Current Perspectives in Moral Psychology

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Abstract Moral psychology has undergone a renaissance in recent years. Methodological and theoretical advances promise new perspectives on old questions—and as academic disciplines become less siloed, the potential for cross-disciplinary collaboration becomes even greater. In this chapter, we ask leading scholars to offer their views on the future of moral psychology. Biologist and primatologist Frans de Waal, philosopher Hanno Sauer, social anthropologist Paolo Heywood, and marketing scholar Verena Wieser share their thoughts on recent developments and their implications. The chapter ends with a conversation between philosophers Edouard Machery and John M. Doris—two founders of modern moral psychology—about how the field has progressed in the academy.

—Benjamin G. Voyer & Tor Tarantola (Eds.)

The editors thank Jennifer Sheehy-Skeffington for suggesting questions to pose to the contributors.

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B.G. Voyer, T. Tarantola (eds.), *Moral Psychology*,
DOI 10.1007/978-3-319-61849-4_8

Frans de Waal

With recent developments in moral psychology and experimental philosophy, there's no going back for the way philosophy is done. Would you agree?

Since the Enlightenment, philosophy has taken over the top-down role in moral thinking from religion. Instead of religious dogma or scripture telling us how to behave, the philosophers provided us with principles, logic and reasoning underlying our moral decision-making. Rather than working with human psychology, or, as I would say, primate behaviour, many philosophers declared natural behavioural tendencies as largely irrelevant. It was all about the "ought," and not about the "is." Philosophers would come up with principles, such as utilitarianism, that deny the fundamental loyalties that mark every mammal. Every mammal values its own kin and offspring above everyone else, but utilitarianism asks us to value all human life equally and go by the numbers (the more happiness the better), which is not how mammalian psychology has been designed. I would love to see a moral philosophy that is more in tune with human tendencies and recognizes that these tendencies have an age-old history. I know very well the "naturalistic fallacy" argument, but think it is grossly overrated: driving a wedge between morality and biology has given us a view that is out of touch with human nature. Even David Hume (1739/1985: 335)—to which the naturalistic fallacy arguers often refer—recognized this, as he never said we should ignore human biology (in fact, he invoked it very much himself when he spoke of human sympathy) but only added that "a reason should be given" for how we argue from the facts of life to the values we strive for. Asking us to give a reason is not the same as saying it cannot be done.

The idea that moral principles can be born from very basic natural tendencies was brought home to me in the most forceful manner when we found signs of a sense of fairness in other primates. Not only do monkeys (and also dogs and corvids) protest against receiving less than a partner for the same task, chimpanzees show, just as humans, a tendency to equalize outcomes even if doing so is not to their immediate advantage. Although we believe that in the long run this equalizing tendency is advantageous (Brosnan and de Waal 2014), the fact is that the sense of fairness of chimpanzees is hard to distinguish from that in humans. This means that fairness, instead of a moral principle arrived at by means of reasoning or societal ideals, is an old tendency with evolutionary advantages. It obviously requires cognition (the parties need to be able to learn the advantages of equalized outcomes), but then, the cognition of chimpanzees and humans is more similar than different. It is reflected in how they solve the dilemma between wanting as many rewards as possible and wanting profitable cooperation. Philosophers need to start rethinking their field in the context of not only human psychology but also our species' evolutionary background.

Can moral psychology help answer moral or ethical questions?

I cannot answer this question for psychology, but for biology I think it is rather simple. Biology does not dictate any specific moral rules. These rules vary by human

culture and vary across time within a given culture, so cannot be given by biology. But biology has given us the basic capacities we need to build moral systems. First of all we are interested in others and in working with them, which is a prerequisite for morality. Then there are the capacities for empathy, the following of social rules, sense of fairness, tit-for-tat cooperation, social attachments and commitments and so on, all of which enter the moral equation and are older than our species.

Human morality is like language. We are all born with the capacity to develop it, using the moral building blocks and sentiments recognizable in the work of Edward Westermarck (1908) and David Hume (1739/1985), but how precisely we fill in the capacity is up to our environment and culture.

How important is it to be multidisciplinary when doing research in moral psychology? What are the main difficulties in achieving this?

The field of moral psychology could benefit from more exposure to studies on animal behaviour. After all, in the study of social animals, we are very used to social organization constrained by rules and regulations. The social hierarchy of the primates is one big system of regulation, which requires emotional control and inhibitions. Even if these rules and regulations are not justified by what we would call moral principles, the fact that animals cannot express themselves in unlimited ways, but face all sorts of social constraints, is obviously very similar to a moral system. We, humans, speak of "right" and "wrong," whereas in many animals life turns around what is "acceptable" and what is "unacceptable" behaviour. Punishment for the latter behaviour makes animals refrain from it. Here is a description from my book *The Bonobo and the Atheist* (de Waal 2013: 149), which treats these connections at length:

> At Tama Zoo, in Tokyo, I witnessed a surprising ritual. From the rooftop of a building, a caretaker spread handfuls of macadamia nuts among 15 chimpanzees in an outdoor area. The chimps rushed about collecting as many macadamias as they could in their mouths, hands, and feet. Then they sat down at separate locations in the enclosure, each with a neat little pile of nuts, all oriented toward a single place known as the "cracking station." One chimp walked up to the station, which consisted of a big rock and a smaller metal block attached to it with a chain. She then placed a nut on the rock's surface, lifted the metal block, and hammered until the nut gave up its kernel. This female worked with a juvenile by her side, whom she allowed to profit from her efforts. Having finished her pile, she then made room for the next chimp, who placed her nuts at her feet and started the same procedure. This was a daily ritual that always unfolded in the same orderly fashion until all nuts had been cracked. I was struck by the scene's peacefulness, but not fooled by it. When we see a disciplined society, there is often a social hierarchy behind it. This hierarchy, which determines who can eat or mate first, is ultimately rooted in violence. If one of the lower-ranking females and her offspring had tried to claim the cracking station before their turn, things would have gotten ugly. It is not just that these apes knew their place; they knew what to expect in case of a breach of rule. A social hierarchy is a giant system of inhibitions, which is no doubt what paved the way for human morality, which is also such a system. Impulse control is key.

There is very interesting work on emotional control, such as the marshmallow test conducted on apes and parrots, and these animals being as good at controlling their impulses as human children. These findings are not surprising for students of animal behaviour, but the general public, of course, still sees animals as wild and uncontrolled.

On the positive side there is all the work on empathy and genuine altruism in animals (de Waal 2008), including nowadays neuroscience studies on empathy in rodents (Burkett et al. 2016), which indicate that caring for others, even if there is nothing necessarily to be gained by the altruist, can be found in other species. By taking all of these tendencies into account, moral psychology can ground itself in evolutionary biology, which—I would say—is the only sensible grounding for any field that concerns itself with human behaviour.

Hanno Sauer

With recent developments in moral psychology and experimental philosophy, there's no going back for the way philosophy is done. Would you agree?

Yes. Empirical evidence shows that our powers of introspection are frail and prone to self-deception. We simply don't know where our conceptual intuitions come from and what influences them. Naïve conceptual analysis is dead.

Can moral psychology help answer moral or ethical questions?

Yes. It cannot answer moral questions on its own; but neither can empirically empty allegedly "pure" moral theorizing. More specifically, empirical information can be brought to bear on issues of normative import by (i) debunking the empirical presuppositions regarding moral agency that various normative theories incur, by (ii) debunking people's moral intuitions as epistemically defective, and by (iii) reflexively enabling people to improve their moral judgements and actions in light of (i) and (ii).

What role should moral psychology and neuroscience play in shaping law and public policy?

Given the actual extent to which law- and policy-makers seem to pay attention to evidence and reason, they should at the very least play a much *larger* role. It could also be tremendously useful in identifying and counteracting the various epistemic limitations of jury members, in reassessing the conditions for criminal responsibility, and in gauging the long-term effect of criminal "justice." Properly taking into account empirical evidence in general, not just psychological and neuroscientific evidence, but also social scientific and economic insights, would likely lead to drastic reforms of the current penal system.

How important is it to be multidisciplinary when doing research in moral psychology? What are the main difficulties in achieving this?

All-important—it simply cannot be done unilaterally. The main difficulty, it seems to me, is to reap the benefits of the epistemic division of labour while avoiding the costs that come with it. People come from different backgrounds and have different abilities. It is extremely tricky to coordinate people's work in the absence of central oversight (which would likely be undesirable anyway).

Paolo Heywood

With recent developments in moral psychology and experimental philosophy, there's no going back for the way philosophy is done. Would you agree?

Whilst I think there's a lot in the way of insight to be gained from experimental philosophy, particularly when it comes to cultural diversity, I also think—and I am of course bound to say this as an anthropologist—that quantitative methods in the social sciences have their limits. Responses to survey questions about abstract cases can tell you plenty of things, but they cannot tell you the same things that observing the ways in which people deal with moral and ethical concerns in their everyday lives can. Which of those one is more interested in obviously depends on one's aims. And, for what it's worth coming from a layman, I see no particular reason why philosophers should abandon conceptual work in favour of methods already employed by sociologists and psychologists, unless we have come to think the kinds of results produced by the latter are in some way or another superior, more cost-effective or more "impactful" than the former. And if that's the case, then it's worth asking why. Philosophically, might I add.

Can moral psychology help answer moral or ethical questions?

Of course. Again, though, I would highlight the word "help" in that question. Moral psychology, neuroscience, philosophy and anthropology can all "help" answer moral or ethical questions because they provide answers of different forms to such questions, not because any one of them has hit upon the correct form answers should take.

What role should moral psychology and neuroscience play in shaping law and public policy?

It's a bit difficult to have much faith in the value people will continue to place on "experts" in the wake of recent political events. And since I am neither a moral psychologist nor a neuroscientist, it's not really for me to attempt to specify their place in public life. That said, as I have already indicated, I am rather wary of the ways in which academic disciplines are increasingly required and effectively extorted into having "impact." The more that academic disciplines are put in hock to whatever people happen to think is "useful" at any particular moment, the more vulnerable they are to rapid changes in assessments of utility—as we have recently seen—and the less they are capable of doing what they are best at: questioning our assumptions (regarding, e.g., what it means to be "useful").

How important is it to be multidisciplinary when doing research in moral psychology? What are the main difficulties in achieving this?

As I've suggested, I think interdisciplinarity is at its best when it is complementary, rather than integrative, and actually that a significant difficulty lies in ensuring that "being multidisciplinary" doesn't end up meaning taking one totalizing approach that also happens to draw from a range of disciplines. I personally think it would be more productive if we all kept on arguing with one another over approaches, rather than stifling such debate in an attempt to find an ideal approach that doesn't in fact exist.

Verena Wieser

What are the philosophical developments that shape our understanding of morality in marketing research and practice?

Morality always has been—and still is—a contested concept in marketing and consumer research and practice. The discipline features lively debates concerning what 'doing good' or 'doing bad' means in marketing contexts and how those meanings develop in contemporary consumer societies (e.g. Caruana 2007a, b; Stoeckl and Luedicke 2015). I would like to share one or two observations on these debates here.

The vast amount of morality research in marketing follows a *techno-rationalist marketing discourse* (Caruana 2007b), which views morality as one discriminating factor in consumption choices. From a micro-marketing perspective, morality competes with pragmatic factors such as price and quality when consumers decide, for instance, between conventional and fair-trade products in their daily routines. A rich pool of research traces how, when and why consumers couple their purchase decision with—or decouple their purchase decision from—societal moral norms and personal concerns (see Grayson 2014 for a summary of articles on this issue in the Journal of Consumer Research).

The discipline's focus on consumer choices, however, leaves blind spots in the moral marketing landscape. Whilst consumer researchers consistently spot a gap between consumers' moral attitudes and actual purchase behaviours, business scandals and brand crises unveil the substantial limitations of the logics of efficiency and corporate self-control. The overestimation of the "empowered" and "responsible" consumer (Caruana and Crane 2008; Giesler and Veresiu 2014; Izberk-Bilgin 2010) has called reformist perspectives on the marketing agenda which endorse the conversion of protected moral values, such as the respect for human life or for ecological balance, into golden rules of marketing conduct. However, the modernist endeavour of reducing moral ambiguity in consumers' lives increasingly fails in its attempts to translate the abstractness of unifying ideals into concrete marketing measures. Besides other barriers, a lack of global governance systems makes it both difficult to agree on universal moral duties and to monitor compliance, respectively.

An emerging *moral pluralist discourse* (Eabrasu 2012) promotes a view that corporations accept and promote more than one morally acceptable set of commitments in the postmodern world. Supported by the responsiveness of digital media, marketers build the moral identity of their brands in a sociocultural flux. On one hand, brands compete on claims to be more sustainable, more ethical or, at least, less evil relative to other market participants. On the other hand, normative branding projects attract cynical comments that label moral marketing campaigns as "pseudo-moral," "greenwashing," or "blue-washing." Research will show whether an inflation of moral messages in marketing activities leads to a loss of moral sensitivity in the marketplace (Bauman and Donskis 2013) or to a more nuanced and attentive public opinion on moral concerns.

What are the current hot topics and directions in consumer and marketing research concerning morality?

Morality research in marketing monitors closely how brands dynamically navigate the blurry frontiers between good and bad. Extreme cases—when brands break taboos (e.g. in shock advertisement campaigns) or exceed the limits of legal tolerance (e.g. in corruption scandals)—show how marketers, consumers, regulators, the media and other brand stakeholders deal with morally ambivalent marketing activities.

Marketing research on morality will further set the focus on consumers' moral reflexivity and self-awareness and other/market awareness. Study programs increasingly trace the moral footprints of consumers online (e.g. through capturing the moral tone of consumer feedback in social media environments), compare how consumers define morality in various consumption contexts (e.g. in mundane spheres like food consumption versus in extraordinary experiences like holiday consumption) and investigate how consumers develop their moral competences over time and vis-à-vis contextual premises (e.g. socio-economic developments, cultural trends, social group/family traditions).

Going beyond consumers' purchase decisions, cultural and historical marketing research reveals how moral values form and evolve in consumer subgroups (e.g. in neighbourhoods or online brand communities) and how consumers use morality in combination with consumption goods and experiences to enact identity work (e.g. in moral conflicts between fans and enemies of luxury brands). Finally, interdisciplinary research pushes methodological boundaries and investigates how consumers experience morality with their bodies and through moral sentiments (e.g. through anger, anxiety, disgust or guilt).

How should we understand the nexus between morality and regulation?

The question of how morality translates into regulation is also a question of authority. One facet determining authority is moral language; legal authority dominantly rests on negative judgements of "what is wrong," "what is unjust," "criticizable" or "impermissible," on ensuing obligations, interdictions and penalties. However, at the other side of the morality coin, positive moral judgements simultaneously build moral authority, like notions of "praise" of "what is good," "obligatory" or "heroic" (Bartels et al. 2015). To mention just one of many areas of interest, morality research will need to pay more focused attention to the cultural and regulatory qualities of both positive and negative moral language in consumption and marketing contexts and beyond.

A Discussion Between Edouard Machery and John M. Doris

EM: John, good to talk to you. So today we're going to be talking about empirically oriented moral psychology and its growth in philosophy and psychology over the last 10 or 15 years. I think it would be useful to start with the obvious question—

what were things like in the beginning, 10 or 15 years ago? What do you think moral philosophy and moral psychology were like about that time?

JMD: You and I were in interestingly different circumstances, because I was an ethics graduate student who got interested in cognitive science, and many of my colleagues, like you and Shaun Nichols, were people working in cognitive science who got interested in ethics.

EM: That's right.

JMD: There was a lot of resistance, but our experiences of that resistance might have been pretty different. At my end, resistance was often just benign neglect; people didn't think to do empirical work or empirically informed theorizing. When some of us proposed doing it in ethics, the response was usually based on concerns about normativity—that, you know, you couldn't import empirical facts into moral philosophy without distorting ethics' distinctively normative character.

From your end things might look a little bit different. There was the thought in psychology—I think there still is in the mainstream psychology journals—that science doesn't deal in evaluative discourse. So, to caricature just a bit, philosophers thought values were good, facts bad; psychologists that facts were good, values bad. From both directions we were doing something that went counter to the dominant ideology.

EM: I agree entirely. There was also this sense when I was finishing my PhD in the early 2000s, that the real psychology was not social psychology and, more generally, not the psychology of "real-life behaviors": what we eat, how we love, what we do in everyday life, etc. The real psychology—the one we philosophers of psychology should be excited about—was cognitive psychology. So for a philosopher of cognitive science in the late 1990s and early 2000s—for graduate students like me at the time—it was really not obvious why philosophers of cognitive science should worry about morality.

It was not even clear there was a good psychology of moral judgement. I think things have changed tremendously in 15 years. Now more psychologists are interested in morality, but at the time there was very little interest in it from cognitive scientists.

Did you have that impression too? That social psychology and psychology related to "real-life" behaviors were not well respected in the philosophy of psychology and perhaps even in psychology until maybe 10 years ago?

JMD: Maybe something like that. Anyway, "serious" philosophy of cognitive science was focusing on issues I call architectural.

EM: That's right.

JMD: Architectural questions, and the empirical work that was relevant to this was on very low-level cognition. So philosophers of cognitive science weren't interested in psychology treating what philosophers like me would think of as questions of broad human interest.

EM: That's the way I felt. So how did you get interested in empirical moral psychology—what we think of as real moral psychology? Why did you as a graduate student at the time get into it?

JMD: Actually for philosophical reasons! Two of my heroes—then and now—were Bernard Williams and Alasdair MacIntyre. (Bernard Williams is deceased of course, and much missed in philosophy.) And I took them to be saying that if philosophical ethics is going to get better, it's going to need a more lifelike moral psychology. This is a point, of course, made before by Anscombe—though on my view she did little to contribute to the cause. For Williams and MacIntyre, "lifelike" meant thinking more about character. My thought, a thought they probably thought flat-footed, was, "well that means we should go talk to psychologists!" But both of them were very supportive when I talked to them about it.

Originally—and this is kind of funny—I was interested in the thematic apperception test and motivational psychology, which of course is a species of personality psychology. Then I happened to date a personality psychologist who was Mischelian and she said, "you really need to think about his critique of traits if you're thinking about moral psychology."

And so one day I was in the library, back when people went to the library (and this is actually why maybe it would be good if people still went to the library) and I saw this book called *The Person and the Situation*. This kind of seemed relevant to what I was thinking about. So I opened it up and realized one author was at Michigan. So, I got my adviser Allan Gibbard to arrange an introduction, and I went to meet Dick Nisbett.

I must have been a sight: I used to have long hair, and so this shaggy giant came into Dick's office and said, "have you ever wondered about how all this stuff that you do relates to morality?" And he said, "I've been waiting for years for someone to knock on my door and ask me that."

And then after that I was off to the races. You know: you have an idea that you can do something—empirical moral psychology—but you need to have a good example for traction. And I think the traction was that character theorists and virtue ethicists very much took themselves to be in pursuit of a lifelike moral psychology. So as it were, they invited me in, which gave me and others like Gil Harman license to dirty the carpet with those messy facts.

EM: Let me just follow up on that. How did people around you react? You meet Nisbett, and his research is obviously relevant for your interest in moral psychology. Clearly you're right on target, but how do the Michigan folks—you were a graduate at Michigan at the time—how did they react?

JMD: Well, it helped that I got Nisbett on my committee. He was—is—a very big deal there; he already had a University Professorship.

So having Dick's stamp of approval helped a lot. But I do remember one of my teachers saying about my character skepticism, "I don't know what you could say to convince me of this."

Michigan of course had excellent moral philosophers of all stripes, you know, conspicuously Darwall, Gibbard, and Railton, and all of them were sympathetic to naturalism.

And of course you might see the kind of work we started to do as enabled by the kind of theoretical groundclearing that people like Peter Railton and my under-

graduate teacher, Nicolas Sturgeon, did when they showed that there's a kind of ethical naturalism where ethics doesn't need to fear science. So I think Michigan people were pretty supportive.

Of course it's always a little hard to sort out the philosophy from the sociology since for much of graduate school I spent a lot more time doing martial arts than philosophy. So I certainly had more than a few moments of impatience from my professors, but Michigan was probably one of the best places to do moral psychology. None of the faculty then did quite what we do now, but they were pretty sympathetic, and of course my adviser Allan Gibbard is just an incredibly intellectually curious guy—he wanted to see arguments but he was very supportive. I don't think there are many other places where I could've made that fly because obviously I was a very beginning philosopher and at the time I was not going to have the best possible arguments. One doesn't imagine that I would've been able to do what I did at many other major graduate programs.

EM: The other places that became important for moral psychology were Rutgers around Stephen Stich and Princeton around Gil Harman. I don't know exactly when Stich and Harman got interested in moral psychology—they taught a graduate seminar together I believe.

JMD: With John Darley in 2000. That's where many of us met.

EM: That's right, yes so it was 2000.

JMD: Gil had been thinking about that for a few years because he'd been working on the fundamental attribution error, and Steve had a paper in 1993 about mental representation in ethics. But I don't think it was clear to either of them that it was going to be, as we say nowadays, a thing.

EM: It's noteworthy that Stich didn't develop his interest in moral psychology immediately after that 1993 paper. It's a very good paper and an influential piece of work, but it did not lead to an explosion of work in moral psychology either by him or by his students and colleagues.

Personally I got into moral psychology through Stich because I was at Rutgers in the early 2000s, when Steve actually was starting to take moral psychology extremely seriously and to do important research in this area.

I was influenced by the work that had already been published at the time, including yours. Psychologists were getting involved. I read John Mikhail's dissertation when I was still a graduate student.

Of course evolutionary psychology also got me interested in the psychology of "real-life" human behavior, including the psychology of morality. Evolutionary psychologists were doing work that was at the intersection of cognitive psychology and social psychology. And that led me to pay more attention to social psychology and, as a result, moral psychology.

Do you have a sense of when psychologists themselves got involved? Was Marc Hauser an early adopter?

JMD: It's kind of interesting how to think about this. From the 1960s to early 1980s, we have what we can call that the golden age of social psychology.

There were all of those studies on helping and prosocial behavior and the figure who looms so large then is the great John Darley. Then John turned to other stuff.

Of course Stich is a lifelong friend of Nisbett, so he was kind of in the picture for many of us.

If you think of the first meeting of the Moral Psychology Research Group that Stich organized in 2003, there were very few scientists. I think both Joshua Knobe and Josh Greene were there, but they were originally philosophically trained. Fiery Cushman and Liane Young, both Harvard graduate students in psychology, joined the group later.

Think of the scientists that visited the Moral Psychology Research Group in our early days. Marc Hauser came, but many of the visiting scientists weren't working directly on morality per se: Paul Rozin, George Lowenstein, Marty Seligman. A lot of us were really influenced by psychologists, but it didn't seem like these psychologists or their students were really quite our fellow travellers or colleagues. Maybe that came a little bit later.

Maybe an exception here would have been Jonathan Baron; he cared a lot about morality and moral philosophy. And of course then we have Jon Haidt, who might have been one of the first moral psychologists.

EM: Indeed. I remember when I was at Rutgers as a visiting graduate student in the early 2000s, we read a lot of Jon Haidt's work and he was being discussed by graduate students around Steve Stich.

He was clearly very influential at the time in leading us to think that the psychology of moral judgement was relevant to philosophical questions and vice versa.

JMD: Of course Jon had a very talented graduate student, Jesse Graham, who's now one of our colleagues in the Moral Psychology Research Group. But interestingly, it might be that Jon was more influential amongst philosophers than psychologists.

EM: I wouldn't be surprised. It may be worth saying a few things about the Moral Psychology Research Group (MPRG), which we've mentioned a few times. There may still be a few people out there who don't know enough about that group, so it's time to enlighten them. When was the group created exactly? 2003 was the first meeting, is that right?

JMD: Yeah, 2003 as far as I can remember. I must've been working in Santa Cruz. Steve organized the meeting and I remember it was a sticky New Jersey grey day and I had trouble finding the venue and then there couldn't have been more than 8 or 10 people. I'm quite sure Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, Gil Harman, Jesse Prinz, and Shaun Nichols were there.

EM: I was not there. I may have been back in France at the time or I may have been in Germany. Josh Knobe must've been there, and perhaps Chandra Sripada and Dan Kelly.

JMD: And as I say, if scientists were represented, it was Princeton trained philosophers. That's interesting though; Princeton is not a very empirically oriented program, and two of their very best known recent products are very empirical.

Another crucial moment for MPRG was the really big conference on "The Psychology and Biology of Morality" Walter Sinnott-Armstrong put together at Dartmouth in 2004. A lot of the early MPRG types were there, together with other

good philosophers and many scientists studying morality but not necessarily yet collaborating with philosophers, like Kent Kiehl.

So it was kind of a coming out party where MPRG started to connect with a wider community. A big moment at that conference was Josh Greene presenting his early work—I don't think we've mentioned experimental philosophy so far, but this then new movement attracted huge attention, and a lot of the "X-phi" work was on morality.

There was an MPRG held right after the big conference. Joshua Knobe, another founding X-phi-er, was there, and he and I presented something on responsibility. Walter sent me the program from that MPRG not long ago, and the business meeting was titled something like, "Drinks & Planning Session: Where Do We Go From Here?" [laughs]

We've come a long way—there's now something like five of the Sinnott-Armstrong Moral Psychology volumes. Walter's been a force all along, first because he was respected as a philosopher's philosopher who knew his way around the arguments, which brought credibility to empirical approaches, but also because of his institution building skills.

X-phi also cross-polinated back to psychology, as it was influential for younger psychologists studying morality, like Fiery Cushman and Liane Young, who have gone on to do important work. X-phi seems pretty well-established now, too, with the *Oxford Studies in Experimental Philosophy*, edited by Joshua Knobe, Shaun Nichols, and a psychologist, Tania Lombrozo, slated to appear regularly. Fingers crossed!

EM: A watershed moment for X-phi was the preconference before the 2008 Society for Philosophy and Psychology annual meeting in Philadelphia. It brought together all the philosophers and psychologists pushing forward what was, and still is, one of the most exciting developments in philosophy: Eddy Nahmias, Bertram Malle, John Mikhail, Jonathan Baron, Liane Young, Eric Schwitzgebel, Brian Scholl, Ron Mallon, Tania Lombrozo, Shaun Nichols, Josh Knobe, Ernest Sosa, Jonathan Weinberg, and myself. It's remarkable that half of them are MPRG members!

It's also really worth highlighting how important the MPRG was in creating a community of likeminded philosophers and then psychologists, people who had similar views about how to develop a moral psychology that was relevant for philosophy. Instead of each of us working in our little niche alienated from both philosophy and psychology, somehow it felt that we could be a force. And we were a force! MPRG was actually extremely important in changing the sociology of philosophy, and I hope to an extent anyway, of psychology.

JMD: Certainly to some extent. You know, now there are all these scientists who characterize themselves as moral psychologists, and who I have never even heard of. That's how much the field has grown. And that's what the MPRG did: We edited the *Moral Psychology Handbook*, which was a nice touchstone, but more importantly the group generated hundreds of collaborative publications. And many group members pollinated across disciplines and continue to do so.

Of course the fact that Stich, with all his influence and energy, was some sort of protector for the group pushed us forward in the early days. In the early days, it was absolutely critical having people like Stich and Harman to give the group credibility. Then we got lucky with some publications that people wanted to talk about and as it spread, we've been able to attract young people.

I take it a big reason for the success of moral psychology is that it's just kind of fun. I mean everybody is different. Some people are worried about external world skepticism. Some people are worried about whether dishrags persist through time. And that's fine! It's a great thing about philosophy that there are a lot of different questions, but a lot of people thought the questions in moral psychology were really cool. Pick your favorite example and it's just fun to read that stuff and try and figure it out.

EM: I agree. If someone asked me why moral psychology was so successful in philosophy and in psychology, I would mention some of those things you've mentioned. The fact that Steve Stich and Gil Harman were already extremely influential in philosophy gave us some credibility, as you said.

Also moral psychology is fun, no question about that.

And we were lucky in attracting some of the best and brightest in both philosophy and psychology at the time, and the type of research we were doing was just extremely good. People could see it was good and interesting.

Something you haven't mentioned is the spirit of what was going on. I mean the atmosphere of what was going on between us was quite different from the usual atmosphere in philosophy. It was very friendly, we were collaborating with one another. It was always constructive. We were trying to help each other. This spirit has now become slightly more common; it's more common now to hear that philosophers should be less critical of one another, less combative. But it was not like that 10 years ago.

In any case, very early on we had this idea that we wanted to help each other even when we were criticising each other. And that was actually a very useful way of creating a research community that ended up being quite successful.

JMD: There was a real feeling of, you know, group connectedness; people were friends; people generally delighted in one another's success.

EM: Yep.

JMD: Now there is more of a breadth in both the group and the field. Valerie Tiberius is the person who first comes to mind, but involving people with more mainstream interest in normative ethics or ethical theory made possible a supportive environment for people from a broad spectrum of methodological orientations to have, you know, to have some fun. And be supported. So yes, I think the MPRG and empirical moral psychology have been a big success.

But you know, as we think about what we want to do as a group and individually going forward, we've been sort of having this suspicion that maybe we haven't figured out what our next big thing is and what would excite us. So it's not unreasonable to ask: how successful has it been really?

I guess this is kind of a mid-life crisis.

EM: I know. [laughs] Well it's…it's not entirely clear which metrics we should use to decide how successful we've been. Clearly many of us have been successful from an academic and professional point of view and moral psychology was part of our success. It did contribute to our academic success, to getting read, to putting some of our ideas out, and getting discussion going around our work. So in that respect we've been successful.

JMD: Citation, dissertations about the work, right?

EM: That's exactly right, by all these measures we've built a successful community and led a successful project. In other respects it's less clear how successful we've been. Have we really changed ethics and philosophy? If you open some of the main journals in philosophy you may feel that you're stuck in the 1960s. I'm of course exaggerating a bit, but you know there isn't that much work of the kind we've been pushing that gets published in the top two journals in ethics and the best generalist journals in philosophy like *Noûs* and *Philosophical Review*. There is the occasional paper, but I think many philosophers still do non-empirical moral psychology. So that's a benchmark which is a little bit more depressing than the first benchmark.

JMD: It's correct to say there are empirically oriented moral psychologists who have had enviable careers. But, I take it the two highest visibility journals in moral philosophy are *Ethics* and *Philosophy and Public Affairs*.

These are journals that I wouldn't really think of submitting an empirically oriented piece to. There have been a few exceptions but they are few and far between. We do sometimes get things in *Noûs* and *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*; they've been generally sympathetic, because Ernest Sosa edits them and is genuinely philosophically open-minded and has a good eye.

EM: They have been. That's right.

JMD: And they are amongst the best mainstream journals. Obviously *Philosophical Psychology* and *Mind and Language* are sympathetic journals, but they are less mainstream. On the other hand, Peter Momtchiloff is at Oxford University Press, and he has been supportive of good quality interdisciplinary work, so we do get monographs at the best house for philosophy.

On the psychology side, I get the same sense on the journals, right?

In social and personality psychology the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* is the flagship, and they don't do a ton of moral psychology either. So the journal benchmark may be not so good. What's your take on the sort of departmental composition benchmark? What are the big graduate programmes doing in both disciplines?

EM: Let me add something about journals: the only exception in psychology would be *Cognition*, which has become extremely friendly to moral psychology. But of course it's not a big journal in social psychology. It's a very good journal, well respected, but it's not the central journal in social psychology.

JMD: It's not *Psychological Science* and they've always had kind of a theoretical orientation.

EM: This may say something interesting about the MPRG as a research group. We are a community of researchers, by some measures a very successful one, but

we've not tried to control institutions from the inside. We did not try to control leading journals, such as *Philosophical Studies* or *Noûs* or whatever, where we could publish our things. Nor did we try to control some academic institutions in philosophy: We never had a plan to control the APA or to be very much involved in the planning of the APA conferences, such that our work could be well represented. Still, we were successful. It's worth noting because not every interest group in philosophy has behaved like that, you know.

Now about departments, it's a good question. It's a bit of a mixed bag as well, you know. Many of us are in good departments. I work at Pitt.

JMD: Not accidently in the History and Philosophy of Science department.

EM: True enough. You're in a top department for the philosophy of cognitive science, with the Philosophy-Neuroscience-Psychology program at Washington University in St. Louis, Shaun Nichols at Arizona, Jesse Prinz at CUNY, Steve Stich at Rutgers and Gil Harman at Princeton

JMD: Although Steve and Gil did not ride into town on moral psychology.

EM: That's exactly the point.

JMD: Moral psychology rode into town on them.

EM: That's exactly right. So we are blessed, but again we are in a sense the exception, right, that confirms the rule. We're sort of outliers. We did well but most of the top departments don't really do empirically informed moral psychology, I would say.

JMD: Here's one way to think about it: who besides Gil Harman is at an Ivy League grad program? (Adina Roskies is a leading moral psychologist at Dartmouth.)

EM: Yeah.

…and who at the University of California? I guess San Diego would be the exception there. David Brink and Dana Nelkin think about science seriously and Manuel Vargas, one of our friends at the MPRG, has just moved there, so maybe San Diego is an exception, but certainly not UCLA or Berkeley.

JMD: Not so good on that kind of measure. Happy enough to note that we're not missing meals, but it does not yet seem that graduate programs feel like they have to have one or two moral psychology types.

In contrast, at many places it's acknowledged that there would be something wrong if they didn't have one or two specialists in ancient philosophy.

EM: I agree.

JMD: This gets us to the question of what's going to happen in 10 years: What's the future looking like for our ilk?

EM: Yup, it's a good question. Moral psychology is booming in psychology. The number of papers that get to be published has increased dramatically over the last 10 years.

Moral psychology may even have reached a ceiling in psychology and in neuroscience. It's not clear to me how much bigger the field of moral psychology in psychology can become. Now in philosophy I'm not utterly optimistic.

Maybe I'm reaching a point in my life where I see things in darker shades than I used to. I do feel philosophers are really hard to move and I also feel that it goes through cycles of interest, and that after 10 or 15 years interests fade and philoso-

phers move to other things. And I do already feel that there's a bit of that going on in philosophy at this point: There was a lot of interest in empirically informed moral psychology—including experimental philosophy.

"This window is closing" is a bit too strong, but perhaps it is starting to be less open. Do you have a similar pessimistic look or am I just…is it my bad night that's speaking?

JMD: Well I don't know, that's a good question, whether it's just being up with your child…

I think that there was a kind of optimism in the old days that was sort of—"we the happy few who are about to die." A real sense of mission, and we're all doing it as close friends and any victory was a big deal. But now the Moral Psychology Research Group is much more diverse and we have people doing very different kinds of work. So I think things feel more diffuse. I'm not sure that's worse.

EM: I agree.

JMD: One way people make things less exciting is by succeeding…

EM: That's true.

JDM: In any case, it's certainly not guaranteed that the gains that we've been celebrating in this conversation are here to stay. What's a thing that people don't talk about anymore that was a big deal, that everybody had to have a view on? In philosophy or psychology, a thing that fizzled?

EM: Modularity would be one of them; people are much less interested in modularity than they were 10 years ago. Ten years ago everybody had to have a view about whether the mind was modular or not, and dozens, hundreds of papers were written by psychologists and philosophers on that topic. I haven't seen very much on that topic lately, and it's not a topic I would really recommend for a graduate student.

JMD: A good case. So should you think that the moment has passed or should you think that the general idea that the mind has a lot of bits and pieces that are often doing their own thing, the most generic way of describing modularity, is now part of the water?

So one way we could think about the future of moral psychology is, jeez, it doesn't quite seem like that there's a bunch of angry young men and women gravitating towards moral psychology the way we were, and it's hard to think of people who are going at it in quite the same way.

But another way to think about it is, everybody talks about interdisciplinarity. So there are all these virtue ethicists writing books that claim to be developing empirically adequate theories, and among philosophers working on emotion, like my graduate student colleagues Justin D'Arms and Dan Jacobson, it's utterly expected that you're going to have some facility with the psychology of emotion.

EM: I'm not sure which of these two descriptions is the right one, and I don't exactly know whether topics like modularity have disappeared or whether they've become part of the air we breathe.

JMD: I vote for the air we breathe then! But it's funny, it makes it kind of harder. In my case, although I've lately been working on character again, that was never really what I was about. I was about figuring out how you could do moral psychology and take empirical work seriously, but still take ethics seriously. And now it's

clear to me that's going on all over, methodologically. You know, the dog has talked, now what should he say?

EM: To switch topic slightly, do you expect some kind of backlash from more traditional philosophers, from moral philosophers?

JMD: I think there has been backlash the whole time…

In the bad old days when we did convention interviews for the job market, I had several interviews with people lecturing me about how wrong-headed everything I was doing was.

There is one thing that I do think is hopeful, especially in light of the current troubles in psychology. Some people think it's a crisis, some people don't think it's a crisis. I don't think it's a crisis; we know what to do to do psychology better. But the perception of a crisis might make philosophers more suspicious of consuming psychology.

The flip side of that is that we're so much more sophisticated about consuming psychology than we used to be. There are some people like you who have research interests in statistics and can do their own experiments. But even somebody like me, who's still very much a philosophical theorist, I routinely collaborate with psychologists and so I pick some of the relevant knowledge up, and I just think we're so much better at it.

My students at WashU take statistics, and there are all these avenues of research that are open to them, that are not open to me.

EM: I agree: philosophers have improved dramatically in their use of science more broadly, and psychology in particular. People have become less naïve, more sophisticated, better at distinguishing bad from good science. There has been progress in this respect, and graduate students are, I have to say, much more sophisticated in this respect than I was when I was a graduate student.

In this respect I'm optimistic about philosophy because the graduate students we train are very good. They are usually very good philosophers and they are savvy from a scientific point of view, from a psychological point of view, they understand very well how psychology gets done, much more than I used to when I was a graduate student.

JMD: Indeed. Is that a good note to stop on?

EM: I think it is. Good talking to you, John.

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