IS MORALITY UNIFIED?
No, say Buddhists

Walter Sinnott-Armstrong
Philosophy Department and
Kenan Institute for Ethics
at Duke University
National Institutes for Health
Thanks

- To the organizers and funders.
- I really appreciate this invitation,
- But …
I am NOT an expert on Buddhism (despite efforts by Bob Thurman & Owen Flanagan).

I will NOT try to tell you what Buddhism says.

I will argue that Buddhist ethics does NOT depend on any distinction between moral and non-moral rules or considerations.

Then I will argue that this lack of distinction is a good feature (rather than a bug) and is supported by recent moral psychology.
Naturalists reject all supernatural beliefs in Buddhism.

Another alternative: Pyrrhonian skeptics suspend belief, so they neither assert nor deny the supernatural part of Buddhism until they have evidence.

They can IMAGINE either naturalistic or supernaturalistic Buddhism being true.

So they go partway with Owen Flanagan and also, of course, with the great …
John Lennon — Karaoke

- Imagine there’s no karma.
- It’s easy if you try.
- No reincarnation.
- Above us only sky.
- Imagine all anatman.
- Living for today –ay –ay. …
- You may say, I’m a naturalist,
- But I’m not the only one.
- I hope someday you'll join us.
- And the world will live as one.
Buddhists Love Lists

- 4 Noble Truths
- 8-fold Path
- 3-fold Cord
- 5 Precepts
- 6 Perfections of the Bodhisattva
- 10 Good Paths of Action
- 20 Derivative Mental Afflictions
- 14 Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism
Ten Virtues (and Vices)

- Actions of the Body
  1. Taking life
  2. Stealing
  3. Sexual misconduct

- Forms of Speech
  4. Lying
  5. Divisive speech
  6. Harsh speech
  7. Idle chitchat

- Mental States
  8. Covetousness
  9. Malice
  10. Wrong view
What is Missing?

- It is just a list, even if subdivided.
- Socrates said to Meno, “I do not want a swarm of bees. I want a definition.”
- Is the list complete?
- Why is each item on the list?
- Why are other items not on the list?
- Damien Keown: Buddhists have no moral philosophy, just moral teachings.
- Maybe that is wise. Maybe not.
This list does not distinguish moral from non-moral virtues.

Some immoral acts are not on the list:
- Breaking promises (and cheating)
- Failing to save a drowning baby
- Torture (when non-malicious)

Some items on the list are not immoral:
- “wrong view” in mathematics or metaphysics
- “idle chitchat” that is not harmful or wasteful
Mackie, Williams, and others distinguish

- A broad notion of morality or **ETHICS** that tries to answer the question, “How should I live?”
- A narrow notion of **MORALITY** or ethics that concerns only a subset of the broadly ethical rules that are supposed to have distinctive content and be enforced in distinctive ways.

- Buddhist lists are about “How should I live?”, so they are about ethics in the broad sense.
- What is missing in Buddhism is the narrow notion of morality tied to enforcement.
Do Buddhists really miss it?

• I am not an expert, so maybe I missed it.
• But Charles Goodman (in the SEP) seems to agree with me when he says,
  • “There is no word in Buddhist languages … that exactly corresponds to the English word ‘ethics’”
  • “It's not clear that Buddhist thinkers have a concept of moral obligation at all.”
• Other commentators make similar points.
Odd Lists

- Buddhist lists do not strike Buddhists as odd.
- Compare this list: US law, UK law, the law of gravity, Murphy’s law.
- Compare Ted Bundy (psychopath): “I know what’s wrong: jaywalking, rape, …”
- Since Buddhist lists presumably do not strike Buddhists as odd in this way, Buddhists seem not to see any important distinction between moral and non-moral vices or wrongs.
Critics will criticize this omission:

- How can Buddhist ethics be adequate if they do not distinguish moral from non-moral rules?
- It’s like a theory that does not distinguish laws of states (countries) from laws of states (of energy).
- We need the notion of morality to determine which norms to enforce on others (Hobbes).

But I disagree.
In my view, it is better for Buddhists not to distinguish moral from non-moral rules.

It is wrong to distinguish what is not really different, as in

- racial discrimination
- pre-Newton physics
- mind/body dualism.

SO it is wrong to distinguish moral and non-moral rules IF they are not really different.
Any Questions?

- You deserve a break.
- So I will take two or three quick questions or comments.
Is there a Real Difference?

- There is a real difference between moral and non-moral judgments only if moral judgments are unified in a certain way.
- A kind is unified if & only if its instances share a common and peculiar feature that enables significant universal generalizations.
Examples

• **Quartz** is a single mineral, because it has a common chemical composition despite different colors.

• **Jade** is not a single mineral, because it includes **jadeite** (pyroxine) and **nephrite** (tremolite).
Jadeite or Nephrite?
Memory includes
- working & long-term memory,
- semantic & episodic memory,
- conditioning & skills, and
- remembering that I have a flight tomorrow.

These have too little in common for memory to be a unified topic (Tulving).
What Unity Is

- **Definition of Unity**: A kind is unified if and only if its instances share a common and peculiar feature that enables significant universal generalizations.

- **Definition of Moral Judgment**: A judgment is a moral judgment if and only if the person who makes it intends it to be a moral judgment (and enough other people see it as a moral judgment, whether or not they agree with it).

- **Application**: Moral judgments are unified if and only if all judgments that are intended (and seen) as moral share some common & peculiar feature that enables significant universal generalizations.
What Unity Is NOT

- It is **not** enough that all moral judgments are called “moral”.

- It is **not** enough that all moral judgments fall within a larger group (such as ethical or normative judgments) that is unified.

- It is **not** enough that moral judgments include subsets (such as moral judgments about sex) that are unified.
My Argument

• **Conclusion**: No feature unifies all and only moral judgments.

• **Strategy**: Reject candidate features one by one.
Unified by Content?

• NO, as shown by a survey (cf. Haidt):
  • **Harm**: Don’t kill, disable, or cause pain.
  • **Dishonesty**: Don’t lie, cheat, break promises.
  • **Injustice**: Don’t distribute goods unequally, punish unfairly, or use unfair procedures.
  • **Hierarchy/roles**: Don’t disobey parents or fail to care for children. Do your job. Obey laws.
  • **Loyalty**: Don’t rat on friends. Be patriotic.
  • **Impurity**: Don’t commit cannibalism, incest, necrophilia, sodomy, or masturbation.
Fig. 1. Liberal versus conservative moral foundations. Responses to 15 questions about which considerations are relevant to deciding “whether something is right or wrong.” Those who described themselves as “very liberal” gave the highest relevance ratings to questions related to the Harm/Care and Fairness/Reciprocity foundations and gave the lowest ratings to questions about the Ingroup/Loyalty, Authority/Respect, and Purity/Sanctity foundations. The more conservative the participant, the more the first two foundations decrease in relevance and the last three increase \( n = 2811 \); data aggregated from two web surveys, partially reported in (41). All respondents were citizens of the United States. Data for 476 citizens of the United Kingdom show a similar pattern. The survey can be taken at www.yourmorals.org.
Unified by Content?

- Not all moral judgments are about harm.
- Not all moral judgments are about social interactions (e.g. masturbation is wrong).
- Not all moral judgments are about actions (e.g. it is immoral to think racist thoughts).
- Conclusion: No common content unifies all moral judgments.
What is Phenomenology? How it feels or seems—e.g. to make a moral judgment.

Moral judgments of obligation are said to involve a sense of what is fitting (Clarke, Mandelbaum, Timmons & Horgan).

Problem: This commonality too broad to define morality, since moves in a game or pants can also seem fitting.
Moreover, different kinds of immorality cause different emotions that feel different (the CAD hypothesis of Haidt & Rozin):

- Harm causes **anger** or outrage (or fear).
- Injustice causes **resentment** (or feeling demeaned).
- Dishonesty causes **distrust** (or feeling cheated).
- Disrespect for hierarchy or roles (or disloyalty to one’s country) causes **contempt**.
- Impurities cause **disgust** (or feeling dirty).
Unified by Phenomenology?

- There is no particular way that it feels (or seems) when someone makes a moral judgment.

- Conclusion: moral judgments are not unified by phenomenology.
Unified by Force?

The moral-conventional or M/C distinction (Turiel, Smetana, Nucci):

- Moral wrongness is seen as more serious, justified by harm, and independent of authority.
- Non-moral wrongness is not seen as serious, based on harm, or independent of authority.

(A) Is it wrong to talk without raising your hand?
(B) If the teacher said that it was OK to talk without raising your hand, then would it be wrong?

(A) Is it wrong to hit the other kids in the class?
(B) If the teacher said it was OK to hit the other kids, then would it be wrong?
Problems for the moral-conventional distinction:

- Some non-moral wrongness is independent of authority (e.g. wrong ways to tie knots and to add numbers).
- Some moral wrongness is not independent of authority (e.g. lying to students after teacher tells you to lie as a social demonstration).
Conclusion: No specific force is common and peculiar to all moral judgments.
Unified by Form?

• A formal definition (Hare 1981, 53-7): moral judgments are prescriptive, universalizable, and overriding.

• Problems:
  - Morality need not override religion (Kierkegaard) or self-interest (Sidgwick).
  - Past tense, counterfactual, and pro tanto moral judgments are not directly prescriptive.

• So moral judgments are not unified by form.
Some theorists claim all moral judgments aim at increasing social harmony or reducing limited sympathy (Warnock 1971).

However,

- Moral judgments requiring punishment can reduce sympathy for criminals.
- Moral judgments about respecting hierarchy can reduce sympathy for people low in a hierarchy.
- Moral judgments against impure sex can reduce both sympathy and harmony.
- Moral judgments against lying can reduce social harmony if the truth is harmful or offensive.
Evidence suggests that different moral judgments arose at different times and in response to different evolutionary pressures.

E.g. rules against harming and impurities arose before language and, hence, before rules against lying or promise breaking.

Conclusion: No specific function unifies all moral judgments.
Unified by Brain Mechanism?

- Morality would be unified IF a single brain mechanism were activated when and only when people make moral judgments or judge that an act is morally wrong.

- But recent research suggests that there is no such general moral wrongness detector.

- Our Team: Parkinson, Sinnott-Armstrong, Koralus, Mendelovici, McGeer, & Wheatley
Unified by Brain Mechanism?

Stimuli types:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Harmful</th>
<th>Dishonest</th>
<th>Disgusting</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wrong</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not wrong</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Behavioral results

- harmful/dishonest/disgusting (>80% in, <20% out)
- wrong or not (>30% each)
- affect
While paying for groceries, Andrew forgets to remove a package of meat from the bottom of his cart. The store clerk does not notice. Discovering his mistake, in the parking lot, Andrew decides that he will not go back to pay for the meat.

22s

Is it morally wrong for Andrew to keep the meat without paying?

2s

How confident?
Results

- Acts judged wrong in each group compared to neutral scenarios
Conjunction Analysis

- DMPFC = dorsal medial pre-frontal cortex

- This region does not reflect activity that is distinctive of moral judgment, because:
  - First, this area is activated by ambiguity in social and non-social contexts.
  - Second, this area is activated when thinking about other people.
Another Area of Morality

- The Issue: equity, fairness, and distributive justice
- The Design:
  - Children from an orphanage in Uganda were divided into groups of 3.
  - Each group of 3 children received 24 meals per child.
  - Participants decided how many meals would be taken away from each of two groups (one group with one child and the other group with two children).
  - Equity and efficiency were varied independently.
  - Three times: display, hit, switch
The Equity Task

You chose to take away:

- Joshua: -15 meals
- Dick: 0 meals
- Enoch: 0 meals

You chose to take away:

- Dick: -13 meals
- Enoch: -5 meals
- Joshua: 0 meals
Results on Equity

- During the Display period, bilateral activity in the **Putamen** was correlated with **efficiency** but not **equity** of chosen allocations.

- During the Display and Switch periods, bilateral activity in the **Insula** was correlated with **equity** but not **efficiency** of the choice.

- During the Hit period, activity overlapping the **Caudate head** was correlated with **both efficiency and equity** of the choice.

- **Individuals** with higher activity in the Insula and Caudate head were more likely to reject inequitable allocations.
Individual Differences

B = Caudate head
C = Insula
Does anything else unify moral judgments?
Maybe, but what? I looked long and hard but found nothing, so I conclude that nothing unifies moral judgments.

But then why do we call them all “moral”?
• Maybe no reason at all (family resemblance)
• Maybe people with power had motives to extend “moral” to new kinds of judgments (e.g. people on top of a hierarchy want inferiors to respect hierarchies, so they extend “immoral” from harmful cases to violations of hierarchies).
Lessons for “Moral” Theory?

- Disunity is no problem for utilitarianism or Aristotelian virtue theories.
- But it IS a problem for Hobbes and Kant:
  - Hobbes is concerned with which rules should be enforced and how.
  - Kant’s theory depends on a strong distinction between moral (categorical) and other norms.

SO:

- Kant was wrong.
- Buddhists were right.
That’s all, folks.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Column A</th>
<th>Column B</th>
<th>Moral category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Stick a pin into your palm.</td>
<td>Stick a pin into the palm of a child you don’t know.</td>
<td>Harm/ care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accept a plasma screen television that a friend of yours wants to give you.</td>
<td>Fairness/reciprocity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Accept a plasma screen television that a friend of yours wants to give you. You know that your friend got the television a year ago when the company that made it sent it, by mistake and at no charge, to your friend.</td>
<td>Accept a plasma screen television that a friend of yours wants to give you. You know that your friend bought the TV a year ago from a thief who had stolen it from a wealthy family.</td>
<td>Fairness/reciprocity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Say something slightly bad about your nation (which you don’t believe to be true) while calling in, anonymously, to a talk-radio show in your nation.</td>
<td>Say something slightly bad about your nation (which you don’t believe to be true) while calling in, anonymously, to a talk-radio show in a foreign nation.</td>
<td>Ingroup/loyalty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Slap a friend in the face (with his/her permission) as part of a comedy skit.</td>
<td>Slap your father in the face (with his permission) as part of a comedy skit.</td>
<td>Authority/respect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5) Attend a performance art piece in which the actors act like idiots for 30 min, including failing to solve simple problems and falling down repeatedly on stage.</td>
<td>Attend a performance art piece in which the actors act like animals for 30 min, including crawling around naked and urinating on stage.</td>
<td>Purity/sanctity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total for column A: $____</td>
<td>Total for column B: $____</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Putamen, Efficiency, Display
Insula, Equity, Display/Switch
Caudate, Equity & Efficiency, Hit
What difference does it make?

• Lessons for Substantive “Moral” Theory?
  • Disunity is no problem for utilitarianism or Aristotelian virtue theories.
  • Kant’s theory depends on a strong distinction between moral (categorical) and other norms, so Kant is in trouble (again).

• Lessons for “Moral” Epistemology? “Moral” intuitions might be more subject to framing effects and emotional distortions and, hence, less reliable and more in need of inferential justification in some areas than in others.
Lessons for Clinical Psychology?

- Deficiencies in one area of “morality” do not ensure deficiencies in other areas of “morality”.
- Which area is deficient can affect treatment.

Lessons for Moral Psychology? Method:

- Don’t lump “moral” judgments together or seek moral/non-moral contrasts.
- Test smaller classes of “moral” judgments.
- We still might eventually find some unifying feature of all “morality”, but I doubt it.

My main claim is that it will be useful to rethink “moral” theory in this light.
Imagine there's no Heaven It's easy if you try No hell below us Above us only sky Imagine all the people Living for today Imagine there's no countries It isn't hard to do Nothing to kill or die for And no religion too Imagine all the people Living life in peace You may say that I'm a dreamer But I'm not the only one I hope someday you'll join us And the world will be as one Imagine no possessions I wonder if you can No need for greed or hunger A brotherhood of man Imagine all the people Sharing all the world You may say that I'm a dreamer But I'm not the only one I hope someday you'll join us And the world will live as one