

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

24.120 Moral Psychology
Spring 2009

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.

XXIII Moral Judgement and Motivation

THE MORAL/CONVENTIONAL DISTINCTION

There are many findings on children's ability (from a very young age) to distinguish between moral and conventional obligations. Moral obligations are seen as less permissible, more serious and less authority dependent.

Nichols argues (in his book) that this counts against 'perspective taking' accounts, i.e. accounts that require us to take the perspective of another. Basic argument: (i) perspective taking accounts require us to have a theory of mind for other people, but this comes in after children get the conventional/moral distinction (the empirical findings here are now in question again); (ii) autistic children get the conventional/moral distinction, but find it very hard to empathize with others. (Is this opposed to a Kantian or a Humean view? Or both? Nichols seems to think that it only counts against the former.)

EXPLAINING THE MORAL/CONVENTIONAL DISTINCTION

Blair's account: the Violence Inhibition Mechanism (VIM): compare the response of dogs to other dogs who submit. Roughly the idea is that the distress gives rise to an aversive feeling, which is what characterizes moral transgressions. In contrast, where there is no distress, there is only a judgement of conventional obligation. This doesn't require a perspective taking judgment. Evidence for the account: imprisoned psychopaths seem to be unable to make the moral/conventional, classing all wrongs as conventional (or, sometimes and disconcertingly, as all moral). They also tend not to have aversive reactions to distress. In contrast, autistic children do make the distinction, do have aversive reactions to distress, but are not able to make sophisticated mind readings (they are bad on the false belief task).

Nichols' criticism: Blair's account doesn't distinguish between *bad* and *wrong*.

NICHOLS' SENTIMENTAL RULES ACCOUNT

The basic idea is that whilst the emotional response is necessary for a moral sensibility, it is not sufficient. It needs, in addition, a rule based system, though this requires sufficiently little mind reading that autistic children are capable of it. This is what enables us to make the bad/wrong distinction. The emotional response is needed to ensure the importance attached to moral rules, and to provide motivation to abide by them.