

Morality with an Accent

ABSTRACT: In this paper, the difficulties inherent in the debate between moral nativists and antinativists, who differ in their beliefs on the nature of systems of morality, are shown to exemplify the need for philosophers to support their views with empirical data. Furthermore, it proposes that an empirical study of first-generation immigrant populations has the potential to resolve the debate over moral nativism, as it would allow researchers to observe the moral “critical period.” Based on the recent philosophical advances made through experimental evidence, this paper goes on to argue that empirical data is a valuable source of information from which philosophers ought to draw.



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Imagine a woman’s husband was injured in a motorcycle accident and became paralyzed from the waist down. The wife found that many of her expectations of marriage were disappointed. For the rest of his life, her husband would require a lot of care and would be depressed and inactive. But even though the wife felt very unfulfilled by her marriage, she decided not to leave him because she felt that if she did, his life would be even worse.

The reader’s heart goes out to the wife in

this story, neglecting her own physical and emotional needs out of a sense of obligation. These feelings just come naturally, provided the reader is American. To an Indian reader, however, it is obvious that the wife is a contented woman, exhibiting admirable self control, and quite satisfied by fulfilling her duty to her husband under trying circumstances.¹

Unlike philosophers, psychologists and sociologists have been documenting variability in moral values between cultures for decades. Philosophers have recently begun to review

1. Miller, J. G., & Bersoff, D. M. (1995). "Development in the context of everyday family relationships: Culture, interpersonal morality, and adaptation." In M. Killen & D. Hart (Eds.), *Morality in everyday life: Developmental perspectives* (pp. 259-282). New York: Cambridge University Press.



the results of these studies in hopes of gaining valuable insight into the nature of morality. As they have done so, many have found the information valuable and have gone on to perform experiments of their own. When combined with rational arguments, psychological experimentation provides philosophers a powerful new tool with the ability to resolve many long standing debates in ethics.

One issue to which philosophers have applied experimental methods regards the development of morality. It has long been assumed that children gain the ability to think and behave ethically through experience and exposure to cultural norms. More recently, some philosophers have argued that morality is “native” or innate to mankind, programmed into the human brain.

Experimental philosophy is particularly well suited to provide a solution to the debate over moral nativism. This paper will briefly summarize the recent history of the debate over nativism, with a focus on the transfer of the theory from linguistics to ethics. Relevant experimental studies and results contributing to the debate in ethics will be summarized. Finally, a new experiment with the potential to end the nativist/antinativist debate will be proposed.

Developments in Linguistics

Contemporary moral nativism grows out of a movement in linguistics which began with the work done by Dr. Noam Chomsky in the 1950’s. Chomsky made several observations about child development and linguistic

capability, the combination of which is an argument for nativism. The first is that if language is learned like other skills, using general learning capabilities, then children would require examples of incorrect grammar, known as negative evidence, in addition to correct speech to acquire command of a language. Chomsky’s second observation is that children only receive examples of correct language usage in their daily encounters. The third is that children learn languages. Thus children must not learn language using generalized learning capabilities. Rather, Chomsky proposed that there is a “Universal Grammar,” or set of grammatical principles, universal to all languages and innate to mankind, without which language acquisition would be impossible.²

Further research by proponents of nativist theory has led to the conclusion that there is a critical period for language acquisition. During that time, generally believed to be the first few years of life, a person develops language skills with relative ease when exposed to appropriate stimuli. If, however, the child has no exposure to language during this period, they will never be able to develop a command of language, despite later exposure.³

Antinativist theories reject Chomsky’s account, regarding language acquisition to be the result of more general cognitive processes, rather than that of an otherwise inaccessible system devoted exclusively to language acquisition. There are a variety of theories which fall into this category. Antinativist scholars have made great effort to discredit Chomsky and post-Chomsky

theories of language acquisition either by *a priori* reasoning or by drawing on experimental evidence to negate Chomsky’s claims. Much of the work has focused on discrediting the premise that children do not receive negative evidence. Pullum, for example, argues that negative evidence is plentiful and learning is possible without the need for a system devoted to language acquisition.⁴

Application to Morality

The rapid progress in linguistics due to the work of Chomsky did not go unnoticed by those in other disciplines. In the field of ethics, Chomsky’s theory was seized upon and adapted in support of moral nativism. Three scholars working independently applied Chomsky’s general approach in linguistics to the field of morality. Gilbert Harman,⁵ Susan Dwyer,⁶ and John Mikhail⁷ all proposed that perhaps morality, like language, is acquired through some innate universal system. Like Chomsky, these academics proposed that, rather than guiding us towards a specific moral code, the “Universal Moral Grammar” provides the mental framework upon which a variety of ethical theories may be built.

For those who believe that there is a biological cause for the development of moral thought,

Chomsky’s concept of innate morality solves many problems. For example, the existence of variation is difficult to explain if morality is determined biologically. Part of the great appeal of using the “linguistic analogy,” as it came to be known, is the ability of a “Universal Moral Grammar” to explain the great variation in morals between cultures while still asserting a universal biological basis.⁶

Since moral nativism posits a complex biological system with the purpose of enabling moral thought, attempts must be made both to provide a mechanism by which such a system would have evolved, as well as to prove the current existence of such a system. Tracing the biological evolution of a moral system through generations of proto-humans to the present day is impossible, so attempts to provide an evolutionary mechanism for a moral system is often presented on theoretical grounds. Such defenses attempt to provide reason to believe that the ability to moralize would be favorable to reproduction and thus evolutionarily selected. Many defenses of this type use game theory to show that in situations that parallel those faced in everyday life, the ability to moralize provides some stable, long-term strategic advantage.⁸

Antinativists are understandably suspicious of such schemes. They argue that the mere

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 3. Lenneberg, Eric, (1964). "The Capacity of Language Acquisition." In Fodor, Jerry and Jerrold Katz, (Eds.), *The Structure of Language*. Prentice Hall.

4. Pullum, Geoffrey K. (1996). "Learnability, hyperlearning, and the poverty of the stimulus." In J. Johnson, M.L. Juge, and J.L. Moxley (Eds.) *Proceedings of the 22nd Annual Meeting of the Berkley Linguistics Society: General Session and Parasession on the Role of Learnability in Grammatical Theory*, 498-513. Berkeley, California.
 5. Harman, G. (1999). "Moral philosophy and linguistics." In K. Brinkmann (Ed.), *Proceedings of the 20th World Congress of Philosophy: Volume 1: Ethics*. Philosophy Documentation Center, 107-115. Reprinted in *Explaining Value*, Oxford University Press.
 6. Dwyer, S. (1999). Moral competence. In K. Murasugi and R. Stainton (Eds.), *Philosophy and Linguistics*. Westview Press.
 7. Mikhail, J., Sorrentino, C., and Spelke, E. (1998). "Toward a universal moral grammar." In M. Gernsbacher and S. Derry, (Eds.), *Proceedings, Twentieth Annual Conference of the Cognitive Science Society*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.
 8. Sripada, Chandra Sekhar (2005). *Punishment and the strategic structure of moral systems Biology and Philosophy* 20:767–789



possibility of advantage in the context of a simple game does not imply the reality of the biological evolution of morality. Rather, they have attempted to provide explanations of how mankind could have evolved to its present condition without the need for a complex biological moral system.⁹

Along with Chomsky's theory, nativists also adopted some of his methodology, relying on empirical data to confound antinativists. Many empirical studies performed by nativists show results which are difficult to explain under existing alternate theories. One such study used a test known as the Wason selection task. Subjects are told that if a card shows an even number on one face, its opposite face should have a primary color. They are then asked to choose which of four cards (showing 3, 8, red, and brown) must be turned over to verify that the rule is being followed. Few subjects are able to successfully solve this logic puzzle; however, when the same problem is presented in a social context, such as checking identification at a bar, and the cards replaced with people and drinks, nearly all subjects are able to solve the puzzle. This result seems to indicate that there is some biological system whose task it is to deal with situations of social interaction.¹⁰

Some nativists have extended the linguistic analogy so far as to posit a critical period for the acquisition of morality. During this stage, the mind would be specially equipped to absorb ethical principles. Finding such a period hardwired into our biology would provide strong evidence in favor of moral nativism. Of course, the existence of such a period is hotly

contested; however, at least one major world culture firmly believes in its existence.

The Chinese government embraces moral nativism. The current Chinese educational system, in fact, depends on its existence. They define the moral critical period to be "a period of time that fosters developing fine traits of moral character or a period of time, in which moral character may proceed in the most positive direction and gain best achievements, resulting from good educational conditions." For Chinese children, this age has been determined to be between seven and nine years old. During this period, Chinese educators focus on instilling "positive" moral values into their pupils so that they will exhibit desired behaviors automatically as they mature.¹¹

While the Chinese themselves draw short of claiming that the effects of moral indoctrination during the critical period are permanent, or at least nearly so, this is clearly the purpose of devoting valuable educational resources to moral education during this period. Indeed, it is the effectiveness of training during this period which distinguishes it as a developmental stage. Beyond this, the linguistic analogy would indicate that training during the critical period for morality would be difficult to modify or overcome.

Moving Forward

It should be clear from the preceding discussion that empirical data can and does have an important role to play in philosophy. Although the general focus of ethics is to

provide an account of how things ought to be, much is to be gained by understanding how things actually are. Particularly in the debate over moral nativism, in which the psychological nature of human beings is the topic of debate, information about the way the mind works is of immeasurable worth. With this in mind, the nativist/antinativist debate may be more easily resolved than previously imagined.

Certain subgroups of the population, many first-generation immigrants for example, are in the unusual position of being raised with one set of values and then living their adult lives in a society holding a completely different set of values. This situation allows the existence of a moral critical period to be experimentally tested. Very different predictions will be made about the intuition of immigrants depending on the existence of the moral critical period.

Let us for the moment assume that no critical period exists. After leaving their home country, first-generation immigrants will be exposed to all sorts of new ideas and moral views in their new homes. After living in the host society for some time, having the opportunity to reflect on their experiences, immigrants should come to adopt many of the views of their new culture. One would expect the change in their moral attitudes to be positively correlated with the amount of time spent in their host country.

Now let us imagine that the linguistic analogy holds and morality is innate. Immigrants who left their home country as young children, before the linguistic critical period has passed, speak the language of their host country without any trace of an accent. As the age at which an

individual immigrates increases, however, so does the strength of the individual's accent. In much the same way, one would expect the presence or absence of a "moral accent" reminiscent of the immigrant's home country to be highly correlated with the age at which the individual immigrated. Thus, those who immigrate at younger ages would be expected to be much more acculturated to the new society's values than older immigrants, regardless of the length of time spent in the host country.

An experiment could be designed using the vignette from the beginning of this paper. Indian and American subjects, as previously noted, responded differently to the story.¹² These differences are broadly reflective of differences in cultural norms between these two societies. Americans value personal freedom and personal satisfaction, while Indians have a greater appreciation of duty and familial loyalty. What, then, of Indian-American immigrants? Confirming or refuting the existence of a moral critical period may be as simple as repeating Miller and Bersoff's experiment among the Indian-American immigrant community.

For clarification, it is useful to consider a scenario in which an Indian family leaves its native country and they become American immigrants. If there is a moral critical period, then those family members who have passed this stage when they leave their home country will continue to reflect the values of their native culture, while the younger generation will adopt typically American values. Speaking in the mode of the linguistic analogy, the older generation will retain a "moral accent" typical of Indians

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11. Shao Jing-jin, Xing Xiu-fang, Zeng Xin-ran (2006). *On the critical period of Chinese pupils' moral development: Retrospect and prospect*. *Frontiers of Education in China* 3: 462-473.

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Conclusions

Innovative researchers in various fields have contributed greatly to the field of ethics. The debate over nativism sparked by Chomsky and later applied to morality is one example of the value to philosophy of drawing from other disciplines. As has been shown in this article, evidence both for and against moral nativist theory is strong, advanced in large part by

appeal to the results of experimental studies.

I argue that this new technique, namely dependence on empirical data, is a fruitful direction for philosophical inquiry. The study proposed in this paper has the potential to solve a philosophical puzzle irresolvable by *a priori* reasoning alone. By expanding their arsenal beyond abstract reasoning to include experimentation, philosophers are able to approach difficult problems from interesting new angles, often finding solutions to age-old debates. ♦