Out of the armchair and into the lab:
How cognitive psychology can help us answer philosophical questions

Tania Lombrozo
Department of Psychology
University of California, Berkeley
Philosophy

The laboratory of the mind

- Sometimes we learn a great deal without empirical data
  - Mathematics
  - Theoretical arguments
  - Thought experiments

Galileo
Thought experiments

(SEP; Gendler, 1998)

The laboratory of the mind

- Sometimes we learn a great deal without empirical data
  - Mathematics
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- But sometimes we are led astray…
Misconceptions about physics

• Sometimes we learn a great deal without empirical data
  – Mathematics
  – Theoretical arguments
  – Thought experiments
• But sometimes we are led astray…
  – Misconceptions about the natural world
  – Misconceptions about our own minds
  – Misconceptions about our own concepts

The laboratory of the mind
Philosophy + Science

Experimental Philosophy
Overview

• Answering philosophical questions with the laboratory of the mind
• Answering philosophical questions with the laboratory of cognitive psychology
  – Moral philosophy: moral permissibility
  – Metaphysics: causation
  – Philosophy of action: intentional action
Consequentialism

• The moral status of an action is determined by its consequences.
The Footbridge Problem

(Images from http://www.wjh.harvard.edu/~jgreene/)
Deontology

- The moral status of an action is determined by its relationship to rights, duties, and obligations.

What’s the difference?
Moral dumbfounding

• People have strongly held moral intuitions that they cannot justify.

What’s the difference?
Doctrine of Double Effect

- It is permissible to bring about harm as a (foreseen) side effect of a greater good, but not as a means to bringing about the greater good.

Thomas Aquinas

(Hauser et al., 2007)
Real-world examples

- **Money**: A hospital might decide to allocate $$ for equipment that will save 5 people/year rather than 1 person/year, but would never sacrifice 1 person to harvest organs for 5
- **War**: causing civilians to die
- **Euthanasia**: administration of morphine
- **Murder**: plot versus self-defense
- **Suicide**: to end life versus to save others

The naturalistic fallacy

- The error of deriving “ought” from “is”
  - The DDE reflects our “natural” judgments.
  - Therefore, the DDE is a principle we ought to follow.
- **Missing premise:**
  - If something is natural, it is what we ought to do.
  - But this is often false!
How psychology *can* inform moral philosophy

• (1) Sometimes psychological facts are relevant for determining what will generate the best consequences or satisfy our obligations.
  – E.g. Maximizing well-being.

• (2) Psychological facts can serve as a corrective by informing us when moral intuitions are driven by properties we consider morally irrelevant.
  – E.g. Fact that “footbridge” problem involves contact.

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Key questions about causation

• What relationship must hold between two events, A and B, such that it’s appropriate to claim that A caused B?

• Are there multiple kinds of causation? In particular, is there something special about psychological causation?
Physical Causation

"The brown circle caused the green square to break."

Psychological Causation

"The black square caused the red circle to flee."
Physical contact vs dependence

- Causation by omission
- Overdetermination

Double prevention
Double prevention

“Person caused outcome”? 

“Person caused outcome”?

- A+C+
  - Both intentional

- A-C-
  - Both accidental
Can psychology inform metaphysics?

• These data suggest that people evaluate causation differently depending on whether they construe an event physically or psychologically
• May help explain the difficulty of conceiving of the mind in scientific terms

Some lessons

• A role for philosophical reflection:
  – Thought experiments can be valuable tools
  – But they can also mislead us!

• Progress in philosophy:
  – From divergence to convergence
  – Outsourcing questions
Thank you!

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