argues that by circumscribing the boundaries of our current folk psychology, we can also settle on the definitions of psychological terms and identify folk-psychological generalizations. To identify the scope of FP, one would collect commonly used and universally accepted psychological statements that feature psychological terms, such as ‘belief,’ ‘desire,’ and ‘sensation’ (Lewis 1972; Stich 1996). Based on Lewis’s view, this collection of commonsense platitudes implicitly defines psychological concepts and specifies the functional roles of mental states. Their functional role then can be used to derive the law-like generalizations embedded in folk psychology.

It is important to appreciate that the view that commonsense psychology constitutes an empirical theory does not require that each individual who uses it explicitly endorses the tenets of folk psychology. The quotidian invocations of mental states in everyday parlance imply the tacit endorsement of the theory. Those who use FP do not need to be aware that they are utilizing a theory with law-like generalizations to explain and predict behavior. In the same way as many native language speakers do not explicitly know the rules of grammar to which they conform.

Based on this characterization of commonsense psychology, the way in which we come to ascribe mental states to persons is by adopting FP and by utilizing its conceptual framework, which includes mental states, such as beliefs, desires, and sensations to explain and predict human behavior in everyday life. This reverses what is often thought to be the natural course of things whereby mental states are construed as immediate experiences unrelated to background beliefs. Instead, we come to identify mental states as the cause of our overt behavior through the endorsement of folk psychology (Sellars 1977, 1997 ed.). By endorsing FP, we become able to introspect some of our states *as* mental states and we become able to distinguish among different kinds of mental states. Introspecting them as mental states means that we distinguish them from let us say inner physical states, such as indigestion or heart palpitations. In effect, the endorsement of FP gives rise to the distinction between mental and physical inner states and in turn influences how each of those states are introspected or perceived, some as physical and others as mental phenomena. The upshot of this view is that our psychological dispositions to both identify our inner states as mental states and our tendency to predict and explain behavior by ascribing mental states is the outcome of adopting a theory and of utilizing its conceptual framework. Thus, our observations either internal through introspection or external through perception are theory-laden. Given that our dispositions are the result of a tacitly endorsed theory, changes to the theoretical framework will result in changed psychological dispositions. An important consequence of the view that commonsense psychology is an empirically evaluable theory is that it could be revised and replaced. In fact, the proponents of the view that commonsense psychology is a theory often argue that it is false and they make the prediction that it will eventually be replaced by a conceptual framework based on a scientific psychology or based on neuroscience (Churchland 1992).[[4]](#footnote-4)

Another way of characterizing folk psychology is to claim that it is not a theory, but a model (Gordon 1995; Godfrey-Smith 2005). Based on this view, an individual can explain and predict the behavior of another person by running a simulation about how they themselves would behave in a given situation. For example, I predict what Alex would do in the presence of a lion on the loose by thinking about what I would do in such a situation. Although this view is proposed as an alternative to the view of folk psychology as a theory, it does not circumvent the need for an established conceptual framework. Since simulation theory states that we explain and predict other’s behavior by using our own psychology as a model; it still requires the endorsement of a framework that establishes the category of mental state as well as the subcategories of particular mental states, such as beliefs, desires, etc., as mediating between external influences or stimuli and behavior. As was stated previously, we begin by utilizing folk psychology to explain and predict our own behavior and we then apply the same approach to others. Thus, the simulation theory of folk psychology does not obviate the need for an implicitly endorsed theory.

Some contemporary accounts challenge the view that commonsense psychology utilizes propositional attitudes, such as beliefs, to predict human behavior. Kristin Andrews (2008), for example, argues for a pluralistic account, which includes predictions based on personality traits. Her argument is then that folk psychology does not utilize only mental states to explain behavior. Rather, she argues, we make many of our predictions based on our grasp of an individual’s personality traits. Continuous with this view, is the claim that the domain of folk psychology is narrow and that much of our social interactions do not include ascriptions of propositional attitudes, such as beliefs and desires (Bermudez 2003). Based on this view the primary role of folk psychology is communication rather than prediction and explanation of behavior. But this way of characterizing folk psychology does not undermine the claim that a significant aspect of our everyday parlance relies on ascriptions of mental states to predict and explain behavior. Furthermore, even if the role of commonsense psychology is primarily for communication, this does not negate that one of the ways in which we communicate requires an FP-type conceptual framework to help state how we feel and why we do things. Putting aside the differences among the accounts of folk psychology, a common core remains--at least some aspects of commonsense psychology rely on a practice of ascribing psychological states to explain and predict human behavior (Bermudez 2003).

Section 3: Commonsense Morality as Folk Theory

The parallel between folk psychology and folk morality is justified because the field of moral psychology relies on the view that moral behavior is in part determined by our psychological abilities (Doris et al. 2017). And this view is endorsed by Persson and Savulescu when they characterize moral attitudes a set of psychological dispositions (Persson and Savulescu 2012 42). Given this approach, moral concepts, such as free will or autonomy, can be recast as relying on certain psychological capacities, such as self-control. Similarly, emotive aspects of morality can be recast as psychological tendencies towards altruism or egoism. If one endorses the assumption embedded in moral psychology, that human morality is limited by human psychology, then commonsense morality could be seen as a subset of commonsense psychology. Even if one objects to the view that morality is a subset of human psychological capacities, there are still a number of ways in which one can note similarities between folk psychology and commonsense morality just by their being conceptual frameworks.

For one, it is possible to characterize commonsense morality as tacitly endorsed theory, i.e., a folk morality (FM). Consider how folk psychology is frequently circumscribed: “These are generalizations that are “common knowledge” among ordinary folk. Almost everyone assents to them, and almost everyone knows that almost everyone else assents to them” (Stich 1996 127). Persson and Savulescu (2012) offer a similar approach when they identify commonsense morality as a common feature of culturally diverse moralities. The causal roles and the definitions of the theoretical terms of folk morality could be identified by applying Lewis’s method of collecting platitudes within a particular domain (Lewis 1972). Within the domain of folk morality, platitudes feature terms like, justice, moral responsibility, altruism, and so forth. To circumscribe the concept of justice, for example, we would gather all the utterances that feature the term ‘justice,’ say to describe an individual’s behavior as just, or to describe a punishment as just, or to categorize a certain allocation of resources as just, and so forth. This collection would yield the folk theory of justice, which would form the basis for the quotidian concept of justice. Insofar as concepts such as moral rights[[5]](#footnote-5) or moral responsibility, mentioned by Persson and Savulescu, are also part of our commonsense morality, the scope of those folk concepts could be identified in similar ways.

As I described earlier, the view that commonsense psychology is a theory entails the claim that observation and judgment become theory-laden. A similar conclusion applies to folk morality. Adopting a folk theory of justice enables us to utilize the concept of justice as specified by the theory and to make judgments whether something falls under that concept. By adopting a folk theory of justice, we become able to judge certain actions or even certain individuals as conforming to the categories introduced by the theory. For example, we see a person giving money to a homeless individual *as* just. We view certain events, such as an old lady being mugged, *as* unjust. Familiarity with the concept of justice supports our ability to cognitively appraise a situation and to feel appropriate emotions. For example, thinking that you are witnessing a theft, say a young man snatching an elderly woman’s bag, will provoke anger, but realizing that the young man was only taking back what was his from the old lady who stole his bag hours earlier, will change anger to a more positive emotion. The upshot is that we develop a certain set of moral attitudes that reflect our explicitly or implicitly endorsed conception of justice. Persson and Savulescu (2012) have argued that the commonsense conception of justice is a reciprocal, tit-for-tat, approach to justice. One could have misgivings about the universality of this tenet of commonsense morality, but leaving that worry aside, a way to explain the psychological predisposition towards reciprocal justice is by appealing to the tacit endorsement of a concept of justice that relies on reciprocity, i.e., the tit-for-tat attitude is the result of the endorsement of a theory of justice that is reciprocal.

A consequence of the view that commonsense psychology is a theory is that it can be revised and in principle replaced by a better theory. Similarly, if commonsense morality is undergirded by a theory then it too could be in principle revised and replaced. This would run counter to the conclusion that our commonsense morality is static. The reason why Persson and Savulescu think that moral attitudes are static is because they maintain that commonsense morality is rooted in biology and is thus limited by it. This probably would not distinguish the ability to be moral from any other abilities, including cognitive abilities, which are the product of biology as well. Even if commonsense morality is limited by biology, this does not curtail the argument that it constitutes a folk theory. Again, I will draw a parallel between commonsense psychology and commonsense morality. There are those who countenance that FP is a theory, but because they think it is innate, they argue that it cannot be replaced by learning a more suitable psychology (Fodor 1975; Carruthers 1996). So even if we assume that we have a biological or evolutionary predisposition to develop a particular type of a commonsense morality, it is still possible to maintain that this type of morality is a folk theory. The question of whether commonsense morality can be revised through learning is distinct from its status as a theory.

But adopting the view that commonsense morality is a theory, whether innate or not, leads to an answer about how best to promote its revision. If we adopt the stance that commonsense morality is a folk theory that has the same features as a scientific theory, then as advancements in science can be achieved through cognitive enhancement, changes in commonsense morality could be achieved by similar means. Moreover, if Persson and Savulescu are correct, and our commonsense morality is limited by biology, the best way to extend those biological limits might be through neuroenhancement that could accelerate changes in background moral conceptual frameworks. This would remove the need for two separate tracks of enhancement, one moral and one cognitive, improvements in cognitive processes such as attention, learning, and memory, would improve our abilities to generate adequate theories and promote more accurate conceptual frameworks.[[6]](#footnote-6) And if Persson and Savulescu are correct and cognitive enhancers can actually promote scientific progress, then their use would also promote improvements in all our theories, including moral theories.

An additional similarity between folk psychology and folk morality is the difficulty with drawing their scope correctly.[[7]](#footnote-7) Here we can return to the misgivings about whether Person and Savulescu accurately identify the tenets of commonsense morality. There is evidence that aspects of our folk morality are neither universal nor static. For example, the research by Henrich et al. (2005) illustrates that fairness, altruism, the willingness to cooperate vary across social groups. What was most notable about this research is that what accounted for this cross-cultural variability were not individual differences but group-level differences in social structure. Henrich et al. (2005) utilized game paradigms, such as ultimatum games and public good games,[[8]](#footnote-8) to illustrate that the willingness of individuals to share resources as well as to contribute to social resources dependent on how their society and their economic system was organized. For example, individuals form communities with higher market integration and higher payoffs for cooperation, such as communities where livelihood depended on collaboration between unrelated individuals, were more likely to exhibit a sense of fairness and were more likely to contribute to social resources. This evidence casts doubt on the claim that tents of folk morality concerning fairness or the scope of altruism are universal. The scope of altruism is relevant here because Persson and Savulescu argued that our commonsense morality features an exclusivist sense of altruism, which neglects those who are neither our kin nor live in our immediate community. Henrich et al.’s research also undermines the claim that folk morality is static, given that cross-cultural differences in folk morality seem to be influenced primarily by social and contextual factors. This indicates that our everyday morality is responsive to differences in social structure, which runs counter to the claim that commonsense morality cannot adapt to a more cosmopolitan social environment where cross-cultural collaboration might be required. The cultural variability and responsiveness to social structure is also preliminary evidence against the claim that we are limited by innate predispositions to develop a particular type of folk morality.

There are also examples of moral progress that could be taken to support the argument that our folk morality is not only revisable in principle, but has already changed over time. Powell and Buchanan (2016) provide a few examples of moral progress to challenge the claim by Persson and Savulescu that our commonsense morality is exclusivists and that it promotes in-group tendencies. They argue that the establishment of human rights and the expansion of their application to individuals regardless, of race, nationality or gender is an example that our moral norms becoming more inclusive. They argue further that the extension of moral regard to some animals is also an example that our folk morality can be inclusive and that it is responsive to social contexts and to the environment. Additionally, there are reasons to think that notions of moral responsibility can be changed to accommodate scientific accounts of the scope of human agency. For example, education about the biological etiology of mental illness can affect interpretation of the degree of control individuals can exert over their behavior (Boysen and Vogel 2008). Similarly, Goldstein and Rosseli (2003) showed that a biological model of depression was associated with a decrease in stigma and a lessened willingness to hold the individual responsible for their feelings and behavior.

Section 4: The Power of Background Beliefs

In the previous sections, I provided the theoretical backing for the claim that our moral attitudes are the outcome of endorsing a folk morality. In this section, I would like to address the claim put forth by Persson and Savulescu that changes in background beliefs *de facto* do not have a significant, or at least sufficient, effect on our moral attitudes. My argument is that having certain moral beliefs is necessary for having certain moral attitudes, and that emotional changes on their own cannot precipitate changes in our commonsense morality.

Persson and Savulescu argue that cognitive enhancement, or just plain-old moral education, is not enough to improve moral behavior because having the right moral attitudes is not just a matter of knowing what is right. They argue our knowing that some of our biases, our prejudices, or our impulses are morally wrong is simply not enough to overpower common pernicious tendencies produced by our commonsense morality, such as xenophobia, nepotism, etc. They argue that although changes in cognition do affect our moral attitudes, they do so in a limited manner and through painstaking efforts to change. Motivational and emotional changes could do the job more efficiently, they assert.

To know this is true, they argue, we can look to everyday situations where overexposure to a particular stimulus saps our emotional reaction to it. Consider the treatment approach to arachnophobia (Persson and Savulescu 2012 117): An individual with this condition will usually be treated using cognitive behavioral therapy, which requires individuals with a phobia to be exposed gradually to their worst fears. The treatment begins by exposure to small spiders and then to larger spiders until the patient is cured. Arachnophobia is taken to be paradigmatic of other irrational aversions, such as racism, nationalism, sexism, and so forth. Persson and Savulescu argue that exposure therapy works because the phobic individual becomes so accustomed to the stimulus that they simply become less motivated to fear it. But there is a competing explanation both for the presence of the phobia and for its potential cure, which is that the cause of the phobia is not a recalcitrant emotion, but a recalcitrant belief, and that its cure is not precipitated by an emotional change, but by a change in beliefs.

Overexposure corrects the belief that spiders are harmful. Some phobias arise from negative experiences where a particular stimulus has caused harm in the past, such as a spider bite that resulted in a severe allergic reaction. The etiology of the belief about spiders and harm could also be more circumspect, say you fear spiders because they are negatively depicted in folklore as bringing bad luck. Either way, the root of the fear is an explicit or implicit belief that spiders cause harm and the cognitive appraisal of any encounter with a spider results in fear. To revise the belief, it is not enough to tell the phobic individual that their belief is inaccurate; they have to form a new belief about the harmlessness of spiders through acquaintance. By gaining exposure to spiders in a safe setting, an arachnophobic individual is able to break the negative association and to form new beliefs. Playing with spiders without any adverse consequences helps the individual modify their concept of a spider from scary to innocuous.

Characterizing exposure in this way is continuous with what we know about how to unlearn stereotypes. One of the ways in which individuals have been shown to be able to diminish both their implicit and explicit biases towards certain groups is through exposure to different social contexts. For example, women exposed to female leaders were less likely to express stereotypic beliefs about women in leadership positions (Dasgupta and Asgari 2004). Predictably, male-dominated environments increased stereotypic beliefs about women in coed colleges (Dasgupta and Asgari 2004). Thus, exposure to women in power changes our attitudes toward women in power by changing our background beliefs. Similarly, both implicit and explicit racist or xenophobic attitudes are diminished in similar ways by exposure to interracial social contexts (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2008). In these cases, it would be inaccurate to say that overexposure to certain groups simply saps one’s negative emotions or that women exposed to female leaders simply stop being motivated to generate certain stereotypic attitudes. In fact, it is not obvious that exposure would lead to a decrease in motivation and negative feelings. If individuals with stereotypic beliefs have certain emotional reactions, exposure to the offending stimulus would not lead to a decrease in negative emotions. If one is sexist, for example, and has negative feelings about women in leadership roles, exposure to women in leadership roles could lead to an emotional change in either direction, including an increase in negative emotions and the reinforcement of stereotypic beliefs. It seems a much better fit to argue that negative stereotypes are broken through exposure because it allows individuals to form new beliefs to replace the stereotypes. This is not to dispute that this type of process of unlearning stereotypes is painstaking and takes time.

The reason for this is that certain beliefs are harder to revise because they are embedded in a Quinean web of beliefs where each belief is justified through inference from other beliefs in the web (Quine 1951). Based on this view, there are some beliefs that are more entrenched or central while others are more peripheral. The more central the belief, although revisable in principle, the more difficult to revise because their truth justifies many other beliefs in the web, and their revision would require a radical change to the entire belief structure. Quine meant for this argument to characterize the totality of our knowledge, and he argued that even mathematics and logic could be in principle revised, although their revision would entail the restructuring of most of our scientific knowledge. But I mean to apply this argument less ambitiously to specific conceptual frameworks or parts of them.

To see why certain beliefs are recalcitrant, consider the old bromide that being cold causes a cold. Many of us have grown up believing that one could get a cold by going out in the cold and not wearing a scarf or hat or by going out with wet hair. Generations of individuals have memories of learning that they have to bundle up to avoid getting a cold; they also have knowledge of other people doing the same, and some of them have even reinforced these beliefs by teaching their children that keeping warm is the way to avoid respiratory infection. Moreover, the belief that being cold will cause a cold is part of an outdated scientific framework once used in medicine that establishes a causative relationship between inclement weather and the development of inflammatory conditions (Zagvazdin 2013). Endorsing this generalization then justifies a number of different beliefs; for example, beliefs about the types of external conditions likely to cause illness; the types of precautions one can take to prevent illness; the types explanation that can be used for why somebody became ill, and so forth. In effect, people develop a certain set of psychological dispositions to explain and predict the presence of inflammatory conditions in certain ways. They also become predisposed to experience fear of illness when they are cold and they develop the tendency to mitigate those risks by keeping warm in a number of different ways.

What is important to keep in mind is that the belief that being cold causes a cold is only an instantiation of the generalization that weather precipitates inflammatory conditions. In other words, the generalization is central, the bromide about colds is peripheral. Eradicating such an entrenched belief could not be as easy as telling somebody that the common cold is caused by a virus, what is required is replacing an entire belief structure. This is because as long as the generalization about the weather and inflammatory conditions remains endorsed, the belief about developing colds remains among one of its implications. Moreover, the generalization is also the basis of all those psychological dispositions I mentioned earlier. In order to eradicate the erroneous beliefs about colds and all the resultant psychological dispositions, what is required is an alternative generalization that could be the source of an alternative set of beliefs, that would then generate an alternative set of dispositions to act in certain ways.

A similar argument can be made about stereotypic beliefs about gender or race. These are core beliefs that are entrenched in how people see themselves, how they see other people, how they form their identity, and even how they judge their societies. Changes in attitudes about race and gender are hard, not because background beliefs are irrelevant to our moral attitudes but precisely because some of them are fundamental to them. The recalcitrance of commonsense moral tenets is not due to the limited influence of background beliefs on our morality, but it is due to their being the basis of our moral attitudes. And if that is the case, affective changes would not be an effective way to accelerate the progress of folk morality. The way to promote changes to commonsense morality is through the development of new conceptions of justice and new conceptions of moral responsibility that could replace our outmoded folk morality. The significant obstacle to this replacement is that conceptions of justice and moral responsibility are still in development, and a consensus on the right way to characterize those notions has not emerged. In fact, the lack of consensus about the right moral attitudes are so pervasive that even the argument that there are universal moral tents is still very much a matter of dispute.

Before concluding the paper, I would like to curtail a potential misinterpretation of my view, which is that endorsing the right moral framework is sufficient to make us more moral. My argument is that that commonsense morality is a folk theory and that the basis of our moral attitudes is the tacit endorsement of a theory. Because of that, I have argued that in order to change our moral attitudes one would have to change our folk moral theory. Moreover, if theory development depends on certain cognitive abilities, such as attention, memory, executive function, and if we identify medical interventions that could improve those, then both scientific and moral theories might progress. My argument is not, however, that improvements in moral theory is sufficient to make people more moral *simpliciter*. The outcome of my view is that endorsing a certain type of folk morality is necessary for having certain moral attitudes, and if we could settle on an adequate folk morality, then the person endorsing that theory would have the right moral attitudes in the right kinds of circumstances. This view does not commit me to the argument that knowing what is right is sufficient for people to do what is right. Acting in accordance with one’s moral attitudes is not simply a matter of having the right moral attitudes. The gulf between having the right moral attitudes and acting in accordance with those is large and can be mediated by a number of factors. One of them is that individual morality is often restricted by social circumstances and by governmental structures that limit a person’s ability to act in accordance with particular moral tenets. An individual working in an unjust system may act in unjust ways even when they have the right moral attitudes. Additional obstacles to doing what is right despite having the right moral attitudes include emotional and motivational factors and individual differences in those abilities.

Section 5: Conclusion

In this paper, I challenged Persson and Savulescu’s rendition of commonsense morality as a set of psychological dispositions. I proposed instead that commonsense morality is best conceived as a folk theory that, when implicitly or explicitly endorsed, produces psychological dispositions to react in certain ways. I argued further that because those psychological dispositions are the consequences of endorsing a folk morality, the best way to replace them is by changing this background theory. To support the argument that a theoretical framework could be the basis of psychological dispositions, I reexamined the case of arachnophobia given by Persson and Savulescu as an exemplar of how beliefs are impotent to change our biases, prejudices, or irrational fears. I argued that instead of thinking of irrational fears and other more pernicious biases, such as xenophobia or sexism, as based in recalcitrant emotions, they should be reconceived as cases of recalcitrant beliefs. I also suggest that the way to replace those beliefs is by forming knew beliefs. Hence, the best way to influence our moral attitudes and judgments is though changes in background conceptual frameworks. Given that Persson and Savulescu argue that scientific progress will be accelerated by using cognitive neuroenhancement, I have argued that if folk morality is relevantly similar to a scientific theory, then whatever pharmacological means there are to accelerate the progress of scientific theories should also hasten the progress of moral theories. I conclude that characterizing commonsense psychology as a folk theory eliminates the need for moral enhancement separate from cognitive enhancement because both scientific and moral progress are the result of improvements in scientific and moral theories.

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1. Published in *Journal of Cognitive Enhancement*. Free copy available for download on the journal’s website: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s41465-018-0098-8> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In this paper, I will rely on the conceivability of pharmacological cognitive neuroenhancement, but not on the more controversial claim that there already are good means of achieving cognitive neuroenhancement. For a challenge to the latter claim, see Advokat (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See, Gligorov (2016), especially chapter 2. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Eliminative materialists argue for the elimination of the entities posited by folk psychology because their view is that postulating mental states as part of FP gives rise to the mind-body problem. It is worth noting that the view I describe in this paper does not rest on the truth or even the adequacy of folk psychology. Elsewhere (Gligorov 2016), I argue that FP is in principle revisable, and that the tenets of folk psychology have changed over time. Specifically, I discuss the ways in which folk psychology has absorbed the influence of neuroscience and scientific psychology, and the ways in which this has reduced the incompatibility between commonsense psychology and neuroscience. In principle, I argue, this could lead to an FP that is very different from our current one; one that would not posit or characterize inner states, i.e., mental states, that are irreducible or distinct from physical states. In fact, I argue that this is already the case (Gligorov 2016 pp. 15-33). In other words, identifying a certain cluster of psychological explanations as ‘folk psychology’ does not commit one to mind and body dualism. (More generally, distinguishing between psychological and physical states does not always entail mind and body dualism; it all depends on the view on holds about the relationship between those two states.) As I propose in this paper, the way to identify the scope of a folk theory is by circumscribing a relevant part of our everyday parlance, but everyday parlance changes overtime, which in turn changes the tenets of our folk psychology. In Gligorov (2016), I argue that failure to countenance that FP changes and the commitment to a kind of essentialism about commonsense psychology is a shortcoming of eliminativist views. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Person and Savulescu refer to their being a “commonsensical theory or rights” (Person and Savulescu 2012 25), but they do not elaborate on what they mean by that or how this might relate to the rest of our commonsense morality. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Here, I would like to emphasize that the claim that neuroenhancers would be effective in promoting conceptual change is empirical and would require proof through research. It is conceivable, for example, that some concepts might be more entrenched than others, and that cognitive enhancers would be preferentially effective in promoting changes to scientific theories, and be ineffective on folk morality. (I wish to thank and anonymous reviewer for pointing out this possibility.) My argument, however, is that without such evidence, given the similarities I have described between FM and a scientific theory, there is no reason to assume that there would be a difference in effectiveness. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For more on the view that commonsense categories can depend on culture, see Stich (1998). Also see, Dennett (1987 54), who argues that folk psychology varies, not just across cultures, but even within countries, states, or neighborhoods. For a more radical rethinking of the problem of scope in commonsense theories, see Gligorov (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. In the ultimatum game, one individual, called the “proposer,” is usually provided with a divisible resource, such as money. The proposer is asked to offer a proportion of that resource to another person, called the “responder,” who has the choice to either accept or reject the offer from the responder. If the responder accepts they receive the part of the resource offered by the proposer and the proposer receives the rest. If the responder rejects the offer, neither individual receives anything. Based on the conception of self-interested rational agent, the responder should accept any offer no matter how small because it is better than nothing, while the proposer should offer the smallest possible amount. (The players are usually anonymous to each other.)

An iteration of the public goods game used by Henrich et al. (2005) is the voluntary contribution game, where players are given a sum of money and then told that they can contribute to a public fund as much as they want. The money contributed by the players to the public fund is increased by 50% and then distributed equally among players. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)