

PHIL 480: Seminar in the History of Philosophy
Building Moral Character: Neo-Confucianism and Moral Psychology

Spring 2013

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[Handout #13]

Joshua Greene, “The Secret Joke of Kant’s Soul”

§ Main Theses

1. **Deontological judgments tend to be driven by emotional responses, and deontological philosophy, rather than being grounded in moral reasoning, is to a large extent an exercise in moral rationalization.**
2. **On the other hand, consequentialism arises from rather different psychological processes, ones that are more “cognitive,” and more likely to involve genuine moral reasoning.**
3. **Therefore, deontology as a normative theory is in doubt.**

§ Background Support

1. There is a substantial and growing body of evidence suggesting that much of what we do, we do unconsciously, and for reasons that are inaccessible to us.
2. Some people, some of the time, may actually reason their way to moral conclusions, but this is not the norm.

§ Kant’s View

Kant notoriously claimed that an action performed merely out of sympathy and not out of an appreciation of one’s duty lacks moral worth (Kant, 1785/1959, chap. 1; Korsgaard, 1996a, chap. 2).

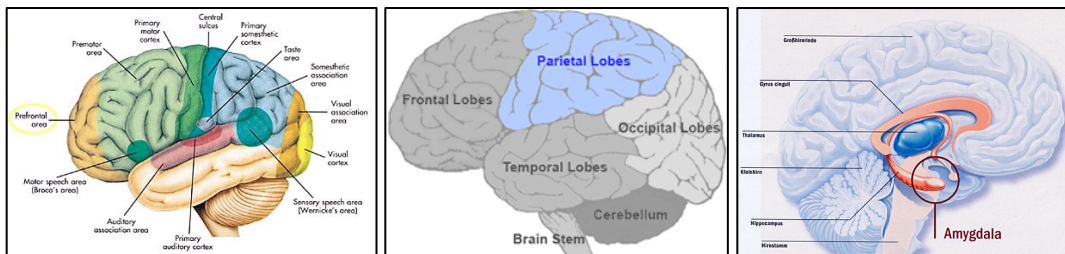
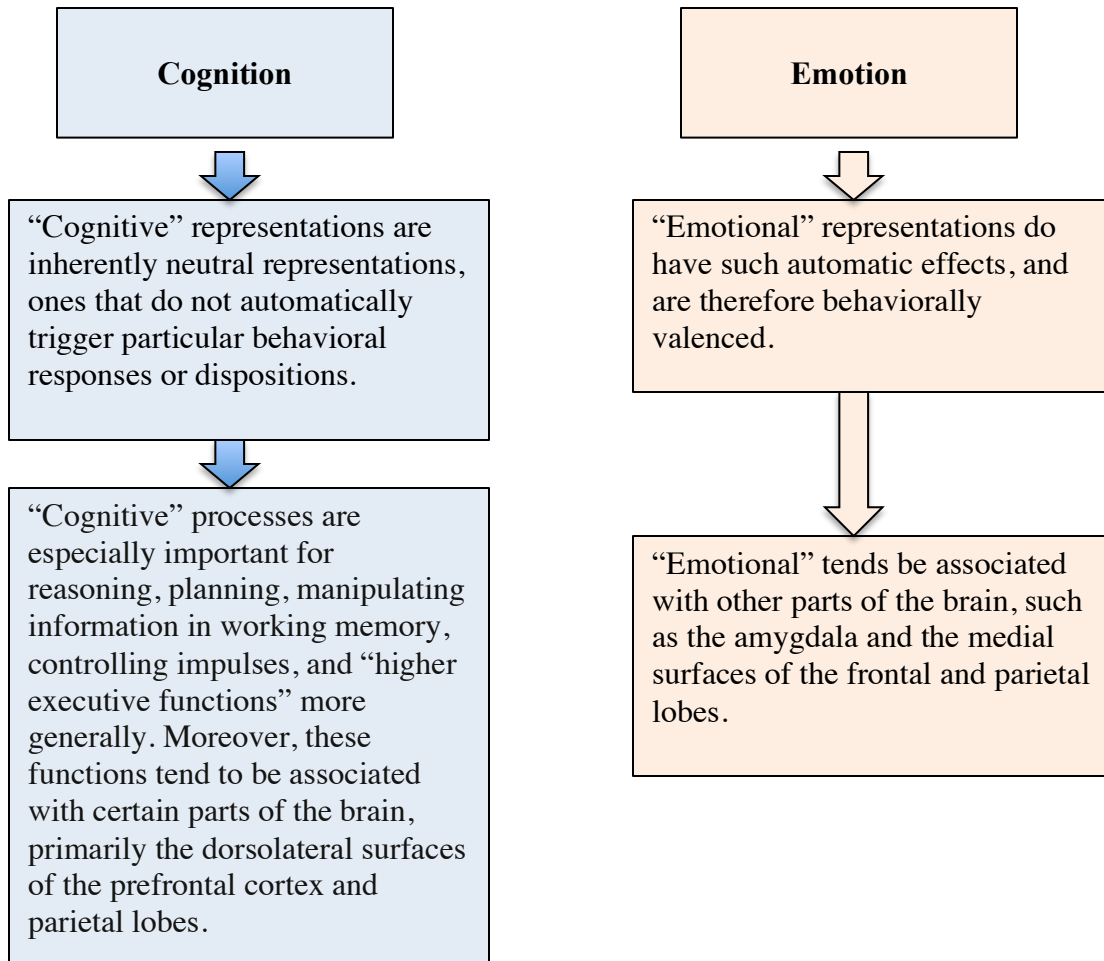
Refutation: But all deontological judgments are prompted by emotional responses.

§ Greene’s Master Argument

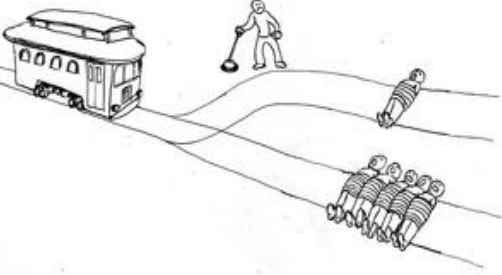

1. **Assumption #1:** the terms “deontology” and “consequentialism” refer to psychological natural kinds.
2. **Assumption #2:** Consequentialist and deontological views of philosophy are actually two different ways of moral thinking that have been part of human repertoire.
3. **Empirical Test:** If it turns out that characteristically deontological judgments are driven by emotion (an empirical possibility), then that raises the possibility that deontological philosophy is also driven by emotion (a further empirical possibility).

4. **Final Conclusion:** Deontological moral philosophy is essentially an attempt to produce rational justifications for emotionally driven moral judgments, and not an attempt to reach moral conclusions on the basis of moral reasoning.

§ Cognition versus Emotion



§ Scientific Evidence from Neuroimaging with the *Trolley* and *Footbridge* Thought Experiments

| | |
|--|---|
|  |  |
| <p>The Trolley Case: Is it okay to turn the trolley in order to save five people at the expense of one?</p> | <p>The Footbridge Case: Is it okay to save the five people by pushing a fat man off the footbridge to his death?</p> |
| <p>Consensus: it is morally acceptable to save five lives at the expense of one in this case.</p> | <p>Consensus: it is <i>not</i> okay to save five lives at the expense of one.</p> |
| <p>Impersonal → cost and benefit analysis</p> | <p>personal → up close and personal violence</p> |
| <p>consequentialist judgment</p> | <p>deontological judgment</p> |

Hypothesis:

__ We hypothesized that the thought of pushing someone to his death in an “up close and personal” manner (as in the footbridge dilemma) is more emotionally salient than the thought of bringing about similar consequences in a more impersonal way (e.g., by hitting a switch, as in the trolley dilemma).

__ We proposed that people tend toward consequentialism in the case in which the emotional response is low and tend toward deontology in the case in which the emotional response is high.

Results:

__ Contemplation of personal moral 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” brain areas, the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex and inferior parietal lobe.

Q: What does the study prove?

• The Crying Baby Dilemma:

__ It is wartime, and you and some of your fellow villagers are hiding from enemy soldiers in a basement. Your baby starts to cry, and you cover your baby’s mouth to block the sound. If you remove your hand, your baby will cry loudly, the soldiers will hear, and they will find you and the others and kill everyone they find, including you and your baby. If you do not remove your hand, your baby will smother to death. Is it okay to smother your baby to death in order to save yourself and the other villagers?

Hypothesis:

__ When people say “yes” to such cases (the consequentialist answer), it is because the “cognitive” cost-benefit analysis has successfully dominated the pre-potent emotional response that drives people to say “no” (the deontological answer).

__ If that is correct, then we should expect to see increased activity in the previously identified “cognitive” brain regions (the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex and inferior parietal cortex) for the trials in which people say “yes” in response to cases like crying baby.

Results:

__ People exhibit more “cognitive” activity when they give the consequentialist answer.

§ Greene on Deontology, Consequentialism and Emotion**1. We humans are creatures of confabulations:**

__ We respond to the conscious deliverances of our unconscious perceptual, mnemonic, and emotional processes by fashioning them into a rationally sensible narrative, and without any awareness that we are doing so.

2. Deontology is a kind of moral confabulation:

__ We have strong feelings that tell us in clear and uncertain terms that some things simply cannot be done and that other things simply must be done. But it is not obvious how to make sense of these feelings, and so we, with the help of some especially creative philosophers, make up a rationally appealing story: There are these things called “rights” which people have, and when someone has a right you can’t do anything that would take it away.

3. Consequentialist moral judgment is not driven by emotion, or at least it is not driven by the sort of “alarm bell” emotion that drives deontological judgment.

__ I am not claiming that consequentialist judgment is emotionless. It is a weighing process and not an “alarm” process. The sorts of emotions hypothesized to be involved here say, “Such-and-such matters this much. Factor it in.”

4. Deontological judgment is an alarm signal.

__ In contrast, the emotions hypothesized to drive deontological judgment are far less subtle. They are alarm signals that issue simple commands: “Don’t do it!” or “Must do it!”

§ Conclusion:

Deontological judgment is affective at its core, while consequentialist judgment is inescapably “cognitive.”