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The Revisability of Moral Concepts

Nada Gligorov [a]
[a] Mount Sinai School of Medicine
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researchers to judge whether brain-injured patients have this capacity, neuroscience can help to establish whether these patients meet the criterion of personhood. In addition, imaging showing brain dysfunction correlating with impulsive behavior can inform judgments of moral and legal responsibility that cannot be decided on behavioral evidence alone. Neuroimaging data may aid legal experts in assessing how impulse-control disorders affect behavior and whether they warrant full responsibility, mitigated responsibility, or excuse. These examples illustrate that neuroscience should not be judged by whether it preserves or threatens the contested concepts, but by whether it clarifies the conditions under which they obtain.

Kaposy claims that our valued concepts "might require the rational refusal to believe discoveries of neuroscience that put them in doubt" (23). As matters now stand, there is not enough neuroscientific evidence to undermine the ideas that persons are natural kinds and that they have free will. Nevertheless, it is possible that future neuroscientific discoveries will show that unconscious brain processes completely control our thought and behavior. This could mean that personhood and free will, as we now define them, are illusions that enable human organisms to adapt to and survive in the environment. It would be irrational to ignore this knowledge and not revise our conception of who we are. If we are not essentially persons who act on the basis of conscious will, then it would not be contradictory to question our commitment to these concepts. It would also be irrational not to revise our ethical practices in the light of this knowledge. Suppose that a number of functional imaging studies indicate that brain processes constrain the choices open to a human agent at any given time. As a constraint, this would limit the scope of agency and the content of responsibility, what we are responsible for. Although this would not explain away free will and responsibility, it could mean that we are less free and less responsible than previously thought. Such a discovery may or may not occur in the foreseeable future. But it behooves us as rational beings to be open to this possibility.

Neuroscience need not force us into a state of cognitive polyphasia, where ethical reasoning conflicts with a neuroscience-influenced understanding of human beings. Unless one accepts substance dualism and libertarianism, any such conflict is more apparent than real. If one accepts the view that persons are constituted by their minds and brains and can be the authors of their actions despite deterministic or mechanistic processes in the brain, then neuroscience does not warrant giving up our belief in personhood and free will. Empirical considerations pertaining to the brain and normative considerations pertaining to human agents should not be seen as competing but complementary. The psychological and behavioral criteria that ground personhood and free will can be informed by knowledge of how the brain enables the mind in mediating consciousness and the capacity for reasoning and decision-making. Neuroscience does not have the last word, though, since it is human agents who determine the metaphysical, moral, and legal significance of information about the brain. A proper interpretation of the philosophical implications of neuroscience shows that it does not threaten to eliminate our valued concepts and practices but can help us to gain a better understanding of them. ■

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The Revisability of Moral Concepts

Nada Gligorov, Mount Sinai School of Medicine

The rise of scientific explanation for natural phenomena has produced some of the most exciting problems in philosophy, such as the problem of free will and the mind and body problem. Those philosophical areas seek to explain how free will and consciousness can exist in a natural world that seems to be determined by mechanistic laws. Advancements in neuroscience further highlight this problem because, unlike physics, the object of study is various aspects of human psychology, including our ability to be conscious, rational, and free in our decision making. The

Address correspondence Nada Gligorov, PhD, Assistant Professor of Medical Education, Mount Sinai School of Medicine, Box #1076, One Gustave Levy Place, New York, NY 10029, USA. E-mail: nada.gligorov@mssm.edu

aforementioned concepts feature prominently in commonsense psychology, and because of that the revision of those concepts in accordance with neuroscience is often met with animosity. Kaposy (2010) argues that moral norms relying on free will, personhood, and rationality should not be revised in accordance with neuroscientific discovery because they play important moral and social roles. I argue that most concepts, including moral ones, are a web of changing beliefs shaped by various sources of information, including scientific discovery. As there is continuous, bidirectional influence between science and commonsense, the strength of our current commitments cannot be the basis for an argument against their revision in accordance with neuroscientific discovery.

The philosophical literature has mostly settled on two ways in which concepts can be altered: They could be revised or reconceptualized. Revision of concepts could occur in the following way: Imagine we endorse a theory much like our current commonsense psychology that predicts and explains human behavior by utilizing concepts such as free will, personhood, and rationality.[1] Imagine further that a different and new theory proposes to explain and predict human behavior by positing physical entities such as brain states, much like current neuroscience. If the two theories are compatible, the new theory could reduce the old theory (for more on this issue, see Churchland 1989, 48). The concepts of the old theory, here commonsense psychology, would remain. A successful reduction of commonsense psychology would vindicate the entities endorsed by that theory because it would provide additional proof that free will and rationality have a physical instantiation in the brain. Reduction of free will would not require the elimination of that concept. It would, however, entail some revision of the original conceptual framework. For example, reduction could make it true that free will is localized in the brain and is a physical process, so the concept would have to be revised to include that fact.

Commonsense psychology and neuroscience, however, could be incompatible, which would preclude the reduction of one theory to the other. In that case we would have to opt for the elimination of one of the two dueling theories. Incompatibility between theories arises when they posit disparate ontologies. For example, if commonsense psychology is committed to the view that free will cannot be a physical process, or that free will cannot, by definition, be subject to the workings of a determinist natural law, then any theory that is physicalist or deterministic would be incompatible with commonsense. The incongruity between the two theories would further entail that one of them is false and its conceptual categories illusory. In such cases, the better of the two theories would win and we would have to reconceptualize to the wining theory. Kaposy (2010) cites Green and Cohen as espousing precisely such a view; the authors predict that people will get used to an entirely different way of interpreting and explaining how humans make everyday decisions, whereby all our decisions are a result of a mechanical process. In this scenario, the winning theory would be neuroscience.

An incompatibility, like the one just described, between commonsense views about the nature of moral concepts and the neuroscience of morality is unlikely. Arguments for elimination of our moral intuitions presume a type of essentialism for moral concepts. In order to create opposition between our moral intuitions and neuroscience, one needs to support the claim that we can specify a steady endorsement of a particular commonsense view about the nature of moral concepts, which is unlikely to change in the future. In other words, in order to argue for the elimination of a particular concept, that concept should be well defined. Given that all attempts to specify necessary and sufficient conditions for notions such as free will, personhood, and even rationality have failed in the past within the philosophical literature, it seems even more unlikely that we can find consensus on those issues in commonsense. One can, as Kaposy does, approximate a view based on our current use of those moral terms: how we speak of them, to whom we attribute them, and how they feature in our explanations of other people's behavior. But any such rendering of our moral intuitions would not be enough to argue that our intuitions entail the strict commitment to particular features of moral concepts.

An additional problem with determining our intuitive moral commitments is correctly drawing the scope of commonsense and distinguishing purely commonsense conceptions from philosophical or scientific ones. We see this issue illustrated in Kaposy's article. The examples given for the definitions are either drawn from philosophical writings, such as the Kantian definition of rationality, or they are neurophilosophical conceptions like Patricia Churchland's compatibilist definition of free will. It is unclear how we could determine with any certainty that Kant's notion of rationality is more representative of commonsense then is Churchland's adjusted definition of free will. Furthermore, if we were to expunge both philosophical and scientific influences from our moral notions, one could wonder whether anything would remain of our concepts (for further discussion see Gligorov 2007, esp. chap. 2).

Even if we could settle on a commonsense view of moral notions, our current commitment to those concepts cannot be an indication that those will remain the same in the future. Neuroscience has already influenced our ideas about mental states. A particularly conspicuous change in commonsense is the piecemeal abandonment of the Cartesian view of mental states. In Descartes's view, mental states are characterized as conscious and nonphysical states. Although nowadays there is still great diversity of opinion, we can claim with some conviction that most people would agree that the locus of their mental states is in the brain. Thus, any importance that we had previously ascribed to the notion that mental states are nonphysical has changed

1. The view that commonsense psychology is a theory has been defended by Churchland (1989, 2–6). For opposing views, please see Searle (1992, esp. 58–63).

over time. Another obvious conceptual shift resulted from the popularization of Freud's writings and has affected how we see the relationship between consciousness and mental states. Freud's theory shaped our commonsense by introducing the category of unconscious mental state into our everyday parlance. Nowadays people often refer to unconscious thoughts and motives, and accuse each other of "Freudian slips."

It should not be assumed, however, that the interaction between scientific and commonsense views is unidirectional. Neuroscience of morality finds its basis in commonsense notions of moral concepts. Any localization, for example, of mental states in the brain begins by relying on intuitive notions of the nature of those and uses them to draw correlations between our manifest psychology and its underlying physical causes. Sellars (1991, 20) argues that scientific views are the "offspring" of commonsense, with the caveat that scientific conceptual frameworks are not restricted by commonsense. In this view, the complete revision of moral concepts is in principle possible, but the more correct characterization of the relation between moral intuition and neuroscience is that of continuity and mutual influence.

As Kaposy (2010) correctly points out, free will, personhood, rationality, and other such notions feature prominently in our moral norms and guide our social expectations. We expect people to act rationally; we assume that they have autonomy and can make decisions for which they can assume responsibility. But given that our commonsense categories have changed in the past, their current prominence is not enough to argue against their revision. The extent to which neuroscience will shape our conceptions about ourselves is an empirical claim yet to be verified, but religion, philosophy, and science have shaped our beliefs in the past, and it seems likely that they will continue to do so in the future. ■

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Clarifying Conceptions of Freedom: Kaposy's Argument Against "The Inference"

William Smith, Emory University

Chris Kaposy's article "The Supposed Obligation to Change One's Beliefs About Ethics Because of Discoveries in Neuroscience" (2010) targets a common "inference" among neuroscientists and ethicists. Kaposy puts "The Inference" this way: "Scientific discoveries x, y, z imply that we ought not to believe claims in our ethical lives that are inconsistent with x, y, z." He claims this inference is increasingly deployed to eliminate the ethical concepts of free will, persons, and selves in light of neuroscientific evidence; he argues against it with two claims. First, he asserts that rationality requires the concepts that are attacked and concludes that we cannot be under a rational norm to eliminate a concept grounded in rationality (henceforth, the "Freedom Is Rationally Necessary" claim). Second, he claims that the practical value of these concepts warrants belief therein whether or not scientific evidence undermines their epistemic warrant (henceforth, the "Freedom Is Practically Warranted" claim). Both claims strike me as naive in terms of active debates in the literature on free will and responsibility. In my view, Kaposy neither presents the best versions of these claims nor acknowledges responses that opponents of these views have been making for some time.

Take the "Freedom Is Rationally Necessary" claim. Kaposy claims that we cannot be rationally required to

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Address correspondence to William Smith, Emory University, School of Medicine, 444 Burlington Rd, Atlanta, GA 30307, USA. E-mail: wsmithv@emory.edu