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Talking About “Objective Morality”

For years, science, religion and philosophy have tried to understand more and more about human nature. More specifically, every one of these fields has tried to state more exactly the meaning of what morality really is, and has tried to give their own definition. The article “Do The Right Thing” written by Rebecca Saxe, an assistance professor of brain and cognitive sciences at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, discusses a possible existence of common morality or, in other words, a possible existence of universal and fundamental components of morality, which is also known as objective morality.

In the early 1990s, proponents of cognitive science stated that morality was some sort of natural and inherent sense. Saxe questions, “How and why most of us, most of the time, restrain our basic appetites for food, status, and sex within legal limits, and expect others to do the same. [...] The answer lies in our universal moral sense, one that emerges as naturally as a sense of beauty or ritual”. Just a decade later, new technology had been invented and with it was maybe born new chances to learn more about the nature of the sense of morality. This raised a question; what is going to be done to learn more about it? There are three experiments to be analyzed: an Internet survey, a cognitive study of infants, and a study of the brain imaging.

After creating three scenarios of moral dilemmas, an Internet survey was opened and the result was deeply analyzed to prove its consistency. The Internet project failed because of several reasons. More than two third of the participants were from the United States and not equally from all over the world. The majority of the voters were somehow already interested in moral reasoning so being already aware about the issue their answer wasn't neutral. Lastly, the result of the survey could not be generalized to obtain a general answer for other kinds of moral dilemmas that means that the existence of common or even more clear, objective morality could not be proven.

Secondly, the cognitive study of babies was focused on learning what would be the reaction of a group of twelve-month-old babies watching two different videos: the first one contained shapes (a triangle, a square, and a ball) interacting positively and then negatively with each other and the second one would contain a man and woman interacting positively and then negatively with each other as well. Its results showed that the baby can recognize what is nice and what is mean but he cannot recognize what is right and what is wrong. The experiment failed because it did not answer to the critical question of common morality.

Lastly, a brain imaging would find out if a special brain region dedicated to moral reasoning exists. The way to learn it would be to take an fMRI (a special MRI scan) to an individual who is reading three kinds of sentences that are describing a moral violation, an immoral action, and finally something completely neutral. Even considering that the fMRI shown that certain parts of the brain are always taking part in making moral judgments, it hasn't been proved that within it exists a "special" region for moral reasoning per se.

Referring to this inconclusive study, Rebecca Saxe concludes, "Cognitive science can offer a descriptive theory of moral reasoning, but not a normative one." In a few words, scientists cannot understand the real nature of morality and so it cannot prove that an actual objective morality exists.

Saxe misses her analysis starting by the beginning. None of the experiments she reported in her article were correctly approaching to the problem. Even though the way she approached the problem is inappropriate and pointless, her conclusive point is quite truthful.

Saxe then starts reporting the result of an Internet survey, conducted by Joshua D. Greene, to explain that the basic component of morality cannot be proven through the use of Internet. Even if it would seem to be an obvious statement to make, morality cannot be measured or expressed numerically and so it cannot be surveyed on a multiple choices questionnaire that means that the first problem was not the use of Internet but rather the actual use of the survey. The survey was based on three similar moral dilemmas. One of dilemmas was stated as follows: "A runaway trolley is hurtling down the tracks toward five people who will be killed if it proceeds on its present course. You can save these five people by diverting the trolley onto a different set of tracks, one that has only one person on it, but if you do this that person will be killed. Is it morally permissible to turn the trolley and thus prevent five deaths at the cost of one?" Here, as quickly stated before we have a choice to make between answer A and B. Answer A says, let the trolley go and kill the five people instead just only one and answer B proposes, divert the trolley deciding to kill one person instead of five. Even though, for some people, it may seem to be a stupid statement, in the real life, any choice cannot be reduced into two ways. Life is too complex and articulated, which is the

reason why it seems superficial to reduce a moral choice to two options in a survey. It is possible to find the same kind of example in a scene of the movie *Donnie Darko*. Donnie, the protagonist of the movie, is having a conversation with his professor about an exercise she had just assigned. She wants every single student to read a little card with a trite and elementary dilemma written on it, and then place it on the left side of the blackboard if it is a result of fear or on the right side of the blackboard if it is a result of love. Donnie argues with her about the pointlessness of the exercise. "Life isn't that simple" he says, "...Who cares if Ling Ling returns the wallet and keeps the money? It has nothing to do with either fear or love." The professor Kitty Farmer answers, "Fear and love are the deepest of human emotions" and Donnie powerfully replies, "Okay (...) but there are other things that need to be taken into account here, like the whole spectrum of human emotion. You can't just lump everything into these two categories and then just deny everything else!" Life is not A or B, that's why one cannot take in consideration the answers of a multiple choice test and then come to a conclusion such as the result of objective morality.

Secondly, Rebecca Saxe took in consideration a study of three-year-old babies, ultimately considering the result unacceptable because it is not consistent with the topic: the baby would recognize the difference between nice and mean but not the one between right and wrong. The baby was shown two videos: the first consisted of an interaction between animated shapes and the second consisted of an interaction between two real humans. Finally, scientists would have gotten their conclusion analyzing the baby's reactions. How can one fully interpret the reaction of a baby just considering to which video he is attracted the most? It seems presumptuous that the researcher's interpretation of a baby's reaction to the videos could have been

interpreted into a response to a moral dilemma. The baby may have reacted because of many other different reasons than an actual moral choice. Obviously, the experiment never got a sensible answer.

Lastly, Saxe considered the result of a brain imaging to check if a part of it is specifically dedicated to make moral decisions; of course the experiment failed. The brain is divided in many parts and each one of them does something different. The limbic system, for example, is primarily responsible for our emotional life ("My Webspaces Files"). The left hemisphere tends to be the more analytical part ("Traumatic Brain Injury"). Afterwords, if we were talking about a simple brain activity it would be understandable to look forward to find a dedicated part of the brain, but considering that moral choices are brought by a complex brain activity, then it is pointless to search a specific part that is dedicated just for it. For example, let's go back to the trolley's moral dilemma. When one is thinking about what to do, many parts of the brain are working looking forward to find the best answer. In this case, just to realize that five people are a greater quantity than only one person, one needs to involve his logical and mathematical skills. Of course, even feelings are involved: "What did the single person do to deserve to die? If I would leave the trolley go he will survive. If I wasn't here I wouldn't be able to take this decision. Why should I kill this man?" The last two brain activities, just described above, are of different natures and that's why it would be pointless to even think about a specific part of the brain making moral choices. Being moral choices a complex brain activity showing what the brain does is breaking it down in smaller parts, solving it, and then coming to a final conclusion.

In conclusion, the existence of objective morality cannot be proven because of a basic problem that starts when one wants to explain morality through science. In this

age, it is still impossible to state any sensible conclusion about the nature of morality.

That does not exclude the possibility to discover anything relevant in the future though.

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