

## Psychology instead of Ethics?

### Why psychological research is important but cannot replace ethics.

#### **Abstract**

Do empirical findings prompt us to abandon the belief that we act and decide on the basis of reasons? I will point to our everyday practice and use the heuristics approach of decision making such as proposed by Gerd Gigerenzer to argue that it doesn't and that we have, at least, two good reasons to negate the question 'Psychology instead of Ethics?'

Recent research done in cognitive psychology suggests that our judgments and decisions are primarily driven by intuitions and that giving reasons is a matter of post-hoc rationalization or even confabulation – thus challenging the ethical self-conception held by common sense and many philosophers. I will argue that the empirical findings do not indicate that we have to reframe the picture of reasoning or our ethical self-concept. Rather, they are consistent with the view that people are competent to play what I call the *Game of Reasons*. This game consists in the preparedness to give reasons, in understanding the norms of giving reasons, and in the willingness to be influenced by reasons.

Still, sometimes our behavior is not in line with norms. As common sense has no elaborated theory how this could be the case, it is worthwhile to have a look at psychological explanations of moral judgment. The heuristic approach of moral judgments is best suited to explain why and to predict when our judgments will go wrong. But within the heuristic approach a normative criterion is needed in order to distinguish whether a heuristic reliably led to the right decision or not. Therefore, psychological research has to be informed by philosophy. This is the first of two reasons to negate the question 'Psychology instead of Ethics?'. I will present case studies representative for a research movement claiming that our acts and decisions are basically driven by intuitions. Combining my arguments from the Game of Reasons with the heuristic approach allows me to reinterpret the empirical findings as application errors of otherwise adaptive heuristics on the one hand and as evidence that our reasoning capacity can be defeated by adverse external cues on the other. In conclusion: That the fact, that the Game of Reasons can be manipulated doesn't show that we don't generally play the game well. Nevertheless, results from cognitive and moral psychology are necessary to understand how moral judgments work. The important follow up question is whether psychological research can tell us whether we are able to control our heuristics sufficiently. As "ought" still implies "can", normative philosophy can't demand from individuals what they are unable to achieve. In this sense, philosophy has to be informed by psychology. This is the second reason to negate the question 'Psychology instead of Ethics?'. My proposal for a reconciliation of the philosophical and psychological position will lead to the insight that the normative and the psychological questions are mutually dependent. While not sufficient on their own, both positions are necessary for an informed picture about our reasoning abilities as well as for our ethical self-conception.