

Can Psychology Replace Ethics?

Psychology's Contribution to Ethics: Two Case Studies

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This paper will argue that psychology cannot replace ethics. However it will be argued, with reference to two case studies, that the empirical investigation of human morality can offer an important contribution to ethics. First, an empirical approach can illuminate matters of definition. Secondly, it will be shown that psychology can elucidate the processes by which ethically desirable ends might be facilitated. For instance, psychological approaches to forgiveness may help to expedite the ethical ideal of forgiveness.

Defining the Phenomenon of Interest: A Case Study Involving Gratitude

Who is deemed qualified to pontificate about ethical matters? This is allied to the issue of who has the right to define the phenomena of interest in questions involving virtues, ethics and morality. Tension may exist between so-called 'expert' definitions and lay understandings. Normative ethicists may make distinctions between concepts that do not reflect lay usage and may seek to refine or reclaim the 'true' meaning of words to prevent the erosion of conceptual distinctions. Conversely, it might be argued that normative ethicists should hold no privileged place when it comes to defining the terms of language as it is used.

It is essential that philosophers take seriously the question of what ordinary people understand by ethical concepts, partly because the cultural and social differences such analyses reveal are interesting in themselves, but also because there are implications for the relationship between ordinary people and the academy. We need to go beyond a superficial assumption that we know what, say gratitude, virtue or forgiveness is, or that it takes the same shape in every society. Empirical studies in psychology have utilised prototype analysis to examine concepts such as modesty (Gregg et al., 2008), forgiveness (Kearns & Fincham, 2004) and gratitude (Lambert, Graham and Fincham, 2009 and more recently, Morgan and Gulliford, under submission) from a lay perspective. The first case study shows that psychology can thus make a contribution towards defining ethical concepts.

Practical Benefits of Psychological Research in Ethical Domains: A Case Study Involving Forgiveness

The ideal of forgiveness may seem remote from the human dynamics of forgiveness and may be enriched by taking account of psychological interventions that promote forgiveness as a therapeutic goal. A number of psychological publications on forgiveness emerged in the 1980s and 1990s. These interpersonal and intrapersonal approaches fall into two main categories (Gulliford, 1999; 2004; 2013). First, there are interventions which advocate distancing oneself from the offence using cognitive reframing techniques. There are also psychological approaches which promote empathic identification with the offender in order to facilitate forgiveness. Both offer ways in which the abstract ideal of forgiveness may be embodied in real life.

Psychological interventions, such as these, focus not on when forgiveness is appropriate or fitting (as a normative ethical account might) but on how forgiveness could be expedited. As such these methods do not replace ethics, but they do complement it in elucidating how certain ethically desirable ends might be promoted.