THE DISUNITY OF MORALITY AND WHY IT MATTERS TO PHILOSOPHY

What can moral psychology and neuroscience contribute to moral philosophy? Descriptive sciences cannot directly entail normative conclusions, as Hume and Moore taught. Nonetheless, science still might play an important role in a larger argument (such as an inductive inference to the best explanation) with a normative conclusion. In addition, when philosophical moral theories depend on empirical presuppositions and premises, psychology and neuroscience can test those assumptions. This latter use of moral psychology and neuroscience is what we will try to exemplify here.

For centuries, moral philosophers have proposed various theories about moral judgments. Recently moral psychologists and neuroscientists have joined the fray and developed descriptive accounts of how moral judgments operate in our minds. All of this work in all of these fields regularly assumes that something is common and peculiar to all and only moral judgments that make them worthy of study as a unified topic. In this paper, we will use empirical research (including some neuroscience) in conjunction with philosophical methods to argue against that assumption. Then we will discuss implications of giving it up.

1. What Is Unity?

Consider mineralogy. Quartz comes in many colors, but it is still a single mineral because the different types of quartz have the same basic chemical composition. The colors are due to impurities. In contrast, jade is not a unified mineral. Jade consists of two subtypes—jadeite and nephrite—with different chemical compositions: Jadeite is a type of pyroxene, and nephrite is a type of tremolite. Because of these chemical differences, it would be silly for a mineralogist to try to formulate a precise theory of jade in general. If a mineralogist wants to learn physical properties of jade, such as its density, hardness, and solubilities, the min-

eralogist will have to study jadeite and nephrite separately. A general theory can work only if its subject matter is unified in the right way.

A group of things is unified in the relevant way if and only if they share some feature that enables important universal generalizations about its distinctive properties. The shared feature might be content, structure, function, source, or almost anything else. The group is unified only if some such feature enables generalizations that hold not just usually but universally in all cases. Moreover, those generalizations must be important in illuminating the nature or effects of the phenomena.

2. What Is a Moral Judgment?

Whether moral judgments are unified in this way depends, of course, on what counts as a moral judgment. If someone stipulates that moral judgments include only judgments based on God’s commands, then all of these moral judgments will be unified by their basis in God’s commands. But then if someone else proclaims that all moral judgments must serve the good of society, then all of these moral judgments will be unified by their connection to social good. Defenders of each view can simply deny that any judgment that seems to be a moral judgment is really a moral judgment if it doesn’t have to do with God’s commands or the good of society. Unfortunately, that easy move is cheating, just as it would be cheating to deny that nephrite is really jade because it’s different from jadeite. One could just as easily deny that jadeite is jade because it’s different from nephrite. To avoid such cheating and pointless disputes, we need to specify what counts as jade or as a moral judgment in some way that does not beg the question and make the view empty.

Accordingly, we define moral judgments to include all judgments that are intended to resemble paradigm moral judgments. The judge’s intention is what makes the judgment moral. If people who say that homosexuality is wrong intend to be saying that homosexuality violates standards that they do or would see as moral in much the same way as exemplars that they take to be paradigms of moral judgment, and if they intend to be denying judgments that they also take to be similarly moral in nature, then their judgment is a moral judgment for our purposes. Here we will focus on clear cases that not only isolated individuals but many or even most people would classify as moral judgments, because they recognize that people who make those judgments intend them to be about morality rather than some other topic, and they also recognize that most
people would see those judgments (and their denials) in that way. If millions or billions of people see a judgment as being about morality, then that is strong evidence that it is a moral judgment at least in the absence of a very strong countervailing argument.

The relevant contrast is neither with immoral judgments nor with incorrect moral judgments. In order to classify a certain judgment as a moral judgment, people do not need to agree with it. They can think that other people are badly mistaken when they judge that homosexuality is morally wrong. Nonetheless, the judgment that those other people make is a moral judgment in the sense that it is intended to be about morality rather than about some other topic. In contrast, if someone says that restaurants are not allowed to sell postage stamps, that is a legal judgment rather than a moral judgment. If someone judges that investing in new restaurants is financially unwise, that is an economic judgment, not a moral judgment. If someone criticizes a new restaurant as ugly, that is an aesthetic judgment instead of a moral judgment. In contrast, when someone claims that it is immoral for a restaurant to serve meat, that is a moral judgment as opposed to a legal, economic, or aesthetic judgment. Even people who deny this judgment should recognize that it is intended to be about morality. Of course, a single judgment can be intended to be aesthetic as well as moral, such as when someone says that it is wrong on several grounds to clear-cut old-growth forests, but we will count a judgment as moral to the extent that it is intended to be about morality.

3. The Issue

Our question, then, is whether all judgments that are intended to be about morality as opposed to law, economics, aesthetics, and so on are unified by any common and peculiar feature that enables important universal generalizations about their distinctive properties. If so, then moral judgments are unified. If not, then they are not unified.

Even if moral judgments are not unified, they still might all share some more general feature, such as normativity, and normative judgments still might be unified. Some subsets of moral judgments might also be unified. The question here is only whether there is any unity at a particular level of generality—that of moral judgments as a whole.

In denying that any feature unifies moral judgments, we do not deny that all and only moral judgments share the feature of being called or intended as moral judgments. After all, all jade is called jade, but that label
does not unify jade in a relevant way. The reason to dismiss such verbal features is that they cannot support important universal generalizations. Similarly, the fact that all and only moral judgments are called or intended as moral judgments cannot support important universal generalizations about moral judgments. But every other kind of potentially unifying feature does need to be ruled out in order to show that moral judgments are not unified.

How can we prove such a negative existential? We can't; but not every good argument needs to be a proof. Our strategy will be to consider all of the main plausible candidates and reject them one by one. In particular, we will consider content, phenomenology, force, form, function, and brain mechanism. Our list of candidates cannot be complete, and our arguments against some candidates will not be conclusive. Nonetheless, the argument as a whole illustrates patterns that could be used to refute new proposals, so it provides strong reason to believe that moral judgments are not unified.

4. Are Moral Judgments Unified by Their Content?

The first candidate to consider is the content of moral judgments—what they are about. In one sense, what moral judgments are about is actions. However, we also make moral judgments about institutions, emotions, character traits, and people, and it is doubtful that those moral judgments can be reduced to judgments about particular actions (cf. e.g., Baron 2002). In any case, other kinds of normative judgments, including legal, economic, or aesthetic judgments, can also be about actions. When people judge that it is ugly to dance or paint in a certain way on purpose, they are judging an intentional action, but this judgment is aesthetic rather than moral, assuming the judger does not intend to say that it is immoral to dance or paint that way. Thus, the feature of being about actions is not distinctive of moral judgments, so it cannot make moral judgments unified.

Another common proposal about content claims that all and only moral judgments are about harm to others (cf. Gert 2005). However, although many moral judgments are about harm to others, others are not. Imagine that a colleague gets tenure. If you fail to give her a celebratory gift, then she will not be harmed, not even by feeling disappointed, because she did not expect any gift. Assume also that she is not needy and is already happy before she gets your gift. After all, she just got tenure. Nonetheless, many people would say it is nice to give her a gift. It is not legally nice, economically nice, religiously nice, prudentially nice, or aes-
thetically nice. It seems to be morally nice, because the act of giving intentionally benefits another person. At least some people who make this judgment intend to be saying that the gift is nice in a moral way, and most people would recognize the judgment to be moral in this way.

Some theorists might respond that such judgments of niceness are not moral judgments or at least not the kind of moral judgment that they meant to unify, perhaps because niceness is an ideal rather than a requirement. But that is cheating in this context. If this niceness judgment is intended as a moral judgment, and if most people classify it as a moral judgment, and if it is not about harm, then it refutes the claim that all and only moral judgments are about harm to others.

Even apart from ideals like niceness, many moral requirements are not about harm. Consider this quick survey (building on Shweder 1997 and Haidt 2007):

**Harm:**

*Death:* Do not kill.

*Disability:* Do not blind, paralyze, or maim.

*Physical pain:* Do not torture.

*Psychological pain:* Do not insult or make people feel bad.

**Justice:**

*Retributive:* Do not punish more or less than is deserved.

*Distributive:* Do not treat people unequally.

*Procedural:* Give everyone a fair hearing and a fair chance.

**Dishonesty:**

Do not lie.

Do not break promises.

Do not cheat (e.g., in games or in marriage).

**Social position:**

*Hierarchy:* Do not disrespect or disobey your parents or elders.
Role: Do your job and duty (e.g., as employee, spouse, citizen, or club member).

Loyalty (to an in-group): Be patriotic. Don’t rat on friends.

Purity:

Sexual: Do not commit incest or necrophilia.

Gustatory: Do not commit cannibalism.

These categories overlap and are incomplete and vague, but the point here is only to display variety. All of these judgments are widely (though not universally) intended and accepted as moral judgments, at least when qualified with “... unless you have an adequate reason (justification or excuse).”

The first group of common moral requirements clearly concerns harm to others. So does retributive justice, insofar as punishment involves harm. Distributive justice also usually focuses on the distribution of means to relieve harms.

However, unequal distribution of benefits, such as giving unequal optional presents, is often also considered unfair and immoral. Moreover, procedural justice applies to providing benefits, as in unfair procedures for awarding science grants or art prizes. Dishonesty (such as lying, breaking promises, and cheating) is also often judged to be morally forbidden even when dishonesty does not cause obvious harm, as in some violations of deathbed promises.

It is even more dubious that the final two types of moral requirements always depend on harm. Spitting on your father’s grave is disrespectful, so many would judge it immoral even when it harms nobody at all. Those who disagree see this judgment as a moral judgment that is mistaken rather than as some other kind of judgment. The same goes for purity. If one eats or has sex with a dead human body when nobody is looking, no disease is transferred, and the person died by accident, then cannibalism and necrophilia might cause no harm to others. People could stretch to find some indirect harm, believed harm, or risk of harm, but that tenuous relation to harm is not what really makes many people call such acts “immoral” or classify such judgments as “moral” (Haidt et al. 1993).

For all of these reasons, moral judgments are not unified by being about harm to others. Admittedly, moral judgments still might be unified
by some content other than harm to others. However, it is hard to imagine what could unify the grab-bag of contents in the above list of common moral judgments. Someone always might come up with a surprising proposal; but, until then, we conclude that nothing about the content of moral judgments can unify them in a relevant way.

5. Are Moral Judgments Unified by Their Phenomenology?

Another way to unify moral judgments looks inward to phenomenology—to how it feels or seems to make a moral judgment or how actions or people seem to us when we judge them morally.

It is hard to argue about phenomenology, but moral judgments against rape surely feel and seem very different than moral judgments in favor of celebratory gifts, though both judgments are moral rather than legal, economic, aesthetic, and so on. Even within moral requirements, different rules are associated with different emotions (Rozin, et al. 1999). Violations of moral rules about harm produce anger or fear, whereas violations of moral rules about dishonesty yield distrust, violations of moral rules about distribution make one feel demeaned, and violations of moral rules about purity lead to disgust. Although these labels might be questioned, it seems clear that moral judgments within various areas of morality feel and seem very different. And, of course, it also feels very different to be treated immorally—to be harmed, deceived, or cheated—than to see someone else treated immorally.

Admittedly, these powerful emotions might cover up a relatively weak but still shared feeling or sense that occurs in all and only moral judgments. But which feeling or sense? One common response refers to a sense of what is fitting (e.g., Mandelbaum 1969). However, the notion of fitting is much too broad to capture anything peculiar to morality. A frame can fit a painting physically and aesthetically without being morally good.

Other phenomenologists refer to a felt demand. However, one feels no such demand when one judges that someone else had a moral obligation to a third party. And if one now judges that one had a moral obligation to visit one's estranged father before he died, then today one need not experience that obligation as a demand, because it is too late to do anything about it. Moreover, moral judgments about ideals and supererogation (such as heroic acts or just niceness) specifically do not feel like demands, because they encourage rather than demand. So moral judgments are not all unified at the level of phenomenology (cf. Sinnott-Armstrong 2008a).
6. Are Moral Judgments Unified by Their Force?

A prominent group of psychologists headed by Turiel (1983) have pressed a distinction between moral norms and conventional norms. They asked young children questions like these:

Is it wrong to wear pajamas to class? (Yes.)

Would it still be wrong if the teacher said it was permitted? (No.)

Is it wrong to hit other children? (Yes.)

Would it still be wrong if the teacher said it was permitted? (Yes.)

The parenthetical answers are typical for children above age 4 but not for children below age 3. These answers are taken to show that children above age 4 have learned to treat the latter kind of judgments as independent of authority. In addition, adults and children above age 4 tended to say that the wrongness of hitting other children is serious and based on harm to individual victims, but they gave different answers for conventional wrongs. Turiel and his followers labeled wrongs that are treated like wearing pajamas to class as conventional wrongs and wrongs that are treated like hitting other children as moral wrongs. Thus, they suggest that moral wrongness and only moral wrongness is seen as authority-independent, serious, and harm-based.

However, the features that Turiel uses to define moral wrongness are not really distinctive of morality. There are wrong ways to tie knots, because the knot will slip if you tie it that way. It is still wrong if a teacher tells you to tie it that way and if people in another society tie knots that way. That wrongness can also be serious and harm-based if the safety of a mountain climber, for example, depends on the knot not slipping. But it is still not morally wrong to tie the knot that way, at least accidentally. The same goes for harmless but wrong answers in mathematical calculations.

Conversely, some moral judgments are not authority-independent. Suppose you are a student, and your teacher asks you to lie to the rest of the class one at a time to see how far you can go without being detected. In class tomorrow, she plans to point out what you have been doing and get students to discuss your lying as a lesson on how lying can disrupt social structures by weakening trust. This pedagogical technique might not work as intended, but it is not morally wrong for you to lie as the
teacher tells you. Why not? Because the teacher gave you permission. If the teacher had not given you permission, then it would be morally wrong. Thus, whether or not this lying is morally wrong depends on whether the teacher asks you to do it. That means that this kind of moral wrongness is not independent of authority.

In response, defenders of the Turiel might claim that your lying is morally wrong _pro tanto_, but it’s justified. However, the issue here is overall wrongness, and your lying is not morally wrong overall if it is justified. Another possible response is that what keeps your lies from being morally wrong is not the teacher’s permission but only that you are going to reveal the truth soon, as when a joke or surprise party involves deception. However, this class exercise still seems morally permitted if you and the teacher waited until the following week to expose the experimental lies. Thus, the teacher’s permission seems to be what makes lying morally permissible in this case.

It might seem that lying or, more generally, dishonesty is a special case. However, lying is typically judged to be immoral rather than a violation of convention (or law, aesthetics, etc.). Moreover, Kelly et al. 2007 argue for similar claims about cases of harm (such as whipping as a punishment 300 years ago compared to today). Anyway, there do seem to be various judgments that are intended and seen as moral judgments but are still not (and not seen as) independent of authority. Therefore, we cannot use the supposed authority-independence of moral judgments—their force—to unify moral judgments.

7. Are Moral Judgments Unified by Their Form?

Hare (1981, 53–57) famously defines a moral judgment as any judgment that is prescriptive, universalizable, and overriding. To say that a judgment is prescriptive is roughly to say that it is used for (or somehow essentially connected to) certain speech acts, centrally advising or guiding action. To say that a judgment is universalizable is roughly to say that it can be extended to all relevantly similar cases. Finally, according to Hare, moral judgments are (or are treated as) overriding in the sense of being more important than nonmoral considerations so that morality determines what we overall ought to do in any conflict between moral and nonmoral reasons.

At least two conditions in Hare’s definition raise questions. Against the claim that moral judgments must always override religion, Kierkegaard (2006) interprets Abraham as believing that it was morally wrong for him
to sacrifice his son Isaac even though he overall ought to follow God’s commands. Moral judgments also need not always override self-interest, according to Sidgwick (1981), who suggests that some conflicts between egoism and morality are unresolvable in the sense that it’s not irrational to follow self-interest and it’s also not irrational to follow morality. Regarding whether morality always overrides aesthetics, Williams (1981) discusses the case of Gauguin, who left his needy wife and children in order to pursue his art in Tahiti. Even if Gauguin knew that leaving his family was immoral, Gaugin still might judge that he overall ought to have gone to Tahiti to pursue his art. In these cases, someone makes a moral judgment without taking it to be overriding. Hare can simply deny that such nonoverriding judgments are really moral judgments, but they are intended and seen as moral judgment by the people who made them as well as by many others (who might or might not agree). So moral judgments of the kind under discussion here need not always be overriding (see also Flanagan 1986).

It is also questionable whether all moral judgments must be prescriptive. If we judge that it was morally wrong for Brutus to kill Caesar long ago, we are not advising Brutus or anyone else. Even if we were back in ancient Rome, we would not have advised Brutus not to kill Caesar, because Brutus would have killed us for giving that advice. We might even prefer for Brutus to kill Caesar, because we would not want history to be disturbed in ways that might prevent us from being born. We are also not prescribing against similar acts today, because we are never going to be in a position to do anything similar in all relevant respects to Brutus’s act. Thus, when we judge that it was morally wrong for Brutus to kill Caesar, it is hard to see how we prescribe anything for anyone.

Hare’s theory also fails to fit negated moral judgments. If we say, “It’s not morally wrong to buy a lottery ticket,” are we prescribing that you buy a lottery ticket? No. Are we prescribing that you not buy a lottery ticket? No. This negative moral judgment is not prescriptive one way or the other. Such negative or permissive judgments are moral judgments, but they are not prescriptive (cf. Sinnott-Armstrong 1995). So moral judgments are not unified by their form in the way Hare claims.

Of course, other philosophers might propose other formal features. One that is worth mentioning is Kant’s categorical imperative (1997), but
Foot (2003) argued effectively that some nonmoral norms, including etiquette, are categorical in the usual interpretation and that some norms that are seen as moral are also seen as hypothetical. In light of Foot's arguments, it is hard to imagine how this approach could work.

8. Are Moral Judgments Unified by Their Function?

Having considered phenomenology, force, and form, it seems natural to look next at another F: function. Many theorists claim that morality evolved and currently functions to solve a certain problem. Warnock (1971) argued that the goal of moral judgments is to reduce liability to harm that arises from limited sympathy: We care about ourselves and our friends and family much more than we care about other people. This limited sympathy leads us to choose acts that harm others, so we are all in danger when lots of other people have such limited sympathy. Morality is supposed to solve this problem by having rules that apply to all people equally: You shouldn’t lie, cheat, kill, or rape anyone—even strangers for whom you have no sympathy.

This story seems plausible in some cases, but it clearly does not cover all of the judgments that people classify as moral. A judgment that homosexual sodomy is morally wrong will reduce sympathy for homosexuals. Similarly, a retributivist rule that legal officials must take an eye for an eye is supposed to decrease the sympathy of officials for criminals. Again, when people judge that they have special duties to their in-group, this judgment will actually reduce sympathy for people who are not in that in-group. Moral judgments like these function not to reduce but to increase limits on sympathy. Of course, many people disagree with these judgments, but, even if mistaken, they are still intended and seen to be about morality rather than law, economics, aesthetics, or any other topic. Hence, many moral judgments do not function to overcome limited sympathy.

Another perspective on the function of moral judgments comes from evolutionary psychology. The best evidence (though limited) suggests that different moral judgments evolved or arose separately. For example, Lieberman (2006) argues that different kinds of disgust—pathogen disgust, sexual disgust, and moral disgust (such as for torture)—arose from different evolutionary pressures at separate times in a certain order. And it is hard to see how moral rules against lying or promise breaking could arise before
language or why moral rules against harm and impurity would not have arisen (in some form) before language, since our ancestors were subject to harmful aggression long before they could talk. This speculation suggests that different moral judgments serve different functions, so we should not expect any specific function to be common and peculiar to all moral judgments.

9. Are Moral Judgments Unified by Brain Mechanisms?

Even if moral judgments are not unified in any other way, they still might have a common and distinctive physical basis, presumably in the brain. Here is one place where the neuroscience of ethics becomes relevant to philosophy.

Some early neural studies might seem to suggest that moral judgments are unified by their neural basis. In a review article, Moll et al. (2005) claimed, “Recent functional imaging and clinical evidence indicates that a remarkably consistent network of brain regions is involved in moral cognition.” These claims seem to be about all and only moral judgments, because sub-areas of morality are not distinguished, and moral cognition is picked out separately from other normative areas.

However, more recent neuroimaging evidence tips the balance in favor of the thesis that different moral judgments rely on different neural systems. This section presents a few of these findings.

9.1 Ideals vs. prohibitions

Unsurprisingly, different brain processes have been found for moral judgments about ideals in contrast with prohibitions. In a recent study by Moll et al. (2006), subjects started with $128 in real money, and they could end up with that amount or more if they did not give it away. Then subjects were asked to read about real charitable organizations, some of which were linked to euthanasia, abortion, children’s rights, the death penalty, gender equality, war, and nuclear power; so they raised controversial moral issues. Subjects were then asked to respond “Yes” or “No” to a choice of real pay offs to themselves and to a certain charity. Their choices fell into various groups:

*Pure Monetary Reward*: “Yes” to +$2 to you and $0 to the charity

*Non-Costly Donation*: “Yes” to $0 to you and +$5 to the charity
Costly Donation: “Yes” to -$2 from you and give +$5 to the charity
Non-Costly Opposition: “No” to $0 to you and +$5 to the charity
Costly Opposition: “No” to +$2 to you and +$5 to the charity

In the last two cases, subjects who opposed donations to certain charities either at some cost or no gain to themselves presumably based that decision on a negative moral judgment that those charities violated some moral prohibition. Opponents of abortion, for example, might prefer to lose $2 than to contribute $5 that would enable abortions. In contrast, subjects who gave donations to certain charities either at some cost or no gain to themselves (the second and third cases) presumably based that decision on a positive moral judgment that those charities furthered some moral ideal.

Moll et al. (2006) found that these moral judgments about moral prohibitions and moral ideals were associated with activation in distinct brain regions. Subjects who donated on the basis of moral ideals showed higher activation in the subgenual region. In contrast, subjects who opposed donations on the basis of moral prohibitions showed higher activation in the lateral orbital frontal cortex. Some regions were activated by both moral ideals and moral prohibitions, including the ventral tegmental area, the striatum, and the anterior prefrontal cortex. However, the ventral tegmental area and the striatum were also activated by pure monetary rewards as well as other kinds of reinforcement expectancy, so they were not activated only for moral judgments. The anterior prefrontal cortex was not activated by all moral judgments, because it was not activated by noncostly donations or noncostly opposition, so it seems to be related not to moral judgment but to cost to the chooser. Overall, no region of the brain was found to be common and peculiar to both moral ideals and moral prohibitions. Positive and negative moral judgments, thus, appear to be subserved by different neural systems.

9.2 Prohibitions with different contents

Our group (Parkinson, et al. 2011) tested the more limited hypothesis that moral prohibitions share a common and peculiar neural basis. The first step was to construct a set of scenarios that cleanly separate different areas of morality by describing actions that were (physically) harmful but neither dishonest nor disgusting, other acts that were dishonest but neither
harmful nor disgusting, and yet other acts that invoked (sexual) disgust but were neither harmful nor dishonest. For example, the second group included undiscovered lies to keep a secret, and the third group included cases of necrophilia as well as consensual adult sibling incest without deception or risk of offspring. We developed these stimuli so that they would be ambiguous in the specific sense that at least thirty percent of subjects found the act to be morally wrong and at least thirty percent found the act to be not morally wrong. This enabled us to compare the brain activations when participants actually judged that an act was morally wrong to the brain activations when they judged that an act was not morally wrong. A final group for comparison included neutral stimuli that were neither harmful nor dishonest nor disgusting and were not judged to be morally wrong.

Our results were complex but clear. Harmful acts that were judged morally wrong compared to neutral scenarios were associated with increased activity in the left dorsal lateral prefrontal cortex, the anterior cingulate cortex, the supplementary motor area, the inferior parietal lobe, the superior temporal sulcus, and the thalamus. In contrast, when participants judged dishonest acts to be morally wrong, there was bilateral activity in the dorsal medial prefrontal cortex (dmPFC), the temporal parietal junction extending superiorly into the inferior parietal lobe, and the posterior cingulate cortex, as well as increased activity in the left dorsal lateral prefrontal cortex. When disgusting acts were judged to be morally wrong, we observed increased activity in bilateral dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, dmPFC, the amygdalae, the anterior cingulate cortex and the posterior cingulate cortex as well as the right temporal pole and left inferior frontal operculum/anterior insula. None of these areas were common and peculiar to all and only judgments of moral wrongness.

Other studies have found similar results regarding the neural basis of moral judgments about fairness or justice. Robertson et al. (2007) found that areas of the brain reacted differently to sensitivity to harm versus sensitivity to unfairness and dishonesty. Hsu et al. (2008) found that judgments of equity activated the insula whereas judgments of efficiency activated more the putamen. Hsu et al. (2008) did find caudate activity related to both equity and efficiency, but only during the “hit” period, which was at a time later than the moral choice in their design.

Thus, not all moral judgments activate the same brain regions. A fine-grained subgroup of moral judgments still might show a prototypical
neural response. However, such a finding would not show that moral judgments are unified at the relevant level of generality.

10. Conclusion

We have argued against the main proposals for unifying moral judgments based on content, phenomenology, force, form, function, and brain mechanisms. Admittedly, our arguments are hardly conclusive proofs, and we might have overlooked some other way to unify moral judgments. Our survey was not complete, and we cannot complete it in our lifetimes. So we have not proven that nothing unifies moral judgments. Hence, our conclusion is best characterized as raising a question: If something else unifies all and only moral judgments, what is it? In the absence of any promising way to answer this question, it is reasonable to doubt that anything unifies moral judgments.

Critics might admit that they don’t know what unifies moral judgments but still insist that something must, because all of these judgments are called “moral.” However, as we mentioned, the fact that certain judgments are grouped together under a common label does not show that the group has any more unity than jade does. The classification might be based on no reason at all or on a false belief, such as that people used to believe that all moral norms are based on divine commands.

Another possibility is that a core subset of moral judgments were extended over time to more and more judgments with less and less in common (compare Wittgenstein 1973 on family resemblance). But why would such extensions occur? One speculation is that people on the top of a social hierarchy control the media and culture, so they can affect common moral language. They also have personal motives for extending the term “moral” to judgments to which it did not previously apply (cf. Stevenson 1938). For example, if the core cases of moral wrongness involve harm and dishonesty, but powerful people want to reduce other types of behaviors, such as incest, cannibalism, or disobedience to superiors, then they might want to extend the term “immoral” to those other behaviors. Similarly, if they want to increase certain behaviors, such as punishment practices, then they can call such behaviors “moral.” Of course, this story is oversimplified and speculative. Nonetheless, the point here is only that it could explain our common labeling without any unity in moral judgments. Hence, the fact that all moral judgments are called “moral” cannot refute the conclusion that moral judgments are not unified.
11. Where Disunity Matters

This conclusion might seem obvious. Didn’t we know long ago that many terms, especially in controversial areas, cannot be strictly defined? Of course we did, but many philosophers, psychologists, and neuroscientists continue to formulate their theories, arguments, and experiments in ways that presuppose the unity of morality. So we will close by discussing where disunity does and does not make a difference. We do not claim that the disunity of morality undermines moral philosophy or psychology wholesale. However, it does require philosophers and scientists to limit their claims, it causes serious trouble for some popular views, it opens up some unexplored possibilities, and it points towards underused experimental methods.

First, consider substantive moral theory. Some people seem to think that the disunity of moral judgments shows that no single objectively true principle can work throughout morality. Nothing like that follows. Even if nothing distinguishes moral judgments from nonmoral judgments, there still might be a single standard that determines when all moral judgments are true as long as it applies also to nonmoral judgments, so it does not pretend to determine when only moral judgments are true. For example, consequentialism might work this way. If what is right and wrong is determined by overall consequences, then it doesn’t really matter whether or not the wrongness is moral in nature, because that same general consequentialist standard is going to apply to using the wrong color in a painting or to failing to brush your teeth. The same point also seems to hold for virtue theories of ethics.

Other moral philosophers accommodate the disunity of morality by admitting that their theories cover only some moral judgments but not all. For example, Rawls did not claim that his approach in *A Theory of Justice* (1972) could be extended to moral judgments that are not about justice. Indeed, he did not even try to cover retributive justice. Similarly, Scanlon (1999, 219–20) explicitly denies that his theory applies to environmental issues where no people are harmed or to future generations of people who cannot engage in the contract that Scanlon sees as the basis of moral judgments. These limitations are well motivated if morality is not unified. Just as mineralogists need different generalizations for different kinds of jade, so moral philosophers who do not want to cover all normative judgments (or some other larger group that includes all but not only moral
judgments) might need different theories for different kinds of moral judgments. These moral theories can survive by admitting that they cannot cover all of a disunified group.

In contrast, some moral theories—or arguments for them—seem to presuppose that morality is unified. One prime example is Kant. In the first section of his famous *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant claims to be analyzing “the moral cognition of common human reason” (1997, 16). He then argues that “common” moral cognition justifies his thesis that all and only moral imperatives are categorical (1997, 27). This thesis is crucial for his fundamental theory, because he later tries to derive the content of his most basic moral principle—his first formulation of the categorical imperative—from the very nature of moral imperatives: “When I think of a categorical imperative, I know at once what it contains” (1997, 29). His later formulations of his categorical imperative also seem to depend on the nature of morality as such: “Morality consists, then, in the reference of all action to the lawgiving by which alone a kingdom of ends is possible” (1997, 42) and “But that the above principle of autonomy is the sole principle of morals can well be shown by mere analysis of the concepts of morality” (1997, 47). Thus, Kant’s whole moral theory would seem to face serious problems if “common moral cognition” included too wide a variety of moral prohibitions to fit within Kant’s theory.

Admittedly, Kant is always hard to interpret, and he might find another basis for his claims if he cannot base them on common moral cognition. However, in passages like these (and many more), Kant sure seems to present his argument as if it depends on the unity of “common” morality. Thus, our arguments against the unity of morality would seem to undermine Kant’s moral theory. Kant might have ways out of these problems, and modern Kantians (or Neo-Kantians) might avoid these problems completely by modifying Kant’s arguments or principles. Nonetheless, Kant’s theory is at least one place in substantive ethics where the unity of morality seems to matter.

What about metaethics? Metaethics includes moral semantics, moral metaphysics, moral epistemology, and moral psychology. We will discuss these four sub-areas in turn, although they are often conflated.

Moral semantics investigates the meaning of moral terms in a wide sense of “meaning” that includes pragmatics. Standard theories of moral
semantics assume that all moral terms have a single kind of meaning. Moral semantic realists claim that all moral terms refer to something real; whereas moral semantic expressivists think that all moral terms are used to express noncognitive states, including emotions, sentiments, desires, or prescriptions. In contrast with such uniform views, Gill (2009) has argued for what he calls moral variantism, which claims that moral terms have different kinds of meaning in different cases, such as when different terms are used by different people in different circumstances to judge different kinds of actions. This semantic moral variantism might seem to comport well with our claim that morality is not unified.

However, variantism faces serious problems as a semantic view (Sinnott-Armstrong 2009). One reason is that moral terms do not have different meanings in different cases according to linguists’ tests of ambiguity. For example, it would be linguistically odd to say, “I own two pens, a writing pen and a pig pen,” but there is no linguistic oddity in saying “I have sinned twice since my last confession” even if the sins fall within different areas of morality. Consider also zeugma: It sounds odd to say, “Joe and Kelly are both boring. Joe is boring a hole, and Kelly is boring an audience.” In contrast, it doesn’t sound odd to say murder and incest are both morally wrong, even though murder and incest fall into different areas of morality. Thus, the meanings of moral terms do not vary in the way that Gill claims, even if morality is not unified.

The next area of metaethics is moral metaphysics, which studies the reality or existence of moral facts or properties. Metaphysical moral realists claim that there are real moral properties. Metaphysical moral subjectivists, projectivists, and constructivists deny that there are such moral properties. Following Gill, a metaphysical moral variantist could claim that there are real moral properties in some areas of morality, but moral properties are somehow projected, constructed, or subjective in other areas of morality. The disunity of morality does not imply any such metaphysical moral variantism, but it still might seem to make that view more palatable by explaining how such a mixed bag could get grouped together. If the term “moral” was extended in the way speculated above, then the term “moral” might refer to one property in core moral judgments before the extension but then later to a different property after being extended to noncore moral judgments. Indeed, the term “moral” might refer to no property at all after the extension. By analogy, the term “idiot” was a technical term used by mental retardation experts to refer to people with
the intelligence of a three-year-old or an IQ under 25. Now the same term is applied abusively to a much wider group of people, and it might seem to be used not to refer to any property at all but only to express disdain for someone. If the term “moral” is analogous to “idiot,” then its extensions might explain how it refers to real moral properties in some cases but not others. Of course, the disunity of morality still does not show that the term “moral” actually was extended in this way, but it might help to open up and motivate a new possibility in moral metaphysics.

Next comes moral epistemology, which is the study of whether and when we are justified in forming or holding moral beliefs or when we know what is morally right and wrong. Traditional moral epistemologists assume that all moral judgments are justified (or not) in the same way—whether by intuition or by coherence among beliefs or by deriving them from nonmoral or nonnormative premises or by some contractarian or contractualist framework (Sinnott-Armstrong 2008b). Epistemic variantism would claim that moral beliefs are justified by different methods or to different degrees in different areas. Some support for epistemic variantism comes from empirical research revealing that moral intuitions are more subject to framing effects and emotional distortion and, hence, less reliable and more in need of inferential justification in some areas than in other areas (Sinnott-Armstrong 2008c; Felz and Nadelhoffer 2008). If so, then moral intuitionism, which denies the need for inferential justification, might be easier to defend in some parts of morality than in others, which might mean that different moral epistemologies work for different moral judgments.

Finally, the disunity of moral judgments teaches an important lesson for methods in empirical moral psychology and neuroscience. In many experiments, researchers lump together moral judgments and seek contrasts between moral and nonmoral judgments. This top-down method can produce both false-negatives and false-positives, because morality is disunified.

False-negatives occur when researchers miss something interesting. For example, if one class of moral judgments within a mixed group of stimuli activates a brain area more highly than the control, but another class of moral judgments within the mixed group of stimuli activates that same brain area less than the control, then researchers will miss both of these significant brain activation levels, because they will cancel out each other. Similarly, researchers might find no significant difference between moral and nonmoral conditions, even though a subset of moral judgments is related to a significant activation increase, simply because the increased
activation from a subset of our stimuli is not statistically significant when thrown in with all the other types of moral judgments.

The top-down method also leads to false-positives. For example, if researchers present ten moral scenarios each from five different areas, and they find an increased activation for that total set compared to a neutral base line, then they might conclude that all of the moral judgments tend to activate those areas. However, that entire result might come merely from one or two classes of moral judgments out of the five kinds, even though the other moral judgments don’t activate that brain area at all. If they assume that those other judgments will activate that area, they will fall into the trap of false positives.

These problems can be avoided by a more fine-grained bottom-up method. Researchers need to isolate smaller classes of judgments within one region of a map of “morality,” present relevant scenarios from a single perspective, and look for the neural basis or the evolutionary origin or the psychological process behind that smaller class of judgments. If they get results, then they cannot assume that these results extend to other kinds of moral judgments. They need to test any new kind of moral judgment with new experiments that vary one factor (content, perspective, etc.) at a time.

Of course many moral neuroscientists and psychologists are already aware of these traps, but they still often fail to design their experiments and write their articles with these problems in mind. They continue to lump together different types of moral judgments, which clouds the interpretation of their results. They also draw conclusions about the nature of morality in general from studies that only include a subset and sometimes only a small sample of the variety of moral judgments.

Mistakes like this need to stop if moral psychology and moral philosophy are to make progress. In both fields, it is likely to be useful to rethink moral theory in light of the disunity of morality and then to adopt more fine-grained methods.5

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NOTES

1. This assumption was questioned already by Flanagan (1991, 15-20) and Stich (2006). Our view owes much to these predecessors.

2. For more detailed arguments, see Sinnott-Armstrong and T. Wheatley (manuscript). That article is the source for much of this companion piece, which selectively streamlines our arguments for philosophers in Sections 1-10 and then draws out some new philosophical lessons in Section 11.

3. Since Turiel's main goal is empirical, it is not clear that he or his followers would accept this generalization as a definition of moral judgment, but what interests us here is only whether his research can be used to unify moral judgments in this way.

4. Some researchers saw this early: "Morality is probably not a 'natural kind' in the brain. Just as the ordinary concept of memory refers to a variety of disparate cognitive processes (working memory, episodic memory, motor memory, etc.), we believe that the ordinary concept of moral judgment refers to a variety of more fine-grained and disparate processes, both 'affective' and 'cognitive'.” (Greene and Haidt 2002, 523)

5. For helpful comments, we thank audiences at the College of Charleston, Washington University in St. Louis, Oxford University, Duke University, Holy Cross College, Princeton University, Harvard University, Davidson College, National Cheng Kung University, National Chengchi University, the Society for Philosophy and Psychology meeting at Lewis and Clark College, The Australasian Association of Philosophers, the Moral Psychology Research Group, and a Moral Psychology Conference in Sydney, Australia.

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