

Cognitive Science, Social Theory, and Ethics

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The terms in my title form an odd triple. Social theory has been largely immune from, or has ignored, cognitive science. Ethics and social theory have a long and well-grounded history of antagonism, interspersed with moments of mutual borrowing. Cognitive science and ethics have a more intense relationship. One of the main critiques of John Rawls, for example, was that he lacked an adequate moral psychology. Many philosophers have at least entertained the thought that the antiquated moral psychology of the eighteenth century, on which philosophers routinely rely, might get some valuable content from cognitive science. There is also the idea that the experimental work on moral matters done by psychologists on topics shared with ethics, such as the moral/conventional distinction, might be illuminated by a cognitive science approach to the mechanisms of moral reasoning (Kelly and Stich, forthcoming 2007). And there is plenty of intriguing material to work with. “Neuro-economics” has used fMRI techniques for brain-imaging to determine what parts of the brain itself are activated in various “moral” situations, such as the punishment of free-riders. And behind cognitive science is evolutionary psychology, which has long sought to account for such “ethical” phenomenon as altruism and reciprocity. These examples of potential rapprochement between ethics and cognitive science all involve universals or universal phenomena, and indeed, ethics as a subject, like evolutionary psychology, has typically focused on universals, so there appear to be grounds for matching the two.

In contrast, the relation between cognitive science, especially the part associated with evolutionary psychology, and social theory has been one in which cognitive science has taken over the critique provided by evolutionary psychology of “the standard social science model.” The phrase comes from Tooby and Cosmides (1992). The “Standard Social Science Model” is usually explained historically in terms of Anthropology (because Tooby is himself an anthropologist), and attributed to Franz Boas, especially as exemplified in the writings of his student Margaret Mead. The “Standard Social Science Model” is one in which individuals internalize culture, which consists of norms and values, which is both a unified and coherent whole, and is widely variable between societies. Culture is also largely unconstrained either by biology or by psychology. The origins of the model are in a critique of instinct theory from the point of view of a kind of behaviorism which understood the acquisition of culture as a kind of conditioning, and thought that people could be conditioned to internalize a vast range of responses.

These claims have some relation to actual social theory, though it is an odd one. The standard social science model is an ideal-typification of some commonplace, textbook social science reasoning, rooted, though not very closely, in nineteenth century social theory, notably

Émile Durkheim, based on some widely influential neo-Kantian ideas to the effect that historical periods, disciplines and the like were characterized by shared presuppositions, standardized in such influential but now discredited thinkers as Talcott Parsons, and reproduced in such “interpretive anthropologists” as Clifford Geertz. Boas and Mead stand to one side of this tradition. They tended to see the issues in terms of a long running debate in anthropology over the unity of mind, or the question of how much we have in common with all humans, and took the view that of course humans have some things in common, but that the evidence of ethnography was that we have little with respect to the content of what is usually called “culture,” which in turn pervades the subject matter we call “mind.” Social theorists, concerned for the most part with historical societies and usually treating “primitive” societies as a separate category, often as one dominated by biological urges, as Weber put it, have generally been agnostic about this question.

The antagonism between social theory and ethics is rooted in a related problem: the diversity of morals, a problem that does arise for historical, non-primitive societies, and is thus well-within the scope of social theory. Though Aristotle was comfortable in observing that “some philosophers are of the opinion that justice is conventional in all its branches, arguing that a law of nature admits no variation and operates in exactly the same way everywhere— thus *fire* burns here and in Persia— while rules of justice keep changing before our eyes” (Winch 1972: 50), for modern ethics, the ethics of Kant and utilitarianism, this diversity is something of a scandal. Most of modern ethical meta-theory has tried to ground ethical claims in reason, which is taken to be universal, or moral intuitions which are also taken to be universal. The actual diversity of morals has thus usually been treated as superficial: this is why the moral/conventional distinction has been so important. Actual diversity could be explained as a matter of convention, with the thought that there was a core of morality that was not diverse.

Making sense of the problem of diversity in ways that fit with cognitive science is the large unanswered problem, among many unanswered problems, in the three-way relation between these three domains of thought. The relation between ethics and cognitive science has at least a rough research framework: an attempt to ground distinctions familiar to ethics, such as the moral/conventional distinction in psychological experiments, a search for cognitive mechanisms that would explain findings in the general domain of experimental moral psychology, a localization of these mechanisms in the brain itself, and the evolutionary understanding of the mechanisms themselves. This framework, however, seems to exclude the problem of diversity, or to relegate it the diversity to the unexplained category of “conventional.”

But turning the problems of concern to social theory, the explanation of actual diversity in historical societies, into a residual category, won’t work. Neither the anthropological nor the experimental evidence support the moral/conventional distinction. It was thought that certain universal features, such as the infliction of (universally recognizable) kinds of harm might be characteristic of the moral as distinct from the conventional (Kelly and Stich). But this— as any social theorist would have expected— is not the case. People ascribe moral significance to violations of arcane codes of purity and the like and appear to use the same cognitive mechanisms to do so as are employed in cases of universally recognized harm.

Social theory approaches this issue in its own way. “Conventional” is itself a term of social theory. But it is used by social theorists much more narrowly-- usually to apply to such conventions as driving on the left hand side of the road— as an explanation as a matter of citing a

historical decision that might have gone another way. People's beliefs about the world and commitments, which are historically diverse and at the same time central to their experience of the world, are, in contrast, the sorts of things that social theory seeks to make sense of and explain in terms of their substantive history and role in society.

In short, the things that become residual categories in universalizing accounts, either in cognitive science or ethics, are central to social theory, but the domain of explanations available in social theory extends to the subject matter claimed by cognitive science and ethics. The boundary provided by the moral/conventional distinction doesn't work to separate the domains. This muddle raises many questions, but also points to a solution. If there were a set of common concepts other than the failed moral/conventional distinction that could provide some kind of framework which could both accommodate the diversity of morals and makes sense in cognitive science terms, and also fit with some intelligible account of ethics, we would be able to solve the trilemma and illuminate each domain. Is this possible? Or is this triple a case in which only two of the three can be made compatible?

The usual approaches of past social theory suggest that the triple can't be made compatible, and some cognitive scientists seem ready to concede that to make sense of the actual empirical diversity of morals seems to require something like the standard social science model for at least the range of facts that are socially diverse. The "cognitive science" solution offered by Kelly and Stich does precisely this. It relativizes norms to societies and treats the individuals' relation to these norms as one of "internalization." Kelly and Stich even hypothesize a cognitive mechanism to go along with this model: a means of identifying the norms in a given setting which are to be internalized. This "find'em and internalize'em" model is the very same standard social science model that evolutionary psychology was supposed to overthrow. This approach amounts to conceding that even if evolutionary psychology can perhaps identify some unifying features of mind that pertain to morals, these will necessarily be very general. The ethical framework in which an agent actually operates will be one determined for him by the mechanisms of identification and internalization— not from some sort of autonomous ethical theory or reasoning whose content is modularized in the mind and ordained by evolution.

For ethics, this is not a happy solution, but a familiar one. It is relativistic. And perhaps the only reasonable response to the diversity of morals is to accept ethical relativism. This was certainly the conclusion of Edward Westermarck, whose *The Origin and Development of Moral Ideas* ([1906-08]1971) and its companion volume *Ethical Relativity* ([1932]1970) are still taken as standard statements of the problem, and which befuddle ethicists. Why is it so befuddling? The reasons have to do with the moral/conventional distinction: if we start out with our own definition of morality, we can find lots of analogues with the morality of other peoples. But if we ask how they define the category of the moral and justify the moral beliefs and usages that they seem to share with us, the analogies quickly break down— especially with respect to concepts in the Kantian universe of discourse. If we credit as genuine matters of morality the things others regard as genuine matters of morality, though not included in our category of the moral, none of our usual universalizing ethical theories, such as the Kantian notion of duty or utilitarianism, can be stretched to fit. What count as obligation and duty, similarly, are extraordinarily variable between societies and settings. The concept of "morality" as distinct from "religious" or "ritual belief," or simply "true," turns out itself to be highly relative, and it seems that our distinctions

are the product of little more than the Christian tradition, with its emphasis on the contrast between the pharisaical conception of the “law” and the higher goods of faith, hope and charity.

There is, however, an alternative approach to understanding morality that both fits with a tradition in social theory and with an approach to the ethical that transcends and replaces the moral/conventional distinction. This approach centers on the concept of practice or practices. Standard social science conceptions of practice, such as Pierre Bourdieu’s *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977), and even the notions popularized in anthropology under the heading “practice theory” (Ortner 1984), however, also have roots in the standard social science model criticized in the cognitive science literature, so it might seem that this is the wrong place to look for an alternative. Yet, if the concept of practices provides an alternative that is sufficiently developed as social theory to allow us to say something different about these topics, especially if it can be more successfully linked to some plausible image of cognitive mechanisms, we need to consider whether it also provides a better way of approaching the triple.

My concern in this paper will be to show how a properly understood notion of practice might resolve some of the trilemmas here. I will first discuss the history of the split between social science and ethics, show how practices were a resolution to this split, and then turn to the cognitive. This will include some critical commentary on what I will call the classical concept of practices, which will give us the basis for asking the question “precisely what parts of cognitive science are relevant to understanding morality?” The conventional view, which assumes a certain kind of universalism, won’t account for a practice related notion of morality, though the practice account is the only one that fits with actual diversity. I will then state some starting points, or plausible assumptions, about the nature of the relevant cognitive capacities and mechanisms, and then reconsider the practice literature in these terms, suggesting that a revised notion of practice does fit with diversity. I will then turn to the problem of the implications of this revised account for the problems of ethics.

Social Theory vs. Ethics: Round One

Herbert Spencer, who has recently been recognized as one of the parents of cognitive science, provoked the split between social theory and ethics. The period in which Spencer wrote was dominated by two views of ethics— intuitionism, which held that there was a moral faculty which had the capacity to discern the good, especially virtues, and utilitarianism. Both had very convincing claims to make against the other.¹ One way of reconciling the two was Spencer’s. Spencer argued, in line with his general evolutionism, that morals evolved and that moral intuitions were themselves the product of evolution (1879). They could not, consequently, be taken as primary data for ethics, as the intuitionists supposed, but were the product of upbringing in given social settings. The evolution of society was intelligible as a topic in social theory. The response to this, by Henry Sidgwick, in one of the founding documents of philosophical ethics, *Methods of Ethics* (1922), argued that the two ethical approaches could be unified if we accepted that utilitarianism was the good that we knew intuitively.² This overly convenient solution to the puzzle preserved the idea of a universal good, but at the cost of a serious account of the diversity of morals, and changed the role of moral intuition itself from an immediate source of information about our moral feelings to an abstract arbiter of choices between abstract ethical theories.

Subsequent developments in ethics did not help matters. Serious historical and comparative work on morals recognizing the radical nature of the diversity of morals continued to be presented to the philosophical community, for example by Westermarck, but it became associated, partly through Westermarck's own efforts, with relativism, which was in turn denounced as self-contradictory and in conflict with our own moral intuitions. Sidgwick's solution did not survive. But what did survive was his "method" of testing ethical theories, for example theories of obligation, against own intuitions. This led to an absurd historical flattening, justly ridiculed by Collingwood in passages such as these:

. . . in ethics, a Greek word like δέῖ cannot be legitimately translated by using the word "ought," if that word carries with it the notion of what is sometimes called "moral obligation." Was there any Greek word or phrase to express that notion. The Realists said there was; but they stultified themselves by adding that the "theories of moral obligation" expounded by Greek writers differed from modern theories such as Kant's about the same thing. How did they know that the Greek and Kantian theories were about the same thing? Oh, because δέῖ (or whatever word it was) is the Greek for "ought." (1939: 63).

And of course, according to this conception of philosophy, we are entitled to say that their theories of obligation were wrong or right on the basis of our intuitions.³

This "method" thus led to a *de facto* denial of the diversity of morals— morals were understood in terms of our intuitions, differences in terms of convention rather than morals, and, as in this case, the theories of past philosophers, which were obviously divergent, were dismissed as muddle-headed or erroneous, based on no more than the test of our own intuitions or ideas of what is reasonable. But there were other arguments. It was frequently asserted that apparent differences— for example the Nazi anthropologists' rejection of egalitarianism in the name of Aryanism (Williams 1973: 233)-- were illusory since the Nazi anthropologists, by attempting to justify their anti-egalitarianism on grounds of supposed anti-egalitarian anthropological fact, implicitly recognized egalitarianism as an ordinary, shared, moral truth. John Rawls incorporated this denial of differences into his own method, which attempted to separate what was distinctively moral by the device of the veil of ignorance (1971). His student Thomas Nagel carried this further by equating particular ethical views with rationality (1997). A kind of Kantianism emerged, based on the idea that we could leverage our intuitions about rationality into a kind of ahistorical, decontextualized reflection that would enable us to see what the truly rational core of our moral beliefs and feelings was, and to distinguish what was moral from what was conventional by these same means. This was just a continuation of the idea that our intuitions were and should be the arbiter of what is right and reasonable in ethics, albeit qualified— qualified by reference to other of our intuitions about what is reasonable.

One problem with this approach to ethics, unsurprisingly, was that it had long since ceased to make much sense of either ethics or rationality as actual historical and empirical phenomena. Originally, ethical intuitionism had rested on a naturalistic psychology: it assumed faculty psychology, and argued that among the faculties was a moral faculty (Mackie 1977). Kantianism, similarly, involved faculty psychology. But Kant used a different form of argument, transcendental arguments, which appeared to be independent of psychology. These arguments

worked as follows: something, for example moral judgements, were assumed to be valid; he then asked what the logical conditions for the possibility of this kind of judgement were. The argument established that one could not accept such things as valid moral judgements without accepting the truth of these conditions.

Yet the argument had some compelling reasons for supporting it. If one agreed that there was such a thing as valid ethical judgement with respect to a particular case, it seemed that one had already conceded the condition for the possibility of this judgement, namely ethical reason. If one gives reasons for an ethical judgement, this is already to presuppose the core principles that warrant these reasons, and if we presuppose principles we presuppose the normative standards of rationality that make the reasoning from the principles valid. One could not even contest the notion that there were such things as normative standards for reason without invoking these standards, and thus falling into a kind of self-contradiction. From such considerations it was a short step to reasoning that because we were rational creatures who were compelled to acknowledge the normative reality of reason. We had to have evolved into becoming such creatures, and therefore, although the details were not known, we could assume that we had in fact evolved in such a way, so that the naturalistic or scientific explanation of our evolution could not be in conflict with the normative the idea of reason.

We can summarize this by identifying four sticking points in this argument. The first, as noted, involved psychology. Without some variant of faculty psychology, it was difficult to make this picture of reason square with any sort of psychology. Even Kant grasped that he needed a transcendental psychology to go along with his transcendental philosophy. But he made little headway in explaining how it was itself possible (Kitcher 1990). The second problem, as we have also seen, involved actual diversity, a problem that was essentially ignored in this literature. It was assumed that despite apparent differences in moral beliefs and practices, there could be no conflicting principles at the fundamental level of “reason,” and that reason itself was sufficient to warrant ethical claims. Kant’s successors of course grasped that there were questions that reason could not settle. This is why the neo-Kantians argued that different domains and different historical epochs had different fundamental presuppositions. As suggested here, the ethical Kantians that followed them, such as Rawls, thought that one could abstract from local normativities in a way that stripped them of their historical and cultural content, and that one could do this by the appropriate kind of reflection. But the results of these threatened to be more or less ideological, because different philosophers managed to discover different rational cores when they performed the task of abstracting the rational content. The neo-Kantians had already learned this lesson (cf. Turner, 2007: 34-41). These familiar issues led to some less familiar ones. A third issue is over the problem of what the presuppositions correspond to in reality. If they are not psychological facts, what are they? One Kantian answer was that they are normative realities, presupposed by discourse in the way that the material world is presupposed by discourse about ordinary facts, with which the mind interacted, albeit in a different manner than the mind interacted with physical facts. But this answer commits us to an ontology that seems to be in conflict with science. Even some of the most aggressive defenders of this conception concede that there is something is “spooky” about the idea of normative reason as a kind of external reality that “human minds must somehow be able to latch on to”(McDowell 1996: 77), especially if this is a notion of reason that is sufficiently extended to warrant claims about ethical truth

based on reason. Fourth, the reasoning that is necessary to make this argument square with actual diversity in beliefs and in standards of rationality, as well as with the diversity in moral reasoning, is simply implausible. The problems with the moral/conventional device have already been noted. In the end, the claims that need to be made to dismiss actual cases of historical or cultural variation make it appear that appeals to “reason” are little more than special pleading for one’s own ethnocentric moral prejudices. In short, the problem of the diversity of morals won’t vaporize in the face of a few supposed cognitive and evolutionary universals. And the distinction between the universal and the trivial and accidental features of morality begins to look circular: to save the theory of universality, we define the problem cases as falling outside the domain of the theory, eventually ending up with a domain that is defined so narrowly that it no longer matches up with the kind of questions we originally wanted the theory to answer.

Enter Practices

In 1981, Alasdair MacIntyre threw the cat among the ethical canaries with his book *After Virtue*. A previous book, *A Short History of Ethics*, had historicized ethical theory by showing that particular ethical theories were responses to genuine intellectual problems that arose as a result of social change. Old categories and old solutions to ethical problems ceased to apply, or following the ethical outlook led to unexpected and insalubrious results. To this he added a new consideration, derived in part from his engagement with the problem of progress and change in scientific theory. There, against the idea of Kuhnian paradigm shifts, he had invoked the idea that changes in science were narratively constructed to exhibit progress, and that this was integral to science itself, not just a kind of historical add-on or commentary. The argument absorbed Kuhn’s lessons, but expanded it. Now, according to MacIntyre, the development of science was a matter of a tradition which included not only the stuff that Kuhn had identified with paradigms— itself a significant expansion of the notion of science, but also a body of ideas, beliefs, tacit knowledge, framing assumptions, and discourse that normally had not been thought of as a part of science proper. Kuhn thought of himself as going beyond the textbook view of science; MacIntyre went beyond that. The upshot of this expansion, as applied to ethics, and combined with his earlier historicization of ethical theory, was this: ethics was about moral traditions; moral traditions, like all traditions, were carried on in community life and especially in its narrative traditions. True to his appropriation of Kuhn, traditions thus conceived consisted of much more than explicit content or reasoning, meaning tacit and inarticulate knowledge— a notion Kuhn had acquired from Michael Polanyi.

Polanyi’s famous slogan was “we know more than we can say.” This might be rendered in cognitive science terms as a thesis about what John Searle calls “the Background,” that is to say the vast collection of neural connections in which learning, for example of the kind that allows for the production of inferential reasoning, is contained, or as “non-conceptual knowledge,” including the non-conceptual knowledge necessary for the production of “conceptual” acts, such as speaking. In any of these interpretations, the knowledge is inaccessible, for example to reflection, and takes a form that cannot be analogized to explicit knowledge (thus cannot be understood as a set of rules, for example). This “hidden” character is a crucial part of the notion of practice, and it has a number of philosophical implications that are

relevant to the discussion of ethics as I have framed it here. One cannot reduce the notion of practice to anything else because the notion of practice is itself impossible to make fully explicit. The fact that practices cannot by definition be made fully explicit blocks any linguistic reduction of practices to rules or principles, which is to say to anything which can be explicitly justified or explained by reference to other, higher, rules or principles. The same holds for causal analysis of practices. Not only are the processes that sustain practices hidden, it is sufficiently unclear what practices themselves are that no causal account can provide a substitute for the concept of practice. Nor can the phenomena of practices be rendered incidental in a causal account that deals with such questions as the problem of the means by which practices come to be and are sustained. A base-superstructure model of the explanation of practices, in which the base is economic force and practices are the superstructure won't work because the content of practices is not accessible in the way that the content of ideologies is. So no homologies can be established between practices and supposedly "more basic" facts.

Practices, in other words, are a "fundamental" fact which explains other facts often themselves thought to be fundamental. The diversity of practices understood as fundamental facts produces "practice relativism." If other things were "prior" to practice, if meaning or understanding or coherent communication were possible without the sharing, that is to say the prior sharing, of practice, practice relativism would be a less threatening phenomena. A phenomena somewhat akin to the simple diversity of customs or moral ideas, which could be accounted for in ways that were less threatening, for example in terms of local circumstances that produce different results. If we could say, as Aristotle was comfortable in saying, that customs differed in different places,⁴ we could still say that some customs are better than others. But the claim made on behalf of practice is that practice is a condition for, and in some sense causally or logically prior to communication, understanding, and the like. If communication and understanding are themselves preconditions for evaluation then the diversity of practices precludes evaluation. Evaluation itself depends on practices whose diversity is irreducible. To say that one practice is better than another is necessarily to say it within a practice.

The notion of priority granted to the concept of practice, however, is itself somewhat muddled. The relationships of priority obtain for already mastered and developed linguistic or quasi-linguistic communities. The "speakers" of a particular moral language have, this model assumes, already fixed practices that they have mastered. The communicating and linguistic thought and consequently the evaluations that they engage in is on the "basis" of these previously mastered practices. This image dovetails nicely with the tradition of ordinary language philosophy in which the language to be analyzed is treated as a fixed and unproblematic object and we are reluctant to consider the possibility that language changes or is in flux in any way that disturbs the apparent fundamental fixity of the "language game" (Kovesi 1967). And it is this fixity that produces the problem of relativism, for it is the image of a framework that creates a "within" and a corresponding "without" such that we are compelled to always ask what the answer to an evaluative question is "within" a practice.

The Triple Revisited

What does the notion of practice, and the suggestion that practices are fundamental to ethics, do

to the trilemmas introduced at the start of this paper? It resolves the conflict between ethics and social theory, but at a price: relativism. Perhaps there are ways to pay this price that make it less onerous, or ethical relativism can be simply accepted as the price that needs to be paid to make ethics cohere with the rest of our understanding of the world. But there is a more direct issue between this solution and cognitive science that is part of the original trilemma. How can the notion of practices be made to fit with cognitive science? It is obvious that there is a close kinship between some of the concepts that appear in the cognitive science literature and the practices literature. Tacit knowledge, for example, appears in both. But on closer examination, the similarities disappear, and a chasm emerges. In the case of tacit knowledge, for example, the practices literature has in mind something that is inarticulable knowledge shared in a group; in the cognitive science literature it is the universal pre-linguistic knowledge of linguistic structures that allows the complex structure of language to be learned despite the poverty of the stimuli—the limited data that the learner needs to acquire a language quickly. The evolutionary psychology literature would lead one to think that a whole range of moral impulses, intuitions, and felt rules are part of our genetic inheritance, and manifest themselves more or less directly in the norms and values actually formulated in given societies. In short, evolutionary psychology positions itself as a kind of alternative explanation for the facts that the standard social science model constructs as the facts.

This seems to fit well with ethics done in the way I described earlier, in which moral intuitions are purified by reason. The model of how it all might fit together could look like this. Begin with evolutionary psychology. There are some strong and constraining elements of our evolutionary inheritance—let's call them inclinations and aversions, to keep it simple—which provide a fixed framework within which actual normative systems, the “sociological” kind, made up of rules, norms, and values develop, and must be consistent with. There has to be a cognitive mechanism that goes along with the acquisition of the rules norms and values, such as Stich and Kelly's model of “find ‘em and internalize them.” These nested frameworks are the source of our moral intuitions. We can ignore the problems with the moral/conventional distinction, because ethics, will solve it. Through reflection and the use of our rational capacities we can make these norms consistent and justified, and distinguish those parts of sociological normativity that are conventional from those that are genuinely binding on us as rational agents, and are, as Wiggins puts it, the only answer possible (2004). Actual practice becomes irrelevant as evidence or a source of problems about diversity, since we can overcome these problems by relying on reason itself. Reason is in the business of picking and choosing among the possible norms, and actual norms are by definition possible norms; but actual norms, or what philosophers call “sociological” norms, are by definition not “genuine” norms, which is the subject of ethics. The point of ethics, on the now common view, is to identify the genuine norms, those we are committed to by virtue of being reasoners, and use these norms as a standard to criticize sociological norms or actual practice.

This all seems great on paper—but as our troubles with the moral/conventional distinction should have led us to expect, none of this quite fits together. The inherited aversions and inclinations central to evolutionary psychology, are about one set of things, reciprocity, altruism, incest, sexual desirability, linguistic capacity, and the like. Rules, norms, and values are sometimes related to these things, as in the case of kinship rules, but usually not very closely

related, and in any case consist of lots of other things that have no apparent relation, such as table manners, the arcane and ever changing codes of acceptability of in-group adolescents, and so forth. There is also a problem of what is inherited. Is it a formal capacity of reasoning that provides organizing principles for data, which provides the content, or is it the content itself? One of the ways neo-Kantian ethics tried to salvage its claims to universality in the face of historical diversity was to insist that the universal content of ethics was “formal.” Consider some social science ideas genealogically related to neo-Kantianism, such as Levi-Strauss’s idea that the classifying and organizing capacities of the human mind lead to the construction of particular kinds of social structural patterns (for example, residential patterns in the villages of primitive societies, which are of course also “normative”), we can see the problem. There simply isn’t anything for ethics to say about moieties and their distribution in space, though these things, rather than equality and opportunity, to choose an example from Nagel (1991), are the organizing categories of their societies. We have no intuitions about their reasonableness. They simply remind us of the limits, not to say ethnocentrism, of our intuitions and ideas of reason.

Practice theory has a ready explanation for the failures of this model of the relations between the members of the triple. Begin with the idea that a culture is made up of a set of rules or of “norms and values,” to choose a textbook sociology locution. Practice thinking suggests that this is an attempt to summarize the hidden content or tacit background behind a way of life in its full complexity by analogy to some notions—rule, norm, and value—that make sense as something explicit (we can write the rules of classroom conduct up on a blackboard, or produce a values or code of conduct and ask people to sign it). But the analogy is a bad one: we simply can’t articulate the background in this way. We can represent it for particular purposes in this form, for example we can make up some business travelers’ rules for understanding another culture. These “as if” rules are instrumentally useful, as a phrase book for a language would be, but they are not a representation of what is going on in the minds of the people in the culture.

There are some cognitive science reasons for this. As Searle has pointed out, since rules are not self-interpreting or self-applying, turning rules into actions or results would require rules to apply the rules, which would themselves require rules of application, quickly resulting in a situation in which the brain would need a large amount of time to perform the computations necessary to act. The evolutionary psychology and cognitive science versions of the use of notions like rule and tacit knowledge avoid this by a device that is not useful for understanding culture or ethics. The term “tacit knowledge” appears in the cognitive science discussion of language acquisition, but in the form of the universal conditions for language acquisition. These are necessarily understood as limited and formal. Actual language use involves a more slowly developed capacity to use a large vocabulary in inferences—something that develops continuously over a lifetime.

One might object, by reference to Kelly and Stich, that this prejudges the question. Perhaps we have an in-built cognitive mechanism that allows us to identify and internalize norms. But this thesis begins to seem implausible when we consider actual norms, rather than the hypotheticals used in psychology experiments. Tipping, for Americans, is “normative.” But the sheer variety of individual practices with respects to tipping is astonishing: how much, who one should tip, what deserves tipping, and so forth turn out to be questions whose answers are highly variable. The idea that there is a “rule” behind the practice is risible. Indeed, when this was

discussed recently on a radio call in show, the listeners were themselves astonished at the variety of opinions and personal practices that callers reported. Sociologists would have trouble identifying “the norm” here, and obviously the people who are following their version of it have trouble too. So it seems odd to think that we can do this more or less automatically.

The case of tipping is trouble for one version of “practice theory,” the kind closest to the standard social science model that thinks of practice as a unified whole that is internalized. The problem is this: we can imagine the “find and internalize” model working for very simple norms; it is very strange to think that a huge, complex, and unified body of dispositions, tacit knowledge, normative commitment, and the like can be internalized in this way. A better model for this is the notion of mastery. Mastery is a more or less continuous process in human linguistic and social interaction and interaction with the world that is never fully complete and that is never fully identical for the same person. This holds even in such apparent limiting cases as mathematics. People with very different mathematical skills may nevertheless have backgrounds sufficient to master the same proofs. Moreover, it is by doing so that they alter their mathematical capacities. The activity of mastering in these cases is not something that is relegated to the distant past of the agent but is rather an active and continuous process.

It is equally plausible to suppose that individuals who adapt to changing circumstances and new experiences acquire different senses and uses of language than those who have not been exposed to the same kinds of experiences. This is especially visible in cases of complex professional languages, such as the language of the law, which is continuously extended and refined throughout the career of a lawyer and is what enables an experienced attorney to excel in forms of legal reasoning that are beyond the capacities of the neophyte. What holds for professional language holds equally for the language of morals and of social interaction. Little of this change, change of the kind involved in continuous mastery, need be conscious or “thought,” though a person may often on reflection notice the changes in evaluation that changes in modes of description may lead to.

If mastery is a better model than “find them and internalize them” because it is continuous, one might ask, “what is being mastered?” Doesn't the notion of mastery require some sort of fixed object to be mastered? There are indeed often, as in professional performances such as those of a lawyer or in feats of public reasoning such as those of the mathematician, public moments of mastery that display mastery. But these moments do not imply anything about the existence of some sort of object that needs to be acquired or mastered in order to perform the public acts. Or at least for there to be some sort of shared object that lurks behind and accounts for the public achievement which is accepted, applauded, or recognized as correct by others.

This model of practice, in which a practice is not a collective object, like a shared rule, but a set of individual capacities developed through learning from mutual interaction and interaction with the world, fits with certain conceptions of ethics. In one sense it is Hume's (cf. Wiggins 2006: 33), since it places habit and the development of the passions through leaning at its heart. And it is perhaps, a point to which we will return, subject to the criticism commonly made of Hume's ethics, that it is good at explaining what people do but not very useful for explaining what they should do. It also fits with MacIntyre's notion of moral traditions. The standard criticism of this notion is closely related. To the extent that it is a descriptive account and historical explanation of the doctrines that ethical theorists have propounded, it is plausible.

When an attempt is made to derive something positive from it— to tell people how to live— it teaches relativism. To put it differently, its explanatory side is a kind of *Ideologikritik*, which raises the question of whether any derivation of a positive ethical lesson from it can be anything other than ideology. So the question of whether and how it fits with ethics is still open. The question of how it can be made to fit with cognitive science is open as well. But we are now in a better position to answer it by providing an alternative account of the relevant mechanisms, which in this model will be mechanisms involving learning, and by providing an alternative to the model of nested theories described above.

Some *Obiter Dicta* about Cognitive Science

One way of answering the question of whether this model fits with cognitive science is to say what sort of cognitive science it fits with. Here is a working hypothesis:

1. Mental contents that are non-universal, and much of what is universal, are acquired through learning.
2. The kinds of learning that vary “socially” is accounted for largely by connectionist habituation.
3. Some of this, language “rules” and perhaps a few other things, such as gestures and conversational structures, may be the product of a vast quantity of more or less consistent input, consequently the acquisitions of one person are more or less the same, at least as outwardly manifested, as the acquisitions of other people. It may be convenient to represent these acquisitions as rules, but at the mental level they aren’t.
4. Much of what makes up social life for the individual involves skills and expectations based on inputs that do not obliterate differences. Representing these things as rule-like is not only false, at the mental level, but seriously misleading about social life.
5. Some inputs are explicit sayings, symbols, metaphors, images, gestures, performances, accessible through the ordinary senses of people. To some extent, the reception and emulation of these inputs is facilitated through the brain structures known as mirror neurons, which permit people to perceive and emulate such things as bodily movements without training or feedback. Some is through structured feedback resulting from rituals, disciplinings, trainings, and education: the paradigm case here is the one made famous in Kripke’s discussion of Wittgenstein’s example of addition as a case of rule-following (Kripke 1982). These all can be thought of as “shared” in a prosaic sense. But as G. H. Mead’s phrase “significant symbols” suggests, something in the way of individual mental content, “skills at interpreting,” so to speak, are needed to convert what is explicit and shared or collective into personal mental content, lived experience, and so on (Mead [1934]1972).
6. Other inputs are non-explicit: either they are “wild” rather than disciplined or trained, or they are the tacit or habitual accompaniments to training, ritual, and discipline. They may consist, for example, in expectations about the behavior and responses one acquires in interaction with others.
7. These non-explicit acquisitions may be very important to social life. Indeed, all

intentional thinking, and this includes emotional responses as well as conscious problem solving, depends on the operation of mechanisms acquired by habituation. But it is a mistake to “collectivize” them as “shared tacit knowledge” or practice in the sense of a collective object possessed by members of a group. There is no way for such an hypothesized object to be acquired by the individuals in whom they are supposed to operate.

8. Brain structures exist that organize, or predispose to organization of, these inputs. What we are accustomed to calling moral feelings of various kinds, for example, have particular neural patterns localizable to particular brain structures. What is hardwired and what is not is an open question, however, and the content— the connections that are trained in ways that connect through these structures— will vary considerably depending on inputs and learning.

9. Our access, through reflection and introspection, to our mental processes is limited and prone to systematic error. How limited is unclear: even our supposed knowledge of our intentions may be bogus, with our actions already in train and determined by the time we are conscious of intending. These limitations are likely to apply as well to our reflections on our moral intuitions and feelings. What an fMRI might reveal about the nature of our response to free-riders, for example, may be very different in its implications from the sense that we ourselves construct of our own feelings.

If this account is more or less correct, practice-like patterns of social behavior emerge “naturally” from interaction and are “moral,” at least in the Humean sense that the input-output connections that are learned will also involve connections to parts of the brain that involve feelings, such as sympathy and benevolence, or the desire to punish free riders, that we traditionally associate with morality. When we reflect on and theorize about our moral feelings and intuitions, this body of learned feeling is going to provide the data. Our “rationality” itself, at least in the broad sense of reason used in the ethics literature, is going to amount to some sort of compound of inherited psychological capacities and learned inferential patterns. The explicit, articulated reflections on these practice-like patterns (and this is all that practice is going to be, meaning it is not going to be some sort of unified whole), whether they take the form of heroic myths, maxims which apply within them, or ethical theories themselves, cannot possibly extract the kernel or essence of the practice, because there is no such kernel or essence.

Ethics: A Connectionist Practice Account

This account of morality would seem to have all the problems of the Humean account. It would not provide an answer to the question of what ought we to do, but merely explain what we feel, and it would be relativistic, indeed radically subjective, in that each of us would feel different things, reason differently, and perhaps come to different conclusions. Or would it? None of this seems to follow. The issue of relativism arises from fixity or closure, especially the idea that in thought one is stuck in a frame from which one cannot escape. But in this account there is no such thing, no assumed framework or set of shared premises. That is part of the other model of practices. In this account, there are past experiences that lead us to respond differently, and also

to make different inferences in the face of the same things— but this is an innocuous fact that no one denies.⁵ Like the Humean account, it does not imply anything directly about “oughts.” But neither does any meta-ethical theory. Like any meta-ethical theory, it can point to where to look for moral guidance, explain the nature of the sorts of characteristic moral problems that do arise, and indicate what sorts of solutions can be found to them.

If practices are understood in this way, they account for moral motivation and moral reason at the same time: reasons are a form of congealed experience, based on learning under the condition of motivated action. This learning can be “moral” when it is learning which connects inputs to different parts of the brain, including the motivating ones, sometimes making for more complex, or higher motivations. The learning is largely on the tacit level, and can’t be captured by simple, or even highly complex, theories. So no “principle” is going to substitute for experience. Kant’s idea that morality is a matter of consciously following principles that can be articulated and can claim universal validity is thus wrong from the start: any articulated theory or principle is inevitably going to be a simplified and inadequate representation of our moral knowledge based on experience. Most of this experience is social and the result of social interaction. The third person point of view, the Lacanian “Big Other,” Mead’s generalized other, Freud’s superego are all names for the tacit distillation of these experiences, and it could not be otherwise: social interaction and experiences of success and failure in action provide the only data on which they can be based.

The term “success” inevitably suggests the wrong thing— that we are concerned with some sort of ultimate standard for success that is distinctively ethical and therefore as problematic as any other theory of the human good, or, alternatively, some sort of biological notion in which success is defined in terms of allowing the selfish gene to reproduce itself. Neither is necessary— we can make do with the notion of success we get from connectionist feedback at the tacit level, and say the following: virtues are the largely learned but also biologically based bundles of personal qualities that enable us to succeed in attaining our various ends in a given social setting. They are intermediate ends, or means to further ends, which happen to serve a variety of other ends, none of which is any sort of *summum bonum*. It would be no surprise that some virtues are enduring and can play this causal role in a variety of historical settings and that some are not, playing this role only in very restricted settings.⁶ And it would also be no surprise that given differences in inputs and circumstances for learning, some people fail to develop the virtues in childhood that they would need in order to attain the goods that they later aspire to.⁷

“Knowledge” is a word chosen deliberately. This is not a form of moral skepticism, much less irrationalism. One of the implications of this account of practices is that the “instinctive” or intuitive knowledge we have is based on the same things that all knowledge is based on, namely inherited cognitive capacities and tacit learning. The difference between learning and internalization is that tacit, connectionist, learning is self-correcting, and thus minimally rational by definition. The puzzle is not that it goes right, but in accounting for the fact that it can go wrong— which it typically does through the difference between the types of cases on which the learning was done and those to which it is applied. Where it does go wrong there is a role for theory or explicit principles. But it is a role that presupposes the tacit background. This requires some explanation. A core “moral” experience is this: we have a set of intuitions, rooted in

learning, that lead us into difficulties in a new situation. The model here was captured in the title of the book by Robert Fulgum, *All I Really Need to Know I learned in Kindergarten* (1988), with this difference: one probably learned much of this tacitly long before kindergarten. Novel situations arise, however, in which this knowledge is not enough. Conflicts occur between two goods, novel problems of proportionality in which the lesser evil is not so obvious, and feelings of guilt, over necessary choices which may be “for the best,” but also do harm, and so forth—including simple befuddlement in the face of orthogonal choices. In these situations we are torn between what we feel is right based on one set of tacit ingrained moral inferences and what we feel is right based on another. Both are well-rooted in our moral experience— and they became well-rooted because they got there in a world in which they did not constantly lead to conflicts of this sort. If they had led to conflicts they would not have become ingrained.

One view of such conflicts is that they can and should be resolved by “reason,” and that the resolution should consist in a theory that comes to “one right answer,” in the phrase of Ronald Dworkin. A simple example of this is Nagel’s discussion of the conflict between merit and equality (1991). He supposes that the right strategy in the face of the conflict is to raise the issue to a higher level of abstraction, resolve it at that level, and reason back down to cases with that theoretical resolution understood as the guiding universal principle. Acting morally becomes acting according to the principle enunciated in the theory. The practices account differs. For it, this is a real conflict that can be genuinely “resolved” only under circumstances that point to a resolution. Explicit reasoning has a role— for example in dealing with questions about proportionality, or whether the harms balance. But getting rid of the conflict through the construction of a moral ideology⁸ is a denial of the genuine moral knowledge we had about merit and treating people equally when we got ourselves into the novel situation where rewarding merit appeared to conflict with treating people equally. The moral response, for the practices account, is to acknowledge the conflict, perhaps to prudentially seek to avoid the creation of situations in which there is a conflict of this sort, but also to regret the bad consequences, meaning against one’s tacit learning, of the choices one makes in the situation.

In a sense, of course, this is a model of the generic moral experience of conflict between what one knows is right and what one has to do. And “theory” can have a role in such situations. But its role is not to replace what has been learned. It is rather to rely on, revise partially, and to complement. Cookbooks, similarly, have their uses, as reminders for the expert and as guides for the neophyte or unpracticed. And explicit theories may help correct for cognitive biases or mislearnings that we have learned, in another way, that we are prone to.

Conclusion: the Public Side of the Issue

The conflicts between the triple with which I began, of social theory, cognitive science, and ethics, are now in the twilight of interdisciplinary discussion. They are already beginning to slip into the darkness of “the culture wars.” John Gray, writing in *The New York Review of Books*, notes that

Many philosophers [notably the contemporary Kantians discussed in this paper] have accepted an understanding of morality that it difficult to square with the findings of

science, or even to state coherently. [The scientists'] research suggests something more like the Greek standpoint of a more practical, virtue-based morality, which accepted that humans are moral by nature (2007: 28).

The blunter views of many scientists are now appearing in the popular press. Marc Hauser's argument that humans have "some kind of unconscious driven moral judgements without its being accessible to conscious reflection" (quoted in Blumer 2007), which simply follows well-known findings about our inability to introspect correctly about our own cognitive processes (Nisbett and Ross 1980, 195-227), which fit with the rest of what is known about the largely hidden character of cognitive processes. These findings are already in the realm of public discussion. The quotation from Hauser appeared in a newspaper column. Nagel's book was specifically intended as an intervention in the culture wars against a social theory-informed relativism (1997). Beyond the handwaving, there are real issues. Where nature begins and social life takes over is a problem for evolutionary psychology and social theory. The inability of the "conscious reflection" model to make sense of actual moral thinking *is* a problem for ethical theory. The diversity of morals is, a century after Westermarck documented it in detail, still controversial news that universalizers about morality have not yet grasped fully.

The last time a serious rethinking of each of the elements of the triple happened was a century and a quarter ago, under the influence of Darwin: this produced the Spencer-Sidgwick split, which in turn generated the separate disciplines of sociology and ethics. The wide-ranging debate at the time raised many of the same questions, and many of the participants saw the same conflicts that have been discussed here— in the locutions of the time. These explosive issues became part of public discussion the form of a bitter and wide-ranging debate over social Darwinism and the possibility of socialism which transformed the popular understanding of human nature. But the issues were transformed and hidden by the disciplinarization of the domain, which replaced the conflicts with fences, and allowed each discourse to develop by ignoring the others, and allowed ethics to go back to its pre-Darwinian sources. The time has arrived to take the fences back down.

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Notes

1. These are well-rehearsed, from the intuitionist side, in the opening pages of Lecky's *History of European morals from Augustus to Charlemagne* (1955).
2. As Sidgwick put it, "We have found that the common antithesis between Intuitionists and Utilitarians must be entirely discarded: since such abstract moral principles as we can admit to be readily self-evident are not only not incompatible with a Utilitarian system, but even seem required to furnish a rational basis for such a system" (1922: 496).
3. The point needn't be buttressed by a theory, but the opponents of this kind of Collingwoodian point are prone to claim that it does in fact rest on a theory, and a false or problematic one, namely "contextualism" or "Holism," i.e. the thesis that cultures are interpretable only as unities or wholes. This claim was the implicit target of my earliest writings, especially *Sociological Explanation as Translation* (1980) and "Translating Ritual Belief" (1979), which argued that the notion of context could be made sense of by understanding the logic of the resolution of translation issues, which appealed to "context" by making specific bits of context relevant to the solution of particular translation puzzles rather than to arbitrarily constructed and fictitious "wholes."
4. As one translation of a famous passage in the Nicomachean Ethics reads, "some philosophers are of the opinion that justice is conventional in all its branches, arguing that a law of nature admits no variation and operates in exactly the same way everywhere— thus *fire* burns here and in

Persia— while rules of justice keep changing before our eyes” (Winch 1972: 50).

5. Unless they are in the grip of a philosophical theory that insists that inference is “normative” and that, say, squirrels and non-language users can’t make inferences.

6. Even the virtue of chastity, which the intuitionists brandished as proof positive that some things could be known by intuition but were not utilitarian, makes sense as a virtue in these terms: in some settings, including the Victorian setting of intuitionism, chastity doubtless was an intermediate means to a multitude of important ends, for a large group of women.

7. I discuss this useful notion of intermediate ends, derived from early twentieth century philosophy of law, in a paper on “Weber as a Constitutional Thinker” (Turner and Factor, 1987).

8. By moral ideology I mean a case of the absolutization and universalization of a particular solution to a parochial problem. It is not accidental that the most rabid defenders of an extensive idea of reason, such as Nagel (1997), are in practice the most parochial. Nagel, admittedly an extreme case, actually propounds what he claims to be a novel (and presumably definitive and backed by reason) theory of political legitimacy in a text that is based entirely on considerations drawn from the writings of a small handful of like-minded ethical theorists and a restricted set of examples drawn from American political and social disputes, almost none of which involve political legitimacy as normally understood. He makes no reference to the vast historical and social theoretical literature on legitimacy, acknowledges no alternative conception of legitimacy but that of liberal democracy, and ignores even Weber, the modern source of the idea of political legitimacy (Nagel 1991).