

## Philosophy 418L

Fall 2019

Clifford Bakalian

### Innate Moral Systems

An action's moral worth and value has great impact in much of today's world of social, economic and political issues. While our society likes portraying ourselves as "right," I would like to question how justifiable this action can be. I believe that determining if morality is innate or not would influence how we view moral systems as a whole. I see it as there are two main parts to morality. There is the moral agency, which consists of the ability to make moral judgements and the capabilities to come to conclusions about morality. Then there is the moral system, what an agent actually determines to be morally good, or morally bad. I believe the important and more interesting question is in regards to an innate moral system and thus I will focus primarily on determining its innateness. To begin, I will discuss what innateness is. After I will talk more about morality, what it is and if its innate and its relation to emotion. Finally I will talk about emotion and the innateness of its existence and function in regards to morality.

The term innateness has caused much debate in various forms of research and fields of study. As Griffiths points out many of the previous methods to define innateness are confused and cover a wide range of considerations. However, Griffiths seems to adequately point out three main things the concept of innateness is confused with. He refers to each of these things as developmental fixity, species nature, and intended outcome. Regardless if Griffiths is correct in saying that the concept of innateness is confused with these terms, I believe these properties lay a good foundation to start the conversation of defining innateness. To clarify, these concepts seem like good criteria something *may* have to qualify as innate. Rather, the more of these properties a trait has, the more probable the trait is to being "innate." I will use "innate trait" here to refer to traits which have a preva-

lence to appear in the normal course of development. This is a theory briefly mentioned by Samuels. I believe that the normal development theory can encompass the three properties that Griffiths puts forward as well as includes some things he leaves out.

The first property that Griffiths puts forward is the property of developmental fixity. If a trait has this developmental fixity then it would mean that this trait is hard to change. This trait's development would be independent, or at least insensitive to environmental or outside influence. One such example is the ability to learn language. It would seem that regardless of which culture or region of the world one is born, they are capable of learning some form of spoken language. However, there is one small issue with this concept though I believe the normal development thesis is capable of answering it. That is, traits that are environmentally insensitive seem to have been the product of their environment. It is through years of evolution that these traits seem to be environmentally insensitive as they are created as a byproduct of their environment. However, I believe that Griffiths has a point that traits that are "environmentally insensitive" are difficult to change. Hence, I think we can simplify this statement to something like the following: innate traits may have the property that they are difficult to change. This concept is something the normal development thesis covers. That is, traits that tend to develop in the "normal" course of development, could also develop in "non-normal" development. So even if the environment changes drastically, the normal development thesis states that it is still possible for the trait to emerge as it would seem that "normal development" is independent from environmental factors.

The second concept innateness is confused for is "species nature". That is, the trait must be something that helps defines its species. Griffiths believes this should indicate the trait is typical in the species and if a creature lacks it, that organism is atypical. I believe this can also be considered under the normal development thesis as species nature also refers to the properties that make a species normal. Each species has traits that define

it. Suppose species  $S$  has a set of traits  $T$  that define it. Should organism  $O$  exhibit traits from  $T$ , then  $O$  is considered normal. The smaller the union of the traits that  $O$  exhibit and  $T$ , the more abnormal  $O$  is considered. After all, my pet Jade is a very abnormal fish because she has fur paws and meows all the time.

Lastly, the concept of intended outcome. That is, the trait appears how the organism is meant to have it. Should the trait be tampered with, then it would appear that the organism itself is deformed. I believe this to be very similar to the species nature concept, except instead of traits that make up a certain species, Griffiths is referring to traits that can be compared to how effective they are to similar traits at accomplishing certain tasks. One such example is the ability sympathize with others. Two people can have differing capabilities to sympathize with their peers, yet both still have this trait. While this is an interesting point to make, I believe that it is not truly important when ascertaining if a trait is innate.

With these concepts in mind, I would like to make a few final points about the normal development thesis before we move on to the innateness of morality. First, it is important to remember that the normal development thesis does not conclude a trait to be innate or not but rather states whether a trait is more likely to be innate or not. That being said, the normal development thesis implies that regardless of how strong a certain trait shows up in an individual organism, if the trait shows up in the course of normal development, then it is more likely than if the trait did not show up. In addition, the normal development thesis does not penalize if traits do not show up in non-normal environments, but could reward traits that show up in both normal and non-normal environments.

Now that we have established a baseline for what innateness, I want to establish what morality is. We have already established the difference between moral agency and moral systems, but I want to dive into moral agency first because I believe that having moral agency is a necessary condition for a moral system. To be more clear, I want to

discuss why we may have abilities relating to morality in our society. Joyce, in his paper proclaims that morality is innate due to evolutionary concerns, however I am inclined to disagree with Joyce. However, in his argument, Joyce sets down a good foundation for why we have moral agency in our development process.

Let us begin by defining the moral system as a system in which we can classify actions or things as "good" or "bad." This, as Joyce says, implies a few things. First, an action that is morally good is something we ought to do and an action that is morally bad is something we ought not to do. For example, It would be odd, and perhaps even contradictory to say, *X is morally good, I ought not do it*. Second, the existence of moral actions and judgements would imply there to be a notion of justice and the existence of "the emotion of guilt (or 'a moral conscious')" (Joyce). That is, certain emotions like guilt can guide or alter our judgements of moral worth. This also means that morally "bad" actions should be punished, and morally "good" actions should be rewarded. This system of punishments and rewards leads to the next point of how moral agency may have been integrated into our daily lives.

Joyce hypothesizes that moral systems evolved in humans societies because having a system which promoted fairness ("justice") worked best for our survival. This is ultimately because we needed to work together and split up tasks for our societies to grow. It would appear that we needed a system which would incentivise the actions which may not benefit us at the time, but actions that we would understand to benefit us in the future. We can see these actions in groups of monkeys when they groom one another. A monkey may be incentivised to groom its peer because she understands that she will be groomed in turn and be safe from ticks and other parasites. Studies show that sometimes the actions one monkey takes could be gamble and a system of justice ("morality") exists in these situations. A monkey is usually happy to groom members of their own group because there is an understanding of mutual help between them. However, when the monkey

they are to groom is not part of their group, a gamble must be made. It is usually the case that the monkey will groom the stranger because it will expect the grooming treatment back. Should the groomed monkey not return the favor, then the monkey that groomed will be quite angry. This would seem to indicate the idea of fairness is present in the mind of the monkey and that if this fairness is not satisfied, then something is wrong. I bring up this entire situation because this idea of justice and fairness is what much of morality and moral judgment is based upon. However, I posit that the moral justice and moral fairness concepts are based in emotion and as such in order to continue further we must talk about emotion.

It would seem, as the monkey study indicates, that emotion is tied closely to our idea of fairness and justice which consequently imply that emotion is tied to our idea of morality. For the most part, I think it is safe to say many people get a "bad" feeling when something they believe to be morally wrong has occurred, and a "good" feeling when they believe a morally right thing has occurred. It is in my experience that many people use these emotions of good and bad to indicate the moral value of certain actions. I must point out that I am not saying people use these emotions to outright determine moral judgements, but that emotions are used as guides to help come to a judgement. Also, once a moral judgement is made, it is not emotion that prevents us from doing morally bad actions, nor does it solely incentivize us to do morally good things. Rather, emotion helps us make moral judgements, but not dictate our practice of moral actions. Thus, if we are going to talk about the innateness of morality, we must first talk about the innateness of emotions.

The emotional systems that humans have is quite complex and there are parts that are quite unknown, however for the sake of this paper we will be assuming there are two major aspects to the emotional system as put forth by Novianto. Namely that there is the biological and cognitive aspects of the emotional system. I will first discuss the biological

system and its impact on innate emotion and then I will discuss the cognitive aspects. I will conclude by detailing how both systems impact the overall innate system of morality.

I believe it is safe to say that we can have emotions triggered by either outside or internal events which then triggers some biological response which our brain then interprets as emotions. The biological aspect however, is just the feeling of those sensations. I do not think anyone will criticize or argue if I say this biological system of response to stimuli is innate. That is, it would seem that regardless of the environment that a person would find themselves, the person would be capable of feeling sensations in response to a stimuli. It would also seem that it is abnormal if a person of the human species did not feel emotion at some level. Finally, those that feel little to no emotion usually are diagnosed with depression or some other issue which one would say is not healthy. This biological response is considered to have many of the traits which are found in the natural development theory and so I feel pretty confident to say that this is at least innate to humans. However, the issue is people still have to understand and interpret their emotions even with the biological side. Consequently, this would seem the verdict of innate emotion lies solely on the innateness of the cognitive aspect of a person.

So while there is a biological component which gives us sensations based on outside stimuli, there is still much to do when it comes to emotions. Namely there is a process that converts these sensations to concepts (like pain, pleasure, good and bad). Peter Carruthers and Georges Rey both have their own opinions on how we process and analyze our emotions. Carruthers proposes there is an Interpretive Sensory-Access (ISA) model where we are just interpreting our emotions with no privileged access into our own minds. Rey on the other hand proposes a tagging system named TAGS where we have privileged access to the input and output of our "mind." I believe that while both systems differ on how we conclude our own emotion, both are ultimately not innate to humans.

The ISA model questions the usual assumption that we as people always have some

idea of what is going on in our minds. While many people are under the impression they are aware and always know what's happening in their heads, Carruthers points out much evidence to the contrary. It would seem, as Carruthers points out, that we have a "mind reading" facility that we use to ascertain and determine what others are feeling. Carruthers posits that we use this same system on ourselves rather than having a separate facility for self introspection. This would imply that we are interpreting our own emotions and actions much like we do to others. The most prominent piece of evidence Carruthers has is a study involving people given free socks. In the study, participants were allowed to choose a free pair of socks from one of four bins. There was no difference between the socks however when questioned why the participant choose one pair over another, participants were quick to justify their choice. In a follow up survey, it was concluded that these participants truly believed their justifications. I believe this has one major implication to the innateness of emotion. If we are truly just interpreting our emotions to the best of our ability, then the specific emotions we conclude we feel are not innate. This is because the specific emotion in question could not follow the natural development thesis. To clarify, the ability to feel and process emotion may be innate, but whether we will always feel good or bad about an action is not. This is analogous to the idea that we have the innate knowledge to learn a language, but not an innateness of Japanese or English. Thus, it would seem that if morality is dependent on how we feel about certain actions, then the terms of "morally good" and "morally bad" are not innate.

Alternatively, in the TAGS model presented by Rey, we have the case that we have some sort of inner model in our systems that tags each sensation with an emotion. However, Rey concedes two very important points. First, that when we learn the tags we scribe to sensations due to the many occurrences of that sensation. This way we know what sensations to ignore and which to identify. Second, that part of this tagging has to deal with the environment and context the sensation occurs. Should I feel blood rushing from my stomach very quickly, it would seem that in some situations this would be the sensation of

dread, while in others, it is the sensation of excitement. So again, like the case with Carruthers argument, one could argue that tagging sensations as certain emotions is an innate trait, what those sensations are is not innate. One could tell a young child that every time they feel the sensation of cold, that the associated feeling is happiness. Thus it could be the case that tagging appears in the normal course of development, but not the association of cold and happiness. Hence, in Rey's case, the rise of certain emotions is not innate either.

Ultimately, I do not believe that there is a way which we can say that certain emotions are innate. Rather, we can only say for sure that the ability to feel emotions and interpret them (either through ISA or TAGS) could be innate. Earlier we decided that our ability to feel and analyze emotion is the basis for creating moral agency, but it is the moral system (the feelings of "good" and "bad"), which tells us if something is "morally good" or "morally bad." Thus, because the ability to analyze and feel emotions could be innate, then it would should follow that the ability to create a moral judgements (ie. moral agency) could be innate. However, because the trait of feeling certain emotions in certain circumstances, or even not feeling certain emotions in general is not innate, I would argue that the moral system itself is not innate.

*Carruthers, Knowledge of Our Own Thoughts is just as Interpretive as Knowledge of the Thoughts of Others, 2011*

*Griffiths, What is Innateness, 2001*

*Joyce, Is Morality Innate?, 2001*

*Novianto and Williams, Innate and Learned Emotion Network, 2011*

*Prinz, Moral Psychology, 2008*

*Rey, Introspection, Inattentional Blindness and an Insufficient Inferential Base, 2011*

*Samuels, Is Innateness a Confused Concept?, 2007*