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To cite this article: David Sackris & Rasmus Rosenberg Larsen (2022): The disunity of moral judgment: Evidence and implications, *Philosophical Psychology*, DOI: [10.1080/09515089.2022.2056437](https://doi.org/10.1080/09515089.2022.2056437)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09515089.2022.2056437>



Published online: 28 Mar 2022.



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ORIGINAL PAPER



The disunity of moral judgment: Evidence and implications

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ABSTRACT

We argue that there is significant evidence for reconsidering the possibility that moral judgment constitutes a distinctive category of judgment. We begin by reviewing evidence and arguments from neuroscience and philosophy that seem to indicate that a diversity of brain processes result in verdicts that we ordinarily consider “moral judgments”. We argue that if these findings are correct, this is plausible reason for doubting that all moral judgments necessarily share common features: if diverse brain processes give rise to what we refer to as “moral judgments”, then we have reason to suspect that these judgments may have different features. After advancing this argument, we show that giving up the unity of moral judgment seems to effectively dissolve the internalism/externalism debate concerning motivation within the field of metaethics.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 25 February 2021
Accepted 17 March 2022

KEYWORDS

Moral judgment; moral cognition; internalism; externalism; metaethics

Historically, many philosophers have appeared to assume that moral judgments form a distinctive category of judgment, and that such judgments differ in important ways from other types of judgments. That is, they have assumed that judging that murder is wrong is a fundamentally different kind of judgment from judging that the sky is blue or that $2 + 3 = 5$.

Evidence of this basic assumption, that moral judgments form a distinctive type of judgment, is present throughout different sections of moral philosophy. Immanuel Kant, perhaps the most influential Western philosopher since Aristotle, proposed in his *Second Critique* that a moral judgment, due to its discreteness, was made by a single, distinct faculty of the mind (Kant, 1998/1785).¹ At the turn of the twentieth century, H.A. Prichard (1912) distinguished between moral and non-moral thinking, where moral thinking appears to be an immediate appreciation of what is morally obligatory. John Rawls saw one task of his *A Theory of Justice* as focusing and refining our “moral sensibilities” or distinct “moral capacity”, which he compares to our

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ability to recognize well-formed sentences in our native language. Rawls also seemed to conceive of our sense of moral judgment as a specific “mental capacity” (1971, pp. 41–46).²

In contemporary meta-ethics, Michael Smith characterizes “the central organizing problem in contemporary metaethics” (Smith, 1994, p. 11) as an inability to satisfactorily define moral judgment, thus indicating an assumption that there is some defining feature of moral judgment to be found that qualifies moral judgment as a distinctive class or type. Further, Smith believes that moral judgments may be unified by their content, insofar that humans have a commonsense understanding of what morality and moral judgment is about, and that we can use that commonsense understanding to help us to define the concepts in question (Smith, 1994, pp. 39–40). Richmond Campbell aims to tackle the same problem as Smith in his paper “What is Moral Judgment?” (Campbell, 2007), where he lays out a fundamental philosophical problem for understanding moral judgment: Are they beliefs or desires? To suppose that only one of these two options could be the correct answer seemingly presupposes a commitment to the belief that either *all* moral judgments are beliefs, or that *all* moral judgments are desires; that is, such a dichotomy requires a commitment to a position on which all moral judgments are a specific type of mental state. If, for example, moral judgments are in fact entirely composed of desires, that would be one significant feature that is held in common, or unifies, all instances of moral judgment.

The debates between so-called sentimentalists and cognitivists also seem to presuppose that there is some unifying feature shared by all moral judgments. For instance, both modern (e.g., Hume, 1983) and contemporary sentimentalists (e.g., Nichols, 2004; Prinz, 2007) argue that moral judgments are fundamentally and even entirely composed of emotions. There are also examples of contemporary philosophers who argue that moral judgments are unified by their psychologically distinct qualities, such as R. M. Hare (1981) and Victor Kumar (2015). Kumar argues that what makes moral judgments unique is that such judgments are conceived as comparatively more serious, authority-independent, generalizable, and objective than other normative judgments.

That philosophers believe that there is something discretely unique about moral judgments is also reflected in survey data. For example, Bourget and Chalmers (2021) have found that 69.3% of philosophers are “cognitivists” about moral judgment, and 20.7% are “non-cognitivists” (10.3% of philosophers answer “other”). This suggests that 90% of today’s philosophers hold that moral judgments fall into one of two distinctive categories (cognitivism or non-cognitivism), which serves as evidence that the majority of philosophers believe that moral judgments share at least one unifying feature.

We also seem to find this assumption of unity or distinctiveness in the debates that animate the field of metaethics more generally. When philosophers ask whether moral judgments necessarily motivate the person judging to act, such questions logically presuppose that moral judgments are a distinctive kind; we don't ask whether judgments of color necessarily motivate. Other meta-ethical questions seem to also assume that moral judgments are special in some way: we ask whether moral questions are questions of fact, and if moral judgments are recognitions of such facts; we ask whether moral judgments are true or false in the same way as other, more typical judgments.³ Asking if moral judgments are alike, or different from, other judgments of fact, again, seems to presuppose that there is something special about such judgments that distinguishes them from other judgment types.⁴

Furthermore, the belief that individuals can be morally impaired seems to presuppose that moral judgment is a discrete judgment type that is produced by, or corresponds to, a specific region or functional area (or coordinated set of areas) of the brain such that *that* system or region can be impaired or compromised. Several philosophers working on moral judgment believe that, for example, psychopaths are either incapable of making moral judgments entirely or that they do not make moral judgments in the same way as most people. Kumar states that psychopaths “lack moral motivation altogether” (Kumar, 2016a, p. 334) as if this is a well-known fact.⁵ If moral judgment is the result of a special or distinctive cognitive faculty that corresponds to a specific brain region(s), then surely that faculty may also be disabled or damaged, or so the thinking seems to go.⁶

Although twentieth century work in moral *psychology* – the study of human moral *behavior* – began with similar assumptions,⁷ a number of contemporary researchers in this field have begun to increasingly cast doubt on the belief that moral judgment forms a distinct category of judgment or that it is the result of a distinctive cognitive process.⁸ This doubt has been propelled by (among other things) the finding that when people make moral judgments (i.e., judgments about *rightness* and *wrongness*), these judgments appear to be composed of an irregular number of brain functions and processes that are not purely, or even primarily, used for making moral judgments. For example, moral judgments typically employ areas of the brain believed to *also* be responsible for understanding the minds of others and the attribution of intentions, yet this is not a brain function whose primary, or only purpose, is to play a role in moral judgment (e.g., Borg et al., 2011; Cushman & Young, 2011; Greene, 2015b; Young & Dungan, 2012).

Responding to some of these findings, Walter Sinnott-Armstrong and Thalia Wheatley (2014) have proposed that for moral judgments to form a distinct category of judgment, there would have to be “some single

important feature” present in all instances or members of the category (Sinnott-Armstrong & Wheatley, 2014, p. 454). That is, if we are to believe that there are different categories of judgment, what differentiates these categories must be definable. Based on their criterion for distinguishing between kinds of judgments, Sinnott-Armstrong and Wheatley consider research in cognitive science and attempts within the field of philosophy at providing a unifying feature for moral judgments and conclude that there is little to suggest that moral judgments form such a distinct kind. They state that “our claim is not only that there are different kinds of moral judgments; it is also that nothing at all, at any level, unifies those kinds” (Sinnott-Armstrong & Wheatley, 2014, p. 455).⁹

Whether or not we are convinced by the arguments of Sinnott-Armstrong and Wheatley, it is essential to notice that their arguments sow doubt about the belief that moral judgment constitutes a distinctive kind or category. While such a discussion is in and of itself significant, there has still not been a serious conversation about what sort of consequences their position might have on some of the similarly long-standing debates about the nature of moral judgment discussed above. Initiating such tentative discussion, then, seems to be a natural step forward and is what we aim to do here.

When we say that moral judgments are not a distinctive kind, or that they are not formed by distinctive mental faculty, we mean by this that there is no significant unifying feature that all moral judgments possess. For example, if a person believes that *all* moral judgments are the result of purely cognitive processes, then that person believes that all moral judgments share a significant, unifying feature. Alternatively, if a person believes that all moral judgments are the result of emotion processes (i.e., non-cognitivists), then again, this person believes that there is a significant feature shared by all moral judgments such that if a judgment does not involve (or is not constituted by) emotion processes, then the judgment in question is not a “moral” one. There have already been significant philosophical arguments to the effect that moral judgments do not constitute a unified category in virtue of sharing some significant feature (e.g., Sackris, 2021; Sinnott-Armstrong & Wheatley, 2014; Sinnott-Armstrong et al., 2012; Stich, 2006). We largely agree with such arguments and do not aim to rehash them here.

However, even if there is no significant conceptual feature that all moral judgments share, it may be that they are unified or distinctive because they arise as a result of a particular physical process or faculty. For example, if an individual thinks that moral judgments are entirely composed of emotions, it must be the case that they are the result of emotion processes in the body/brain. So, the belief here would be that moral judgments arise from

a distinctive physical process (or coordinated set of physical processes), which thereby marks them out as a distinctive kind. It is this latter viewpoint that we will focus our arguments upon in this paper.

Here, we intend to do two things: First, we will review some of the existing evidence and arguments in favor of abandoning the view that moral judgments are the result of a distinctive brain faculty or set of cognitive process and on the basis of such cognitive processes are unified. Next, we aim to demonstrate that such an abandonment may seriously impact traditional debates in moral philosophy, which has yet to have been explored in any significant way in the field of metaethics. In particular, we will focus on the potential impact on the so-called *internalism vs. externalism* debate, namely, the philosophical discussion about whether moral judgments are necessarily motivating (internalism) or have no necessary connection with motivation (externalism).¹⁰

For the purposes of this paper, we reasonably presuppose that moral judgment must have *some* basis in brain/cognitive processes.¹¹ This assumption has been the basis for the work of individuals such as Joshua Greene et al. (2001); (2004) and Jana Borg and colleagues (Borg et al., 2011), all of whom had individuals consider moral dilemmas while inside of an fMRI machine. Second, if moral judgments have certain, necessary or significant features, such as always motivating action or always taking the form of a belief, we would expect to see certain areas of the brain consistently involved in the moral judgment process. Furthermore, it is widely believed by psychologists and some moral sentimentalists that emotions and motivation are necessarily linked.¹² Therefore, we might reasonably expect to see emotion processing centers in the brain reliably activated during moral decision-making processes if internalism is true; alternatively, we should see no such reliable connection if externalism is true.

Additionally, externalism is much more than merely the rejection of internalism, although it is often portrayed this way.¹³ The externalism thesis is typically conjoined with other claims about the fundamental nature of moral judgment. David Brink (1986), for example, points out that many philosophers have taken moral realism and internalism to be generally incompatible; the realist is typically committed to a view on which a moral judgment is a kind of belief, and that beliefs are not motivational. Therefore, the externalist, just as much as the internalist, should expect certain cognitive processes (and not others) to be reliably activated when a subject makes a moral judgment – merely different ones than the internalist.¹⁴ In other words, the internalist/externalist debate seems to lend itself to empirical investigation in a way that other meta-ethical debates may not, so considering the evidence from the scientific exploration of moral judgment in relation to this debate seems especially apt.

1. Evidence, new and old

In the introduction to *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, Hume observes the following:

There has been a controversy started of late, much better worth examination, concerning the general foundation of morals; whether they be derived from reason, or from sentiment; whether we obtain knowledge of them by a chain of argument and induction, or by an immediate feeling and finer internal sense; whether, like all sound judgment of truth and falsehood, they should be the same to every rational intelligent being; or whether, like the perception of beauty and deformity, they be founded entirely on the particular fabric and constitution of the human species (1983, p. 6).

Famously, Hume argued that the foundation of morality lies in the sentiments. For the purposes of this argument, the significance of this passage lies in the fact that it represents an instance of an important historical, dichotomous assumption: that moral judgments are either *all* based in reason or that they are *all* based in the sentiments. As we know, Kant read Hume's work and argued for the former response, that moral judgments are rationally constituted.

What is key here is that both Hume and Kant assume that this question, as posed by Hume, and which as demonstrated above is continually asked to this day, has only one answer. However, what if this is the wrong approach? Could it be that some moral judgments are primarily rooted in cognitive processes while others are primarily rooted in emotional processes? Why do we assume that the answer to such metaethical questions will always be either/or?

There is a similar divide when it comes to the two great normative moral theories of the last two hundred years: Kant's deontological ethics and Mill's utilitarian system. Invariably, students of philosophy are usually more drawn to one of the two systems, but neither one, by itself, is ever found to be completely satisfactory. Even the most committed deontologist engages in utilitarian reasoning in certain contexts (surely, we have all heard deontologists concede that they should lie to the murderer at the door, torture the terrorist who planted the ticking time bomb, etc.)¹⁵; similarly, even the most committed utilitarian will engage in deontological reasoning (conceding, for instance, that there is a morally relevant difference between murder and manslaughter).¹⁶ It just seems that certain moral contexts cry out for certain forms of moral deliberation.

Perhaps the reason we are perennially divided between these two accounts of the process by which moral judgments are arrived at (sentimentalism vs. cognitivism), as well as the two accounts of which principles should be utilized in making a moral judgment (deontology vs. consequentialism), is that the way in which we do in fact make moral judgment

depends on the problem we confront and the circumstances in which we confront it. What this long-standing divide suggests to us is that there may be no one single process (or coordinated regions of the brain) that gives rise to the mental state picked out by the phrase “moral judgment”. That is, this seemingly irresolvable historical chasm should leave us open to considering the possibility that the label “moral judgment” fails to identify a unique decision-making process. Of course, this realization may well be one we could only come to in light of more recent evidence.

It was with the aim of debunking the belief that deontological moral judgments were the result of pure reasoning processes, as Kantians have claimed, that Joshua Greene began scanning subjects’ brains as they considered moral dilemmas (Greene, 2008, p. 36). Although his goal was not to dispute the historical assumption that moral judgment is the result of a unified brain faculty,¹⁷ he later came to view his results in this light.

In Greene’s experimental studies, when subjects considered moral dilemmas that required them to directly involve themselves in a morally charged situation, what Greene refers to as “personal” moral dilemmas (e.g., would *you* shove one person from a bridge to stop a trolley from killing five people), areas of the brain that are believed to be involved with emotion-processing appeared to be more active. When subjects considered more “impersonal” moral dilemmas that did not require their direct involvement (e.g., flipping a switch from a distance to divert a trolley from killing five and as a result killing one person),¹⁸ their judgments appeared to arise primarily from areas of the brain responsible for (non-emotional) cognitive processes:

Contemplation of personal dilemmas produced relatively greater activity in three emotion-related areas: the posterior cingulate cortex, the medial prefrontal cortex, and the amygdala At the same time, contemplation of impersonal moral dilemmas produced relatively greater neural activity in two classically “cognitive” areas of the brain, the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex and inferior parietal lobe (2008, 43-44).

The consideration of different kinds of dilemmas seemed to activate different brain processes in order to reach what we would typically refer to as a “moral” verdict. It is worth considering the significance of this result for a moment. If moral judgment is a distinctive kind of judgment that always has certain features or properties, we might expect that such a judgment would *always* be made in the same way, or would *always* be the result of a distinct process or coordinated set of processes. However, if it turns out that what we call “moral judgment” is the result of varying combinations of disparate brain processes, we should be less confident in our conclusion that such judgments should always have the same features.¹⁹ If the judgments are arrived at in different ways, we might well expect those judgments to have different features or properties. The fact that we *call* two judgments “moral” does not mean that we will necessarily engage a categorically distinct system

or process to reach our final judgment. To put it even more directly: just because we label two judgments “moral”, it doesn’t necessarily follow that they are categorically identical.²⁰

Since Greene’s work, significantly more evidence has been adduced in favor of the position on which moral judgments do not appear to arise from a single system devoted to moral judgment formation at the level of brain processes. For example, Cushman and Young (2011) have found that our patterns of moral judgment can be attributed in part to regions of the brain responsible for the attribution of intentions and causation, general reasoning process that might be engaged in a variety of judgment types. They conclude that our moral judgments are “derived” from more general judgment forming processes (Cushman & Young, 2011, p. 1053). Borg et al. reach a similar conclusion, stating that when we judge an act to be “morally wrong” we are making use of brain regions that play “a general role [. . .] in encoding negative valence and avoiding aversive stimuli rather than a unique role in contributing to negative moral verdicts” (Borg et al., 2011, p. 408). Consider the variety of things that we might consider “aversive stimuli”: mosquitos, harsh noises, annoying colleagues, another meeting, a menacing figure in a dark alley. If all these things are judged as “negative” in a similar way, it is hard to see how we might mark out negative moral judgments as different in kind than these other judgments listed.

There is even evidence that positive and negative moral judgments are reached via separate neural systems in the brain (Borg et al., 2011, p. 409). If there are in fact separate systems for reaching positive and negative moral judgments, then this seems difficult to reconcile with the assumption that moral judgments are the result of a single, unified, process about which we can make meaningful generalizations.

In a review of recent neuroscientific literature on moral judgment, Young and Dungan concluded that “morality [relies] on domain general-processes which are housed in many parts of the brain . . . morality is virtually everywhere in the brain” (Young & Dungan, 2012, p. 1). Decety and Cowell reached a similar conclusion, stating there is “no unique center in the brain for moral judgment” (Decety & Cowell, 2014, pp. 528–529). Greene ultimately arrives at an identical conclusion, stating “I believe that moral cognition is not a natural kind at the cognitive level” (Greene, 2015b, p. 40). Although Greene favors a dual process account of moral judgment, this is ultimately because he appears to see the formation of all judgments as the result of one of two cognitive systems. He characterizes the brain as having an “automatic” and “manual” mode. “Automatic” responses are typically the result of emotion processes and “manual” responses are typically the result of effortful cognitive processes (what we usually characterize as “thinking”). Greene deploys this dual process account in his explanation of moral judgment, but it is important to stress that he sees this as a general

explanation of human judgment formation. Greene compares the brain to a digital SLR camera, which has two modes – automatic and manual. He then says:

The human brain has the same general design. First, we humans have a variety of automatic settings—reflexes and intuitions that guide our behavior, many of which are emotional Our brains also have a manual mode. It is a general purpose reasoning system, specialized for enabling behaviors that serve longer term goals . . . (2014, p. 696).

Greene sees the human brain as designed to engage in dual process reasoning about everything – it is not that he sees moral judgment as a special kind of judgment that engages two distinct cognitive processes. On this theory, as human beings we have fast, automatic responses, and slower, explicitly conscious reasoning processes. Moral judgment is merely one instance of this more general design.²¹

Let us consider a final bit of evidence. Jonathan Haidt argues for six moral foundations and associates them with characteristic emotions (Haidt, 2012). Other theorists have posited links between specific emotions and moral judgments (Graham et al., 2013) We might think this provides some grounds for a unifying basis for the moral judgment process, e.g., “moral judgments always involve (or are constituted by) these specific emotions x, y and z, and if a judgment is not rooted in one of these emotions, then it is not a moral judgment”.

First, it is important to note that Haidt, for example, does not *identify* moral judgments with specific emotions, and he does not suggest that other emotions could not play a role in moral judgment beyond the ones he focuses upon.²² More significantly, Cameron et al. (2015) raise doubts as to whether moral judgments can even be minimally linked to specific emotions as moral foundationalist views seem to suggest. (Cameron et al., 2015). The argument advanced by Cameron et al. is that we are culturally conditioned to conceptualize certain felt responses *as* specific emotions. That is, we interpret our bodily response to events as certain emotions, not that certain kinds of events or judgments *trigger* specific emotions. This is not to deny our lived experience of *feeling* different emotions types, but instead the constructionist position is that our emotions are composed of “domain-general ingredients” and a “combinatorial process that flexibly combines the same basic psychological elements into different mental states” (Cameron et al., 2015, p. 373). The basic idea behind the constructionist approach is this: just as conceptual knowledge affects how we interpret our visual experiences, so too does conceptual knowledge transform “core affect into a specific experience of emotion” (Cameron et al., 2015, p. 373). For example, when walking in a dark alley, our conceptual knowledge might lead us to interpret a plank leaning against a wall as another

human lurking in the shadows. Similarly, our conceptual knowledge affects our interpretation of our emotional experience: In the case of the dark alley, we interpret our felt bodily response as fear instead of anger in response to what we perceive as a shadowy figure. If Cameron et al. are right and there is no specific linkage between moral judgment and certain emotions or emotion processes, then that is one less way to distinguish moral judgment from other sorts of judgments.

The research considered here shows that there is likely no distinct brain area or distinct set of cognitive process that corresponds directly with what we would identify as “moral” judgments. Why should this be significant? Return to Hume’s dichotomy we began this section with: he wonders whether moral judgments are founded *entirely* on the sentiments or *entirely* on reason. Philosophers have traditionally assumed that these are quite different bases for moral judgment, and that if morality is founded entirely in the sentiments, then we would expect it to have some set of properties y. However, if morality is founded entirely in cognitive processes (reason), we expect it to have a different set of properties z. The evidence considered here indicates that moral judgments are the results of diverse brain areas: the judgments cannot be identified entirely with cognitive processes nor entirely with emotion processes in the brain. It could be that what we univocally refer to as “moral” judgments are sometimes the result of brain processes that have the set of properties y, and in other cases “moral” judgments are the result of brain processes that have the set of properties z.²³ If this is indeed a real possibility, we should have much greater hesitance about making sweeping generalizations about the nature of moral judgment.

Although there may well be other significant features of moral judgments we could call upon as evidence of their distinctiveness as a type of judgment,²⁴ if we put any stock in the idea that what typified moral judgments was that they were the result of a distinctive decision-making process(es) within the brain, then such a belief appears to be false. It now seems that what we call “moral” judgments are the result of a variety of brain areas that also play a role in the formation of what we previously would have classified as different kinds of judgments. The evidence considered suggests we should be leery of our ability to introspectively identify “types” or “kinds” of judgments.

But perhaps even the introspective data should have told us that moral judgments were likely not the result of a distinctive cognitive process: some moral judgments seem to be formed almost instantly as the result of merely perceiving certain events; other moral judgments seem to be the result of a lengthy deliberative process. Why think that such different processes leading to a result we refer to as “moral” judgment must necessarily have the same properties or features? Of course, they could – but what reason do we have to think that they actually do? To make meaningful, generalizable claims about moral judgments, we have to presuppose

that moral judgment constitutes a distinctive category that can be distinguished in some significant way from other judgment types. In the absence of such an identifiable, significant distinguishing feature, we should be hesitant about our ability to truly make such generalizations.

3. Implications for the internalist/externalist debate

In this section, we shall suppose, for the sake of the argument, that we have tentatively convinced the reader of the possibility that moral judgments do *not* form a distinctive category. That is, human beings form judgments (no one doubts that), but we have yet to show that there is a distinctively different sub-category of judgments called “moral”. After a thorough consideration of possible unifying features of moral judgment, Sinnott-Armstrong and Wheatley reach a similar conclusion (Sinnott-Armstrong et al., 2012). We acknowledge that there is much more work to be done, and that there is little reason to believe that the claim that moral judgments form a distinct category has been thoroughly *falsified*. But we do think that the arguments provided in the previous section throw into question whether it is at all sound to simply assume that moral judgments are distinctive judgment types; at the very least we believe we have given significant reasons to doubt that moral judgments are the result of a distinctive or dedicated cognitive process.

So, in the light of this proposition, in this section we shall consider the implications of rejecting the position on which moral judgments form a distinctive category for metaethical debates, namely, its implications for the so-called internalist/externalist debate. In this debate, *internalists* maintain that we cannot make a “real” moral judgment without being motivated to act on said judgments; that is, moral judgments motivate necessarily. *Externalists* believe that it is at least conceivable that a person could make a moral judgment without being motivated to act on said judgment.

The first thing we wish to note is that the neuroscientific findings discussed in the previous section seem to explain why there should be conflicting intuitions about that nature of moral judgment: the evidence indicates that moral judgments made in different contexts may well call on differing brain systems to render a verdict. Greene’s distinction between personal and impersonal moral judgments is both informative and revealing here. When confronted with an identifiable individual suffering directly in front of us, emotional areas of the brain are more likely to be triggered, and emotion has been traditionally linked with motivation to act within the psychological and philosophical communities²⁵; hence, it is intuitive to consider such judgments necessarily motivating. Unsurprisingly, most non-cognitivists are also internalists; that is, they maintain that moral judgments necessarily motivate.²⁶

On the other hand, consider the formation of what Greene refers to as an impersonal moral judgment. In such cases, we consider the plight of abstract or far off individuals that we have no direct contact with. His evidence indicates that when considering such situations, the judgments reached rely on emotions to a much lesser extent. If we accept the plausible claim that emotions generally provide motivation, it makes sense that such judgments would be felt as less motivating, or perhaps not consciously felt as motivating at all. Such judgments lend credence to the externalist position: that moral judgments can be rendered in the absence of motivation.

Greene's conclusions about the nature of personal and impersonal moral judgments likely ring true with anyone who has experience teaching Singer's (1972) "Famine, Affluence, and Morality" to undergraduate students. Faculty who have taught Singer's famous article have likely directly observed this "divided" moral judgment process first-hand. Students typically state that they would be highly motivated to help the drowning child right in front of them and quickly agree that it would be wrong not to (in our experience, it is not uncommon to have students suggest that non-helpers should be thrown in jail). Students also frequently judge that it is right to help the starving children of East Bengal after some discussion of Singer's argument; however, they typically don't show the slightest bit of motivation to actually act on their judgment, nor do they think non-helpers should be punished.²⁷ Why not?

Well, if it's true that different moral decision contexts will call upon different decision-making processes, it's because Singer is actually asking us to consider radically different moral contexts. In one, we are to imagine that the individual who needs help is *right in front of us*; in the other, the individuals we are to imagine who need help are far away, nameless, and faceless. If we suppose it's true that moral judgments are reached via diverse processes, then this difference in the resulting judgment shouldn't surprise us: the differences in the two hypothetical situations may cause us to form judgments via different processes. No matter how hard Singer tries to convince us that there are no morally relevant differences between the two cases, it may be that we can't help but reach different judgments about the two cases because (perhaps) we can't help but call upon different brain processes in our formation of a verdict in each case.

At this point, it may be helpful to seriously entertain the possibility that some reasoning processes may always motivate action when a judgment is reached, and others may not. If Borg et al. (2011) are right that we make use of differing functional areas of the brain to reach positive and negative moral judgments, then it could turn out that only negative moral judgments are motivating, while positive moral judgments, like judgments that we ought to help others, are simply not motivating or less motivating. If true, this would also explain the judgment patterns that Singer seeks to critique in his article: our judgments

concerning what it would be good to do may simply be less motivating than our judgments concerning acts that must be refrained from, which would explain why we are generally less inclined to engage in charitable behaviors or chastise those who fail to do so. We focus on punishing wrong-doing; we are generally less concerned with promoting right-doing. This set of dispositions may be the result of the fact that we reach judgments about moral wrong-doing and moral right-doing in different ways.

The evidence considered here should lead to suspicion of both the claims made in the *internalism vs. externalism* debate: that either “all moral judgments are motivating” or that “moral judgments are not necessarily linked with motivation”. Both claims presuppose that all moral judgments are categorically identical. It may well be that when we are directly involved with issues of personal harm, the resulting judgments are always motivating. But when passing judgments on situations far removed from us, we may typically be less motivated to act, or not motivated at all. If certain cognitive processes typically play a role in motivation to act while others do not, this would explain the basic dividing line on the sides of which the internalists and externalists align themselves. However, if what we refer to as moral judgments call on various cognitive processes, then this is an irresolvable debate: moral judgments fall on both sides of the line in question.

Of course, this is just one possibility. It could be that judgments of moral wrongness almost always strongly motivate, while judgments concerning moral rightness provide merely weak motivation because different brain and/or mental processes are involved in such judgments. Presumably, there are other possibilities as well. We should actively consider the possibility that the statements that we aim to make about moral judgments need to be much more fine-grained, as opposed to sweeping generalizations. If we fail to consider such possibilities, so it seems, then we aren’t fully committed to understanding the nature of human judgment.

4. Conclusion

The view on which moral judgment is a distinctive category is rarely explicitly argued for and seems to be taken for granted within the philosophical community.²⁸ The goal of this paper has been merely to communicate a moderate suspicion about the distinctiveness of the category of moral judgment and demonstrate that at least one debate within meta-ethics (to some degree) stands or falls on the basis of the assumption of distinctiveness. Rejecting this long-standing assumption would likely impact other metaethical debates – beyond the *internalism vs. externalism* debate – such as the cognitivist/non-cognitivist dispute. That is, perhaps in some contexts

judgments about rightness and wrongness do primarily express a kind of approval or disapproval, and in others moral judgments are more akin to statements of belief.

We want to conclude by indicating why we believe there is little reason to think that there is in fact some unifying or distinguishing feature of moral judgments to be found. Many philosophers have readily admitted that it is difficult to define what constitutes a moral issue.²⁹ If what counts as a moral judgment really is vague, then what we would want to do, it seems, is to find uncontroversial, or paradigm cases, of *rightness* and *wrongness* (e.g., theft or murder), investigate how people judge *those* cases, and then see if they engage in the same process when it comes to the more peripheral or controversial cases. In some sense, it is this first task that Greene pursued in his early studies (Greene et al., 2004, 2001). If anything constitutes a clear moral dilemma (among philosophers at least), it is a Trolley Problem. Yet even here he found that participants seemed to draw upon different brain regions and processes when rendering verdicts concerning clear moral cases. If paradigm cases of moral dilemmas do not yield clear results, it is hard to imagine that a specific, identifiable brain process (or pattern of processes) is consistently engaged when rendering judgment on the vast number of issues that might be considered moral.

Notes

1. In support of this interpretation, see, Sinnott-Armstrong et al. (2012); Sinnott-Armstrong & Wheatley (2014).
2. We owe this observation to Steven Stich. See his 2006.
3. For example, G.E. Moore (1903) held that moral judgments are true or false, but recognizing a moral truth was not like the recognition of other facts. He held that the moral goodness of something depended on “non-natural” facts. Mackie (1977) famously denied that there were any moral facts at all.
4. A large number of contemporary and near contemporary authors could be listed here as participants to these debates. For a start, see, Sayre-mccord (2014); Smith does a nice job of briefly covering the central debates within metaethics in section 1.2 of his (Smith, 1994).
5. Psychopaths are often used as a kind of counterexample to moral internalism because it is believed they can make moral judgments without being motivated. The following authors consider the possibility that psychopaths constitute real-life counterexamples to internalism: (Brink, 1986; Prinz, 2007); Kennett 2006, Matthews 2014, Maibom 2018, (Nichols, 2002, Sinnott-Armstrong & Wheatley, 2014; Smith, 1994).
6. For evidence and arguments that psychopaths are not in fact morally impaired, see, Aharoni et al. (2012), Borg and Sinnott-Armstrong (2013), Larsen et al. (2020), and Marshall et al. (2018).
7. Stich (2006) calls this the “elegant machine” view of morality. Kohlberg seemed to hold this view. As one example, in his (Kohlberg & Hersh, 1977) he says that studying moral development is “the analysis of developing *structures of moral judgment*, which are found to be universal in a developmental sequence across cultures” (p. 54, our

- emphasis). The study of the moral/conventional distinction also seems to presuppose that there is a significant distinction between the two judgment types to be studied. See for example, Nucci and Turiel (1978).
8. See C. Daryl (Cameron et al., 2015; Decety & Cowell, 2014; Greene, 2015a, 2015b; Cushman & Young, 2011; Schaich Borg et al., 2011; Young & Dungan, 2012)
 9. Sinnott-Armstrong et al. (2012); Sinnott-Armstrong & Wheatley (2014)) review a variety of potential unifying features for moral judgment and systematically reject them. They also consider possible implications of the rejecting the idea position that moral judgments form a natural kind of distinct class of judgments. Our argument here owes much to their work.
 10. Moral internalism may be interpreted as both a conceptual truth and an empirical one. For example, Smith (1994) defends a conceptual connection between moral judgment and motivation, while Brink (1986) argues that if it is even conceptually possible to unhook moral judgment and motivation, then the internalist thesis is defeated. Prinz (2007) Björnsson (2002) offer empirical arguments for internalism. Internalism has been defined in various ways; for an overview see, Smith (1994, chapter 3) and C.M. Korsgaard (1986).
 11. It is entirely possible to reject a position on which cognitive processes must be rooted in physical properties in some fashion. Although many in the field have taken such a position, for the sake of space we will not engage with such views here.
 12. See for example, Stangor and Walinga (2014, pp. 441–442); Prinz (2007, pp. 17–18).
 13. For an example, see, Shafer-Landau (2000, p. 271). Assuming that the externalist believes that beliefs must have some kind of material component.
 14. For a discussion of this point about the externalist's commitment to an essential nature of moral judgment, see, Sackris (2021).
 15. For example, C. M. Korsgaard (1998) and Cholbi (2009) argue that Kant misapplies his own theory to the case of the murderer at the door; Shue (1978) argues that there are no morally permissible grounds for allowing torture, but then ultimately concedes that in a ticking time bomb scenario torture might be permissible due to the sheer number of lives to be saved.
 16. We might interpret Mill himself as defending a deontological position in *On Liberty*, although of course he claims his position is based on utilitarianism construed in the broadest possible way.
 17. Or coordinated set of processes/faculties. For the sake of conciseness, we will use the phrase “process” or “faculty” with the intention of including the possibility that moral judgments are not made via a single brain process or faculty, but instead via some specific, coordinated set of processes or faculties.
 18. Greene relied on the Trolley problem and Footbridge problem as first discussed by Thomson (1976) and Foot (1967) as the basis of his impersonal and personal moral dilemmas.
 19. Barrett, Mesquita and Smith (2010) attribute a position like the one on which moral judgment is a monolithic entity with certain necessary features to what they call “essentialist” thinking. They identify two key problems with essentialist thinking: it creates the tendency to ignore context and it leads to naming phenomena with nouns instead of identifying them with processes. A greater attention to context and processes are exactly what we are calling for here.
 20. Kumar argues for the unity of moral judgment despite his recognition of the fact that moral judgments appear to result from disparate brain processes. To his credit, he admits that “One general challenge that proponents of theories [such as his own] is to show that while the constituents of moral judgment are multiple, moral judgment is

- nonetheless unified” (Kumar, 2016b, p. 793). Kumar’s attempt to unify moral judgment despite these challenges is quite similar to Hare’s (1981), which Kumar readily acknowledges. For a critique of Hare’s position, see, Sinnott-Armstrong and Wheatley (2014, pp. 464–465).
21. Peter Railton (2017) also argues that moral learning and moral judgment are merely instances of more general cognitive faculties and that moral judgment is not the result of distinct cognitive processes. Although Railton characterizes Greene as giving a dual processes account of moral judgment, he seems to (by our lights) misinterpret Greene as merely aiming to account for moral judgment. On our understanding, Greene is giving a dual-process account of general reasoning faculties. Whether dual process accounts are generally good accounts of our reasoning practices is not our main concern here. If our reading of Greene is correct (which later remarks from Green, such as his [Greene, 2015b] seem to confirm), Greene and Railton are actually in agreement that what we call “moral judgment” is the output of a generalized reasoning faculty and not a distinct cognitive system. See, also McHugh et al. (2021) where the authors theorize that moral judgment is merely an instance of the general (learned) human ability to categorize things.
 22. See especially Chapters 6, 7 of his (2012).
 23. And, of course, there could be more. We don’t suppose that there are only two bases for what we refer to as “moral” judgments. We imagine that the bases are multiple.
 24. See, Hare (1981); Kumar (2015)
 25. For example, Stangor and Walinga define emotion as “a mental and physiological feeling state that directs our attention and guides our behavior” (Stangor & Walinga, 2014, p. 442) in their *Introduction to Psychology*. The modern sentimentalist tradition within philosophy can be traced back to the 17th and 18th century British Empiricists such as Earl of Shaftesbury, Francis Hutcheson, Thomas Reid, Adam Smith, David Hume, etc (Driver, 2013). For contemporary advocates, see, (Blackburn, 1998; Greene, 2013; Haidt, 2012; Prinz, 2007; Slote, 2010).
 26. Prinz, for example, states: “If moral judgments contain moral concepts, and moral judgments have an emotional composition, then moral judgments motivate action, because emotions are motivational states. [Sentimentalism] entails internalism . . . ” (Prinz, 2007, p. 102). It’s not that simple of course – not all sentimentalist positions commit themselves to internalism. For example, Nichols (2004) view is slightly different from Prinz’s in that he sees morality as founded in rules, and those rules are rooted in human emotion. Slote’s (2010) sentimentalist account seemingly commits him to internalism in a similar fashion to the way that Prinz’s account does.
 27. King (2018, p. 635) also makes the latter observation about her students and their reading of “Famine Affluence and Morality”. Greene discusses student responses to “Famine, Affluence, and Morality”, however he reaches a different conclusion. He believes his theory explains why readers typically *don’t* judge that they ought to help the children of East Bengal (Greene, 2008, pp. 47–48). In my experience, however, and the experience of King (2018), after some discussion students do typically say that such individuals ought to be helped. Regardless of this difference in perception, what is significant here is that even when students do agree that it would be morally right to help such individuals, they almost never act on such judgments. For a discussion of internalism/externalism as it directly relates to Singer’s work, see, Sackris (2021).
 28. Kumar (2015, 2016a, 2016b) is a notable exception.
 29. Flanagan highlights the difficulty of defining morality and states “ethical relevance may turn up in unexpected places, and no beliefs or domains of life can be deemed ethically irrelevant a priori” (Flanagan, 1993, p. 17). Shafer-Landau (201500) does not

believe “morality” can be defined, which would seem to imply that “moral judgment” is similarly undefinable. See his “Introduction”. Richardson (2018), in his *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on moral reasoning states “[W]e will need to have a capacious understanding of what counts as a moral question. For instance, since a prominent position about moral reasoning is that the relevant considerations are not codifiable, we would beg a central question if we here defined ‘morality’ as involving codifiable principles or rules”. Svavarsdottir admits that “it is of course notoriously difficult to say what distinguishes moral judgments from other evaluative or normative judgments” (Rozin et al., 1999, footnote 6). Dreier states “we should just admit that it may be vague whether a given judgment is moral or not” (Dreier, 1996, p. 411, n. 419).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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