

Motive Internalism in Neuroethics

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Abstract

Motive Internalism, in meta-ethics, is the position that if an agent sincerely makes moral judgments, the judgments are purely belief and themselves motivate the agent to take the necessary actions. As neuroscience concerning moral judgments advances, we are permitted to consider this meta-ethical topic with empirical facts. Cases of patients who have damage to the ventro-medial frontal area of the brain, are just one example, and some argue that these cases disprove Motive Internalism. However, this argument is found to be based on misinterpretations of Motive Internalism and in this paper I will offer the proper interpretation by considering the “inverted-commas” use of moral judgments. I will argue the interpretations of the neural basis of Motive Internalism.

Introduction

As neuroscience advances, many ethical problems have arisen and Neuroethics has attracted a lot of attention. Neuroethics is the field that looks into these problems and many conferences have been held around the world.

Roskies categorized this neuroethics into “ethics of neuroscience” and “neuroscience of ethics”. The former addresses practical ethical problems in applying neuroscience and the latter addresses theoretical ethical problems which have arisen from the knowledge of neuroscience.

In this paper, I will consider motive internalism in the latter sense. As neuroscience has gradually revealed scientific features of moral judgments, we can consider morality in metaethics with such empirical facts. We have to care to interpret these meta-ethical positions and I will offer some interpretations.

Firstly, I will clarify Motive Internalism and the concept of moral judgment and motivation. Next, I will review some neuroscience studies concerning moral judgments and present arguments against motive internalism. Finally, I will discuss the misinterpretation of motive

internalism and then offer proper interpretations by comparing moral judgments and inverted-commas use of the judgments.

1. Motive Internalism

Internalism in metaethics has been basically taken as the view that moral judgments have a necessary and internal connection with the reason for, or the motivation for, the act to which the judgments refer. The issue of the connection between moral judgments and motivation is important in metaethics. However, there are various opinions to this problem and various types of internalism (Mele, 1996, p.728; Brink, 1989, p.38). Brink classified internalism into reason internalism and motive internalism (Brink, 1989, p.39). In this paper I will discuss the latter.

Smith wrote that;

In metaethics, we are concerned not with questions which are the province of normative ethics like 'Should I give to famine relief?' or 'Should I return the wallet I found in the street?' but with questions about questions like these." (Smith, 1994, p.2)

That is, what is considered in metaethics, is not which act is good or right, or what are the best normative theories, but what it means for us to suggest or accept some norm or what is the nature of ethical properties and moral evaluation itself. The term "moral judgments" in this paper, does not describe judgment in accordance with normative theories, but first-person moral judgments, which an agent makes sincerely. These moral judgments are typically made in the linguistic and conscious process.

Our acts are generally based on moral judgments. We sometimes state moral judgments to others in order to make them act or persuade them not to act. When we do something like this, we assume that moral judgments have such a force. It seems that moral judgments have a practical aspect and have close connections to an act. Moral judgments are made to provide an answer to a question about what should be done, and to serve as a guide to actions. This function of guiding actions is called motivation. Thus, if moral judgments, which an agent makes, have the function of guiding action, the agent is motivated to act in making the moral judgment.

Although there are various positions as to the connection between moral judgments and motivation, these positions are basically taken in

order to answer the following two almost identical questions. One is whether we need to refer to motivation in analyzing the nature of moral judgments in the first place, and the other is what kind of relation moral judgments have with the motivation. Motive internalists argue that it is important to refer to motivation, and that moral judgments have a necessary and internal connection with motivation. In other words, they insist that when an agent makes moral judgments, the person is actively motivated to take the action to which the judgments refer only by the judgment.

On the other hand, motive externalists argue that there is no need for referring to motivation, and that moral judgments have contingent and external connections with motivation. "Contingent and external connections" means that even if moral judgments motivate agents to act, they are not necessarily connected and the appearance is a psychologically contingent fact. They consider that what, in fact, motivates the agent is something other than moral judgments.

The motivation which motive internalists insist on, may need to be further clarified. Although this motivation is the motivation of taking the action to which moral judgments refer, they do not insist that the agents have other external motivations, that is, motivations to which the moral judgments do not refer. It is possible for agents to fail to take an action to which a moral judgment refers because of weakness of will, psychological disabilities and so on. In other words, they insist that moral judgments can provide one source of motivation (McNaughton, 1988, p.118, p.134). What they insist on is not a necessary and internal connection between moral judgment and an act, but between moral judgment and the motivation. If other motivations are weaker or lacking, the agent takes the action to which the moral judgment refers. In addition, they actually take the action "when in a particular case someone is (or perhaps merely believes that he is) morally required to do something" (Nagel, 1970, p.7).

A division remains within this motive internalism over the nature of moral judgments. What Smith calls 'the moral problem' is helpful in seeing this division. Smith wrote that "the moral problem is, in fact, the central organizing problem in contemporary metaethics" and "it explains the massive disagreements that exist among philosophers about metaethical issues" (Smith, 1994, p.12). The following three propositions, quoted from his book, are inconsistent.

1 Moral judgments of the form 'It is right that ϕ ' expresses a

subject' s beliefs about an objective matter of fact, a fact about what is right for her to do [cognitivism].

- 2 If someone judges that it is right that she ϕ s then, ceteris paribus, she is motivated to ϕ [motive internalism].
- 3 An agent is motivated to act in a certain way just in case she has an appropriate desire and a means-end belief, where belief and desire are, in Hume' s terms, distinct existences[Humeanism] .
(Smith, 1994, p.12)

According to Humeanism, beliefs only describe the world but are themselves not able to motivate an agent to take actions. On the other hand, desires have a function of motivation and are able to motivate an agent to take actions only by means-end beliefs.

Although each of these positions has been convincing, we cannot take all of them together. There are also two positions in motive internalism. One rejects cognitivism, and the other rejects humeanism. However, the term motive internalism is often used to refer to the latter, which is the concept followed in this paper.

2. Motive Internalism and Neuroscience

Recently, many neuroscientists have carried out various studies regarding moral judgments. Studies about the ventromedial (VM) cortex are considered to be especially wedded to moral judgments. Damasio is one well-known researcher in this area of research. Damasio and his colleagues did many studies with patients who have damage to the ventromedial frontal area of the brain. The VM cortex is considered to have relevance to the control of reason and emotion. Although functional localization in the VM area has not been described yet, the effects of disabilities in that area are critical and noteworthy.

Phineas Gage is one of the most famous patients who had VM cortex damage. After a spear-like tamping iron injured his brain in an explosion accident in 1848, his personality changed from a trusting and respectable to an antisocial one. Although Gage' s case was reported by the doctor who treated him, it went largely unnoticed until recently. The autopsy date is unknown and his brain was not preserved, therefore, researchers do not have clues as to exactly which area in the brain he might have been damaged, thereby, relate this to his symptoms. However, Damasio and his colleagues recreated his brain and penetration of the tamping iron with 3D computer graphics, and they pointed out that the area where his brain was

damaged was the VM area (Damasio et al. 1994).

Damasio and his colleagues have also studied many other patients with damaged VM cortises and the case of EVR (he), especially, is worth mentioning. His personality also changed after VM area damage. Damasio and his colleagues conducted various tests with EVR, for example, psychological tests, and the results indicated that he was quite normal in terms of perception, memory, learning ability, attention and calculation. In addition to these tests, some tests measuring social convention and moral valuation and similar , were also carried out.

Roskies insists that the cases of VM patients disprove claims of motive internalism. She summarizes the results of these studies as seen below (Roskies, 2003, p.57).

- (1) VM patients are able to make appropriate moral and social judgments when queried. When presented with hypothetical situations, the conclusions they reach about moral questions concur with those which normals typically reach. Psychological evaluation shows that some VM subjects attain the highest level of abstract moral reasoning.
- (2) Clinical histories and observation suggest that VM patients are impaired in their ability to act effectively in many moral situations.
- (3) Normal subjects produce a skin-conductance response (SCR) to emotionally-charged or value-laden stimuli. In contrast, VM patients do not generally produce SCRs when presented with such stimuli. However, other tests produce normal SCRs in VM patients, demonstrating that the autonomic nervous system itself is undamaged.
- (4) VM patients display and report attenuated or absence of affect when faced with situations that reliably elicit emotions in normals.

In addition to this, she interprets SCR as evidence of the presence of motivation, and she considers that lack of it means absence of motivation. The SCR is considered to be a reliable indicator of motivation for action in neuroscience studies. Her conclusion is that normalcy of making moral judgments and lack of motivation “show that VM patients are counterexamples to the claim that there is a necessary connection between moral beliefs and motivation” (Roskies, 2003, p.59).

For the purpose of this paper, I will agree with her that VM patients

lack motivation. However, this is a misinterpretation of motive internalism. Whether her interpretation of motive internalism is right or not requires further consideration.

3. Neural bases of Motive internalism

We cannot simply refute Roskies' s argument on the grounds that she used agents with disability as the basis of the argument. It is certain that "a normal agent is hard to define without resorting to statistical means, or without some understanding of the biological function of ethical reasoning". And "we must take care not to beg the question and define normalcy to be ' motivated to act according to one' s moral judgment' " (Roskies, 2003, p61).

However, it is important to find out whether the neural bases which motive internalism originally premise, are functioning properly. As long as we identify our mental activities as natural properties, motive internalists' position on moral judgment means that there are certain types of neural bases which bear such functions. For example, the statement that human beings are able to see X-rays without any artificial devices means that humans have a certain type of neural bases for such an ability.

Therefore, if VM patients have disabilities in such neural bases, it is natural that they are not consistent with motive internalism. Motive internalists assume normalcy of such neural bases and do not insist that they are able to hold their position in the case of agents who have disabilities in such neural bases. It follows then, that to disprove motive internalism with empirical evidence is to prove that there are no neural bases which bear such function as motive internalists claim.

From this point, we can say that Roskie' s argument depends on how she interprets neural bases, and that clarifying the neural bases which are disproved by the VM patient' s case is necessary and sufficient to confirm her interpretation.

The evidence that she uses in her argument is obtained from research on patients with disabilities. Based on that alone, we cannot conclude that VM patients disprove the existence of VM area function. When a person loses a function through damage to some area, we generally consider that there is a possibility that area controls the function.

The function which the VM area might have is suggested by EVR' s symptoms. One of the most remarkable symptoms is that in spite of his normal cognitive function, knowledge, reasoning and so on, he couldn' t

use these abilities in a practical way. According to this, there is a possibility that VM patients have a disability in the neural base concerning, at least part of, motivation and the neural base is isolated from the neural bases which bear the function of making VM moral judgments (Moral statements by VM patients are called VM moral judgments for ease of clarity).

Therefore, we cannot disprove the existence of these neural bases. This is the basis of her interpretation. As long as she considers that VM patients are counter-example to motive internalism, it means that she believes the neural base which bears the function of VM moral judgment cannot be isolated from the one which bears the function of motivation. What we have to consider is whether this interpretation is appropriate or not.

As far as I know, motive internalists have not referred to the presumption of neural bases, however, we can presume they did, from ideas concerning moral judgments. As has already been stated, motive internalism in this paper takes cognitivism and moral judgments to have both functions of belief and motivation. However, motive internalists do not insist that all beliefs and judgments necessarily motivate to take the action to which the judgments refer to, for example, when we solve a mathematical problem, there is no motivation to take the action to which the belief refers.

If an agent does not sincerely make moral judgments, the judgments are not moral judgments in the precise meaning of the term and the judgments do not also necessarily motivate the agent. For example, recalling and repeating other peoples' opinions or conventional expressions. In this case, it is more accurate to express that 'the person says "it is right to ϕ "'. This has been called the inverted-commas use (Hare, 1956, p. 124). Although Hare is not a cognitivist, motive internalists who take cognitivism agree with him on this. (McNaughton, 1988, p.137).

I will compare the moral judgments and inverted-commas use of the judgments from the viewpoint of neural bases. As previously mentioned, while moral judgments have functions of belief and motivation, inverted-commas use of the judgments has only the function of belief. The difference between them is the function of motivation to take action, but their formation and meaning are identical. That means moral judgments are composed of the inverted-commas use of moral judgments with the additional function of motivation. In other words, moral judgments can be said to be inverted-commas use of the judgments in cases of lack of

motivation to which the judgments refer, and the function of motivation can be isolated from the function of inverted-commas use of the judgment.

Of course, it is possible for a neural base to bear several functions since a sequence of neural bases corresponds to a specific function. However new functions can be added, and are possible, because of the intervention of other sequences of neural bases. Therefore, the function of motivation is borne by a sequence of neural bases which is different and isolated from the function of belief. The neural bases, presumed by motive internalism, can be interpreted like this.

If such an interpretation is true, there is a possibility that VM moral judgments are different from moral judgments that motivation internalists insist on. Even if VM patients apparently make and state moral judgments in appropriate situations, these judgments cannot be called moral judgments from the motive internalist's viewpoint as long as the patients have damaged neural bases, which motive internalists premise. There is a possibility that they cannot sincerely make moral judgments in a precise sense and their judgments are "inverted-commas use of judgment" .

Some may consider that my interpretation is inconsistent with internal connections and intrinsicness which motive internalists claim, however, there are no good reasons to take such interpretations, like Roskies, as substantive positions. The problem with Roskie's position is that if motive internalists premise additional and isolable neural bases, there is no difference between other moral judgments and beliefs or inverted-commas use of moral judgments, in the case of motivation, meaning that all beliefs have the function of motivation. However, almost every motive internalist denies this idea and it is difficult to call it substantive motive internalism.

The basic idea of motive internalism is that the agent who sincerely makes moral judgments is necessarily motivated to take the action to which the judgment refers only by the judgment. This means that, as long as we meet the conditions necessary for motive internalism, any interpretation of neural bases we take, causes no problem.

Conclusion

In this paper, I looked into motive internalism, which is one of metaethical positions and offered a proper interpretation, that is, motive internalists premise that the function of motivation is borne by a sequence of neural bases which is different and isolated from belief. As long as we identify our mental activities as natural, it is necessary to consider

metaethical problems with empirical facts. We have to pay attention to what each metaethical position premises and to interpret them properly in doing so.

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