

Library of Ethics and Applied Philosophy 32

Markus Christen  
Carel van Schaik  
Johannes Fischer  
Markus Huppenbauer  
Carmen Tanner *Editors*

# Empirically Informed Ethics: Morality between Facts and Norms

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Editors

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# Introduction – Bridging the Is-Ought-Dichotomy

Humans are moral beings, involved in a complex web of social interactions, acting upon biological dispositions and entangled with culture and history. Although the orientation toward the morally good is generally seen as the hallmark of humanity, moral conflicts and ethical dilemmas seem to be inevitable, often painful aspects of our moral lives. The various traditions of ethical thinking, understood as the systematic reflection upon morality, have always tried to disentangle, clarify and maybe even solve the “moral mess” people often experience. The role of facts in this endeavor—not only information about the problems with which we deal, but also about our capacities to deal with them in a moral way—has again and again been disputed within ethics. How sharp is the distinction between the world of facts and the world of norms?

Recently, interest in using empirical approaches to understand (human) morality has surged across various scientific disciplines: Psychologists investigate how emotions and intuitions influence our ethical theorizing; behavioral economists analyze the impact of moral affect on rational decision making; neuroscientists portray the “moral brain”; anthropologists reconstruct the deep history of moral traits; primatologists look for the “building blocks” of human morality in our primate relatives. Ethicists react in various ways toward these developments. Some deny a substantial relevance of empirical facts for normative argumentation, others call for “empirical ethics” and a few even start doing simple experiments in order to understand genuine moral intuitions. Furthermore, from a science-studies and cultural-history point of view, the recent flood of publications on morality invites interpretations on boundary struggles between disciplines (who has which role in disputes on normative issues?) and on the current social climate within our society.

This volume intends to provide an overview of the most recent developments in empirical investigations of morality and tries to assess their impact and importance for ethical thinking. It involves contributions of scholars from philosophy, theology and empirical sciences with firm standings in their own disciplines but also with inclinations to step across borders—in particular the one between the world of facts and the world of norms. Human morality is complex, and probably even messy—and any distinction between facts and norms becomes blurred when looking closely

at the various components that potentially enable and influence our moral actions and ethical orientations. In that way, morality may indeed be located *between* facts and norms. For that reason, an empirically informed ethics less concerned with analytical purity but thoroughly immersed in moral complexity may be an important step toward making the contributions of ethics more valuable and relevant. With this in mind, we hope that this volume introduces the reader into a zone of scientific inquiry, where fruitful new topics emerge at the boundary between the kingdoms of facts and norms.

This book emerged from an international workshop held in Zurich in March 2010. At this gathering, distinguished scholars and young researchers both from moral philosophy and empirical sciences discussed the various implications of empirical research for ethical theorizing. The editors thank the Swiss National Science Foundation and the University Research Priority Program Ethics of the University of Zurich for supporting this workshop and the book that resulted from these discussions. In particular, we thank Kevin Ladd from the Indiana University of South Bend for critically commenting and proofreading the manuscript, an anonymous reviewer for providing his very helpful input, and Christopher Wilby from Springer Science + Business Media for his support in publishing this book.

The Editors

**Part I**  
**What Is Empirically Informed Ethics?**

# Chapter 1

## Outlining the Field – A Research Program for Empirically Informed Ethics

Markus Christen and Mark Alfano

### 1.1 Introduction

“What is the right thing to do?” This question<sup>1</sup> echoes through the centuries and millennia of human history. It alludes to the sometimes disturbing moral dilemmas humans face, and it has produced elaborate ethical theories of the virtues people should foster, the norms societies should promote, and the states of affairs at which people should aim. It is therefore unsurprising that human behavior in moral contexts has become a topic of empirical research, although it was to some extent deliberately excluded as a legitimate research topic at the advent of modern science.<sup>2</sup> The last two decades have witnessed a substantial increase in empirical research on morality—in particular using psychological and neuroscientific methods.<sup>3</sup> This research also influences moral philosophy; in fact, empirical research on morality

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<sup>1</sup>Allowedly, the human concern with morality is not represented by a single question, and the focus on moral decision-making and moral action, for which this question stands, is most typical of a recent understanding of ethics as a “toolbox” for helping to solve problems and setting aside questions like “Who should I become?” that refer to virtues and moral ideals; see Pincoffs (1986) and Williams (1985) for critiques of this tendency to narrow the focus of ethics.

<sup>2</sup>A well-known piece of evidence for this point is the draft of the credo of the Royal Society written by Robert Hooke in 1663, in which he articulated the role of the Society as “to improve the knowledge of natural things, and all useful Arts, Manufactures, Mechanic practices, Engines and Inventions by Experiments, not meddling with Divinity, Metaphysics, Morals, Politics, Grammar, Rhetoric or Logic.” Although this sentence did not enter the final charter of the Royal Society explicitly, its fragments can be traced to various parts of the charter (quoted after Weingart 2002: 96).

<sup>3</sup>For bibliometric evidence for this claim, see Christen (2010).

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has been the biggest beneficiary of citation transfers into the humanities, compared with other research topics of social neuroscience (Matusall et al. 2011).

Moral philosophers' responses to this trove of empirical data on the evolutionary origin, the biological foundation, the psychological malleability, and cultural diversity of human morality have been ambivalent. One strand of argument—Kauppinen (Chap. 16 in this volume) calls this strand *Armchair Traditionalism*—denies the relevance of empirical data to normative justification, with the obvious exception that it frames the specific problem under investigation (e.g. Nida-Rümelin 2006). Another strand of argumentation—labeled *Ethical Empiricism* by Kauppinen (Chap. 16, this volume)—acknowledges empirical insights for theory building within ethics (Edel 1961), but with conflicting conclusions. For example, research on the psychological foundation of moral intuitions can either be taken as a support for founding normative theories (Nichols 2004) or be used to undermine the normative importance of intuitions (Singer 2005). With respect to the application of ethical theorizing to practical problems, some scholars promote “empirical ethics” that should, in particular, improve the context-sensitivity of ethics (Musschenga 2005). And finally, some philosophically trained researchers have started using empirical methods themselves in order to inform their normative thinking (for an overview see Appiah 2008; Knobe and Nichols 2008; Loeb and Alfano forthcoming).

Of course, the role and relevance of empirical data for ethics depends on the specifics of the problems one wants to solve. Empirical knowledge will affect metaethical theories differently from, for instance, biomedical ethics or business ethics. This divergence in relevance does not necessarily indicate a fundamental conflict within moral philosophy with respect to the role of empirical data. However, there are diverging opinions about what it actually means for ethics to be *informed* by empirical knowledge—and one could even ask to what extent analytically sharp distinctions are blurred by the inclusion of empirical data in normative thinking (see Sect. 1.2.4).

Thus, the endeavor of promoting an *empirically informed* ethics raises various questions. This chapter structures them with respect to the subject-matter, the kinds of empirical methodologies and data that could be useful for ethics, and the types of problems and fundamental questions of ethics for which an empirical approach could be particularly fruitful. It also outlines what is at stake when empirical insights are taken seriously by normative theorists—a point that may affect a competence philosophy attributes to itself: the clarification of concepts and the demarcation of sharp distinctions between them. Morality could indeed be a field where this goal is more difficult to achieve than in other fields—and the facile drawing of distinctions may even mask interesting questions.

Take as an example the basic terms ‘morality’ and ‘ethics’. In particular in the German tradition, these terms are understood to have distinct referents. The former denotes the various norms, practices, virtues, and so on that a specific society or culture holds over a given period of time; the latter is the systematic investigation and justification of these practices, for which the moral philosopher is particularly qualified (e.g. Düwell et al. 2002; Nida-Rümelin 2006). But a closer look at the