
What do neural correlates of moral judgments reveal on moral agency?

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Overview

- **Goals:** What does it mean to (empirically) investigate moral agency?
 - **Methods:** The methodology of neurobiological studies on moral agency.
 - **Problems:** Philosophical comments to the empirical investigation of moral agency.
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Goals: Investigating moral agency (1)

Developing a theory of moral agency consists in understanding the following statement:

„X is due to the abilities $\{Y_n\}$ in the context K a moral agent“

Goals: Investigating moral agency (2)

What the neurobiological investigation on moral agency presupposes and intends:

„X is due to the abilities $\{Y_n\}$ in the context K a moral agent“

Presupposition: X, „moral“, (K)

Goals: $\{X_n\}$, „agent“, (K)

Methods: Studies on moral agency (1)

Intentions/Goals

Steps of moral decision making

Emotional influences on moral decision making

Intentional versus unintentional moral decision behavior

Social influences on moral decision making

Effect of conflicts between different normative theories

Enriching the homo oeconomicus

Tools/Settings

- intention – action - consequences
- encoding – integration
- correlation to brain regions (TMS: causality)

- prejudice & disgust
- personal vs. impersonal dilemmas
- Empathy

- norm-violations
- moral attitude
- effect of

- audience effect
- (- moral masquerade)

- justice vs. care
- utilitarianism vs. deontology

- trust

Methods: Studies on moral agency (2)

Types of experimental settings:

1) *Kohlberg-Paradigm* (developmental psychology):

- Moral marker: Fixed, external scale (stages)
- Experiment: Dyadic interaction using defined dilemmas
- Results: classification into steps based on sophisticated analysis

2) *Moral Dilemma Tests*

- Moral marker: Dilemma-choices representing “moral types”
- Experiment: Confrontation with dilemmas in written/oral/visual form, possibly attached to physiological measurements (scanners etc.)
- Results: classification of agents into “genuine moral types”, correlations to (biological) processes.

3) *Experimental game-theory*

- Moral marker: Only implicitly given (trust, cooperation)
- Experiment: Various games (Ultimatum etc.)
- Results: classification of agents into types of behavior (e.g. trusting)

Methods: Studies on moral agency (3)

Problems I have with classical approaches:

- 1) They often rely on an external “moral scale” not taking into account changes of moral behavior “normalized” by the persons’ moral beliefs
- 2) Dilemmas usually refer to “drastic” scenarios (harm, killing), which do not represent “ordinary” moral problems (fairness, lying, mobbing...)
- 3) The kind of interactions is restricted (often only binary), the “social character” of morality (i.e. its effects on social relations) is dismissed.
- 4) The measurement process may involve biases that are not taken into account (Kohlberg: interviewer, games: pre-experimental instructions)
- 5) Multidimensional concepts (like trust) are reduced to rather simple types of decisions (leading to misconceptions).
- 6) It is usually not addressed, what representations (“Vorstellungen”) specific scenarios induce in the agent.

Methods: Studies on moral agency (4)

Dimensions of a “minimal moral behavior”

- 1) “Moral stimuli” (i.e. those aspects of a moral experiment that induce moral behavior) induce complex **representations** (Vorstellungen) within the agent, which should be addressed.
 - 2) Moral behavior express themselves by **types and strengths of relations** with other agents.
 - 3) Moral behavior may induce **tensions** between reputations qualified externally and by the agent.
 - 4) The role of **reasons** must be addresses not primarily concerning their role as causes for behavior but towards their internal relations (seeing the “space of reasons” from a network-point-of-view).
 - 5) Intuitive aspects guiding behavior are probably best addressed by referring to **moral emotions** (which are not easy to measure).
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Problems: philosophical comments (1)

Perspective: Intentional vs. (self-)observation

Do we really have to choose between these two perspectives when moral decision making should be explained?

Problems: philosophical comments (2)

Concept of moral: narrow vs. wide

Most (if not all) empirical studies do not outline their concept of moral or use a rather restricted concept of moral (e.g. altruism, focus on specific moral emotions like shame)

Problems: philosophical comments (3)

Moral perception: The role of beliefs

On what does the test person (e.g. in a fMRI-Study) react? On a moral stimulus or on the beliefs/associations these stimuli excite?

Problems: philosophical comments (4)

Rationality: Emotions vs. Ratio

To what extent influence (unintentional) moral emotions the coherence of a belief-system?
