

Moral Magnifying

Or: How to Make Better Intuitive Moral Judgments About Climate Breakdown

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Abstract: This article makes a recommendation for improving our ethical judgments. Working with the background assumption that many of these judgments are based on emotions, I argue that we predictably tend to underestimate the ethical significance of certain kinds of problem. Specifically, due to a lack of emotional connection, we tend to underestimate the badness of situations which are large-scale and abstract. Illustrating the problem with the case of climate breakdown, I argue that we should adopt a practice of *moral magnifying*. This involves upping our estimations of the badness of problems with these features and striving to increase their emotional vividness. More broadly, I argue that moral epistemologists should devote more effort to making practical recommendations of this kind, a project I call *ameliorative moral epistemology*.

1. What Problems Can Moral Epistemology Solve?

“We don’t have a problem of economics, technology and public policy; we have a problem of perception.” James Balog in *Chasing Ice* (Orlowski 2012)

- I’m going to argue that this is a problem that philosophers can help solve.

Moral Epistemology: the study of epistemological questions as they apply to our ethical judgments.

Traditionally, moral epistemology focuses on grand, abstract questions, like:

- How is moral knowledge possible?
- Can we refute the moral sceptic?
- Does the evolutionary origin of the mind undermine the possibility of having justified moral beliefs?

I think there are also *practical* problems which moral epistemologists are uniquely positioned to solve.

- If you understand the mental processes we use to make ethical judgment and the conditions in which they produce desirable epistemic outcomes...
- ... then you can spot kinds of situation in which our ethical judgments are predictably going to underperform.
- That allows you to make practical recommendations for improving our ethical judgments.

So, let me propose a new line of work for moral epistemologists:

Ameliorative Moral Epistemology: the study of how to make better ethical judgments.

- Compare Bishop and Trout (2005) and Ballantyne (2019), who take up ameliorative projects in general epistemology.

By pursuing a programme of ameliorative moral epistemology, philosophers can help solve real-world problems like James Balog’s “problem of climate perception.”

2. Emotional Intuitions

A procedure for ameliorative moral epistemology.

- (1) **What mental processes?** Identify the cognitive processes that underlie ethical judgment.
- (2) **When do they succeed?** Identify the conditions in which these processes produce judgments with desirable epistemic statuses, e.g. knowledge, justified belief.
- (3) **How can we make them run better?** Provide practical recommendations for improving the quality of ethical judgments produced by these processes.

(1) *What mental processes?*

- Many of our ethical judgments are inferred from principles we antecedently believe...
- ... but there are other the ethical judgments which seem plausible independently of any principle we believe. INTUITIVE ethical judgments.
- Of these intuitive judgments, there's good evidence that many are based on emotion.
 - Empirical evidence: Clore and Gasper (2000), Haidt (2001), Greene et al (2001), Slovic et al (2007)
 - Philosophical arguments: Milona (2017), Hutton (forthcoming)

E.g.: seeing a photograph from a humanitarian crisis. The feeling of sadness it evokes presents the situation as involving great loss. In this way, the emotion presses you to make the ethical judgment that *the situation is extremely bad*.



(2) *When do emotion-based ethical judgments succeed?*

- An emotion is directed at a 'target'. It presents that target as exhibiting a certain evaluative property (see e.g. Döring 2003).

Hatred ⇒ despicable

Grief ⇒ irreparable loss of something important

Fear ⇒ dangerous

- An emotion-based judgment will be a **true belief** iff the target really does instantiate the relevant evaluative property.
- If your emotions reliably match the evaluative features of their targets, the habit of forming emotion-based beliefs will be a source of ethical **knowledge**.

Q: Which emotion-based judgments are ethical? Two viable answers.

(Narrow) Only a subset of emotions have ethical content, namely "moral emotions" e.g. guilt, outrage.

(Broad) Ethics encompasses all forms of value and importance, so all emotions have ethical content.

The ameliorative question...

(3) *How can we make the process of emotion-based ethical judgment run better?*

3. Problem: Emotional Disconnects

Human beings' emotions are imperfect in various ways. They are:

- Influenced by ethically irrelevant factors, above all the mood you're in when considering a situation;
- Socially conditioned, so they can exhibit implicit bias;
- Disconnected from certain kinds of ethically significant situation.

These issues do show up in trad. moral epistemology, as grounds for doubting whether emotions can be a source of justified ethical belief (e.g. Pelsler 2014).

- But they look like good opportunities for making some ameliorative recommendations

I'll focus on emotional disconnects. (I'm working on another paper addressing the problems of mood-dependence and implicit bias.)

- Emotion-based ethical judgments will predictably underestimate the badness of situations which are **large-scale** and **abstract**.

Large-scale: *"Different groups of participants stated their willingness to pay to save 2,000, 20,000, or 200,000 birds. ... [T]he average contributions of the three groups were \$80, \$78, and \$88 respectively. The number of birds made very little difference. What the participants reacted to, in all three groups, was a prototype—the awful image of a helpless bird drowning, its feathers soaked in thick oil. The almost complete neglect of quantity in such emotional contexts has been confirmed many times."* Kahneman (2011)

Abstract: *"[P]eople were asked to donate money to Habitat for Humanity to help build a home for a family. They were told either that "the family has been selected" or that "the family will be selected." This subtle variation ... made a difference. The subjects in the first condition gave a lot more, presumably because of the shift between a concrete target (the specific individuals who had been selected) and a more abstract one (those that will be selected in the future, who could be any of a large number)."* Bloom (2018)

4. Solution: Moral Magnifying

Analogy: objects in mirror are closer than they appear.

- A wing-mirrors with a convex surface gives you a better field of vision. But objects look smaller than they would in a flat mirror, biasing you towards overestimating the distance.



How to make better judgments about objects seen in a convex wing-mirror.

1. Develop a habit of presuming that objects are nearer than they look.
2. Get a direct look at the object, e.g. by looking over your shoulder.

Moral magnifying: when a problem is large-scale and abstract ...

1. Develop a habit of presuming that large-scale, abstract problems are worse than they intuitively seem.
2. Find ways to make such situations more emotionally vivid.

Moral magnifying seems preferable to mistrusting emotional intuitions altogether (compare Singer 2005), because it allows you to preserve the epistemic benefits while avoiding the costs.

- Is reasoning from principles really so much better? Consider evidence on motivated reasoning, etc.
- Where do our beliefs about ethical principles come from? Unless you believe in “rational intuition,” it seems likely that our beliefs about ethical principles are ultimately based on emotion too (perhaps indirectly, through coherence-reasoning).

5. A Test-Cases for Moral Magnifying: Climate Breakdown

5.1 *Climate Apathy as a Problem of Emotional Disconnect*

The relevant case: getting the facts right but underestimating the ethical significance. Not denialism, but apathy (compare Wallace-Wells 2019).

- E.g. refusing to do anything until very high levels of proof are met. (These can be met now, but people responded weirdly to the “merely” strong evidence that’s been available for decades.)
- E.g. call it a crisis and paying lip-service to the need for action, but refusing to take decisive action now.

Climate breakdown is...

- **Large scale.** Global; many-faceted; involves very large numbers. Climate change as a “hyperobject”, i.e. something so big and complex it’s intrinsically impossible to grasp fully (Morton 2013).
- **Abstract.** Climate breakdown doesn’t lead to some specific, imaginable bad outcome. Instead, it raises the probabilities across a huge range of potential bad outcomes. So, it’s in the realm of “the family will be selected”, not “the family has been selected”.

“If you were to design a problem that the mind is not equipped to deal with, climate change would fit the bill.” Daniel Kahneman on *Hidden Brain* podcast (Vedantam n.d.). See also Marshall (2014).

5.2 *Fixing Climate Perception with Moral Magnifying*

Solution 1. Develop a habit of presuming that it’s worse than it intuitively seems.

Get to a point where a recognizable move is to say: “Well, of course you don’t think it’s a big problem! It has features that make it difficult to connect with emotionally.”

Solution 2. Find ways to make it more emotionally vivid.

- Impassioned speech (compare Lepoutre 2018).
- Evocative images.
 - Overcoming abstractness by evoking empathy for a specific victim.



- Overcoming mind-bogglingly large scale by evoking a feeling of the sublime.
 - Kant: the sublime is the feeling through which we become aware that we're encountering something too great for our powers of perception to grasp.
 - E.g. the footage in *Chasing Ice* of the largest ever glacier calving ever captured (Orlowski 2012). <https://youtu.be/hC3VTgIPoGU>

5.3 Can moral magnifying really solve the problem?

I'm not claiming that climate apathy is *only* a result of emotional disconnection.

- Well-funded misinformation and doubt-spreading campaigns (Oreskes and Conway 2010)
- Motivated ignorance stemming from sense of political identity (Williams 2020)

But, plausibly, these social process work in tandem with the individuals' processes of intuitive ethical judgment.

- What you can get people to believe is constrained by what seems intuitively obvious. (Compare evidence surveyed in Mercier (2020).)

So, if we can cultivate better intuitive moral judgments about climate breakdown, that will be an important part of the battle.

Conclusions

- We should adopt a practice of moral magnifying. When faced with problems that are large-scale and abstract, we should
 - (i) get used to presuming that they are more serious than they intuitively seem; and
 - (ii) find ways to connect with them emotionally.
- Moral epistemologists should put their skills to work in the service of a new goal, that of giving practical advice for improving our ethical judgments. This is the project of ameliorative moral epistemology.

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