

## Drawing from Models of Consciousness to Inform Ethical Inquiry

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The question of right and wrong has been viewed through various lenses in philosophy as well as other disciplines; recently, commentators in cognitive science have begun to enter the discussion about ethical judgments, bringing new insight to this discussion, as well as some implications for ethical education. In this paper I intend to do three things. First, I will critique some traditional approaches to ethical inquiry.

10 Second, I will discuss an example of a theory of consciousness stemming from cognitive science, and also discuss questions raised by consciousness studies, not only about the way that we do ethics, but also for the way that we teach ethics. Finally, I will propose a new approach to ethical inquiry, which takes in to account what theories of consciousness are telling us about our own thinking.

The dilemma over ethical methodologies finds its origin at the very onset of philosophical discourse, and, many times, perhaps due to the centrality of morality to much of human experience, it is an area of philosophical relevance that's discussed, perhaps more than others, outside of academia. In many ways, this adds a perceived level of responsibility to authors within ethical thought, as it is relevant to fields and

20 areas that are very much a part of the public domain, such as law, medicine, media and education. In academic debate there is much discussion about the nature of ethical

theory, and the various schools of ethical thought, and the pragmatic implications of adhering to one theory or another.

I would not agree that ethicists actually have a level of responsibility that is higher than any other branch of philosophy. However, it does seem that ethics is a ripe area for the exploration of new models of inquiry because there is a level of praxis that is implied in the study of, i.e. “what is right”, that is not necessarily found in questions of metaphysics, epistemology, and other areas of philosophical discourse. In other words, beliefs about ethics can for some, be much more central to human experience insofar as they affect human action and inaction, than questions of equal importance from other  
10 areas within the discipline. Because cognitive science is a relatively new contributor to philosophical discourse, it seems fitting to extend its theories first to areas where we can also assess the implications of this application. For the purposes of this paper, I will restrict my analysis to the application of consciousness theory to individual ethical inquiry, or, the process by which individuals make sense of the ethical dimensions of their own experiences. This theory certainly has implications for the way ethical inquiry is engaged in at a larger scale, as well, but with the aim of brevity in mind, I will focus here mainly on the inquiry process of the individual, but will also discuss the implications of group inquiry to this individual process.

Mark Johnson, a cognitive scientist writing about ethical judgment, criticized  
20 traditional methodologies of ethical theory in his book, *Moral Imagination*.<sup>1</sup> Johnson

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<sup>1</sup> Mark Johnson, “Moral Imagination”, 1994.

echoed the thoughts of Iris Murdoch<sup>2</sup> who criticized moral theory for being uncontextualized. Johnson argues that real ethical theory must be situated in some way, ethical in a particular situation, for a particular person, or at a particular time. Murdoch argues that that moral imagination allows us to explore these particulars and situations without directly experiencing them. Johnson defines moral imagination as the process of “imaginatively discerning various possibilities for acting in a given situation and envisioning the potential help and harm that are likely to result from a given action”. Johnson takes Murdoch’s views a step further and argues that not only is moral imagination crucial to the development of ethical judgments, but that the use of  
10 metaphor is also a critical element of moral education.

Johnson then makes two claims. First, he maintains that metaphor and imagination are critical tools in encouraging people to make educated ethical judgments. Second, he claims that traditional ethical theories fall short at accurately being descriptive about the individual’s lived experience of ethical judgments. To illustrate this point, he claims that all thinking is imbued with emotion and, thus, judgment; and, further, that these emotions differ from person-to-person, situation-to-situation, making traditional ethical theory overly uncontextualized. This, he maintains, necessitates the creation of a less linear and rigid notion of ethical judgment, rather than a linear, absolute notion of right and wrong. Using metaphor and imagination, he  
20 argues, allow us to begin to perceive and, in a way, experience emotions and judgments

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<sup>2</sup> Iris Murdoch, “Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals”, 1992.

that are not inherently ours in order to make ethical judgments that are reflective of a variety of perspectives without a notion of universal moral law.

Johnson does not set out to claim that traditional ethical theory is wrong, nor does he claim that it is not worthy of discourse, but, rather, that cognitive scientific research has forced a moving away from the perceived instrumental value of more traditional theories, and towards a view of them as common tools in a pluralistic notion of morality. To make this argument, Johnson proposes a dichotomy between rationality and reason, which he equates to absolutist theories of morality, and passion, which he infers is related to the more artistic, metaphorical and imaginative ways of thinking. The latter, he argues, mirrors cognitive science's observations about the ways in which the mind operates.

In proposing this dichotomy Johnson appears to run the risk of being relativistic, by maintaining that passion allows the individual to be the determinant factor in constructing his or her own framework of morality and notion of right and wrong. This fear is not unfounded, as much work in philosophical thought has aimed to solidify morality in such a way that it is (at least somewhat) objective, and applicable for common goals such as setting laws and enforcing policies. Ethical theories commonly claim that there is a universal ethical guideline that is applicable to all people, based on a definition of personhood (such as all rational people; all adults, etc.). To understand why this is not a risk, it is best to think of traditional ethical theories as tools that provide the basis of a framework for each individual to build upon when developing

their own notion of morality. In this sense, it is not that most existing theories are necessarily too simplistic or not useful, but simply that they are not sufficient for building a complete framework for ethical judgment. In this sense, it is not necessary to reject the objective and rational dimensions of ethical theory, but, instead to also accept what Johnson calls the passionate dimensions of ethical theory as well.

To explain Johnson's ideas more clearly, I will use the illustration of "kairos, borrowed from the Greeks who used the word to describe a notion of time in which the individual seems to step outside of traditional linear chronology, when doing something they are passionate about. This is a dimension which may be best understood by the illustration of an artist who, to the outsider, is extraordinarily attentive to her work, however, that artist, being so engulfed by her project, may work for hours without noticing that time is, in fact, passing by. This, I would argue, is the fusion of rationality and passion that Johnson argues is a metaphor for the way in which we can most easily practice ethical thinking, when one is so attentive to the task at hand but that the task is at the same time rationally engaged in and passionately enacted.

Johnson is not proposing a relativistic dichotomy between objective, reasonable notions of morality and a more individualistic notion. Rather, what Johnson proposes is analogous to Kairos, where one utilizes not only rational dimensions of ethical thought, such as objective measures or theories, as well as more passionate dimensions such as emotion and intuition. . Decisions made in this way borrow not only from pre-existing theories individually, but some times in unison, and possibly with a new interpretation

of their instrumental value. In this way, Johnson is borrowing from cognitive scientific research, which talks about a non-linear, and perhaps even networked notion of consciousness.

This balance is demonstrated in contemporary theories on consciousness, as well as research in artificial intelligence, which argue that, perhaps the mind does not function in a behavioristic linear fashion, but that, on the contrary, we don't have to dismiss ideas of constructs altogether and accept a tabula rasa theory of mind either.

Johnson also argues strongly that metaphor plays a crucial role in the development of ethical judgment. Johnson explains that an individual can use  
10 metaphor to understand ethical situations that they have not experienced, drawing inferences from situations that they have experienced (i.e. this situation is like X) , to better develop a frame of reference for the moral judgments that they make. Later in this paper I will argue that this has implications for shared ethical inquiry, and further, that pedagogical constructs of ethics can be informed by cognitive scientific models of consciousness, such as Pete Mandik's Unicorn argument (2009).

The philosopher's unicorn is exemplary of a model of consciousness which lends itself to doing ethics. Pete Mandik (2009) argues "...since there are representations of things that do not exist, there cannot be any such property as being represented, and thus no such property with which to identify either being conscious or being  
20 phenomenal." In other words, our minds aren't making a conscious representation of a unicorn, but, rather, the mind applies a series of "X 'is like' Y" models to objects that we

have experienced and can represent to a new construction (i.e. the unicorn). In this particular case we could say that “A Unicorn Horn is like a Rhinoceros’ horn”, and “A Unicorn Body is like a Horse’s body”, and “Unicorn Wings are like Birds’ Wings”. We could claim that we are representing particular instances of “unicorn” which we have experiences, namely, toy unicorns, unicorns from movies, etc., but ultimately we must concede that the original concept of “unicorn”, was not a representation of any one thing that was experienced.

It is obvious that consciousness is not merely representation as this entails that thoughts have intentionality, i.e. that thoughts are *about* a particular, making us  
10 conscious of that particular. Obviously, in saying that we are conscious of a unicorn, we are not saying that there is a representation of a unicorn in our minds, as there is nothing for that thought to be representative of. Rather, we are conscious of a conglomeration of thoughts about things that we have experienced, whether directly or indirectly, things that have properties. Mandik’s Unicorn theory of consciousness clearly shows how ethical inquiry can be informed by cognitive science. Assuming one accepts Johnson’s claim that there is no universal moral law, we must accept that ethics is a constructed concept, and Johnson seems to offer a realistic model of constructing an individual notion of right and wrong by using rational, imaginative, and metaphorical thinking.

20 I would take Johnson’s argument a step further and argue that this sort of thinking is actually conducive to group process, as well, in so far as this affects the

individuals construction of an ethical framework (i.e. the individual utilizes the group as a collective mind for individual decision-making). If we were to use a sort of “group kairos” model for common ethical inquiry, while engaging in committee work, or in a classroom, or other collective setting, we can also safely assume that the people engaged in the discourse will have had relatively different experiences with various ethical dimensions. This sort of dialogical inquiry in to ethics is particularly conducive to teaching ethics because it creates, in essence, one mind for thinking and critically examining, while maintaining multiple individual minds for ethical decision making. In other words, a group can think collaboratively, while individuals still maintain control  
10 over their own framework of right and wrong.

Mandik’s unicorn argument describes how we make meaning of things that do not exist. He claims that we do not, in fact, represent something that exists out in the world, but, rather, that we take pieces of things that we have experienced and construct a new concept. This theory of consciousness serves two very important roles when applied to ethical inquiry. First, this explains how one can understand someone else’s example whether they’ve experienced something similar or not. His or her mind takes pieces of things they have experienced (whether directly, or through books, television, etc.), and constructs a mental image of the other person’s experience.

The second, and arguably more important contribution that this theory of  
20 consciousness has to offer is insight in to the construction of an ethical framework. The assumption that there is no universal moral law, and that, in fact, traditional ethical

theories are more useful as tools to help the individual construct his or her own ethical framework seems to be much more conducive to our understanding of how the mind works. Drawing from Mandik’s discussion of the unicorn, and assuming that there is no universal moral law, it is easy to think about the construction of an ethical framework in much the same way as we construct the concept of a unicorn.

I would argue that because of this method of constructing “right” and “wrong” can be most fruitfully accomplished in a dialogical community, as this actually allows the individual to draw from the experiences of each member of the group. Just as our concept of the unicorn is incomplete if we are missing an important piece, (horse, for  
10 example), so our ethical framework will be less complete if it does not include any level of diversity. A person who has not experienced racism, for example, would have no motivation to incorporate race into his or her ethical framework, and, in fact, might be ignorant that race is something that might be included. In a diverse group, however, this individual can experience race through the lens of another. This, too, is particularly helpful in teaching ethics, as, many times, the scope of a students’ experiences are limited on their own, but actually quite complimentary when viewed beside one another.

In fact, it may already be intuitive for to use this type of collaborative thinking when discussing questions in philosophy that may seem more abstract, such as “what is  
20 real”, and “what is possible?” For example, when thinking about qualia and belief, the t the thought experiment of the inverted spectrum is commonly utilized to clarify and

imagine the possible implications of our thinking. Similarly, in philosophy of mathematics, metaphor can be used to make sense of numbers that are not tangible. In this sense it seems that ethics is actually one of the only branches of philosophy where the use collaborative thinking is discouraged, when questions are posed, such as “what is right?” and “how are we to live?”.

One might object that this sort of thinking cannot construct a pedagogical framework for teaching ethics, but rather, that it is a mere description of human intuition. I would argue that not only is this sort of thinking descriptive of what goes on intra-personally and within one mind, but that this is also possible interpersonally, through an educational community that represents a collective mind. Within a community of inquiry, individuals are relieved from the burden of having to imagine all possibilities by themselves, and instead are allowed to rely on others to contribute to the group’s collective thinking process, imaginative, or perceived thinking being contributed to by members with varied experiences when a community is diverse in nature.

References:

1. Mandik, Pete, 2009. Beware of the Unicorn: Consciousness as Being Represented and Other Things that Don't Exist. *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 16(1)
2. Johnson, Mark; Moral Imagination.
- 10 3. Iris Murdoch, "Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals", 1992.