

Books Synopsis

Regard for Reason

in the Moral Mind

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Brief Description

The burgeoning science of ethics has produced a trend toward pessimism. Ordinary moral thought and action, we're told, are profoundly influenced by arbitrary factors and ultimately driven by unreasoned feelings. This book counters the current orthodoxy on its own terms by carefully engaging with the empirical literature.

The resulting view, optimistic rationalism, shows the pervasive role played by reason, and ultimately defuses sweeping debunking arguments in ethics. The science does suggest that moral knowledge and virtue don't come easily. However, despite the heavy influence of automatic and unconscious processes that have been shaped by evolutionary pressures, we needn't reject ordinary moral psychology as fundamentally flawed or in need of serious repair. Reason can be corrupted in ethics just as in other domains, but a special pessimism about morality in particular is unwarranted. Moral judgment and motivation are fundamentally rational enterprises not beholden to the passions.

Outstanding Features

- A much-needed defence of the rationality of moral thought and action
- Rebutts scientific debunking of morality
- Engages critically with both the science and the philosophy of morality
- Written in a lively style, accessible to readers from any disciplinary background

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Chapter Abstracts

1. Empirical Pessimists

Abstract: Scientifically-informed theories of ordinary moral thought and action are on the rise but trend toward pessimism. Many believe moral judgment is ultimately just a matter of feeling certain emotions or that our moral beliefs can be easily debunked since they're influenced by morally irrelevant factors, such as evolutionary pressures, framing effects, incidental emotions, and inflexible heuristics that value more than an action's consequences. It gets worse. Even if we could know right from wrong, pessimists contend that we rarely muster up the morally appropriate motives, since we're slaves to self-interest and non-rational passions. Even if empathy for others can motivate altruism, for example, it's fickle and parochial; and we frequently just rationalize bad behavior. Contrary to current orthodoxy, I'll construct a more optimistic view of our moral minds in the rationalist tradition, which centers on a concern to act in ways that are justifiable to ourselves and to others. While the science suggests that moral knowledge and virtue don't come easily, it suggests optimistic solutions, and there is no reason to reject ordinary moral thinking as fundamentally flawed.

2. The Limits of Emotion

Abstract: Empirical research apparently suggests that emotions play an integral role in moral judgment. The evidence for sentimentalism is diverse, but it is rather weak and has generally been overblown. First, there is no evidence that our moral concepts themselves are partly comprised of or necessarily dependent on emotions. Second, while the moral/conventional distinction may partly characterize the essence of moral judgment, moral norms needn't be backed by affect in order to transcend convention. Third, priming people with incidental emotions like disgust doesn't make them moralize actions. Fourth, moral judgment can only be somewhat impaired by damage to areas of the brain that are generally associated with emotional processing.

Psychopaths, for example, exhibit both emotional and rational deficits, and the latter alone can explain any minor defects in the psychopath's ability to distinguish moral from conventional norms. The greatest problem in psychopathy appears to be motivational or behavioral, and emotional deficits do much more of the explanatory work there.

3. *Reasoning Beyond Consequences*

Abstract: Ample experimental research demonstrates that ordinary moral judgment involves both conscious and unconscious reasoning or inference. The evidence suggests in particular that we treat as morally significant more than the consequences of a person's actions, including the distinctions between: acts/omissions; intentional/accidental outcomes; and harming as a means/byproduct. However, contrary to some recent evidence, it isn't clear that ordinary moral thinking conforms to the Doctrine of Double Effect. Drawing on existing research and some of my own experiments, I show that the means/byproduct distinction grounds only some norms, which are sensitive to how involved the agent is in bringing about an outcome. This norm-specific account has some affinity with Double Effect but is distinct. The result is a dual process model of moral judgment on which we at least compute both outcomes and the actor's role in bringing them about.

4. *Defending Moral Judgment*

Abstract: Despite containing non-consequentialist elements and relying in part on automatic heuristics, I argue that ordinary moral cognition can rise to moral knowledge. I rebut several prominent, wide-ranging debunking arguments (based on evolutionary pressures, framing effects, automatic emotional heuristics, and disgust). The discussion reveals a general *debunker's dilemma* for such sweeping arguments: they can identify an influence on moral belief that is either substantial or defective, but not both. When one identifies a genuinely defective influence on a large class of moral beliefs (e.g. framing effects), this influence is insubstantial, failing to render the beliefs unjustified. When one identifies a main basis for belief (e.g. automatic heuristics), the influence is not defective. Thus there is a trade-off for wide-ranging empirical debunking arguments in ethics: identifying a substantial influence on moral belief implicates a process that is not genuinely defective. We thus lack empirical reason to believe that moral judgment is fundamentally flawed.

5. *The Difficulty of Moral Knowledge*

Abstract: While moral knowledge is possible, the science does show that it can be difficult to attain and maintain. There are two main threats. First, empirical research is increasingly unearthing the grounds of our moral beliefs. While wide-ranging debunking arguments are problematic, this does not hinder highly targeted attacks (e.g. beliefs based on implicit biases). Second, contemporary moral issues are increasingly complex, such that resolution often requires expert knowledge (especially concerning bioethical issues, such as cloning and climate change). Yet many of us lack such knowledge or a willingness to defer to experts, or to educate ourselves via self-criticism. Thus, while we share many fundamental values, moral knowledge is elusive, not because our basic moral beliefs are hopelessly flawed, but rather because the relevant *non-moral* beliefs are false or unjustified. To tackle topics engendering fervent disagreement, we don't need a radically revisionary conception of ethics, such as utilitarianism; or a cure to a perceived "empathy deficit" in the populace; or rhetorical appeals to emotions like disgust. Given that moral judgment is fundamentally a matter of reasoning, we would do better to encourage

quality education, intellectual humility (including some deference to experts), and various methods that combat cognitive biases (e.g. overconfidence and confirmation bias).

6. *Beyond Self-Interest*

Abstract: This chapter introduces the long-standing idea that inappropriate motives, such as self-interest, can militate against something like virtue. Some have tried to show that we are universally egoistic by appeal to empirical research, from evolutionary theory to the neuroscience of learning. However, these efforts fail and instead decades of experiments in social psychology provide powerful evidence that we are capable of genuine altruism. We can be motivated ultimately by a concern for others for their own sake, especially when empathizing with them. The psychological evidence, moreover, cannot be dismissed as showing that empathy blurs the distinction between self and other, making helping behavior truly egoistic or even non-altruistic.

7. *The Motivational Power of Moral Beliefs*

Abstract: Even if we can rise above self-interest, we may just be slaves of our passions. The dominant Humean tradition has desire reining supreme when it comes to motivation generally and moral motivation in particular. But the motivational power of reason, via moral beliefs, has been understated. Appealing to empirical work primarily in social and developmental psychology, I show that moral beliefs play a prominent role in motivation, even in the difficult case of temptation. Experiments show that often when we succumb, it is due in part to a change in moral (or normative) belief. Rationalization, perhaps paradoxically, reveals a deep regard for reason—to act in ways we can justify to ourselves and to others. The result is that we are very often morally motivated. Even when behaving badly, actions that often seem motivated by self-interest are actually ultimately driven by a concern to do what’s right. This addresses a second form of egoistic pessimism but also sets up a challenge to the Humean theory addressed in the next chapter.

8. *Freeing Reason from Desire*

Abstract: The previous chapter showed that our beliefs about which actions we ought to perform frequently have an effect on what we do. But Humean theories—holding that all motivation has its source in desire—insist on connecting such beliefs with an antecedent motive. I argue that we can allow normative beliefs a more independent role. First, I show that the Humean theory rules out some of the ways we ordinarily explain actions. This shifts the burden of proof onto Humeans to motivate their more restrictive, revisionary account. Second, I show that they are unlikely to discharge this burden on empirical grounds, whether by appealing to research on neurological disorders (acquired sociopathy, Parkinson’s, and Tourette’s), the psychological properties of desire, or the scientific virtue of parsimony.

9. *Defending Virtuous Motivation*

Abstract: This chapter considers whether there is empirical evidence that we’re rarely virtuously motivated—i.e. rarely do what’s right for the right reasons. There are two key challenges that threaten to “defeat” claims to virtuous motivation: self-interest and arbitrary situational factors. The structure of these threats is similar to the debunking arguments from Ch. 4: defective influences on moral behavior make us motivated by the wrong reasons. The motive of self-interest is indeed powerful and rationalization is rampant. Still, there are limits to egoism and

arbitrary influences, as exemplified by experiments on cheating and dishonesty. Ultimately, like debunking arguments, defeater challenges succumb to a Defeater's Dilemma: one can identify influences on many of our morally-relevant behaviors that are either substantial or arbitrary, but not both. Our best science so far suggests a trade-off: substantial influences on many morally-relevant actions are rarely defective.

10. Cautious Optimism

Abstract: This chapter serves as a brief conclusion with a recapitulation of the main claims and moves made in the book and a discussion of some implications. The best defense of our moral minds yields a *cautious optimism*. Ordinary morality is capable of rising to knowledge and virtue, because we do have a regard for reason, but we do often fail. When we do fail, though, the problem is not typically commonsense morality itself, but our poor reasoning from it. One broad implication of cautious optimism is that the best method for making more of us more virtuous will not target our passions to the exclusion of our reasoning. However, sound arguments aren't enough, for human beings are fallible creatures with limited attention spans. We must ensure an educated and well-informed populace, but also structure environments so as to facilitate good reasoning, not rationalization.

About the Author

Josh May's research is primarily in ethics and epistemology with an emphasis on how empirical work informs philosophical debates. He has published articles in a number of venues, including the *American Journal of Bioethics: Neuroscience*, *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*, *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*, *Cognition*, *Journal of Medical Ethics*, *Philosophical Studies*, *Synthese*, *European Journal of Philosophy*, and the *Review of Philosophy & Psychology*. His research draws on the sciences to explore how we come to know right from wrong and act appropriately, as well as how and why we sometimes behave badly. May holds a PhD in philosophy from the University of California, Santa Barbara (2011). Before taking his current position at the University of Alabama at Birmingham, he spent 2 years teaching at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia. He has earned several awards and stipends, including the *Emerging Scholar Prize* for his paper on empathy and altruism at the Spindel Conference in 2010, judged by Martha Nussbaum, Russ Shafer-Landau, and Lori Gruen.