Condemnation and coordination: DeScioli and Kurzban

FUNCTION OF MORALITY. DeScioli and Kurzban's approach is adaptationist: we can make inferences about function from structure, and vice versa (as, e.g., in the structure and function of particular organs).

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The first question DeScioli and Kurzban consider is the very idea of morality, specifically: are our moral judgements and intuitions sufficiently stable and coherent to have any evolved function at all? In overtly psychological terms, this means: is the cognitive module(s) responsible for moral judgements and intuitions sufficiently coherent to have any function?

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The argument proceeds along familiar lines. There is evidence that moral judgements and intuitions don't track welfare. There is also evidence that they are not derived from the respect for authority (and so are distinct from etiquette and purely social conventions).

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There is a wide variety of moral norms across times and places. Yet, beneath the surface, there is coherence of moral experience. Similarities are observed in reasoning patterns, condemnation practices, apparent commitment to impartiality, and emotions such as guilt and shame.

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There is, then, sufficient cohesion of moral experience for us to ask the question: what adaptive function does this unified experience serve? (A Kantian paraphrase: what are the transcendental conditions of moral experience? Of course the answer here will be fully empirical.)

MORALITY AS A GAME. Moral exchanges, DeScioli and Kurzban observe, often involve three players: actors, second parties, and third parties. The actors act towards the second parties, and the third parties pass a moral judgement. They either praise or condemn. However, condemnation prevails. This is a very realistic take on what actually goes on. When we imagine, or ask others to imagine, various scenarios and pass moral judgements on them, there typically will be a story involving actors and acted-on, plus us the observers. The actions we are asked to evaluate may be good or bad, subject either to praise or condemnation. However, moral judgement on the whole is dominated by condemnation.

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The three-party interaction that involves violations and condemnations may be examined from three perspectives:

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Judges (condemners): Must decide on the nature of the action, determine the motives and goals of the perpetrators, and allocate punishment. They have to tread carefully to avoid (excessive) retaliation from the perpetrators and balance it against the potential rewards from the victims.

Perpetrators: Must weigh the costs of their actions against the revenge of the victims. Normative violations must be undetected, so far as possible. Intentions must be presented outwardly, to the possible judges, as benign. In addition, they have to be able to compute the chances of retaliation, and train themselves not to engage in the actions that are likely to prompt such a retaliation (i.e. to develop inhibitions against such actions).

Victims: Must minimise the costs of the hostile actions, and one major source for that is aid from the judges (the third party). They have to present themselves *as* victims, and so to influence the judgement of the judges and their punishment routine.

DeScioli and Kurzban speculate that these perspectives are in fact served by different cognitive modules. There are three distinct adaptive problems here, since each individual may be found, and sometimes is found, in one of the three roles.

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CONSCIENCE AND CONDEMNATION. As DeScioli and Kurzban use the terms, conscience is a cognitive mechanism (adaptation) that guides one's action in the capacity of a perpetrator. Condemnation is a mechanism that guides one's action in the capacity of the judge of the actor's past action. They are deployed in different situations: prospective vs. retrospective, knowledge of intentions vs. partial ignorance of them.

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MORALITY AS BASED ON CONSCIENCE. Many evolutionary, also traditional, accounts of morality appealed to the idea of conscience, differently interpreted. Conscience, broadly, is a self-regulating motivation mechanism. There are some surprising difficulties for this explanation. Initially, conscience is invoked to explain the behaviour where individuals act to benefit at the expense of their own interest. Whereas traditional moral views and Martin Luther would simply postulate 'conscience', evolutionary accounts would see this as a problem of altruism. That is, a conscience-driven behaviour would often favour altruistic actions.

But, as we saw earlier (Greene, Haidt), there is plenty of evidence that moral behaviour is very often non-consequentialist. Thus this evidence points at a dilemma: either behaviour is driven by conscience and non-altruism, or it is driven by factors other than conscience. However, within the evolutionary framework, it's hard to see how to accommodate the first horn of the dilemma. Hence we have to look for another set of factors. The coordination-condemnation view offers an alternative.

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