DELINEATING THE MORAL DOMAIN IN MORAL PSYCHOLOGY*

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Abstract. *The aim of this paper is to review current debate about the moral domain in the moral psychological literature. There is some vagueness in respect to the usage of the very concept of 'morality'. This conceptual problem recently has been re-addressed by several authors. So far, there is little agreement, nobody seems to agree about how to delineate the moral domain from other 'non-moral' normative domains. Currently, there are several positions that disagree about the scope of morality, ranging from complete monists to complete pluralists. The paper will review these positions and will tentatively suggest further directions to test their claims. At this moment, there is no decisive evidence for either position.*

Keywords: *moral domain, moral psychology, normative cognition.*

1. Introduction

Historically, Western moral philosophy has addressed not only the normative question of how rational agents *ought* to behave, but also how ordinary people actually *are* behaving. The latter descriptive project, by and large, was limited to the philosopher's own observations and intuitions. More recently, this descriptive project was supplemented, if not dominated, by social scientific methods. More specifically, a de-

scriptive moral psychology slowly developed as an independent sub-discipline that covers a wide range of research programs, topics and methods (see, for instance, Sinnott-Armstrong 2008; and Doris 2010; also, for a review of more recent development of experimental moral philosophy see Alfano and Loeb 2014).

For the most part, contemporary moral psychology concentrates on different types of moral judgments. In particular, psychologists are interested in everyday judgments about various socially relevant *actions* and *agents* performing those actions. On the one hand, a good deal of research focusses on judgments of *actions* as *wrong*, that is, actions as transgressions (e.g., Haidt 2012, or Gray et al. 2012). Very often such research assumes that a folk judgment of

wrongness, and, especially in such cases as harmful actions, is tantamount to a folk *moral* judgment. On the other hand, some research has focussed on judgments of *agents* as *blameworthy* (e.g., Malle et al. 2014). Blame judgment, according to this line of research, is a kind of second order *moral* judgment because, first, it involves a negative event that is perceived to be morally *wrong* (first order moral judgment) and, second, it requires information about an agent's causal relatedness, intentions, beliefs and obligations. Interestingly, typical cases that were used in those studies involved harmful actions or outcomes, while other types of scenarios were less frequent.

By studying wrongness and blame judgments, moral psychologists not only tried to map the structure of explicit folk moral concepts, but also theorized about implicit psychological mechanisms that produce those judgments. An important distinction in this regard is between moral intuitions and moral reasoning. For instance, some have posited that there are two cognitive systems that quite differently subserve moral judgments (e.g., Cushman et al. 2010). System one is automatic, fast and is rooted in emotions and/or cognitive heuristics. This is when we intuitively disapprove or approve of some action, or when react very fast in some situation. System two is slow and involves conscious, deliberate reasoning and an application of moral principals or rules. Some, following in steps of David Hume (1740/2003), argue that moral reasoning kicks in only to justify or rationalize what moral intuitions already 'decided' (e.g., Haidt, 2001; Nichols 2002). Whereas others, following the tradition of utilitarian

cost-and-benefit considerations, argue that there is more to moral reasoning than just post hoc rationalization (e.g., Cushman et al. 2006, Royzman et al. 2011).

Still, despite a wide range of research programs, there was some vagueness in respect to the usage of the very concept of morality, it was not properly defined and characterized. Incidentally, the above research programs tacitly equated the moral domain with harm, at least most of the studies used harm related scenarios. A notable exception, however, was Elliot Turiel and his so called "moral/conventional task" (1983). More recently, this conceptual problem was re-addressed by several research groups and is now thoroughly discussed in papers and conferences. Not surprisingly, so far there is little agreement among the participants of this debate. In particular, even if everyone would agree that *moral* judgment is a certain kind of *normative* judgment, nobody seems to agree about how to delineate the 'moral' from other 'non-moral' normative judgments – that is, how to delineate the moral domain in general.

The main aim of this paper is to review recent moral psychological literature that explicitly considers the moral domain (for the review of philosophical attempts to define morality see Gert 2011). To begin with, it should be noted that in the current literature, while delineating the moral domain, the term 'moral' has been used in two basic senses (see Sousa and Piazza 2014). In one sense, the emphasis is on a type of normative *content* – for instance, people consider a normative transgression as a *moral* transgression only if it involves *harmful actions* (where perceived harm

operates as a specific normative content). In another sense, the emphasis is on a specific type of normative *conviction* – that is, moral transgressions evoke a strong evaluative conviction that an action is wrong, no matter what is the normative content. Importantly, there is little agreement on what counts as a relevant normative content, and how to characterize the strong normative conviction in moral judgments. In other words, what distinguishes moral judgments from other kinds of normative judgments? Note, however, the two basic senses are not entirely separated, it seems that most researchers try to delineated the moral domain (as opposed to other normative domains) solely in terms of normative content, while some try to specify the normative content *qua* moral domain with normative conviction. Indeed, there is some vagueness in the literature in this regard, therefore, in this review I'll keep those two senses separate and where necessary indicate their connections.

2. Turiel's moral-conventional distinction

At the outset, I would like to sketch a relevant historical background. In particular, I will briefly present the Turiel tradition in moral psychology that was widely influential and is an important reference point for contemporary debate concerning the moral domain. It is a good starting point since almost all participants of the current debate refer to this tradition in one way or another, either by criticizing or by defending it (e.g., for criticism see Kelly et al. 2007; and for responses to the criticism see Sousa 2009; Sousa et al. 2010).

Turiel and his colleagues delimited the moral domain in opposition to non-moral conventional domains (Nucci 2001; Nucci and Turiel, 1978; Tisak and Turiel 1984; Smetana 1981; Turiel 1983; Yau and Smetana 2003; and later adopted by Blair 1995; and Nichols 2004). According to this tradition, folk intuitions (of children and adults alike) systematically distinguish between moral transgressions (e.g., hitting other people, stealing or cheating) and conventional transgressions (e.g., eating with your bare hands or dressing inappropriately to school). This distinction, it is argued, is a rather robust psychological phenomenon that could be observed across different age groups and across different cultural or religious contexts (e.g., Nucci and Turiel 1993; Yau and Smetana 2003). The former conclusion was supported by numerous empirical data that heavily relied on various versions of the so-called moral/conventional task. In particular, Turiel tradition postulated a cluster of interrelated conceptual elements that can be reliably activated by a specified questionnaire. Thus, following Sousa's (2009) general characterization, we could summarize those conceptual elements in this way:

(1) *type of action*: moral transgressions involve a victim being harmed and/or subjected to injustice; while conventional transgressions do not.

(2) *permissibility*: moral transgressions are less permissible than conventional transgressions.

(3) *seriousness*: moral transgressions are more serious than conventional transgressions.

(4) *authority independence*: moral transgressions are seen as authority independent (i.e., their wrongness is not cancelable by the de-

cision of any authority); while conventional transgressions depend on authority.

 (5) *generality of scope*: moral transgressions are general in scope (i.e., their wrongness extends to different places and times); while conventional transgressions are seen as local in scope.

In a typical moral/conventional task people are presented with a prototypical moral transgression scenario, then they have to respond to the subsequent questions that probe all the aforementioned (1)-(5) conceptual elements. If participants exhibit the 'signature moral pattern' (Kelly et al. 2007), i.e., they evoke all (1)-(5) conceptual elements, then we have a case of a *moral* judgment. If some conceptual element is not evoked, then, by definition, we have a case of a *non-moral normative* conventional judgment. As Kelly et al. note (see also Sousa 2009), this signature response pattern forms a kind of 'nomological cluster' – a law-like tendency for (1)-(5) conceptual elements to co-occur. Of course, later studies questioned such a conclusion (e.g., Haidt et al. 1993; Kelly et al. 2007; Shweder, et al. 1997). And it seems that the gist of all criticism is due to (1) – the requirement that, among other things, a genuine moral judgment should involve the concepts of harm and/or injustice (for a more recent debate about the morality of harm and injustice see Kelly et al. 2007, Sousa 2009; Sousa et al. 2010; Sousa and Piazza 2014; Stich et al. 2009; Quintelier et al. 2012). What is important to note here, however, is the fact that (1) refers to the normative content (as it was mentioned in introduction), whereas (2)-(5) refer to normative conviction. In this respect, critics say, Turiel's definition of morality is unduly narrow, it specifies the necessary normative content (say H, for harm) and characterizes the normative conviction (say MS, for moral signature). Thus, the prediction of the researchers in the Turiel tradition would be as follows: if participants will judge that a transgression involves H, then they will evoke MS (see also Sousa 2009). So, to sum up, in Turiel tradition the scope of the moral domain is delineated by the normative content (1), while the normative content *qua* moral domain is specified by normative conviction (2)-(5).

However, such a conceptual connection (in a law-like manner) was criticized. In the next section I will review some of the criticism.

3. Debating the moral domain

As it was mentioned, Turiel and his colleagues have argued that harmful transgressions *and* injustice transgressions are two basic types of normative content that constitute the moral domain[1]. Importantly, the Turiel tradition emphasized that a transgression *should* involve Harm and/or Injustice in order to count as a *moral* transgression (in contrast to mere conventional

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[1] It should be noted that in the literature the general term of 'moral domain' is sometimes used in plural. Plural usage indicates that there are different instances of the category 'moral domain'. For instance, Harm and Injustice are two distinct moral domains in this sense, e.i., two instances of the same category 'moral domain'. In this paper, in order to avoid confusions, I will use the term 'moral domain' only to indicate a category, while particular instances will be labeled as particular types of normative content (or conviction) within the category 'moral domain'.

transgression). Currently, there are several positions that disagree about the scope of morality, ranging from complete monists to complete pluralists.[2] Most of these positions put a strong emphasis on different types of the normative content as a way to demarcate the moral domain.

3.1. Pluralists: arguing for a broader scope of normative content

I will begin with pluralists since this group of moral psychologists came as an explicit opposition to Kohlberg's (e.g., Kohlberg and Hersh 1977) and Turiel's outlined narrow notion of morality – a tradition that dominated moral psychology since 60-ties. More specifically, the critique came from cultural psychologists such as Shweder and his colleagues (for review see Shweder et al. 1997). Based on research in India, they argued that in other cultures, people tend to moralize allegedly conventional domains, for example, it is highly immoral for a Brahman's son to eat meat or cut his hair during the 10 days that follow the death of his father (Shweder

and Haidt 1993). Shweder argued that Turiel's definition of morality is applicable only to the ethics of *autonomy* (concerns about harm, and justice), but there are also ethics of *community* (concerns about duties to the group), and *divinity* (concerns about purity and sanctity). Following this work, Jonathan Haidt and his colleagues later developed a so-called Moral Foundations Theory – a contemporary incarnation of moral pluralism. Initially, Haidt sought to demonstrate that harm-based morality (understood broadly as encompassing physical/psychological harm, injustice and violations of rights) is not the only kind of morally relevant domain in different cultures and different socio-economic groups (Haidt et al. 1993). More specifically, he conducted a study among Americans and Brazilians of high and low socio-economic status. In this study, he investigated the tendency to *moralize* harmless offenses by presenting to participants rather provocative scenarios, for instance: describing a woman who is cleaning a toilet with a national flag, consensual sex between siblings or eating one's own pet dog. Importantly, Haidt followed only some aspects of the Turiel's method (e.g., he included universality question, but did not included the question about authority independence), also, he included a Harm probe to check whether participants perceived any harm in those allegedly harmless scenarios (for details see Haidt et al. 1993). Haidt found that "Harm is neither necessary nor sufficient as a marker of moral issues" (*ibid*.: 626) for Brazilians and lower socio-economic status Americans. This is considered as evidence against Kohlberg's and Turiel's type of monism (i.e., that all

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2 A clarification is in order. Contemporary monists and pluralists agree that there is such a thing as moral domain (broadly construed) – a separate and psychologically realistic domain of normative cognition, as opposed to non-moral normative domains. This basic assumption is not disputed by neither of them. However, there is a position arguing that perhaps there is no separate moral domain with special psychological characteristics, i.e., moral norms are not a *natural kind* (Kelly and Stich 2007; Sripada and Stich 2006; for discussion see also Machery and Mallon 2010). Instead, these *relativists* hypothesize, there is a general normative psychology and only via social learning we acquire culturally specific norms of conduct, even such norms as prohibition to harm or act fairly in cooperative ventures (e.g., Henrich and Henrich, 2007). In other words, culture determines what is moral and what is not, if such a concept is ever used by particular groups.

morality stems from harm and justice considerations).

On the bases of this research and other accounts from cultural psychology and anthropology, Haidt and his colleagues later developed a thoroughly pluralistic account of morality. They argued that there are at least five moral domains, comprising transgressions related to concerns about (1) care/harm, (2) fairness/cheating, (3) loyalty/betrayal, (4) authority/subversion, and (5) sanctity/degradation (Haidt and Graham, 2007; for a recent theoretical review see Graham et al. 2013; see also Haidt 2012; for other pluralistic proposals see Rai and Fiske 2011; Sinnott-Armstrong and Wheatley 2012). All these five domains are partly constituted by innate and functionally specialized psychological mechanisms that have evolved to deal with specific social or natural challenges. Different cultures, in this respect, differently re-work 'the first draft of the moral mind' (Haidt and Graham, 2007). That is, even if there are common moral foundations, still, the final product is culturally diverse moral systems, simply because different cultures emphasize different normative contents. It should be noted, however, that recently developed pluralistic Moral Foundations Theory relies on different methods. That is, instead of following Haidt's original method (which followed Turiel's method), they now constructed a new Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ). MFQ assumes that there are five independent normative contents in the moral domain and constructs five types of questions to probe all of them. This way Haidt and colleagues expect to elicit systematic responses of different cultural,

socio-economic and demographic groups. MFQ does not try to prove that there are five different normative contents, it simply provides "a reliable, valid, and easy-to-use tool for exploring this expanded moral domain" (Graham, et al. 2011: 382). However, contemporary monists do not agree with this assumption, they believe that it is possible to account for such a moral diversity by assuming less.

3.2. Monists: arguing for a narrower scope of normative content

The aforementioned pluralists criticized Kohlberg and Turiel as monists (though Turiel separated harmful and injustice transgressions), who tried to reduce all morally relevant concerns to the ethics of *autonomy*. Interestingly, Turiel responded to this criticism by pointing out that perhaps there are other ways to interpret the evidence about allegedly harmless offenses (a la Shweder and Haidt), it might be possible to re-describe those responses in terms of harm and fairness (Turiel et al. 1987). Indeed, monists argue, we still need more evidence in order to rule out the re-description strategy, the evidence should point out that other than Harm or Fairness normative contents are doing the real job (see also Fraser, 2012). Thus, in this context, recent monists proposed new ways to conceptualize the moral domain.

Currently, there are two types of monists: harm-based and fairness-based. I will start with the former. For instance, Gray and colleagues have argued that harmful transgressions constitute the basic moral domain, implying a completely monistic view of morality (for review see Gray et al. 2012). This conception of morality is

based on the *mind perception* research paradigm (e.g., Gray et al. 2007). They argue that "morality is essentially represented by a cognitive template that combines a perceived intentional agent with a perceived suffering patient" (Gray et al. 2012: 102), and this moral dyadic template (intentional agent and suffering patient) is "a core feature of all immoral acts" (*ibid*.:107). Moreover, they argue that there are no harmless transgressions in folk moral cognition, simply because the dyadic template compels "the mind to perceive victims even when they are objectively absent" (Gray et al. 2014: 1). Thus, on this account, ostensibly harmless transgressions (e.g., flag burning, family dog eating, consensual incest) activate the concept of harm, whose normative content does the *moralizing* job. That is, all *moral* transgressions "should lead to the perception of harm" (*ibid*.: 3).

However, questioning the above harm-based monistic position, Paulo Sousa and colleagues have argued for a deflationary view of the morality of harm. They argued that, conceptually speaking, harmful transgressions evoke the relevant normative conviction (i.e., a conviction that an action is wrong objectively and universally) if and only if they are seen as involving injustice (see Sousa 2009; Sousa et al. 2009; Piazza et al. 2013; Sousa and Piazza 2014). In other words, they have claimed that harmful transgressions *qua* moral transgressions are reducible to injustice transgressions. Note, not all harmful actions are transgressions (e.g., a dentist causing you pain because he wants to fix your teeth), only those harmful actions that involve *basic-rights violation* or *injustice* are categorized as moral transgressions

(e.g. a dentist causing you pain because he wants to obtain your golden tooth). Similarly, Sousa and colleagues hypothesized that perhaps other normative contents (a la Haidt) could be reduced to injustice considerations, although more evidence is needed to show that.

Finally, Baumard and colleagues have argued more radically that many of Haidt's domains are not clearly seen as dissociated from the domain of fairness, which opens the possibility that these domains are moralized only insofar as they involve fairness considerations (Baumard et al. 2013; Sperber and Baumard 2012). This way, taken together, Sousa, Baumard and their colleagues suggest an alternative fairness-based monistic view. More specifically, in their *Behavioral & Brain Sciences* target article, Baumard, Andre and Sperber briefly addressed this questions by suggesting a broader (reductive) and a narrower (eliminative) approach to morality. According to the broader reductive approach, "in so far as [morally relevant] behaviors are moralized, they are so because they are regulated by considerations of fairness" (2013: 110). According to the narrower approach "many norms, including some norms associated with a sense of rights or duties, are not moral norms" (*ibid.*). The narrower view appears to suggest that the notion of morality is a matter of terminological dispute, one can carry on studying morality as it is defined and ignore other morally relevant considerations. However, it seems that Baumard is willing to take on challenge and incorporate those other relevant considerations, that is, he takes a broader reductive approach. Again, this is still very much an open empirical question, so far there is no

evidence to prove or to disprove this broadly reductive approach to morality.

3.3. The role of normative conviction

Recall, in Turiel tradition the scope of the moral domain is delineated by the 'nomological cluster' of conceptual elements, composed of normative content (1) that is specified by normative conviction (2)-(5). As noted in Kelly et al. (2007), such a characterization seems to imply some kind of probabilistic law: if (1), then (2)-(5). However, as it was mentioned, the normative conviction can be dissociated from the normative content. This way, by refining Turiel's traditional method, one could have a robust criteria to specify any kind of normative content as moral domain.

To give an illustration of how particular normative conviction can specify normative content I will briefly present our current research (Berniūnas et al., *manuscript*). Partly following Turiel's method, we characterized the normative conviction specifying moral transgressions (e.g., the conviction that killing an innocent person is wrong) in contraposition to the normative conviction specifying conventional transgressions (e.g., the conviction that eating a meal with one's fingers is wrong), in terms of two dimensions: while moral transgressions are seen as authority independent (i.e., their wrongness is not cancellable by the decision of any authority) and general in scope (i.e., their wrongness extends to different places and times), conventional transgressions are seen as authority dependent and/or local in scope. From this perspective, the claim that there are different normative contents within the

moral domain is tantamount to the claim that ordinary people can have the above strong normative conviction in relation to different types of normative contents.

Our research, with a revised version of the moral-conventional task, was conducted in non-WEIRD context (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic; see Henrich et al. 2010). Specifically, the study was conducted in Ulan Bator, the capital city of Mongolia. The results suggest that Mongolians are inclined to moralize all five Haidtian domains (Haidt 2012), which would constitute a cross-cultural evidence in favor of moral pluralism. However, there is some evidence indicating that concerns about harm can be conceptually reduced to the concerns about fairness (a la Sousa and Piazza 2014). Interestingly, the strong reduction claim, as advocated by Baumard et al. (2013), does not seem to hold, as many participants moralized these remaining domains independently of a concern with fairness, although with some exceptions. Thus, there remain some unanswered questions and more evidence is needed.

As this example illustrates, a clearly characterized normative conviction (call it "moral signature") can help to delineated the scope of moral domain. Indeed, in combination with cross-cultural samples, this criteria could help us map the moral domain in a more detailed manner. Of course, there could be alternative characterizations of the normative conviction (see, for instance, Goodwin and Darley 2008; and Tetlock 2003), but an underlying intuition here seems to be the same – that to most people certain transgressions appear as *intrinsically* wrong.

4. Conclusions

The aim of this brief review was to sketch some basic conceptual disagreements between moral psychologists. On the one hand, researchers put a strong emphasis on the normative content while delineating the moral domain, and this seems to be the main source of all disagreements. On the other hand, some suggested to use additional psychological criteria to specify the moral domain, that is, the normative conviction, but this area is underdeveloped and requires more conceptual work.

With these issues in mind, we have organized a conference at Vilnius University, 9-11 October 2014: "The Moral Domain: Conceptual Issues in Moral Psychology"[3]. A modest expectation was to spell out some of the problems in defining 'morality' within moral psychological research. A somewhat optimistic expectation was to resolve at least some of the issues to the full satisfaction of the debating positions. For one, issues were not resolved, but the talks provided a stimulation, at least for me, to articulate some of the problems that should be further addressed in order to move on with our research. Of course, this is not an exhaustive list of issues, but a useful check-list for my own future empirical work.

First, the *emic/etic* perspective. It is worth mentioning that moral psychologists apply the term 'moral' in the context of *folk* normative judgments. Indeed, it is often assumed that folk judgment of wrongness is a *prima facia* evidence of folk

moral judgement. Here, it seems, researchers *infer* the concept of morality from people's responses. One important distinction coming from anthropology might be useful here. Anthropologists make a distinction between *emic* and *etic* perspective, where the former implies a perspective of people themselves, i.e, words or concepts as they are conceived and used by people who are under investigation. Whereas an *etic* perspective implies concepts that are constructed and used by social scientist who study a particular group of people. Thus, it is not always clear whether moral psychologists draw this distinction in their studies. One thing is clear, ordinary people (non-philosophers or non-psychologists) don't use the term 'moral' in the same way experts use. Moreover, it is also not so clear whether people imply the concept of morality (as it is understood by experts) when they make wrongness judgments. One reason to doubt that this the case is an astonishing lack of qualitative evidence from diverse cultural groups, something anthropologists routinely do (for an excellent exception see Buchtel, *manuscript*). So it would be safe to assume that psychologists, for the most part, have an *etic* perspective in mind when they study folk moral judgments. In future research, therefore, two levels of description (emic and etic) should be closely aligned.

Second, *explicit/implicit* distinction. In the previous paragraph I have emphasized the need for the emic perspective, for qualitative evidence. But besides the previous methodological proposal we should also pay attention to distinction between explicit reports (as elicited by qualitative

methods) and implicitly held concepts and beliefs that are not necessarily consciously accessible. This level, thus, should still be studied with experimental tools, and this level is very important in current debate. Monists claim that explicit evidence of people's responses is not enough to support a thoroughly pluralistic picture of morality. Baumard, for instance, argued that perhaps an implicit kind of evidence will prove (or disprove) his fairness-based monistic position[4]. His theory assumes an evolved psychology of fairness that, according to him, does all the moralizing job, but it's workings are bellow our conscious awareness.

Third, I should stress again that a distinction between the normative content and the normative conviction should be explored in a more detailed manner. And finally, cross-cultural evidence – evidence that will eventually determine the contours of the moral domain.

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[4] From personal communication.

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MORALĖS SRITIES APIBRĖŽIMAI MORALĖS PSICHOLOGIJOJE

Renatas Berniūnas

Santrauka. Straipsnio tikslas yra apžvelgti šiuolaikinę moralės psichologijos literatūrą, kurioje yra aptariama moralės sritis. Šiuo metu psichologai nesutaria, kaip geriau apibrėžti moralės terminą ir kaip atskirti moralinę nuo nemoralinės normatyvinės srities. Šiais klausimais yra kelios prieštaraujančios pozicijos: psichologas Elliotas Turielis teigia, kad moralės pagrindą sudaro žalos ir teisingumo sąvokos, o monistai bando suvesti visą moralę tik į vieną – arba žalą, arba teisingumą. Galiausiai pliuralistai išskiria bent penkis moralės pagrindus. Straipsnis apžvelgs šias pozicijas ir pasiūlys galimus šių pozicijų teorinio pagrįstumo tikrinimo būdus.

Pagrindiniai žodžiai: moralės sritis, moralės psichologija, normatyvinis pažinimas.