

Ethos, Eidos, Habitus: Towards a Social Theory of Moral Practice.

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Recent work in moral psychology (including x-phi and neuroethics) has distinguished between the function of intuition and reason in the formation of moral judgments. Findings suggest intuition is the senior partner in this psychological duality; it drives substantive moral judgments whilst reason merely provides a 'post-hoc' justification. The experimental production of moral-dumbfounding notwithstanding, our phenomenological experience does not accord with this psychological duality. Subjectively our 'mundane' emotional moral intuitions and cognitive ethical reasoning are, if not aligned, then intertwined.¹ Furthermore we might examine the role of ethical reasoning over time. Whilst our moral intuitions are understood to be the product of a temporally extended process, i.e. socialization, the same thinking is not extended to ethical reasoning. Outré thought experiments about fat men and trolleys aside, there seems good reason to think that our everyday ethical thinking is conditioned by prior commitments and previous experience. Consider, for example, the vegetarian, the GP who contentiously objects to abortion and the anti-death penalty campaigner. The fact that each can intuitively respond to the thought of eating a hamburger, a patients request for abortion, or the handing down of a death sentence does not undermine the reasoned commitments associate with their positions.

Indeed, against the suggestions emanating from moral psychology it seem that, at least in some contexts, our ethical reasoning can overcome established moral intuitions. Some committed vegetarians were brought up eating meat and previously found nothing wrong with it at an intuitive level. However, perhaps because of its methodological tendency to focus on specific individuals making specific moral judgments, moral psychology tends not to recognize the potential for ethical reasoning to act over the medium to long term or the fact that, like intuitions, specific reasons and forms of reasoning are the result of prior experience and *habituated*. In the context of medical education I have argued that ethical reasoning is associated with the (re)socialization of moral intuitions (Emmerich 2013a&b). Furthermore it seems clear that ethical reasoning has at least some role in our *collective* moral landscape. Consider, for example, the role of applied (bio)ethics in the development of (western) 'medical morality'. Certainly such successes are not simply achieved through reason alone and certainly the claims of reason (particularly when dressed as absolute 'rationality') can be overstated. Nevertheless, if we adopt a diachronic view, ethical reasoning is not merely confined to the 'post hoc' justification of established moral intuitions.

¹ In this paper, as elsewhere I associate morality with intuition, emotion and ethos and ethics with reason, reflection and eidos. However, as will become clear by my use of the terms ethos and eidos whilst we can distinguish between morality and ethics, intuition and reason, emotion and reflection we must, nevertheless, emphasis not only their connection but the fact that any eidos is situated within an ethos, any ethics is situated within a broader morality (or moral order), any explicitly stated reasoning is not independent from tacit knowledge embodied in intuition, and any process of reflection is always situated within an emotional context.

Moral intuition and ethical reason should both be considered the result of temporally extended phenomena. However, in the case of the latter, there is a need to find a cognitive compliment to socialization. To this end I have developed the idea of ethical enculturation (Emmerich 2013a&b). In this context we can distinguish between the thick normative character of a culture – its moral ethos – and its characteristic forms of ethical reasoning – is ethical eidos.² Bourdieu’s habitus, the lynchpin is his theory of social reproduction, can be used to suggest that an ethos is a morality made flesh (Bourdieu 1993:86) and we can consider an eidos in similar terms. As with our moral intuitions, our ways of ethical thinking are *embodied* and matters of cognitive *disposition*.

From such a perspective ethical reflection is not a matter of individual reason but of socio-historically constituted *practices*. This view runs counter to the pessimism of contemporary moral psychology regarding reason as it suggests its effects should be understood both diachronically and dialogically. The eidos of ethical reasoning is not simply an individual or subjective phenomena but a collective and intersubjective one. Forms of ethical reasoning and the substantive judgments associated with them develop over time, in a variety of socio-cultural locations, and cohere in a society’s ethos, its culturally accepted moral norms. Rather like the phenomena of coaching (Noble & Watkins 2003), ethical reflection can be understood as being implicated in the formation and reformation of the moral ethos and our intuitions.

In the conclusion to my paper I will address the implications of considering moral intuition and ethical reasoning as a collective or culturally distributed phenomena embodied in habitus. Specifically, I will consider if the idea of habitus is positioned as the conceptual descendent of social character (Meisenhelder 2006) then whether a Bourdieuan understanding of (moral) habitus has any connection to the Aristotelian idea of (moral) character.

References:

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² This concept of eidos is taken from Bateson’s (1958) classic study *Naven* and the later work of Madge (1964), who draws on the same text. It is also a term on the periphery of Bourdieu’s lexicon.