

SMASH Workshop: The cognitive bases of moral diversity

Organized in the frames of SMASH PRO, an interdisciplinary PhD training and research program at CEU, this series of seminars explores the cognitive bases of moral diversity.

It is very tempting to believe that humans have universal moral dispositions that allow the unique type of cooperation we see in our species. Indeed, psychologists have put forth hypotheses about human specific psychological mechanisms that would account for moral choices and judgments. Yet, these universalist hypotheses about moral judgements and choices seem to fall short of explaining their cultural variability. Social anthropologists, on the other hand, have provided evidence about the socio-cultural embeddedness of moral judgments and choices and their diversity. In fact, the cultural variability of moral judgements and choices constitutes an important challenge to the universalist claims. Are there, nonetheless, some psychological foundations of moral judgments and choices that are shared among all humans? Can these foundations help explain not just the commonality, but also the diversity of moral judgments and choices? The claims of psychologists looking for the universal psychological traits and those of social anthropologists emphasizing diversity can be made compatible through several theoretical avenues. Which are they, what evidence supports them and what criticisms do they face?? To what extent does culture modulate otherwise universal intuitions? Are these intuitions in fact the product of socialisation and cultural transmission? In other words, how do psychological mechanisms and cultural factors come into play in determining moral choices?

We will investigate the above questions focusing on three themes:

1. Moral reasoning and social inequality
2. Social conventions and moral norms
3. Cultural transmission of moral dispositions

These themes will be addressed in 3 connected seminars, with 3 speakers for each session and a panel of discussants. Each session will be held on one afternoon of the week, with an online discussion forum to string them together. Proposed dates: **September 24, October 1 and October 8.**

Organizers:

Christophe Heintz, Cognitive Science

Vlad Naumescu, Sociology and Social Anthropology

Angarika Deb, Tamara Kusimova, Pooja Venkatesh (SMASH PhD students)

Seminar 1. Moral reasoning and social inequality

Moral judgments are shaped by moral values and intuitions, but are also constrained by the type of justifications one can provide. The latter will, in turn, be dependent on common ground, institutions, past discourses and traditions. What can the analysis of moral judgements tell us about the factors that shape moral attitudes towards inequality? How do people perceive (in)equality and how is this perception shaped by social institutions, socio-economic background and in-group and out-group comparison? Which discourses about distributions of costs and benefits are culturally successful and why? How do discourses in turn motivate actual choices?

How moral is inequality?

Daniel Nettle, Newcastle University

Humans have been described as naturally egalitarian, and averse to inequality. On the other hand, people also subscribe to ethics of deservingness: those who make more effort should take more reward. These conflicting intuitions collide in the arena of redistribution. I will review recent psychological work showing that the extent to which people think it is moral to reduce inequality through redistribution varies by situation. It is viewed as most justifiable amongst people who get what they have largely through chance; who are homogeneous in the right way; and who face external threats. Cross-national differences and temporal trends in support for redistribution reflect changes in some of these appraisals.

Building ‘Community’, Building ‘The State’: Moralities of Cooperation in Amazonia

Harry Walker, LSE

Beginning in the latter half of the twentieth century, the indigenous peoples of the upper Amazon have embarked on a striking transition from a relatively mobile, dispersed mode of existence in small, autarkic kin-based groups, to a more sedentary lifestyle in stable, legally recognised “communities” requiring more intensive forms of cooperation with ever more distant kin and, increasingly, non-kin. This may be understood as the result of a process of state expansion, involving various forms of coercion and persuasion as well as genuine desire for change on the part of indigenous peoples themselves. My aim in this paper is to use this as a case study for examining empirically some of the assumptions and predictions of the interdisciplinary literature on cooperation, including approaches in evolutionary psychology, culture-gene coevolution, and collective action, which variously draw attention to the importance of individual reputation; shared norms of fairness; institutions (including markets and world religion); the punishment of

non-cooperators; and cultural conceptions of the transparent rational individual. As well as ethnography based on long-term participant observation among the Peruvian Urarina, the analysis draws on an experiment designed to test how peoples' moral judgements might correlate with their degree of integration into markets and the state. While the formal results were inconclusive, the experience of carrying out the experiment, in conjunction with the qualitative data collected, called into question the premise of a straightforward trajectory of integration, or evolution of cooperation. Moreover, the key social factors that appear to influence peoples' moral reasoning in significant ways in this context included dominant conceptions of the nature of wealth; forms of leadership and public accountability; gender and age differentials; and historical experiences of collective action.

Cultural Narratives of Inequality and Responsibility among Russian Youth

Tamara Kusimova, CEU

Russia is known for its high levels of inequality: its Gini index is around 0,4 (like in the U.S.), and the richest 10% account for 83% of all personal wealth (higher than the U.S. and China). Beyond the apparent drawbacks of slowing economic growth this level of inequality affects opportunities for upward social mobility, an issue that is much more tangible in everyday life. Education is one of the most important channels of upward social mobility, but according to current research, education and one's life trajectory depend mainly on the family's socio-economic status. Despite numerous studies of monetary inequality in contemporary Russia, only a few focus on subjective perceptions of inequality and the moral reasoning behind it. The study I will present is a qualitative research of young people with underprivileged backgrounds (usually an intersection of low-income families from a small town or village) that entered top tier universities and moved to Moscow. These are rare cases of upward social mobility through education that presumably allow respondents to grasp the differences between two contrasting socio-economic contexts and articulate their views on the forms of inequality they encounter on their own terms. My presentation will address the following questions: 1) what factors justify their moral attitudes to socio-economic inequality 2) to which extent inequality can be morally justifiable? 3) what constitutes morally "good" and "bad" ways to succeed in life?

Discussant: Radu Umbres, NSPSA Bucharest

Seminar 2. Social conventions vs. moral norms

This seminar investigates the relation between social conventions and moral norms. How are the two related and where do they differ? Conventions are especially fruitful for solving coordination problems. For instance, 'drive on the right' is a convention that enables coordinated driving. These conventions however, are tainted with moral concerns and attitudes. People not following certain rules are condemned and punished. In particular, rules enabling successful coordination are likely to gain a moral valence. How likely are the first to become the second? Can the arbitrariness of conventions account for the diversity of moral norms? The stronger proposal here would be that norms have their origins and bases in moral intuitions.

Morality as Cooperation: The new science of right and wrong

Oliver Curry, Oxford University

What is morality? How many moral values are there? And what are they? According to the theory of morality-as-cooperation, morality is a collection of biological and cultural solutions to the problems of cooperation recurrent in human social life. This theory predicts that there will be as many different types of morality as there are different types of cooperation. Previous research, drawing on evolutionary game theory, has identified at least seven different types of cooperation, and used them to explain seven different types of morality: family values, group loyalty, reciprocity, heroism, deference, fairness and property rights. Here we explore the conjecture that these simple moral 'elements' combine to form a much larger number of more complex moral 'molecules', and that as such morality is a combinatorial system. For each combination of two elements, we hypothesise a candidate moral molecule, and successfully locate an example of it in the professional and popular literature. These molecules include: fraternity, blood revenge, family pride, filial piety, gavelkind, primogeniture, friendship, patriotism, tribute, diplomacy, common ownership, honour, confession, turn taking, restitution, modesty, mercy, munificence, arbitration, mendicancy, and queuing. These findings indicate that morality – like many other physical, biological, psychological and cultural systems – is indeed a combinatorial system. Thus morality-as-cooperation provides a principled and powerful theory that explains why there are many moral values, and successfully predicts what they will be; and it generates a systematic framework that has the potential to explain all moral ideas, possible and actual. Pursuing the many implications of this theory will help to place the study of morality on a more secure scientific footing.

Modeling Minimal Conditions for Social Ills

Cailin O'Connor, UCI

There have been many worries within philosophy about the epistemic role of simplified mathematical models such as those used in economics and the other social sciences. In particular, many have wondered how and whether such models can illuminate complex phenomena related to human societies. This paper will discuss a class of idealized models that outline what I call “minimal conditions for social ills”. But are such models useful to thinking about these complex factors? And, if so, how? Some such models will track actual causal factors that generate real world problems. Others may or may not. Whether or not these models do track these real-world factors is irrelevant to the role they play in showing that

minimal, realistic factors are enough to generate social problems. In doing this they provide important counterfactual information. Investigations of social ills are often aimed at interventions to stop them. Given this it is important to know: if we intervene on the current causes of some social problem, what other common social factors might continue to contribute to it? I consider a case study using models of the emergence of inequity between social identity groups, and also consider what other models might fall under this heading.

Unpacking what goes on in-house: Fairness in division of household labour

Angarika Deb, CEU

Is the ‘sense of fairness’ a culturally-determined norm, providing conventions for large-scale coordination? Or is it a dynamic evaluation of inputs and payoffs, maximising the expected utility of individuals? Most likely, it is a complex cognitive model, involving both. I explore the ‘sense of fairness’ in the specific case of gendered division of household labour. Current literature is split on the relative importance of pre-existing norms and conventions that facilitate coordination and the role of individual bargaining for bringing about a ‘sense of fairness’. The case of gendered division of household labour provides us a unique case study for understanding the relation between both. Couples engage in regular interactions, bargaining and conversations, have dynamic cooperative relations, while being deeply embedded in the cultural setting of social and family lives. In my talk, I discuss these competing views and how they scaffold and influence each other to bring about successful coordination within households.

Discussant: Clark Barrett, UCLA

Seminar 3. The cultural transmission of moral dispositions

There are diverse means through which morality is conveyed, taught and eventually become culturally stable. In particular, expressing moral standards might not be primarily a verbal practice but taught through peripheral participation and ostensive behavior. In foregrounding this modality of transmission reliant on participation in intricate traditions of practice, this seminar seeks to highlight the interplay between bodily training and the moral dispositions cultivated in the acquisition of expert knowledge. What role do evolved intuitions play in the transmission of moral dispositions? How do the constraints of post- facto justifications mediate the development of moral intuitions?

Teaching children how to behave morally, without them knowing that they are doing so

Rita Astuti, LSE

In Betania, a fishing village in Madagascar, children are described as “animals / non humans” (biby). They don't have wisdom yet and are therefore not capable of much understanding. For this reason, they are not considered to be morally accountable, e.g. vis-à-vis the ancestors, nor are they thought to be capable of feeling shame, e.g. of exposing their genitals to siblings of the opposite gender. Despite all of this, adults are keen to instil certain behaviours in their children, even if they admit that the moral valence of these behaviours is lost to them. In this paper, I will start from this observation to then reflect on the implications of this way of teaching to become a moral person.

Learning not to help

Anni Kajanus, Helsinki University

Helping as a form of cooperation involves acts that are, by definition, primarily driven by other-regarding, even altruistic, motivations, rather than by mutual benefit or interests of the helper. How do people make decisions about helping, and importantly, not helping others? This paper looks at the developmental trajectories of helping among schoolchildren in China and the UK, and the intuitions and learned conventions that play a role in the moral judgements about helping. I will focus on emotions, such as empathy, moral righteousness, guilt and fear, that are part of helping; and the processes of cultural learning that feed into both, the ‘automatic’ process of moral emotions, and the more flexible, ‘manual’ mode of moral reasoning (Greene 2013). The findings of developmental psychology suggest a trajectory of helping that progressively moves from relative impartiality toward increasing partiality. A large body of experimental work has shown that from around their first birthday – when they begin to walk and talk – children are already helpful in many situations. They

do not learn this from adults; it comes naturally. However, later in ontogeny this relatively indiscriminate helpfulness becomes mediated by such influences as judgements of likely reciprocity and the degree of shared cultural values and norms. While children start to increasingly pay attention to shared cultural norms, they also come to navigate the complexity of partial and impartial ethics of helping in everyday life. For example, in a school environment a general moral value of being helpful is emphasized, but at the same time, children must learn the complicated rules about when someone deserves and does not deserve to be helped, which can significantly differ from their own ideas about helping.

Risk isn't bedlam: The pedagogy of an intuitive anubhava among traditional healers
Pooja Venkatesh, CEU

Paramparika vaidyas, or traditional healers of plant based and Ayurvedic medicine, in Davangere, Karnatak, lay emphasis on “practice as different from theory (of medicines)” and the cultivation of personal shorthands of intricate and detailed recipes. These shorthands are signature/ intuitive to each vaidya’s practice; such conceptions of anubhava (experience) allow instructors to reveal very little of their own experience. Taking the example of a training initiative, this paper considers how apprentices learn when not closely guided by the instructor but through a lively yet disengaged stance. This disengagement requires, at once, that apprentices adopt the postures and emotional repertoire crucial to the training, while also remaining perceptive to necessary risks that allow shorthands/ intuitions to emerge through the habituation of virtue. How do risks sustain belief? What can the habituation of virtue tell us about morality and its socio- cognitive basis?

Discussant: Gyuri Gergely, CEU