

# Moral Judgments, Emotions, and some Expectations from Moral Motivation

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**Abstract.** I first provide an analysis of the main premises involved in the core of the metaethical debate about the acceptance of an emotional or a cognitive nature of moral judgments and its implications in relation to moral motivation. In order to accomplish this, I start by sketching the main points of the argumentation of Linda Zagzebski (2003) and Kyle Swan (2004). Secondly I suggest that one of the main problematic points of the paradox detected by those authors lays in the assumption of emotions as intrinsically motivating and I develop a critic of a reduced conceptualization of motivation as well as I try to redefine the processes involved in moral motivation, as emotion and cognition, by showing the converging points of view from moral philosophy and psychology. Eventually, I conclude proposing an integral and non-compartmentalized conceptualization of moral motivation and its relation to emotions and cognition, for it could shed some light on the metaethical debate about the nature of moral judgments, externalism and internalism.

**Key words:** moral judgment, emotion, motivation, cognition, metaethics.

Among other metaethical debates, one of the most discussed issues is the conflict reflected by Linda Zagzebski (2003) and Kyle Swan (2004) with respect to the implications of the relation between moral judgments, motivation and emotions. Given the fact that the relation between the cognitive/noncognitive nature of moral judgment and moral motivation seems to be the core of the metaethical debates over the recent decades, the main premises involved in it will be analyzed in what follows, for they are the root of the widely discussed metaethical question.

The debate between Swan and Zagzebski and, in general terms, the debate between cognitivism and expressionism, as well as between internalism and externalism, has its root in the idea of motivation and our expectations with respect to moral judgments as morally motivating states. We are tent to believe that if we know that X is right, we would directly be motivated to act in that direction, and vice versa. Nevertheless, it seems that moral and human motivation does not work like that, as many everyday's life cases show. Hence, what does this mean? Are moral judgments not motivating? Is internalism false? Are moral judgments cognitive, affective, or both? From an externalism account, especially if it is also based on noncognitivism, the relation between the acceptance of a judgment and the corresponding action is denied. Thus, you can believe that you ought to do X, but this does not directly imply that you are motivated to act so, or that you are going to act so. That is, a judgment does not imply an intention, or an action. From an internalist account, the cases of moral *akrasia* would be explained, as Hare (1963) maintained, because either the moral agent does not really believe in those moral judgments, so she does not really think that she ought to do X, or the agent is not really autonomous to act according to what she judges to be the best reason. However, as Swan sketches, "how could it be that

merely taking the world to be certain way we are inclined to do so?" (2004, 375) These -among others- seem to be the eternal questions of metaethics today.

The problem arises by the combination of three theories referred to different moral aspects. As Zagzebski sets out, if "we expect moral judgments to be both cognitive and motivating" (2003, 105), how can we deal with the idea of moral judgments as propositions with a true value, and concretely, how can we compatibilize the idea that moral judgments are intrinsically motivating with the idea that "when we make a moral judgment we are in a cognitive state" (Zagzebski 2003, 104). As a result of this paradoxical situation, one could choose between cognitivism, non-cognitivism, internalism, externalism, rationalism or sentimentalism, obtaining the following theses, respectively:

1. Moral judgments are propositions.
- 1'. Moral judgments are expressions of one's attitude.
2. Moral judgments are intrinsically motivating.
- 2'. Moral judgments are not intrinsically motivating.
3. Emotions are intrinsically motivating.
- 3'. Reason/cognition is not intrinsically motivating.

At the same time, the debate between cognitivism and internalism is intersected by our assumptions about the -emotional or rational- basis or nature of moral judgments. In order to fit the pieces of morality, metaethics has had a special interest in facing the challenge that different conceptions of moral motivation, the nature of moral judgments and moral knowledge may imply. As a result of it, the debate is eventually articulated in the two following syllogisms:

Premise 1: Moral judgments are emotional.

Premise 2: Emotions are intrinsically motivating.

Conclusion: Moral judgments are intrinsically motivating.

Premise 1: Moral judgments are cognitive (genuine propositions).

Premise 2: Cognition is not intrinsically motivating.

Conclusion: Moral judgments are not intrinsically motivating.

Therefore, the problem turns to be the relation between motivation and cognition, if one assumes that moral judgments are cognitive states and proposition; and the relation between motivation and emotions, if one assumes that moral judgments are expressions of one's attitudes, feelings and emotions. The first syllogism would accept internalism but it would have to face the problem of *akrasia* and weakness of the will. The second syllo-

gism does not have to face the problem of *akrasia* since it does not expect moral judgments to be motivating, but it will have to deny internalism.

Once the basis of the debate are settled down, I would like to point out that -beyond our metaethical position about internalism, externalism, cognitivism, or sentimentalism- what is taken for granted in this debate is that emotions are intrinsically motivating as well as reason or cognition is not, in a Humean style, as the minor premises show. For this reason, it seems that a revision of the term motivation is necessary to clarify what we expect from motivation and what we mean when we refer to it. In other words, the main question seems to be, before we decide what moral judgments are like, what it means to be intrinsically motivating, and whether there is something intrinsically motivating or not.

In fact, it seems that knowing that X is true or feeling and believing that one ought to do X does not always motivate you directly to act in that direction. This can be seen as a problem of moral motivation. However, this will turn out problematic if a reduced idea of what motivation entails is assumed. In other words, this is problematic, only if we expect that if something is motivating, then it has to derive into a coherent action, but perhaps metaethical debates should bear in mind the differences between stimuli, motives, reactions and motivation itself in order to clarify the core of its debates.

For this reason, it seems sensible to maintain, as A. Roskies does, that “empirical evidence can be relevantly brought to bear on a philosophical question typically viewed to be *a priori*,” so that we should not turn our back to scientific and rigorous researches, nor look the other way. Certainly, it is true that “empirical evidence is generally thought to be irrelevant to philosophical theorizing in a number of philosophical areas, including metaethics” as well as it is also true that “one metaethical issue often held to be immune from the empirical concerns is the relation between moral facts and moral motivation” (2003, 51), but it cannot be denied that empirical evidence could provide some clarifications as well as it could also shed some light on these debates. Needless to say, science by itself cannot solve philosophical questions, but it surely can prevent us from assuming false-proven start points. For this reason, I would like to start by clarifying what the terms motivation, emotion and cognition imply from a psychological point of view.

#### I. WHAT DO WE MEAN BY ‘INTRINSICALLY MOTIVATING’?

What we mean when we say that something is intrinsically motivating seems to be a key question whose answer generates part of the conflict. For this reason, a general psychological approach to motivation will be given in what follows in relation to the terms emotion, reason and cognition. As J. Prinz states, “asking how one thing relates to another can lead to discoveries that we would not make if the question had not been asked” (2004, 41).

Following M. T. Sanz (2009), motivation can be seen as an indirectly observable theoretical construction about the factors that modulate an agent’s behavior. Therefore, in this first sense, motivation would be a construction built in order to explain the process between motives, that is, the stimuli that trigger an action, and the action itself, so that it

would be a mistake to identify motivation and emotions, as well as it would be misleading to understand emotions as intrinsically motivating if we expect that something intrinsically motivating derives always into an action coherent to one of its stimuli, i.e. an emotion. This conception of emotions, motivation and its direct influence in action would be a reduction of the motivational process. In other words, that kind of expectation would be as wrong as identifying the stimuli and motivation, as indentifying motives and motivation, or, as the genetic fallacy states, it would be as wrong as indentifying the origin of something with that something.

In a second sense, motivation can be understood as a mental process that includes all the factors that lead an agent to act in a certain way, more or less consciously. In this sense, motivation would be an intermediate process between motives and the motivated action. Hence, if emotions were the only intrinsically motivating element of human psyche, that is, if they were the only motives, and if cognition were not intrinsically motivating, we could not act against our emotional motives, so that we could not commit to long term decisions or higher aims, such a finishing a degree, getting on a diet or sacrificing ourselves for political or religious convictions, as it happens in everyday's life.

Consequently, when the metaethical debate about moral motivation and the nature of moral judgments is approached, it should not be forgotten that many different factors convergence in motivation: basic and social needs, biological, cultural, social motives, primary and secondary motives, personality traits, etc., so that the identification of a single element, in this case, emotions, as intrinsically motivating would be -at least- a risky position, especially if moral philosophy desires to give a realistic account of moral agents, of how we develop moral argumentations and how we deliberate and act.

As a result of what have been said, it seems that it makes no sense to distinguish between intrinsically motivating motives and simple motives, since there would not be such a thing as directly motivating motives and 'second class' motives, and given that a simple motive does not directly generates an action or a behavior. The assumption of a thesis like that would imply the denial of the role of motivation in action, for it implies a reduction of our behavior and decisions into a simple effect of some causes or motives that are said to be 'intrinsically motivating' as if there were any other factors that could interact in the motivational process.

In other words, motives, as the precedents of a conduct, do not guarantee the eventual action, since an intermediate process, i.e. motivation, exists. Needless to say, emotions and affective states modulate our motivation and have an influence in our final action, and our decisions and deliberations, but if emotions were intrinsically motivating and cognition were not, we would not be able to fulfill any long term aim, as it has been previously said. Emotions, sentiments and moods can be a motivating stimulus, but we should not indentify stimuli, motivation and responses. It would not be accurate to point out emotion as an intrinsically motivating element, since, in fact, the cause of the behavior, what moves us to a certain behavior, is not emotion, but motivation. Certainly, emotion -taken into account that it involves a valuation- modules the effect of motivation, but it does not

determine it. Bearing this always in mind could shed some light on the metaethical problems mentioned before.

Besides, if we accept that motivation is an adaptive process that prepares us to act in order to survive and/or in order to guarantee the agent's wellbeing and eventually the personal development and growth, that is, if we accept that "motivation is an adaptive process that energizes and guide our behavior to an objective or aim" (Menéndez 2009, 22), and if we believe that moral judgments are intrinsically motivating due to their emotional basis, then we should be disposed to accept that moral judgments and emotions guide our behavior to an aim that provides or guarantee our survival, growth or wellbeing. Then, it would have to be demonstrated that moral judgments guarantee our survival, as well as it would have to be justified how emotions guarantee our personal growth without committing a naturalistic fallacy or without falling in moral determinism.

In this sense, especially in the internalism/externalism debate, it is important to distinguish motivation from the motivated behavior, which would be the result of the motivational process and the motivational traits, that is, the personal predisposition to act in a certain way depending of our personality's traits.

As a consequence, from a psychological point of view, neither emotions are intrinsically motivating, nor cognition is independent of the motivational process. At the same time, neither cognition, nor emotions are irrelevant to motivation, given that both of them can act as a motive and given that these two processes interact and modify each other (Damasio 2000, LeDoux 2000).

## II. COGNITION AND EMOTION: RELATIONS AND INTERACTIONS

In what follows, I will try to show some evidences of the interactive relation between the emotional and the cognitive domain, for, as A. Damasio already observed, "the artificial opposition between emotion and reason has been questioned and is not as easily taken for granted" (2000, 13). In fact, it is not only the case that the questioning of boundaries between the classical dualist distinction between reason and emotion is more and more habitual, but that the distinction between cognition and reason is also necessary for moral philosophy debates.

In effect, cognition has frequently been associated to reason, not from psychological or biological approaches, but from moral philosophy ones. Nevertheless, if cognition and reason are distinguished, it could easily been understood how cognition plays an integral role in the emotional process and, therefore, also in motivation.

From a converging point of view between psychology and philosophy, cognition can be defined as the set of processes through which the agent's mind creates a representation of the environment where s/he lives in order to adjust his/her behavior to it<sup>1</sup>. In this

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1] For an extended explanation of the distinction between cognition and reason used in this paper see Cabezas (2010, 81).

sense, the term cognition would be referred not only to “tools” as language, but also to other processes, such as attention, perception or memory (LeDoux 2000), through which human mind is able to create a mental representation of the environment. This seems to be indispensable in order to guide and adjust our behavior in a given world, which also includes moral behavior and, consequently, moral motivation. Hence, cognition would not be apart from the motivational process, since it would work as a means to search for ways of satisfying it.

On the other hand, if reason is understood as something different from cognition, it can be defined as a mental mechanism that uses consciousness in order to elaborate abstract thinking -that is, unlinked to reality, and, therefore, not necessary linked to a concrete motivation- through which we can build other possible worlds, instead of representations of the real world. Hence, with respect to moral motivation, and if we accept, as Watson states, that “one’s aim in deliberation is to make a commitment to a course of action by making a judgment about what is best (or good) to do” (2007, 175), then maybe we could state that reason is supported by cognitive processes, but reason could be dissociated from motivation, since it would not operate in reality, but in abstraction.

With respect to the relation between cognition and emotions, one might sustain that they are different ways of processing information, especially if one is sympathetic to the idea that “cognitive representations are inherently neutral representations, ones that do not automatically trigger particular behavioral responses or dispositions” (Greene 2008, 40). But again this conception entails some problems. Firstly, the idea that emotions implies automatically a behavior is not accurate if we understand “automatic” as “simple” or “direct”, since many regions of the brain are involved in the emotional process. If the consequences of emotions were as “automatic” as it is though -beyond universal facial expression and physiological reactions- it would be sensible to expect that we all would behave exactly the same way. Secondly, cognition, as Tucker (1981) distinguished, can generate two different kinds of cognitions, i.e., syncretic and analytic or “cold” ones. In this sense, emotions could also be understood as a type of cognitions, syncretic ones, given that they allow us to acquire a kind of knowledge referred to our inner states.

Thirdly, also in relation to emotions, and now independently of the role we can be tented to give them in morality, it is important to point out some ideas in order to clarify their relation to both, motivation and cognition.

Although as Reber states, “historically this term has proven utterly refractory to definitional efforts” (1985, 234), a general approach and definition can be reached from a psychological point of view, bearing in mind that the term emotion or emotions is referred to a multidimensional process. Thus, emotions could be defined, as Fernández-Abascal and Jiménez suggest as:

a process that involves a variety of triggering conditions (relevant stimuli), the existence of subjective experiences or sentiments (subjective interpretation), diverse levels of cognitive procedure (evaluative process), physiological changes (activation), expressive and commu-

nication's patterns (emotional expression), that entails motivating effects (mobilization to action) and a aim, i.e., adaptation to a never-ending changing environment. (2010, 40-41)

According to this approach, emotion would be a process whose function is not other but the analysis of meaningfulness situation for the agent, the interpretation and valuation of them in order to prepare the agent to act in a direction or another. In this sense, motivational processes may derive from emotions, but, as it has been said before, emotion and motivation cannot be equalized. Simultaneously, and although emotions entails a valuation, it is needless to say that they should not be identified with sentiments, that is, the subjective experience of emotion, for a different cognitive implication is involved in sentiments.

Another classic and inclusive approach to emotions that stresses the relation between the emotional and the cognitive domain is the Kleinginna's one:

Emotion is a complex set of interactions among subjective and objective factors, mediated by neural/hormonal systems, which can (a) give rise to affective experiences such as feelings of arousal, pleasure/displeasure; (b) generate cognitive processes such as emotionally relevant perceptual effects, appraisals, labeling processes; (c) activate widespread physiological adjustments to the arousing conditions; and (d) lead to behavior that is often, but not always, expressive, goal-directed, and adaptative. (Kleinginna and Kleinginna 1981, 355)

Nevertheless, it is not only the case that emotions generate cognitive processes, but that cognition is involved in the emotional process in order to elicit an emotion, as it will be shown in what follows.

Certainly, especially in relation to the metaethical problems concerning moral motivation, it cannot be ignored that there is a relevant amount of researches about the interactions between emotion and cognition -which, as it has been marked, should be distinguished here from reason-. As J. Greene maintains, "the present fMRI data support a theory of moral judgment according to which both cognitive and emotional processes play crucial and sometimes mutually competitive roles" (2004, 389).

On the one hand, emotions optimize cognition, for they modulate basic cognitive processes. It is true that the amygdale plays a central role in the emotional domain, but it is important to bear in mind that this is not the only cerebral region able to assign emotional valence, so that emotion and cognition should be considered complementary, instead of independent or antagonist processes. Thus, following Ferrandiz's thesis (1986), one could affirm that it can be affection -which is referred to the simplest element of the emotional domain, that is, to experience of pleasant and unpleasant situations- without the cognitive component, but it cannot be emotion without the cognitive element.

As a result of it, it seems that emotion and cognition maintain a relation that differs from what our traditional intuitions about them had guessed, for it has turned out to be that the complexer and opener a cognitive problem is, the more that emotion is involved. According to Forgas (1995) and his affect infusion model, the more multifaceted the problem to solve is, the more that the affective state would be incorporated and used as a

tool to find new strategies to solve it. Hence, when we face a problem that requires a high effort in order to find a solution and the strategies to find a solution are not fixed, emotionally meaningful information would be integrated in the cognitive process, given that those complex cases require a heuristic and creative system of processing information. This would be due to the fact that the emotional experience is progressively integrated according to cognitive development of the agent (Lane et al. 1990).

In fact, it seems that it is not only that emotion influences memory and attention, which are activities related to cognition, for we process information that is “affectively congruent with our mood” (Bower 1981, 129), but that a positive emotional state facilitates cognitive flexibility and decision making in complex cases, whilst negative emotional state makes us more reflexive and less daring agents (Domínguez and García 2010, 217). This is surely very relevant to approach the metaethical problem about the nature of moral judgments, motivation and their relation to emotions and cognition from a less compartmentalized perspective.

On the other hand, cognition can be understood as an integrated part of the emotional domain (Eich et. al, 2003), not only because both processes share some cerebral regions, such as the hippocampus, the orbitofrontal cortex or the prefrontal ventromedial cortex (Kringelbach 2005, Rolls 2000), but because, as Clore and Ortony (2000) stressed out, emotions occur as a consequence of the activation of the cognitive process related to the significance of the situation. This would, therefore, explain why individual differences with respect to the responses to identical situations exist, also including morally relevant situations.

### III. CONCLUSION

Although evidently many consequences from the previous thesis here defended can be derived, the developing of those metaethical questions will be a challenging task for the future which unfortunately exceeds the limits and aims of this paper. Here I have presented arguments and data against a simplistic or reduced account of moral motivation, cognition and emotion in order to try to offer difference perspectives of analyzing some of the hottest debates in moral philosophy and metaethics.

As a result of what has been exposed through this paper, and in relation to the metaethical problem discussed by Zagzebski and Swan, I am sympathetic to Kennett’s point of view, although there should be taken into account that when she mentions the affective domain, she is referring to the emotional domain, but not only to affects:

The terms of the debate between rationalists and sentimentalists must be modified. Recent evidence on moral development from the social and cognitive sciences and from psychopathology does not endorse the philosophers’ traditional distinction between the affective and the cognitive, or their attempt to locate morality wholly in one or other domain. (2008, 259)



Taking into account an interdisciplinary outlook from psychology and moral philosophy, and bearing in mind the initial paradox, it could be affirmed that we go through cognitive and emotional processes that occur simultaneously in our brain and, what is more, that our mind works with these two kinds of information, without establishing a fixed boundary. As LeDoux maintains, “the terms “cognition” and “emotion” do not refer to real functions performed by the brain but instead to collections of disparate brain processes” (2000, 129). In this sense, an interactive approach can be defended, given the effects of emotions in some tasks, such as memory or attention; and given that the emotional response depends on the cognitive valuation that we make of it (Eich et al. 2000).

For all these reasons, it seems sensible to conclude in relation to the metaethical question that both, cognition and emotion may play a part in motivation, but neither one by itself determines human behavior and moral decision making.

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