

Balance & Belonging:  
Harmony and its Role in Understanding Morality

Joseph Len Miller

A dissertation

submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

University of Washington

2021

Reading Committee:

Colin Marshall, Chair

Carole Lee

William J. Talbott

Program Authorized to Offer Degree:

Department of Philosophy

©Copyright 2021  
Joseph Len Miller

University of Washington

**Abstract**

Balance and Belonging:  
Harmony and its Role in Understanding Morality

Joseph Len Miller

Chair of the Supervisory Committee:

Colin Marshall

Department of Philosophy

In my dissertation I explore the moral relevancy of the relationship between an agent and their surroundings by assessing how we understand, and how we ought to understand, moral problems. This dissertation is composed of three papers that address a different facet of the structure, and our understanding of the structure, of moral problems. The first paper highlights contexts in which assumptions about moral problems are being made (and issues with those contexts). The second paper focuses on a particular popular assumption about how moral problems are structured (e.g., they are cooperative problems) that arises from these kinds of studies and offers an alternative way of understanding how moral problems are structured based in Native American philosophy. The third paper focuses on explaining how a particular Native American conception (Muscogee) of moral problems might look.

# THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS, STORYTELLING, & MORAL COGNITION

“The land speaks, its language arising  
From its own geography –  
The mountains’ hulked shapes  
Are blue whales, remembering  
When they were undersea ridges,  
And rivers are serpentine strands hammered from silver, and dark trees  
Talk to the wind – weaving mortal lives,  
Drumbeats, pillars of smoke,  
Voices wavering into updraft,  
The storyteller shifting the present.”

Karenne Wood, “The Naming,” *Weaving the Boundary* (p. 57)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the last two decades there has been an increased interest in empirically studying moral cognition. Typically, these studies involve thought experiments, and the thought experiments are used in roughly the same way as they are used in philosophy: tell people a story to elicit a response and then explain the response. The way of explaining the response, however, is different. Instead of relying on conversations about our intuitions, researchers use empirical tools to get a better understanding of the way we think about moral issues.

One prominent thought experiment that has been used is the Trolley Problem (Ciaramelli, et al., 2007; Greene et al., 2001; Greene et al., 2004; Koenigs et al., 2007; Mendez, Anderson, & Shapira, 2005; Schaich Borg et al., 2006). Using thought experiments like the Trolley Problem, researchers have concluded, for example, that different moral problems elicit different responses (Greene et al. 2001) and moral problems are more emotionally engaging when they involve the use of personal force (Greene et al. 2009).

These studies have faced a set of similar criticisms concerning generalizability. The main idea behind these criticisms is that the findings from these studies don’t generalize to moral cognition as it occurs in everyday life (i.e., these findings aren’t replicated outside the lab).

In this paper, I aim to offer a qualified defense of these studies against these criticisms. I will suggest that there’s a distinction between two different types of moral cognition (visceral and non-visceral), and this distinction can help us to better understand under what conditions – i.e., in what contexts - the findings from these studies apply. This distinction will be used to suggest that although studies of moral cognition may not be generalizable for one kind of moral cognition (visceral), there’s another kind of moral cognition for which they may be generalizable (non-visceral).

Overall, I’ll be arguing that the role of thought experiments with regards to moral cognition is similar to the role that stories play in Native American philosophy. While stories serve various prominent roles in Native American philosophies (Cajete, 1994 and 2016), as it pertains to my argument, stories can help us to better identify considerations we find to be morally relevant, as well as considerations that we think should be relevant.

In §2 I will review some of the empirical literature on moral cognition, focusing on the Trolley Problem as an example. Then, in §3, I will explain a broad set of criticisms of this literature (§3.1). To explain under what circumstances these criticisms apply, I will suggest a distinction

between two types of moral cognition (§3.2). §4 will contain a defense of the claim that thought experiments can have a role in moral cognition similar to the role that stories play in Native American philosophy. The suggestion I'll be making is that the role that thought experiments play in moral cognition is similar to one role that stories play in moral cognition. Just as stories can help us to consider different aspects or features of a problem, thought experiments do the same by allowing us an opportunity to practice thinking through moral problems. This means that studies of moral cognition that use thought experiments can still inform us about (i.e., be generalized to) one kind of moral cognition (non-visceral), even if it's unclear whether they inform us about the other type of moral cognition (visceral).

## 2. THE TROLLEY PROBLEM: AN EXAMPLE OF THE USE OF THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS IN STUDIES OF MORAL COGNITION<sup>1</sup>

While there are some arguments for thinking that there is a unique set of neural structures devoted to morality (Moll, Eslinger, & de Oliveira-Souza, 2001; Hauser, 2006), this view has been challenged by more recent studies of moral cognition (Greene & Haidt, 2002; Parkinson et al., 2011; Young & Dungan, 2012; Greene, 2014). Rather than thinking that the brain has some unique set of features devoted to processing and solving uniquely *moral* problems, a more popular view is that moral decision-making occurs when the brain is used to solve problems *we take* to be moral problems. In other words, instead of thinking there are certain parts of our brains that are devoted to solving a particular kind of problem (i.e., moral problems), the thought is that our ability to solve moral problems results from using cognitive features that are used in other aspects of cognition to solve problems we perceive to be moral problems. It's not as if we recognize, consciously or sub-consciously, something as a moral problem, then our brain responds by accessing cognitive features that are *unique* to moral decision-making. Instead, we recognize something as a moral problem and our brain responds by employing *general* cognitive or decision-making functions. What classifies 'decision-making' as being *moral* is the content of the problem that's being addressed – not the cognitive mechanisms that are used to solve the problem. Moral problems elicit moral decision-making, but not by eliciting special or unique cognitive or decision-making functions.

One such problem that has received a lot of attention in neuroscience is the Trolley Problem (Ciaramelli, et al., 2007; Greene et al., 2001; Greene et al., 2004; Koenigs et al., 2007; Mendez, Anderson, & Shapira, 2005; Schaich Borg et al., 2006). Although there are quite a few variations of the Trolley Problem, the ones that are most relevant are referred to as the Switch Case and the Footbridge Case.

**The Switch Case:** There is a trolley heading towards five strangers tied to a track. You are standing next to a switch that, when pulled, would divert the trolley onto an alternate track where one person is tied down.

---

<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I am restricting the focus of my argument to studies about moral decision-making. There are a lot of studies that use moral thought experiments to get people to make judgments about praise and blame, but my focus won't be on those studies. I am focusing solely on studies that ask people to make decisions about what should be done; not studies that ask people whether someone can be held accountable for some action.

In the Switch Case participants are asked to make a judgment about whether the switch should be pulled – thus, ending one life for the sake of saving five. In this case, most people think that the switch should be pulled (Greene et al., 2001; Petrinovich, O’Neill, & Jorgensen, 1993).

The main reason neuroscientists have been interested in the Trolley Problem is because a slight variation (the Footbridge Case) has produced different results.

**The Footbridge Case:** There is a trolley heading toward five strangers tied to a track. You are standing next to a very dense person on a bridge that oversees the track. If you push the person, the trolley will hit them and end their life, however, the trolley will be stopped before it hits the five people that are tied down to the tracks.

In the Footbridge Case participants are again asked to make a judgment about what ought to be done. However, this time most people say that you shouldn’t push the dense person off the bridge (Greene et al., 2001).

Although both cases consist of sacrificing one life to save five, people tend to have divergent judgments. Most people think it’s morally permissible to pull the switch, but that it’s not morally permissible to push someone off a bridge (Cushman, Young, & Hauser, 2006; Greene et al., 2001; Petrinovich, O’Neill, & Jorgensen, 1993). For philosophers, the question has been whether this divergence is morally justified. Neuroscientists, however, are concerned with *why*, with regards to neural-pathways and cognitive processes, these divergent judgments arise.

To test why this divergence occurs, Greene et al. (2001) used functional magnetic resonant imaging (fMRI) to measure brain activity when participants were asked to make a judgment about two different sets of moral problems. These sets were referred to as “personal-moral” problems and “moral-impersonal” problems. There were three standards used by two independent coders to distinguish a particular problem as being “personal or “impersonal”:

- (1) Could the action in question reasonably be expected to lead to serious bodily harm?
- (2) If so, would this harm result from deflecting an already existing harm onto a different party?
- (3) Is this party a particular person or a member(s) of a particular group of people?

If the coders determined that for any particular moral problem the answers to (1) and (3) were ‘yes,’ while the answer to (2) was ‘no,’ then the moral problem in question was designated as “personal.” All other problems were designated as “impersonal.” As Greene et al. (2001) state:

The moral dilemmas of which the coders said that the action in question (a) could reasonably be expected to lead to serious bodily harm (b) to a particular person or a member or members of a particular group of people (c) where this harm is not the result of deflecting an existing threat onto a different party were assigned to the “moral-personal” condition (pp. 2107-2108, fn. 9).<sup>2</sup>

They found that when participants made judgments concerning moral-personal problems (problems like the Footbridge Case), brain areas associated with emotion were more active. When

---

<sup>2</sup> This definition is also explained in Greene et al. (2004), p. 389.

participants made judgments concerning moral-impersonal problems (problems like the Switch Case), brain areas associated with emotional processing weren't as active. The conclusion drawn from this study was that people have divergent response because the Footbridge Case is a moral-personal problem and moral-personal problems are more emotionally engaging than moral-impersonal problems.<sup>3</sup>

In a 2009 study, Green et al. attempted to find out why personal-moral problems elicited a stronger negative emotional reaction than impersonal-moral problems. This time, personal-moral problems were understood as being problems that involved the use of personal force. 'Personal force' was defined as follows: "An agent applies personal force to another when the force that *directly* impacts the other is generated by the agent's muscles, as when one pushes another with one's hands or with a rigid object" (p. 365). In these studies, the effect of personal force on moral decision-making was analyzed, as was the interaction between personal force and intention.

To determine the effect of personal force, four different versions of the Footbridge Case were used to contrast the impact of personal force with physical contact and spatial proximity. The first Footbridge Case was *the standard case* (as described above) and involved personal force, physical contact, and spatial proximity. The second Footbridge Case was *the remote case*. In this case, the participant is asked whether they would drop the stranger onto the trolley tracks using a remote switch that opens a trap door. This case involves neither personal force, physical contact, or spatial proximity. The third Footbridge Case was *the pole case*. This case is similar to the standard case except that instead of using their hands, the participant is asked whether they would push the stranger off the bridge with a pole. Since the participant is using a pole instead of their hands, there was no physical contact. However, personal force and spatial proximity were still involved. The fourth Footbridge Case is *the switch case*. This case is similar to the remote case except that the participant is next to the stranger when they're asked to push the button. This means that there is spatial proximity, but there is no personal force or physical contact. "Comparing [the remote case] to [the switch case] isolates the effect of spatial proximity. Comparing [the standard case] to [the pole case] isolates the effect of physical contact. Comparing [the switch case] to [the pole case] isolates the effect of personal force" (*ibid*).

After analyzing the results, it was determined that "harmful actions involving personal force are judged to be less morally acceptable" (*ibid*). Physical contact and spatial proximity showed no effect on participants judgments, and previous reports of the influence of physical contact (Cushman et al., 2006) were shown to actually be the influence of personal force.<sup>4</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> This distinction between moral-personal problems and moral-impersonal problems, though being influential (e.g., Koenigs et al., 2007; Valdesolo & DeSteno, 2006), has been revised (Greene et al., 2009) in order to accommodate a series of criticisms (Mikhail, 2007; Schaich Borg, Hynes, Van Horn, Grafton, & Sinnott-Armstrong, 2006; McGuire et al., 2009). These criticisms vary from showing that the differing responses to personal- and impersonal-moral problems could result from the intention of the person performing the action (Cushman, Young, & Hauser, 2006; Mikhail, 2000; Moore, Clark, & Kane, 2008; Schaich Borg, Hynes, Van Horn, Grafton, & Sinnott-Armstrong, 2006) to showing that some actions (e.g., the Footbridge Case) are more *direct* (Moore, Clark, & Kane, 2008; Royzman & Baron, 2002) or require *intervention* toward the victim (Waldmann & Dieterich, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> To ensure these results generalized to other moral problems, Greene et al. used another experiment. There were three versions of The Speedboat Problem. In this case, "saving the lives of five drowning swimmers requires lightening the load of a speedboat" by removing a passenger of the speedboat who cannot swim. In the first case, the passenger is pushed from the speedboat (using physical contact and personal force). In the second case, the passenger is pushed with an oar (using personal force, but no

To determine the interaction between personal force and intention four other versions of The Trolley Problem were used. The *standard* Loop Case involves diverting the trolley onto a looped side-track that has one person tied down. If diverted, the trolley would kill the one person on the looped side-track, but it would be stopped before it looped back around to the five people on the main track. "Here the victim is harmed as a means (i.e. intentionally), but without the application of personal force" (p. 368). The *weight* Loop Case involves a weight behind the one person on the looped side-track. What would stop the trolley is the weight, not the one person tied down to the looped side-track. "Here the victim is killed as a side-effect (i.e., without intention) and, again, without the application of personal force" (*ibid*). The *obstacle collide* case involves a person on a bridge standing between the participant and a switch that would divert the trolley from a track where five people are tied-down to another track. To pull the switch, the participant would have to run across the bridge and collide with the person in-between the participant and the switch - knocking that person from the bridge. This case involves personal force, but not intention (since the collision is a side-effect of pulling the switch). The *obstacle push* case is the same as the obstacle collide case, except instead of colliding with the person in the way of the switch, the participant has to push them off the bridge. This case involves intentional personal force.

"There was a main effect of intention (*loop* and *obstacle push* vs. *loop weight* and *obstacle collide*... and no main effect of personal force (*loop* dilemmas vs. *obstacle* dilemmas)" (*ibid*). By comparing the standard Loop Case with the weight Loop Case and the obstacle collide case, Greene et al. found no significant effects, but the obstacle push case "elicited significantly lower moral acceptability ratings than each of these other" cases (*ibid*). This means the effect of personal force is explained by being conjoined with the effect of intention.

These studies show that moral problems that involve intention are judged differently than those that don't involve intention. It also shows that personal force has a significant effect on moral judgment when it's combined with intention.

### 3. MORAL COGNITION IN CONTEXT: AN OBJECTION TO THE USE OF THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS IN STUDIES OF MORAL COGNITION

The aim of these studies has been to understand how moral cognition works - i.e., understand how we think about moral problems. This was done by identifying what kind of cognitive processes are involved in thinking through moral problems as well as how those processes are activated or inhibited. To do this, however, specific moral problems were selected and the contexts in which those problems were presented were highly artificial. The hope is that these findings identify cognitive processes that operate (or are engaged) during thinking about more general moral problems outside of these artificial settings.

In this section I'll explain a set of criticisms aimed at studies of moral cognition that utilize thought experiments (§3.1). Then, in an attempt to defend these studies from the aforementioned criticisms, I'll suggest a way of distinguishing two different kinds of moral cognition (§3.2). This distinction is meant to reflect or capture a series of distinctions that underlie these criticisms and help contextualize when these criticisms are appropriate and when they are not.

---

physical contact). In the third case, the passenger is removed by accelerating quickly (using neither personal force nor physical contact). The results were that there was no significant effect of physical contact, but there was a significant effect of personal force (pp. 367-368).

### 3.1. A FAMILIAR CRITICISM: THE QUESTION OF EXTERNAL VALIDITY

These kinds of studies have faced variations of a broad criticism. That criticism is that the findings aren't, or can't be, replicated outside of the lab (i.e., in the real-world). Generally, the concern is that the kinds of moral problems, and the contexts in which they're presented (e.g., the lab), are so unlike those that we find outside of these studies that these findings aren't generalizable. In other words, these findings don't identify cognitive processes that are activated outside of these controlled artificial contexts or they aren't activated when thinking through general, more common, moral problems or, even if they are activated, their effects are overrun or masked by other cognitive processes that determine behavior.

Bauman, McGraw, Bartels, and Warren (2014) have made this point regarding the use of thought-experiments in studies of moral cognition. Their claim is that studies using fanciful thought-experiments (i.e., "sacrificial dilemmas") have low external validity - meaning, the conclusions from these studies can't be generalized to other situations. The reason for this is that fanciful thought-experiments, like the Trolley Problem, "lack experimental, mundane, and psychological realism" (p. 537). 'Experimental realism' refers to the degree to which the participants engage with the thought experiment and take it seriously, 'mundane realism' refers to the degree to which the thought experiments (or components thereof) resemble things the participants would face in their everyday lives, and 'psychological realism' refers to the degree to which the mental processes that operate in the thought experiment are activated in the real-world. Due to the outlandish structure of thought experiments like the Trolley Problem, findings from studies that utilize these thought experiments shouldn't be generalized to everyday instances of moral cognition. Thought experiments like the Trolley Problem have low experimental realism because, although they're engaging, they're difficult to take seriously. It's easy, for example, to find the Trolley Problem to be funny or entertaining. However, this indicates that participants aren't thinking of the thought experiment as being non-threatening or not containing real concerns. These kind of thought experiments have low mundane realism because they "differ considerably from the type and scale of moral situations people typically face in real life" (p. 542). Lastly, they have low psychological realism because the decisions that participants make regarding these thought experiments are inconsequential - i.e., they have no social impact. Since studies that rely on these kind of thought experiments score low on these three measures, they have low external validity.

A recent study by Bostyn, Sevenhant, and Roets (2018) claims to have shown that peoples' responses to hypothetical moral problems used in studies on moral decision-making is not predictive of their real-world responses. Participants were separated into two groups: the real-life version and the hypothetical version. Each participant was given a questionnaire to determine whether they favored consequentialist or deontological moral judgments in hypothetical problems. Participants in the real-life version then completed measures on individual differences that were known to be positively associated with consequentialist judgments in moral dilemmas (e.g., need for cognition and psychopathy) and measures that were known to be negatively associated with consequentialist judgments (e.g., empathic concern, perspective taking, and moral identity). After one to two weeks, participants were assigned to either the real-life or hypothetical version of the mouse dilemma. In the real-life version participants were in a room with two cages of mice (one cage had one mouse and the other had five mice). They were told that the cage with five mice would be shocked, but they could decide (with 20 seconds) to shock the one mouse instead of the five (unbeknownst to the participants, no mice would be shocked). They were then asked for their decision about whether they'd be shocking the single mouse. In the hypothetical version participants were given a description describing this process and asked

whether they would push the button. As Bostyn et al. state, “[a]lthough preference for consequentialist decisions, as measured with a traditional hypothetical-moral-dilemma battery, was predictive of participants’ decision on the hypothetical mouse dilemma, this preference was not predictive of how participants behaved on the real-life moral dilemma” (p. 1090). The authors concluded that peoples’ choices for how they *should* respond to hypothetical moral problems – like the Trolley Problem – is not predictive of how they actual respond to similar problems in the real-world. While this study assessed the difference between peoples’ *judgments* about what should happen and how they *responded* to a moral problem, it’s still a concern about how much these findings can be generalized to real-world moral decision-making.

Machery (2011) has made a similar argument that judgments about thought experiments don’t entail these judgments are reliable when they occur outside the thought experiment. Under the assumption “that the reliability of a skill or capacity depends on the circumstances in which this skill or capacity is applied,”<sup>5</sup> he argues that judgments about thought experiments often don’t occur in the proper contexts. In the real world, the circumstances under which a skill or capacity is reliable is referred to as “the proper domain” of that skill or capacity. While someone may be good at making certain judgments, when those judgments are made outside of the proper domain they are likely not as reliable at making those judgments. For example, just as a basketball player may be reliable at dribbling in a game (the proper domain for basketball) but not reliable at dribbling during practice (outside the proper domain for basketball), someone may be reliable at making moral judgments in the real-world but not reliable at making moral judgments in thought experiments. In these situations, there are two different contexts: the proper domain (e.g., the game and the real-world) and outside the proper domain (e.g., practice and thought experiments). Being reliable in one context doesn’t entail being reliable in the other. As Machery (2011) states:<sup>6</sup>

Suppose that the judgments elicited by thought experiments and everyday judgments are underwritten by the same psychological capacities and that these psychological capacities are reliable in everyday circumstances. Even so, the judgments elicited by thought experiments in general, or perhaps by some kinds of thought experiment, might be less reliable (perhaps much less): the situations described by thought experiments might be beyond the proper domains of the relevant psychological capacities.

As it relates to moral cognition, if we take the proper domain of moral judgments to be the real-world, then judgments about moral thought experiments are occurring outside the proper contexts and, thus, judgments about moral thought experiments aren’t, or shouldn’t be, considered reliable.

### 3.2. NON-VISCERAL AND VISCERAL: DIFFERENT TYPES OF MORAL COGNITION

While I think these concerns are worth investigating,<sup>7</sup> I want to offer a defense against these criticisms by drawing attention to a distinction that might help to explain when, or in what

---

<sup>5</sup> Machery (2011), p. 201

<sup>6</sup> pp. 201-202.

<sup>7</sup> Generally, I find Machery’s (2011) argument appealing. The distinction I’m making isn’t an attempt to refute his argument. Rather, I think this distinction will help to explain under which conditions we can

kinds of cases, these kinds of concerns are appropriate. This distinction is meant to capture a range of distinctions that already appears in these criticisms. Although these distinctions are used to criticize studies of moral cognition, my aim is to highlight how these kinds of distinctions can broadly be used to better understand the contexts in which these criticisms are appropriate.

To capture these distinctions, I'll be using the terms '*visceral*' and '*non-visceral*' to refer to ends of a spectrum of moral cognition. At one end of this spectrum is what I'll be calling non-visceral moral cognition, and at the other end of the spectrum is what I'll be calling visceral moral cognition. Even though I'll be using the terms '*visceral*' and '*non-visceral*,' this distinction is just between moral cognition that is *more or less* visceral. In other words, when I use '*non-visceral*' I don't mean there is absolutely no visceral component to this kind of cognition. This term is just used to identify an instance of moral cognition that is closer to one end of the spectrum of moral cognition. The same goes for '*visceral moral cognition*': it's used to identify an instance of moral cognition that is closer to the other end of the spectrum. Instead of offering a precise, explicit definition (e.g., necessary and sufficient conditions) of either kind of moral cognition, I'll be offering a series of examples that are meant to gesture at or illustrate the difference between these types of moral cognition.

'Non-visceral moral cognition' refers to instances of moral cognition that result from problems that generally *feel* hypothetical or imaginative. This is meant to capture the kind of moral cognition that results from what Bostyn et al. refers to as '*hypothetical*' dilemmas and what Bauman et al. refer to as problems with low levels of realism. Think of these as instances where the agents or participants who are thinking through a moral problem are more removed from the problem itself. Their decisions have, or are felt to have, little-to-no impact on the problem. The kinds of moral problems that elicit this type of moral cognition are thought experiments, hypothetical moral dilemmas, or problems that don't feel as pressing, urgent, or immediate. This doesn't mean these problems aren't real problems (e.g., a problem could still exist without our feeling as intensely about it as we should). It just means that the individuals thinking through the problems don't feel *as* intensely about the issue as they would if it were occurring more closely to them. In other words, they may not be "*hypothetical*" problems, but they feel more similar to how hypothetical problems would feel.

'Visceral moral cognition' refers to instances of moral cognition that result from problems that generally *feel*, more pressing, or feel more real, to the person thinking through them. This is meant to capture the kind of moral cognition that results from what Bostyn et al. refers to as '*real*' dilemmas and what Bauman et al. refer to as problems with high levels of realism. Think of these as instances where the agent or participant who's thinking through a moral problem is more related to, or embedded in, the problem itself. Their decisions have an impact, in some way, on the problem. The kinds of moral problems that elicit this type of moral cognition are everyday moral problems, problems as they're experienced, and problems that feel pressing, urgent, or immediate.

As an illustration of the distinction between non-visceral and visceral moral cognition, I'll provide three cases of different ways of thinking about moral problems. Each case will present a moral problem and two different perspectives or ways of thinking about that moral problem.

---

infer a capacity to be generalizable. In other words, I'll be explaining two different kinds of contexts, and though Machery's argument may be correct, his criticism would only apply the generalizations *between* the two contexts - not to generalizations *within* the two contexts.

These two perspectives are meant to illustrate the distinction between non-visceral moral cognition and visceral moral cognition.

**Case 1:** Consider seeing an ad for Oxfam. In the ad there are images of children suffering from malnutrition and hunger. The moral problem being presented in this ad is the existence of malnutrition and hunger and the suffering it produces. While this problem is real, it's easy for privileged people to ignore. It's not a problem that those of us with privilege are directly confronted with on a regular basis. We can have moral judgments about these issues (e.g., this shouldn't be happening, I should do something about this, I'm going to donate, etc.), but we don't *feel* as intensely about those judgments. This is an instance of non-visceral moral cognition. While this ad includes some perceptual features (e.g., seeing images of children suffering), it's relatively low compared to seeing the problem in-person. I think that judgments about the problems presented in the ad would be stronger (i.e., they would *feel* more pressing or urgent) if the problems were being experienced or observed in the context in which they're occurring. Judgments made in the context of the problem – e.g., being confronted or having to deal with poverty and famine on a regular basis – are instances of visceral moral cognition.

**Case 2:** Imagine two different soldiers thinking about whether they should follow orders and drop a bomb on a compound that'll result in significant casualties. The only difference is that one soldier is far away and piloting a drone, while the other is close to the compound and has to manually pull a trigger to launch a bomb. It seems easier for the soldier piloting the drone to ignore any issues she may have with the commands she's been given. She can, for example, more easily imagine that she's playing a video game. This is an instance of non-visceral moral cognition. This soldier is so far removed (physically and perceptually) from the consequences of her decision that her judgments aren't as influenced by the surroundings of war. The problem is real, but the context in which this person is thinking about the problem makes it easier to feel as if it weren't as real or pressing as it is. The other soldier, however, has to think about her commands in the presence of screams, smoke, blood, bodies, explosions, etc. This is an instance of visceral moral cognition. Even though they're making the same decisions and the same consequences will result, the different contexts produce two different types of moral cognition. Where exactly both of these problems falls on the spectrum of moral cognition may differ from person-to-person, but the important point is that one, the close-soldier, is more visceral than the other. The drone pilot may still engage in a sufficiently visceral kind of moral cognition (i.e., it may be in the middle or even pushing towards the 'visceral' end of the spectrum), but the close-soldier case is engaged in a *more* visceral instance of moral cognition (e.g., regardless of how close or far the drone-case is to the visceral end of the spectrum, the close-soldier case is *closer* to the visceral end).

**Case 3:** Really think about having to make the decision present in the Trolley Problem. *Really* try to imagine yourself in that situation. This would be an instance of visceral moral cognition. These are judgments and decisions made in the

presence of uncertainty, the screams, the sound of the trolley driving on the tracks, the sight of the on-coming trolley and the people tied down, etc. The way the thought experiment is set-up, the perceptual features that would be present have been removed. There is no uncertainty, the affective/emotional response (e.g., stress and terror) that would be present in a real-world trolley problem aren't replicated, there is no urgency, and there aren't the sights, sounds, smells, etc. that would be present (e.g., the sound of the approaching trolley, the sight of people being tied down, whatever smells would be present, etc.). This is an instance of non-visceral moral cognition. Thinking about the thought experiment is an instance of non-visceral moral cognition and thinking about the real-life version is an instance of visceral moral cognition.

The aforementioned concerns regarding external validity may be better understood when considering the distinction between non-visceral and visceral moral cognition. One way of understanding the arguments from Bauman et al. (2014) and the Bostyn et al. (2018) is that non-visceral moral cognition isn't a good indicator of – i.e., can't be generalized to – visceral moral cognition. In other words, studies measuring non-visceral moral cognition are not generalizable – i.e., they have low external validity – when applied to instances of visceral moral cognition. With regards to Machery's criticism, we can understand instances of visceral moral cognition as being the proper domain of moral cognition.

This would mean that the studies mentioned in §2 could still have a high degree of external validity when applied to instances of non-visceral moral cognition. These studies may be identifying cognitive processes that are part of non-visceral moral cognition, even if these processes aren't present or as intense as they are in instances of visceral moral cognition.

#### **4. SIMILARITIES BETWEEN NON-VISCERAL MORAL COGNITION OF THOUGHT EXPERIMENTS AND NON-VISCERAL MORAL COGNITION OF STORIES**

In this section I'll explain how moral cognition of thought experiments resembles moral cognition of stories. To do this, I'll be explaining how a story from a Mvskoke medicine person can function in a manner similar to one of the thought experiments used in Greene et al.'s (2001, 2009) studies. These examples are meant to illustrate how both stories and thought experiments present situations that prompt us to think about which factors we take to be, or which factors we should take to be, morally relevant. Thus, thought experiments, like those used by Greene et al., could still tell us something about one type of moral cognition (i.e., non-visceral) that occurs outside of experimental contexts.

Storytelling undoubtedly has a variety of functions or purposes, and there are a variety of different kinds of stories (Wilson 2008; Kovach 2009; Cajete 1994 and 2016). Thought experiments likewise function in a number of different ways (e.g., in support of general philosophical theories, compare intuitions, justify premises in an argument, etc. in metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics). So I'm not trying to suggest that the thought experiments used in studies of moral cognition function like stories in every way. The analogy I want to make is that just as stories can help people be more considerate, the thought experiments used in studies of moral cognition can do the same.

By 'considerate,' I mean aware of the factors that are, or should be, relevant to a decision (or decision-making generally). Stories can help people identify what factors would (or have) affected their decision-making or what factors should affect their decision-making. With stories,

situations and decisions are presented that can prompt readers to criticize or assess (e.g., agree or disagree with) the decision-making process of the characters. They present scenarios that readers otherwise may not encounter or think about, and, by showing a character's experiences or decision-making process, illustrate how factors can affect particular decisions.

As an example of how a story can serve this purpose, please consider the following from Bear Heart (2001). In discussing Native American education, he offers the following explanation for a role of theoretical questions in providing and receiving an education<sup>8</sup>:

We didn't learn only about hunting and legends – children got a very well-rounded education from our elders. One elder sat down three of us boys who had just reached puberty and asked a theoretical question. "Suppose you were married and your wife and child were about to drown in the river. Which one would you save?"

One boy answered, "I'd save my wife."

"Why?" The elder wanted him to give a reason right there.

"The child is innocent and in its innocence it can go on. My wife and I could always have another child."

Then the elder turned to another. "What about you? Which one would you save?"

"I'd save my child."

"Why?"

"My wife and I would already have had our life together and the child needs a chance to live its life."

"What about you?"

I answered, "I love my child in a very special way and in another special way I love my wife. We might all drown together, but I'd try to save both."

None of these answers was right or wrong. What this elder was doing was teaching us how to think, set priorities, and give reasons why."

This story presents us with a variety of responses to a moral problem. The three children offered three different responses and provided justifications for their responses. As readers or listeners of this story, we can assess the children's responses in a variety of ways. We can identify whether we would've made the same decisions or the same considerations (i.e., provided the same justifications), we can see reasons why we agree or disagree with certain decisions, we can see decisions we may not have even considered, etc. In general, this story presents us with a broad set of considerations (e.g., decisions and justifications) of which we may not have been aware, and it allows us to see how certain considerations can lead to certain conclusions.

For my purposes, I'll focus on two ways that this story can help us to be more considerate. I'll be focusing on the following two factors: decisions and justifications. Using this story as an example, we can see that stories can help us see or assess which factors we find (or should find) to be morally relevant with regards to these two factors.

---

<sup>8</sup> p. 24.

Below is a table summarizing the justifications and decisions offered by each child:

	Decision	Justification
First Boy	Save wife	The child is innocent, and my wife and I could have another child
Second Boy	Save child	My wife and I have already lived a life together
Third Boy	Try to save both	I have a special love for my wife and a special love for my child

Regarding decisions, we see three different responses to the hypothetical problem. Were we asked for our decisions regarding the hypothetical problem, we may have come to one of these three decisions. However, it's possible that some of these decisions are ones we wouldn't have found on our own. This story can help us to consider decisions we may not have otherwise considered.<sup>9</sup>

The same can be said for the justifications. Stories can help us see justifications, or the rationale behind decisions, that we may not have otherwise considered. Whether it comes in the form of identifying values we wouldn't have considered or prioritizing values we already recognized, seeing the justifications that are offered can help to either identify values/reasons we haven't considered or prioritize values/reasons in a way that we hadn't considered.

With these two factors (i.e., decisions and justifications) in mind, this story allows us to consider certain inferences that we may not have otherwise considered. In other words, by seeing the justifications for each child we can see whether that same reason led to a decision. Consider the Second Boy's justification. One possible decision that could result from that justification is to save the wife. The thought could've been something like this: "My wife and I have already lived a life together, *therefore, we'd like to keep living that life together.*"<sup>10</sup> Or the Third Boy's reasoning could've been as follows: "I have a special love for my wife and a special love for my child, *so it doesn't matter which of the two I choose to save.*" These decisions were possible, but they're not the decisions the characters in this story (i.e., the boys) made. By showing us these inferences, we can see how certain considerations can lead to decisions other than the ones we may have predicted.

---

<sup>9</sup> For example, I'm ashamed of this, but the thought of trying to save both my wife and my child and probably dying in the process wouldn't have been a decision I would've even considered.

<sup>10</sup> An example of this inference can be found in episode 6 of the 5<sup>th</sup> season of the TV show *Scrubs*. In the scene a young doctor is checking-in on an older patient with whom he previously conversed. During that prior conversation he was telling her about a very invasive procedure that would, at most, buy her a few more months. She responded by saying, "Well, I've lived a great life." He assumed this meant she was choosing to forego the procedure and die. In the present conversation, the patient asks why a lawyer had asked if her affairs were in order. The doctor replies by saying that they want to make sure she's as comfortable as possible, to which she replies, "for what?" The doctor says, "this morning you told me you'd had a great life," and the patient responds, "Exactly. And I'd like to continue it!"

In this story<sup>11</sup> we see children being presented with a hypothetical problem very similar to the Trolley Problem.<sup>12</sup> The characters – the three boys and the elder – decision-making (i.e., their decisions, justifications, inferences, etc.) present us with considerations that we may not have otherwise considered. Our judgments about this story, I suggest, are best understood as instances of non-visceral moral cognition (or, closer to the non-visceral end of the spectrum of moral cognition). Though we may ask ourselves what we would do if our spouse and child were drowning, or how we would discuss this scenario with these children, we are not asked to make the decision that the children are asked to make. Nor are we even asked to judge the children’s decision-making process. Even though we aren’t asked to make any decisions in the context of the story, it seems natural to form judgments about what we would do in such a situation, as well as form judgments about the characters and their decision-making. The story presents us with things we can consider. However, we aren’t entrenched or immersed in a situation where we have to make a decision about either a drowning spouse or engaging in conversation with these children. As such, it’s easier to feel that any moral judgments that are made about the story aren’t as pressing or urgent, for example, as they would be if we were a part of the story (e.g., if we were a character in the story). We can still engage in moral cognition as a result of the story (e.g., assessing the decision-making or the children in the story), but any judgments or decisions we make are so far removed from the context of the characters in the story that it’s less likely that we’ll be engaging in visceral moral cognition. Despite this, as a story, it can still prompt us to identify considerations we find, or should find, to be morally relevant.

Thought experiments that are used in studies of moral cognition function in a similar manner. Consider being a participant and thinking through the Footbridge Case. The thought experiment presents us with a scenario where there are only two options: let five people die or push one incredibly dense person to their death. For either of these options there are a plethora of available justifications. As a participant, we’re asked to make a decision about what should be done. Thinking through the thought experiment helps us to identify factors that we may not have otherwise identified as being morally relevant.

Just as the preceding story did, this thought experiment can help us identify features of decision-making – e.g., decisions, justifications, and inferences – that we may have otherwise ignored. Again, to illustrate the similarity between stories and thought experiments I will explain how thought experiments can help us be more considerate regarding the following three factors: decisions, justifications, and inferences.

In the example of the Footbridge Case, our decisions are narrowed for us to only two options. We aren’t exposed to any other possible decisions, but by restricting the decision to these

---

<sup>11</sup> I want to be clear about how this vignette qualifies as a story. The children in the story are engaged in thinking through the hypothetical problem (i.e., who to save). For them, this is basically a thought experiment. However, it becomes a story when Bear Heart tells *us* of the children’s decisions. Notice, we – the readers of Bear Heart’s vignette – are not asked to think through the hypothetical problem. We are told of the decisions and justifications of the children who thought through the problem. Since there is no engagement on our part with the hypothetical problem (i.e., we’re not asked to think through it and explain our reasoning), it’s not presented as a thought experiment. However, we can still assess and judge the decisions and justifications of the children in the vignette. Another way of thinking about this is that in Bear Heart’s vignette the children and the elder are the characters. In thought experiments, the participants are the characters (i.e., they’re asked how they would respond, what’s their justification, etc.).

<sup>12</sup> This hypothetical problem is also similar to a thought experiment by William Godwin (1793), “The Archbishop and the Chambermaid.”

two options we are forced to prioritize one option over the other. In other words, we are forced to say that one decision is better than the other. This choice can help us to see that some decisions we may have never regarded as being morally permissible are permissible in certain situations (e.g., situations where there is only one other, horrible, decision).

Regarding justifications, given that participants have to choose which option is the morally correct or best option, in the process of making that decision they can identify which factors they are relying upon (or which factors they think they should be relying upon). In other words, to come to a conclusion about which option is better, the participants have to think through various or competing features of the problem and identify or prioritize those features as being morally relevant. They can find factors that they wouldn't have otherwise considered morally relevant (e.g., the act of pushing someone), or they can prioritize them in ways they otherwise wouldn't have (e.g., pushing someone to death is worse than letting five people die).

As it pertains to inferences, participants in thought experiments may have arrived at particular decisions before they realize the rationale behind their own decision.<sup>13</sup> Thinking through the thought experiment can help them to identify the inferences they're making. In other words, we can see how we're getting to a particular decision from a particular reason (or set of reasons).

Thought experiments can, then, similarly function as stories do regarding the ability to elicit or engage us in non-visceral moral cognition. The factors that I focused on – decisions, justifications, and inferences – highlight how thought experiments and stories can help us to be more considerate of which features we find (or should find) to be morally relevant. In both cases – stories and thought experiments – we are still engaged in a kind of moral cognition, but we're much more removed (emotionally, perceptually, physically, etc.) from the problem itself than we could be.

Whereas reading a story typically involves seeing characters make decisions and seeing the implications of those decisions, thought experiments put the participants in the role of a character.<sup>14</sup> Readers are asked to make a decision regarding the problem at hand (thereby completing the story), and, in doing so, are shown what factors they are using to make that decision. By asking participants to think through thought experiments and complete a story they are able to see what factors are affecting their decision-making. Just as they're able to see what influences a character's decisions (and the consequences of those decisions) in a story, in thought experiments they're able to see what influences *their* decisions (and reflect upon the possible consequences of those decisions). With thought experiments participants are functioning, in this regard, as characters do in stories. This means that, despite the concerns about external validity, studies of moral cognition that utilize thought experiments can still tell us something about one type of moral cognition that occurs outside of experimental settings. In other words, these studies can be generalized to instances of non-visceral moral cognition that occur outside of these experiments.

---

<sup>13</sup> This is similar to claims made by Haidt (2013) and Greene (2013). Their claim is that a surprising amount of justifications for moral judgments are *post hoc* rationalizations for emotional responses. The difference between their claim and this claim is that this claim doesn't entail that the justification is a *post hoc* rationalization. Instead, the rationalization can occur prior to the judgment, but the participant isn't aware of the justification (or components thereof).

<sup>14</sup> It may be thought that the switch between who is the "main character" in thought experiments compared to stories would have an effect on moral cognition. Wimmer et al. (2021), however, have shown that this kind of change in perspective does not have a significant impact on moral cognition.

## 5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

There are a lot of remaining questions regarding the structure of these kinds of studies. There are philosophical questions concerning what constitutes a moral problem (i.e., what distinguishes a moral problem from a non-moral problem) as well as what are the conditions for a decision to be morally correct.

There are also empirical questions concerning the relationship between less visceral and more visceral moral cognition. It's possible that engaging in less visceral moral cognition helps us develop skills or cognitive processes utilized in more visceral moral cognition, but this is an open empirical question. It's also an open empirical question whether the distinction between more and less visceral kinds of moral cognition is, or allows for, *post hoc* or *ad hoc* rationalizations of our already held moral judgments. This may suggest reason to be cautious when making or appealing to the distinction, but caution, by itself, doesn't constitute a criticism of the distinction.

The distinction between more or less visceral moral cognition seems like an intuitive distinction meant to hopefully help explain what we can understand from these studies and criticisms. By understanding the limits of these findings and criticisms we can hopefully better understand the limits and operations of moral cognition.

## REFERENCES

- Bauman, C.W., McGraw, A.P., Bartels, D.M., & Warren, C. (2014). Revisiting External Validity: Concerns about Trolley Problems and Other Sacrificial Dilemmas in Moral Psychology. *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 8 (9), 536-554.
- Bostyn, D.H., Sevenhant, S., & Roets, A. (2018). Of Mice, Men, and Trolleys: Hypothetical Judgment Versus Real-Life Behavior in Trolley-Style Moral Dilemmas. *Psychological Science*, 1-10.
- Cajete, G. (2016). *Native Science: Natural Laws of Interdependence*. Santa Fe, NM: Clear Light Publishers.
- Cajete, G. (1994). *Look to the Mountain: An Ecology of Indigenous Education*. Kivaki Press.
- Ciaramelli, E., Muccioli, M., Ladavas, E., & di Pellegrino, G. (2007). Selective Deficit in Personal Moral Judgment Following Damage to Ventromedial Prefrontal Cortex. *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience*, 2(2), 84-92.
- Cushman, F., Young, L., & Hauser, M. (2006). The Role of Conscious Reasoning and Intuition in Moral Judgment: Testing Three Principles of Harm. *Psychological Science*, 17(12), 1082-1089.
- Foot, P. (1967). The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of Double Effect. *Oxford Review*, 5, 5-15.
- Gouge, E. (2000). *Totkvo Mocvse (New Fire): Creek Folktales by Earnest Gouge* (J.B. Martin, M.M. Mauldin, and J. McGirt, Eds. & Trans.). Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Greene, J. & Haidt, J. (2002). How (and Where) Does Moral Judgment Work? *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 6(12), 517-523.

- Greene, J., Nystrom, L. E., Engell, A. D., Darley, J.M., & Cohen, J. D. (2004). The Neural Bases of Cognitive Conflict and Control in Moral Judgment. *Neuron*, 44, 389-400.
- Greene, J., Sommerville, B. R., Nystrom, L. E., Darley, J. M., & Cohen, J. D. (2001). An fMRI Investigation of Emotional Engagement in Moral Judgment. *Science*, 293, 2105-2108.
- Greene, J. (2009). Dual-Process Morality and the Personal/Impersonal Distinction: A Reply to McGuire, Langdon, Coltheart, and Mackenzie. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 45, 581-584.
- Greene, J.D., Cushman, F.A., Stewart, L.E., Lowenberg, K., Nystrom, L.E., & Cohen, J.D. (2009). Pushing Moral Buttons: The Interaction Between Personal Force and Intention in Moral Judgment. *Cognition*, 111, 364-371.
- Greene, J. (2013). *Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason, and the Gap Between Us and Them*. Penguin.
- Greene, J. (2014). The Cognitive Neuroscience of Moral Judgment and Decision-Making. In M.S. Gazzaniga (Ed.), *The Cognitive Neurosciences V*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Haidt, J. (2013). *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. Vintage.
- Hauser, M. (2006). *Moral Minders: How Nature Designed Our Universal Sense of Right and Wrong*. New York: Ecco.
- Heart, B. (1996). *The Wind is My Mother: The Life and Teachings of a Native American Shaman*. New York, NY: Berkeley Publishing Group.
- Koenigs, M., Young, L., Adolphs, R., Tranel, D., Cushman, F., Hauser, M., et al (2007). Damage to the Prefrontal Cortex Increases Utilitarian Moral Judgments. *Nature*, 446(7138), 908-911.
- Kovach, M. (2009). *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Machery, E. (2001). Thought Experiments and Philosophical Knowledge. *Metaphilosophy*, 42(3), 191-214.
- McGuire, J., Langdon, R., Coltheart, M., & Mackenzie, C. (2009). A Reanalysis of the Personal/Impersonal Distinction in Moral Psychology Research. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 45, 577-580.
- Mendez, M.F., Anderson, E., & Shapira, J.S. (2005). An Investigation of Moral Judgment in Frontotemporal Demetia. *Cognitive and Behavioral Neurology*, 18(4), 193-197.
- Mikhail, J. (2000). Rawls' Linguistic Analogy: A Study of the "Generative Grammar" Model of Moral Theory Described by John Rawls in a Theory of Justice, unpublished doctoral dissertation. Cornell University.

- Mikhail, J. (2007). Universal Moral Grammar: Theory, Evidence and the Future. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 11(4), 143-152.
- Moll, J., Eslinger, P.J., & de Oliveira-Souza, R. (2001). Frontopolar and Anterior Temporal Cortex Activation in a Moral Judgment Task: Preliminary Functional MRI Results in Normal Subjects. *Arq. Neuropsiquiatr.*, 59, 657-664.
- Moore, A., Clark, B., & Kane, M. (2008). Who Shalt Not Kill? Individual Differences in Working Memory Capacity, Executive Control, and Moral Judgment. *Psychological Science*, 19(6), 549-557.
- Parkinson, C. Sinnott-Armstrong, W., Koralus, P.E., Mendelovici, A., McGeer, V., & Wheatley, T. (2011). Is Morality Unified? Evidence that Distinct Neural Systems Underlie Moral Judgments of Harm, Dishonesty, and Disgust. *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*, 23(1), 3162-3180.
- Petrinovich, L., O'Neill, P., & Jorgense, M. (1993). An Empirical Study of Moral Intuitions: Toward an Evolutionary Ethics. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 64, 467-478.
- Royzman, E.b., & Baron, J. (2002). The Preference for Indirect Harm. *Social Justice Research*, 15, 165-184.
- Schaich Borg, J., Hynes, C., Van Horn, J., Grafton, S., & Sinnott-Armstrong, W. (2006). Consequences, Action, and Intention as Factors in Moral Judgments: An fMRI Investigation. *Journal of Cognitive Neuroscience*, 18(5), 803-817.
- Thomson, J. J. (1976). Killing, Letting Die, and the Trolley Problem. *The Monist*, 59, 204-217.
- Valdesolo, P., & DeSteno, D. (2006). Manipulations of Emotional Context Shape Moral Judgment. *Psychological Science*, 17(6), 476-477.
- Waldmann, M.R., & Dieterich, J.H. (2007). Throwing a Bomb on a Person Versus Throwing a Person on a Bomb: Intervention Myopia in Moral Intuitions. *Psychological Science*, 18(3), 247-253.
- Wilson, S. (2008). *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. Halifax, NS: Fernwood.
- Wimmer, L., Friend, S., Currie, G., & Ferguson, H.J. (2021). Reading Fictional Narratives to Improve Social and Moral Cognition: The Influence of Narrative Perspective, Transportation, and Identification. *Front. Commun.* 5: 611935.
- Wood, K. (2016). *Weaving the Boundary*. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press.
- Young, L. & Dungan, J. (2012). Where in the Brain is Morality? Everywhere and Maybe Nowhere. *Social Neuroscience*, 7(1), 1-10.

# DECOLONIZING THE DEMARCATION OF THE ETHICAL

“We were the land before we were people,  
loamy roamers rising, so the stories go,  
or formed of clay, spit into with breath reeking soul—”

Heid E. Erdrich, “The Theft Outright,” *National Monuments* (pp.31-32)

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Consider the following brief story:

**Sally and the Beavers:** Sally lives near a small lake. Over the past few months there’s been a lot of rain causing water levels to rise in nearby lakes, rivers, and creeks. Additionally, a colony of beavers have built a nearby dam causing water levels in the lake to rise more quickly and higher than previously experienced. If the water in the lake rises much higher, Sally’s home will flood. Sally can’t stop the rain, and she can’t move her home. She can however do something about the beaver dam. She considers destroying the beavers’ dam, but she’s unsure if this is the appropriate response.

In this story, it seems that Sally is facing a moral problem (e.g., what should she do about the beavers?).<sup>15</sup> However, what is it about this situation that makes it moral? Is it, in fact, a moral problem? Not all problems are moral problems: there has to be some feature(s) that separates moral problems from non-moral problems. Is it a moral problem partly because it’s a problem that a human (Sally) faces? Is it a moral problem because there’s concern about the beavers? Is it perhaps not a moral problem at all, and any intuitions pushing us to consider it as a moral problem are mistaken?

The question of what distinguishes moral problems is important to the study of the evolution and functioning of morality. Many researchers concerned with this topic have assumed, either implicitly or explicitly, that all moral problems are problems of *cooperation*. This assumption offers a response to the *moral demarcation problem* by identifying a necessary condition of moral problems.

Characterizing moral problems as problems of cooperation is a popular response to this issue – especially amongst researchers empirically studying the beginnings and limits of moral psychology. However, demarcating the moral in this way severely restricts the domain of moral problems, and it implausibly suggests that an individual’s moral status determines which relationships are morally relevant.

In what follows I will argue that understanding moral problems as problems of cooperation is too restrictive and that an individual’s moral status shouldn’t determine whether or which of their relationships are morally relevant. I will then offer an alternative way of demarcating moral from non-moral problems. Characterizing what makes a problem moral in terms of cooperation excludes a variety of problems that are ordinarily understood and

---

<sup>15</sup> For an occurrence of the problem presented in this story, see news reports like the following: <https://www.newschannel5.com/news/beaver-dam-causes-flooding-concerns-in-hendersonville>.

responded to as moral, and has a problematic characterization of morally relevant relationships. The alternative characterization that I propose is based on the American Indian/Native American concept of harmony. Using the concept of cooperation to demarcate the moral removes moral agents from their surroundings or contexts by assuming moral agency applies only to humans or other similarly evolved lifeforms. In contrast, using the concept of harmony allows for moral consideration to be granted to non-humans as well (e.g., non-human animals, plant life, ecosystems, etc.), thereby expanding the domain of the moral. And, it doesn't suggest that an individual's moral status determines which relationships are morally relevant.

## 2. USING THE CONCEPT OF COOPERATION TO DELINEATE MORAL PROBLEMS

Empirical approaches to studying ethics usually focus on scenarios that are assumed to pose moral problems. To study things like moral cognition or the evolution of morality, participants are usually presented with putatively moral problems. Their responses to those problems are then used as evidence about either the moral decision-making of the participants or about the nature of morality. In both cases, *moral* problems have come to be seen as social problems, or, problems of cooperation.

For the purposes of this paper, I'm not interested in the structures or details of these studies. Instead, I'm interested in the underlying assumptions about what constitutes "the moral" as a distinct domain of study. Within most of these studies, there seems to be agreement that morality is best understood as a set of adaptive traits that evolved for the purposes of promoting cooperation and social cohesion. In this, moral problems are characterized as problems of cooperation.

For example, in an attempt "to provide an evolutionary account of the emergence of human morality," Michael Tomasello (2016) claims, "[w]e proceed from the assumption that human morality is a form of cooperation, specifically, the form that has emerged as humans have adapted to new and species-unique forms of social interaction and organization" (p. 2).

Frans de Waal (2006) similarly understands morality as necessarily involving interactions with other primates.

[T]he moral domain of action is Helping or (not) Hurting others... Anything unrelated to the two H's falls outside of morality. Those who invoke morality in reference to, say, same-sex marriage or the visibility of a naked breast on prime-time television are merely trying to couch social conventions in moral language (p. 162).

de Waal's understanding stems from his observations of social interactions amongst non-human primates and the similarities to social interactions amongst humans. Since primates also face cooperative problems and demonstrate adaptive behaviors to address those problems, their adaptive traits can be seen as a kind of precursor to morality. Moral problems are those problems that involve either helping or hurting others, whereas not all social conventions involve helping or hurting others. While some social issues may be seen as "moral" problems, they're not, in de Waal's view, within the domain of morality because they don't involve interactions with others.

Other researchers have been more inclusive regarding their understanding of morality. Jonathan Haidt (2012) understands morality as follows: "Moral systems are interlocking sets of values, virtues, norms, practices, identities, technologies, and evolved psychological mechanisms that work together to suppress or regulate self-interest and make cooperative societies possible"

(p. 314). Joshua Greene (2013), in explaining what is required for us to understand morality, states, “[f]irst, we must understand the structure of modern moral problems and how they differ from the problems that our brains evolved to solve” (p. 14). He goes on to say, “morality evolved as a device for intergroup competition” (p. 25). Although, “much of morality appears to be unrelated to intergroup competition... moral thinking can be related to intergroup competition in ways that are indirect and not at all obvious” (*ibid*).

Nicholas Smyth (2017) draws attention to some similar claims in other writers:

Why do we have moral values? The obvious answer is that morality emerged as a system of rules for getting people to function collectively in stable and productive ways. We have morality to build a coherent social group. Moral values lead us to cooperate and prevent us from harming members of communities (Prinz 2007, p. 32).

[T]he evolutionary function of moral judgments...is *interpersonal coordination*. Roughly, moral judgments are the products of a mechanism that allows groups of interacting individuals to co-ordinate their actions and emotions for mutual benefit. The function of the moral habit is therefore to produce mutually beneficial co-operative patterns of action and emotion (Sinclair 2012, p. 14).

Moral thinking has a function, I have argued—both evolutionarily and contemporarily.... The *moralization* of our practical lives contributes to the satisfaction of our long-term interests and makes for more effective collective negotiation by supplying license for punishment, justification for likes and dislikes, and bonding individuals in a shared framework of decision-making (Joyce 2006, p. 208).

These claims, though varying slightly in context and use, all promote the idea that moral behaviors and moral processes are essentially for problems of cooperation. This presupposes that morality is a solution to a problem and not an activity that we just happen to partake in.

### **3. THE MORAL DEMARCATION PROBLEM: PROBLEMS WITH THE COOPERATIVE DEMARCATION**

Any attempt to delineate moral problems from non-moral problems has to avoid either *excluding* too many seemingly intuitive moral problems or *including* too many intuitively non-moral problems as being moral. This concern about the scope of uniquely moral problems can be understood as the definition either being too wide (inclusive) or too narrow (exclusive).

As an example, consider, the view that moral problems are distinguished from non-moral problems using the concept of practical rationality. Anything that requires the use of practical rationality would constitute a moral problem, and all other problems that don't involve practical rationality would be non-moral problems. This would seem to be too wide a definition because now things like finding my favorite Minnesota Timberwolves jersey when I'm in a hurry become a moral problem. On the other hand, consider the view that moral problems are distinguished from non-moral problems using the concept of family. Any problems that exist between family members would constitute a moral problem, and all other problems that don't exist between family members would be non-moral problems. This definition, it seems, may be too narrow

because now things like disputes with anyone not considered family would not be moral problems.

Using the concept of cooperation to demarcate moral problems is too restrictive. It excludes too many problems that we intuitively consider to be moral problems.<sup>16</sup> There are some potential ways around this concern. A theorist could bite-the-bullet and deny that many problems that are intuitively characterized as moral really are moral. This is what de Waal (2006) does. Or a theorist could explain why problems that do not fit the cooperation description are only apparently ruled out but not really. This is what Greene (2013) does. For example, de Waal (2006) argues that any problem not involving helping or hurting others was simply not a moral problem. In contrast, Greene (2013) argues that intuitive moral problems that didn't seem to directly or obviously involve cooperation could still be related to cooperation in ways that weren't direct or obvious.

Both responses are unappealing. Simply excluding cases severely restricts the moral domain. For researchers studying empirical aspects of morality this is problematic since the hope is (partly) to understand how people process *moral* problems. If our set of problems used to assess how people process moral problems excludes some moral problems, then our understanding of how people process moral problems will be either incomplete or misguided. Including cases in the way Greene does threatens to be *ad hoc*, and there's still the concern that researchers studying the empirical aspects of morality aren't able to completely or appropriately understand how people process *moral* problems.

Consider, for example, the question of whether someone should eat meat. Understanding moral problems as cooperative problems doesn't allow this to be a moral problem. Since most non-human animals can't cooperate with humans, there is no problem of cooperation between humans and non-human animals. It may be reasonable to conclude or presume that eating meat is morally permissible; however, it seems unintuitive to outright dismiss it as not even being a moral concern, as de Waal's view would seem to imply. Understanding moral problems as cooperative problems may allow for some moral reasons to avoid eating meat, e.g., health concerns and environmental impact. But, if the moral domain is restricted to exclude non-cooperative problems, it doesn't acknowledge concern *for the non-human animals* as a legitimate reason to not eat meat. On an approach like Greene's, any moral reason that there would be to not eat meat has to be tied to how eating meat would affect other humans (or beings with which we can cooperate). Yet this seems implausible.

### 3.1 TWO PROBLEMS WITH COOPERATION

There are two related problems with using cooperation to demarcate moral from non-moral problems. First, since cooperation requires a particular conception of agency, moral problems can only occur between agents. In other words, understanding moral problems as cooperative problems (too narrowly) restricts moral problems to occurring *only* between agents. Second, the conception of agency that is required for cooperation implausibly suggests conceiving of an individual as existing prior to morally relevant relationships. This precludes moral problems from occurring between an individual and their environment.

---

<sup>16</sup> Nicholas Smyth (2017) has recently criticized these ways of understanding the function of morality. While I find his criticism convincing, my concerns are separate from his, and I will be providing an alternative way of demarcating moral from non-moral problems.

### 3.1.1 THE FIRST PROBLEM: COOPERATION REQUIRES AGENCY

As most people who define moral problems as cooperative problems have seemed to assume, cooperation necessarily involves agency. I will use the term ‘agency’ in this sense (the sense that it’s required for cooperation) to refer to a set of capacities and circumstances necessary for decision-making.<sup>17</sup> A being is not able to cooperate if it’s not able to make decisions. This sense of ‘agency’ can be understood to have at least two components. First, agency requires some internal traits, features, or properties possessed by an individual or subject. In other words, the capacity for decision-making lies within the subject or individual. I will refer to this component of agency as ‘the internal component.’ Second, agency requires the external factors in a subject’s or individual’s environment to allow them to act on their decisions, and thereby form morally relevant relationships. In other words, the circumstances for decision-making lie outside of the subject or individual. I will refer to this component of agency as ‘the external component.’ When I use the term ‘agency’ it means the conjunction of both internal and external components. In other words, for an individual to have complete agency they need to have both internal and external components. When I’m referring to specifically the internal or external components I will specify.

Consider the following example referencing Sally and the Beaver to illustrate the distinction between the internal and external components. Imagine Sally, a human, who is typically and otherwise capable of making decisions and acting of her own accord in a variety of circumstances. In most situations, we can consider Sally to be an agent because she possesses the requisite capacities necessary to make decisions. Whatever those capacities may be, we could think of them as traits possessed by an individual (e.g., the ability to reason, to listen, to communicate, etc.). This serves as an example of Sally having the internal component of agency. Some other being, say, the Beaver, doesn’t possess those traits, and is therefore lacking the internal component. However, imagine Sally is removed from her home (like she’s contemplating doing to the Beaver) by an alien race. She’s transported to another habitable planet, but one unfamiliar to her where most of her knowledge (which is about earth) doesn’t apply. There are new species of animals, new climates, new vegetation, and new animate and inanimate objects that surround her. Everything is new. Her capacities haven’t changed – she hasn’t undergone any psychological or physical changes, and she’d still be able to exercise her capacities under the right circumstances. However, her ability to act on decisions and form morally relevant relationships on this planet seems compromised (if not non-existent) given that she can’t exercise her internal decision-making capacities (e.g., reason, listen, communicate, etc.).

We could consider whatever traits Sally has as being useless with regards to decision-making and relationship-forming if Sally is in an environment where she’s unable to exercise her decision-making capacities. If there’s nothing to listen to or communicate with in her environment, if she doesn’t know her surroundings well enough to reason about them, then she won’t be able to form morally relevant relationships and make decisions about how to interact with her surroundings. Evaluating Sally as an agent on this new planet would be like evaluating the beavers as agents by assessing their abilities to live as a human. The environment of the

---

<sup>17</sup> I am not making any claims or assumptions about the relationship between agency and moral responsibility. In other words, when I use the word ‘agency’ I am not assuming or referencing anything specific regarding moral praise or blame.

individual being evaluated seems to matter when ascribing agency. This means that it's not just the presence of a set of traits internal to Sally that are required to make decisions – the environment that individual finds themselves in also contributes to the ascription of agency. On earth Sally was able to act on her decisions and form morally relevant relationships because her capacities were suited to her surroundings. In other words, her environment was the kind of environment that allowed her to have the external components of agency. On this new planet, however, Sally is lacking the external component.

As this relates to cooperation, it seems like cooperating requires the ability to make decisions (i.e., cooperation requires agency). And, the ability to act on decisions and form morally relevant relationships seems to result from a subject's surroundings – not *just* the capacities they possess. That is, an external component, as well as an internal component, seems required for cooperation. So, cooperation requires the subject to have the right kind of capacities and the right kind of surroundings or environment (whatever those may be). And, as this example and explanation illustrate, regardless of whether we're considering the internal or external components, a lack of agency precludes cooperation. You can't cooperate without the internal and external components. Sally can't cooperate with alien life forms if she doesn't have or can't exercise the requisite abilities. Hence, she is unable to enter into morally relevant relationships.

Cooperation requires not only agency, but other agents as well. You can't cooperate by yourself, nor can you cooperate with other subjects or individuals who are incapable of cooperating (i.e., incapable of making decisions).

This can be briefly illustrated by considering another conceptual connection – this time between cooperation and consent. Cooperation requires consent.<sup>18</sup> Without consent, any interaction between agents seems like straight-up coercion (in some form or other). Any interaction between an agent and a non-agent (i.e., something lacking the ability to make decisions) doesn't seem to qualify as 'cooperation' because it would just be one individual exercising their agency over another (non-agential) individual. There's nothing the non-agent is doing, or has to do, to cooperate. While the ability to consent (like the ability to make decisions) may involve a plethora of abilities that some beings don't possess (e.g., the ability to reason, understanding language, communicate, etc.), it also seems to require the right kind of environment.<sup>19</sup> If you hold a gun to my head and I agree to give you my family's land, I am certainly not consenting in any genuine, legitimate, or meaningful way to this transaction. I'm in a situation where I'm being coerced. And, with your gun to my head, my giving you our family's land doesn't seem to be some form of genuine, legitimate, or meaningful cooperation.

As this illustrates, cooperation requires consent, and consent requires at least two agents. So, cooperation requires at least two agents. Since cooperation requires agency, and necessarily involves at least two agents, cooperation can only occur *between* agents. If there's only one agent, there's no cooperation, and since trees, water, ecosystems, a lot of non-human animals, etc. are not agents (as previously defined), then there can be no cooperation between these entities and humans. This excludes problems concerning our treatment of the earth and non-human animals from being moral problems.

If moral problems only occur between agents, the role of non-agents in the existence of moral problems is severely limited (if not non-existent). Non-agents can't have moral problems

---

<sup>18</sup> I will use 'consent' to refer to explicit or implicit consent. At most, genuine, sincere, or legitimate *implicit* consent is required. Assuming people can mistakenly presume there's implicit consent, it's not the presumption of implicit consent that matters – it's whether the consent is *actually* implied.

<sup>19</sup> Another way of thinking about this is that cooperation requires consent, and consent requires agency.

because they can't engage in cooperation. And while this may capture *some* non-American Indian/Native American or euro-centric intuitive notions about the limits of moral problems (e.g., moral problems don't exist between a beaver and a tree), it should be questioned whether it's better for *these* intuitions, rather than more American Indian/Native American or non-euro-centric intuitions, to be justified or given priority.<sup>20</sup>

### 3.1.2 THE SECOND PROBLEM: AGENCY AND MORALLY RELEVANT RELATIONSHIPS

As has been stated, using the concept of cooperation to delineate moral problems restricts the moral domain to problems that occur between agents. This results from cooperation requiring agency as conceived of as the ability to make decisions. In §3.1.1 I articulated and explained why this particular conception of agency is required for cooperation to occur, and I explained how this requirement too narrowly restricts the moral domain. In this section I will offer an additional explanation for why this conception of agency is problematic. And, since cooperation requires this conception of agency, cooperation is problematic as a means of demarcating moral from non-moral problems.

Using the concept of cooperation for demarcating moral and non-moral problems is additionally problematic because it suggests that we can conceive of an individual as separate from their environment (i.e., their surroundings, situations, contexts, circumstances, etc.), and hence from their morally relevant relationships. Conceiving of an individual this way is akin to a kind of theoretical colonization. Just like colonization involves removing Indigenous peoples from their land and the attempt to eradicate Indigenous cultures, using concepts like cooperation to demarcate moral from non-moral problems involves conceiving of an individual as separable from their environment and, thereby, eradicating that individual's practices and beliefs that result from their connection with their environment.

As was mentioned earlier, cooperation requires agency, and agency requires internal and external components. The internal component is a set of capacities possessed by an individual. It's a feature or property that applies to individuals – not one that identifies a relationship. As agency is understood as a requirement for cooperation, it's a *precursor* to morally relevant relationships.<sup>21</sup>

Morality, according to the cooperative conception, only exists because agents face cooperative problems. In order to engage in cooperative behavior, both individuals require some set of capacities to engage in that cooperative behavior (i.e., the internal component). Since the internal component is a property or feature of *individuals*, both individuals require these

---

<sup>20</sup> I will not be making this argument here, but I'm not ruling out that moral problems can exist between a beaver and a tree. On some accounts of what constitutes a *moral* problem, this may qualify, and I don't think these kinds of situations should be automatically dismissed as not constituting a moral problem.

<sup>21</sup> Peter Singer (2010) makes a similar point when discussing the evolution of morality. He points out that we have good reason to think that our moral capacities are rooted in biological propensities that we inherited from our pre-human ancestors. As a result, social contract theories, like those of Thomas Hobbes (1651/1994), are mistaken in thinking that morality developed out of our cooperation with others. "It is not the force of the state that persuades us to act ethically. The state, or some other form of social power, may reinforce our tendency to observe an ethical code, but that tendency exists before the social power is established" (p. 24).

capacities before they can cooperate. It's not a feature that results from relationships.<sup>22</sup> In the same way that 'brown hair' is a feature of an individual (it either applies or doesn't apply to any particular individual), the internal component either applies or doesn't apply to particular individuals. This can be contrasted with a feature that only applies to relationships, such as 'lives with.' For 'lives with' to apply to a particular individual there needs to be at least one other individual to whom it applies.

Consider Sally and the Beaver from earlier. 'Brown hair,' as an individual feature, is something that can apply to both Sally and the Beaver. However, for 'lives with' to apply to Sally or the Beaver, there has to be another individual to whom it applies for it to be true or false that Sally or the Beaver *lives with* that particular individual. For instance, if I'm evaluating whether it's true or false that Sally lives with the Beaver, there have to be two individuals present: Sally and the Beaver. My assessment of, 'Sally lives with the Beaver,' is determined to be true or false by considering *the relationship* between Sally and the Beaver (e.g., whether they are or aren't living together) – not by considering *individual* traits of Sally and *individual* traits of the Beaver.<sup>23</sup>

Using the distinction between the internal and external components mentioned in §3.1.1, 'agency,' as required for cooperation, requires an internal component. Although the cooperative definition requires the external component, I want to point out that it *also* requires the internal component. The requirement of the internal component is a problem with the cooperative definition. In order to identify external and internal components, these two components need to be thought of as separable. An individual is conceived of without reference to an environment, and an environment is only conducive to individuals with particular traits.

Agency may exist as a result of our need for cooperative relationships (thus making it so that the cooperative definition requires the external component); however, it doesn't exist solely as a result of our first having cooperative relationships. The internal component doesn't exist as a result of having cooperative relationships – it occurs prior to, or is required for, these relationships. It results from our *need* for these kinds of relationships. The internal component may have evolved *as a means* of cooperating – i.e., it may have evolved because of a *need for* cooperation. However, even if this is true, it's still a feature of *individuals* as opposed to being an identifying feature of *relationships*. If the internal component is a trait that applies to individuals prior to morally relevant relationships (i.e., prior to an ability to cooperate), then it doesn't exist as a result of existing relationships. Or, in other words, morally relevant relationships only exist when they occur between agents (i.e., morally relevant relationships can only be had *between* agents). This conception of an individual as somehow theoretically separable from their environment – void of any connection to their surroundings – precludes moral problems from occurring between an individual and their environment. And this implausibly suggests that an individual's moral status determines which relationships are morally relevant and excludes

---

<sup>22</sup> As was stated earlier, the cooperative definition requires *both* internal and external components. However, even if this weren't the case, the point I'm making is that the cooperative definition *at least* requires the internal component. If it requires the internal component, then agency isn't only a feature of external factors (i.e., relationships).

<sup>23</sup> Another way of stating this is to say that the internal component is a one-place predicate instead of a multi-place predicate like 'between' or 'lives with.' In the same way that 'brown hair' is a predicate of an individual, the internal component applies to individuals. 'Agency,' as required for cooperation, is a conjunction of a one-place predicate (the internal component) and a multi-place predicate (the external component).

problems between agents and non-agents (e.g., non-human animals and the earth) from being moral problems.

### 3.2 SUMMARY

Cooperation requires agency and can only occur between at least two agents. As such, if moral problems are cooperative problems, moral problems are restricted to only existing between agents.

Agency, as conceived as being necessary for cooperation, is taken to require individuals to possess a particular set of properties or features. In other words, cooperation requires the internal component of agency. Since moral problems only occur between agents, they, as opposed to non-agents, have to possess a feature or property (or set thereof) that non-agents lack. This makes agency presuppose that individuals are separated from their environment and relationships. To have a morally relevant relationship there needs to be cooperation, and cooperation requires more than one agent. Therefore, morally relevant relationships require more than one agent.

Since agency is required for morally relevant relationships, it's something that must be possessed by an individual before that individual can have any relationships wherein moral problems exist. This conception of individuals, as existing apart from or somehow separable from their environments, though related, is a separate problem from the problem concerning the restrictive scope of moral problems (i.e., the moral domain). Conceiving of individuals as separable from their environments incorrectly identifies who and why some individuals are morally relevant while requiring the internal component of agency leads to moral problems only occurring between agents, thereby making the moral domain too restrictive.

### 4. USING THE CONCEPT OF *HARMONY* TO DELINEATE MORAL PROBLEMS

There is another way of understanding moral problems that doesn't require us to restrict the moral domain as cooperation does. In elaborating this alternative, I am not suggesting that it should be adopted by empirical researchers. Rather, I am pointing out that the answer to the moral demarcation problem adopted by many empirical researchers prevents them from directly considering some important parts of morality. In contrast, using the concept of "harmony" to demarcate moral problems not only allows many problems that are widely accepted as moral ones to appear as such, but it also better explains what makes some relationships morally relevant.

Instead of moral problems being understood as cooperative problems, moral problems can be understood as problems of promoting or maintaining balance (Arden and Wall 1990, p. 97; Beck and Walters 1977, p. 15). When this balance exists, there can be said to be harmony. When an imbalance exists, then there is a moral problem. Or, in other words, a problem in *need* of solving. How this balance or equilibrium is metaphysically understood isn't important for this contrast, and I won't provide a detailed account here.<sup>24</sup> The main idea is that there is some natural feature or property that is in constant motion that is shared amongst all things. Acts effect how this property is distributed, and an act or omission is bad if it further promotes imbalance, thereby

---

<sup>24</sup> For a fuller explanation of the relationship between the concept of harmony and morality see my (forthcoming) example using the Muscogee (Creek) understanding of harmony.

creating disharmony, and acts are good if they promote or restore balance, thereby bringing about harmony.<sup>25</sup> There may be a variety of conceptions of harmony, but it's a common concept in American Indian/Native American ethics.<sup>26</sup>

Before proceeding, I'd like to explain why this is an American Indian/Native American concept. Harmony is relation-dependent and can be used to refer to relationships between agents and non-agents. Given the importance that American Indians place on our relationships to the land and non-human animals, harmony is better suited to give these beings moral consideration. As Viola Cordova (2007) states:

The universe of the Native American is based on the concept of Harmony. This leads to the idea that man, a part of that universe, must adapt himself to and be responsible for the continuing harmony he sees about him... Harmony, evidenced in the benefits of cooperation with his group and in man's ability to adapt to changing circumstances in his environment (the seasons and the change of lifestyles required year in and year out), is in his eyes the right behavior (p. 123).

Whether these beings have moral consideration *because* of the emphasis on harmony, or the emphasis on harmony results *from* these beings having moral consideration, the concept of harmony allows for moral consideration to apply in ways that are important for American Indian/Native American lifestyles and worldviews.

Balance and the promotion of harmony are emphasized because of the interconnectedness of all things, and, given this interconnectedness, balance and living with your surroundings was necessary as a means of survival (Arden and Wall 1990, pp. 66-67; Beck and Walters 1977, p. 13 and p. 25; Cordova 2004; Cordova 2007, pp. 113-116, pp. 183-185, and pp. 212-213; Farrer 1991, pp. 29-32).

Together with the knowledge that everything is dependent upon everything else comes a respect which borders on fear. We are all related and therefore must be constantly aware of how our actions will affect others, whether they are plants, animals, people, or streams (Beck and Walters 1977, p. 12)

Bringing about balance means reciprocating with other living beings (Cordova 2007, pp. 113-116), and appropriately reciprocating requires detailed knowledge about those beings and our relationships with those beings.

The important thing with these conceptions is that harmony is a relational property. Harmony is something that applies to relationships instead of applying to individuals. An individual can't be in harmony if there's not something to be in harmony with.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> A further explanation of this idea can be found in Jean and Joyotpaul Chaudhuri's (2001) *A Sacred Path: The Way of the Muscogee Creeks*.

<sup>26</sup> As an example of how central the concept of harmony is in American Indian/Native American philosophy, see John DuFour's (2004) argument about how harmony grounds epistemological practices, and chapter 2 of Claire R. Farrer's (1991) *Living Life's Circle: Mescalero Apache Cosmology*.

<sup>27</sup> This doesn't eliminate the possibility of there being internal harmony. Someone saying, "I'm in harmony" can be understood as still referencing a relationship between *parts* of their being (e.g., the functioning of their internal organs, their beliefs and actions being aligned, etc.). The point is that a

As it pertains to the moral demarcation problem, moral problems are those problems that result from an existing imbalance. When an imbalance exists, there's disharmony. In other words, there is a moral problem when there's disharmony. Any problem that isn't the result from some imbalance isn't a moral problem. For example, climate change or factory farming are moral problems if they create imbalances. Something like not being able to find your favorite Minnesota Timberwolves jersey when you're in a hurry isn't a moral problem if it doesn't create an imbalance. However, there may not be a standard that makes it such that certain problems are *always* moral problems. Climate change and factory farming aren't moral problems *if they don't create an imbalance*. Not being able to find your favorite Minnesota Timberwolves jersey can be a moral problem, *if it creates an imbalance*.

As was stated in §3.1.2, a problem with conceiving of moral problems as cooperative problems is that it removes an individual from their context or surroundings by conceiving of an individual as isolated or separable from their environment (this was the result of cooperation requiring the internal component). Understanding moral problems as problems of promoting or maintaining harmony doesn't create this problem. Imbalances and inequalities can exist between agents and non-agents.

Understanding moral problems as problems of promoting or maintaining harmony can avoid conceiving or removing an individual from their environment. This is because, on this understanding, agency isn't required for there to be morally relevant relationships and can instead result from those relationships.

We have no reason to assume that the internal component is required for moral problems to occur if we stop assuming that agency is necessary for morally relevant relationships. It may just be the case that some relationships are necessary for agency, and those relationships that are necessary for agency are *morally relevant* relationships. In other words, agency exists as a result of our morally relevant relationships – our morally relevant relationships don't exist as a result of our having agency. Harmony, as defined, doesn't assume that agency is necessary for morally relevant relationships. As such, harmony doesn't require the internal component. It may still require the existence of the external component,<sup>28</sup> but if it does, it doesn't require the existence of

---

relationship is still being referenced instead of just an individual (e.g., an individual internal organ, or an isolated or individual belief or action, etc.). For example, eating can be a way of restoring balance and bringing someone back into harmony. This is because eating is a way of restoring, or providing, the body with energy and nutrients so that a person can function in accordance with their desires. What it means to be in harmony in these kinds of instances, however, is that there is now a balance between desires and the ability to act on those desires (or some other relationship). Another example of internal harmony can be found in Plato's discussion of the parts of the soul in book IV of *Republic*. Thank you to Colin Marshall and James Maffie for these examples.

<sup>28</sup> I won't be making the argument here, but it's possible that agency is primarily a feature of an individual's surroundings. That would mean we can conceive of the external component (i.e., one's surroundings) as being an enabling condition for decision-making. A beaver in the right environment, might have the capacity to make decisions. This would require surroundings or an environment *vastly* different from ours, but I'm not convinced it's inconceivable. If this is possible, agency may not require any particular internal component, and instead could primarily be the result of how one's surroundings enable whatever abilities or properties an individual may possess. Harmony, then, may still be compatible with agency, but agency is understood as result from external features (i.e., one's surroundings).

the external component as a necessary condition for morally relevant relationships.<sup>29</sup> However, the external component aside, as was stated in §3.1.2, one of the problems with the cooperative definition of moral problems is that it requires the internal component. It may also require the external component, but it's the additional requirement of the internal component that restricts moral problems to only occurring between agents.

Using harmony to demarcate moral from non-moral problems doesn't require the internal component because morally relevant individuals are conceived of as existing as a result of morally relevant relationships. There are no individuals that exist without some sort of relationship (Cordova 2007, pp. 183-185; Miller (forthcoming)). Whether that relationship is to other humans, non-human animals, or the earth, the relationship is necessary for the existence of the individual because each individual exists in some surrounding, and, as such, has some relationship with that surrounding. This can be highlighted by Onondaga Clan Mother Audrey Shenandoah when she states:

There is no word for "nature" in my language. Nature, in English, seems to refer to that which is separate from human beings. It is a distinction we don't recognize. The closest words to the idea of "nature" translate to refer to things which support life (Arden and Wall 1990, p.26).

Individuals may be morally relevant because of their relationships with their environments, but they don't require some set of decision-making capacities to have those relationships.

Consider, again, the earlier example of Sally and the Beaver. Using the cooperative conception of agency, Sally is *first* an agent, and her agency allows her to have morally relevant relationships. The relationships exist *because* of the existence of agency. If those relationships are with other agents, then there can be cooperation. However, Sally can't cooperate with the beavers because the beavers are not agents. Sally can *use* the beavers, but, since the beavers don't have the requisite internal features, Sally can't *cooperate* with the Beaver. As such, no moral problems exist between Sally and the beavers. However, the internal component isn't required if we conceive of relationships as antecedent, necessary conditions for agency. Sally and the Beaver *first* have a relationship. *Then*, this relationship *may be* the kind of relationship that provides Sally (and perhaps the beavers) with agency.<sup>30</sup> Agency exists *because* of the existence of relationships like this.

---

<sup>29</sup> Harmony may require the external component for other reasons (e.g., assessing guilt, blame, praise, etc.), but the point here is that it doesn't require the external component *as a pre-condition* for morally relevant relationships. It's not as if you first have the external component, then, as a result of this, you are able to develop morally relevant relationships (with some factor other than the external component determining what makes the relationship morally relevant). This would still seem to imply that decision-making (i.e., agency) is relevant for moral status. Instead, the relationships that provide you with the external component are the morally relevant relationships.

<sup>30</sup> Not all relationships have to grant agency. Having agency in some relationships (those with my friends and romantic partners) doesn't entail that there's agency in other relationships (those with your boss or police or some other authoritative figures). If someone's in a relationship where they are unable to make decisions (because they're not in a position of power), then that relationship isn't conducive to that person having agency.

Nothing about the cooperative definition precludes conceiving of agents as having a relationship with their environment or non-human animals (i.e., non-agents). However, they can't cooperate with these individuals. Therefore, those relationships with non-agents aren't, by themselves, morally relevant. However, conceiving of morally relevant relationships as more than just relationships between agents will change the moral importance of agency.<sup>31</sup> If morally relevant relationships can exist between an individual with the internal component and an individual without the internal component, then relationships *may* only require one individual with the internal component to be morally relevant. Or, agency *may* not be required at all – meaning, morally relevant relationships could exist between individuals without the internal component.

## 5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper I have argued that the cooperative demarcation of moral problems faces two challenges. First, it requires the internal component of agency, and, second, it assumes that moral agency is prior to morally relevant relationships. I have also shown how the American Indian/Native American concept of *harmony* can be used to answer the moral demarcation problem. By contrasting the use of harmony with the use of cooperation when answering the moral demarcation problem, I hope to have highlighted the limitations of using cooperation and the benefits of using harmony.

With regard to story from the beginning, Sally and the beavers, using the cooperative definition of moral problems means Sally isn't facing a moral problem because Sally can't cooperate with the Beaver. However, using the concept of harmony can explain why Sally and the beavers are facing a moral problem. Their relationship is morally significant, because it's a relationship that requires balance. It thereby is part of the reason why both Sally and the beaver themselves are morally significant. Bringing about or maintaining that balance, i.e., promoting or maintaining harmony, is the way of solving their problem.

## REFERENCES

Arden, H. and Wall, S. (1990). *Wisdom Keepers: Meetings with Native American Spiritual Elders*. Ed. White Deer of Autumn. Hillsboro, OR: Beyond Words Publishing, Inc.

---

<sup>31</sup> Another way of understanding this is to think of the order in which the term 'agency' is applied to individuals. The term 'agency' could be first applied, then defined; or, it could be defined, then applied. We could first define agency (however we'd like to define it, e.g., as a set of capacities required for decision-making), then apply it to individuals who fit the stipulated definition (e.g., individuals who have the requisite capacities). Or, we could apply the term to certain individuals, and try to define it in light of features that are shared among those to which it applies. Assuming 'agency' is a morally loaded term or concept, the distinction between these two approaches can be understood by considering whether 'agency' is a morally loaded term *prior* to how it's applied, or if it's morally loaded *after* it's been applied. I'm not going to argue that either of these approaches is correct. Nor am I going to argue that the concept of 'agency' has any *particular* moral imports (i.e., that it implies anything *particular* about morality). These may be projects for future research. However, I'm assuming that it has *some* moral import. In other words, it's relevant to discussions of morality *in some way*. In doing so, a relevant question to ask is: *from where does it get its moral import?*

- Beck, P.V. and Walters, A.L. (1977). *The Sacred: Ways of Knowledge, Sources of Life*. Tsale, AZ: Navajo Community College.
- Chaudhuri, J. and Chaudhuri, J. (2001). *A Sacred Path: The Way of the Muscogee Creeks*. Los Angeles, CA: UCLA American Indian Studies Center.
- Cordova, V.F. (2004). Ethics: From an Artist's Point of View. In A. Waters (Ed.), *American Indian Thought* (pp. 251-255). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Cordova, V.F. (2007). *How It Is: The Native American Philosophy of V. F. Cordova*. Eds., Kathleen Dean Moore, Kurt Peters, Ted Jojola, and Amber Lacy. Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press.
- de Waal, F. (2006). *Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- DuFour, J. (2004). Ethics and Understanding. In A. Waters (Ed.), *American Indian Thought* (pp. 34-42). Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing.
- Erdrich, H.E. (2008). *National Monuments*. East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press.
- Farrer, C.R. (1991). *Living Life's Circle: Mescalero Apache Cosmovision*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press.
- Greene, J. (2013). *Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason, and the Gap Between Us and Them*. New York, NY: The Penguin Press.
- Haidt, J. (2012). *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.
- Hobbes, T. (1651/1994). *Leviathan*. Edited by Edwin Curley. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing.
- Joyce, R. (2002). *The Evolution of Morality*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Kitcher, P. (2011). *The Ethical Project*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Miller, J.L. (Forthcoming). Etemeyaske Vpokat (Living Together Peacefully): How the Muscogee Concept of Harmony Can Provide a Structure to Morality. In C. Marshall (Ed.), *Comparative Metaethics: Neglected Perspectives on the Foundations of Morality*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Plato. (1992). *Republic*. Translated by G.M.A. Grube. Revised by C.D.C Reeve. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing.
- Prinz, J. (2007). *The Emotional Construction of Morals*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Sinclair, N. (2012). Metaethics, Teleosemantics and the Function of Moral Judgments. *Biology and Philosophy*, 27 (5), 639-662.

Singer, P. (2011). *The Expanding Circle: Ethics, Evolution, and Moral Progress*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Smyth, N. (2017). The Function of Morality. *Philosophical Studies*, 174 (5), 1127-1144.

Tomasello, M. (2016). *A Natural History of Morality*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

# ETEMEYASKE VPOKAT (LIVING TOGETHER PEACEFULLY): HOW THE MUSCOGEE CONCEPT OF *HARMONY* CAN PROVIDE A STRUCTURE TO MORALITY<sup>32</sup>

“And now we had no place to live, since we didn’t know  
How to live with each other.”

Joy Harjo, “Once the World Was Perfect,” *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

For the Muscogee (Creek) peoples,<sup>33</sup> their relationships to their surroundings is essential to moral knowledge, including determining the moral status of actions. Maintaining and sustaining these relationships requires having knowledge of how the land operates, how people effect and are affected by the land (i.e., how people are a part of the rest of the natural world), cultural norms, and individuals’ place in culture.

Knowledge and understanding of those things with whom we share a relationship is morally relevant because it provides a way of promoting *harmony*. Promoting harmony, then, is a normative principle that serves as the foundation for moral knowledge and the guide to morally worthwhile action. Moral knowledge is knowledge about promoting harmony, and morally worthwhile actions are those actions that promote harmony.

For example, given the importance indigenous peoples place on living in, and as a part of, the natural world, knowledge of the land is essential for living in and promoting harmony. Knowledge of traditions and cultural practices also become morally relevant because people live within, and are a part of, groups of other people.<sup>34</sup> Thus, promoting harmony requires knowledge of both the land and their culture. And, given that people live with, and as a part of, the land and a culture, living a good life requires promoting harmony within these necessary components of life.<sup>35</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> I am especially indebted to my Grandmother, Lillian Miller, for encouraging and supporting my journey to understand Muscogee culture and our family’s history. Mvto (thank you), Grandma.

<sup>33</sup> I have chosen to use ‘Muscogee’ to refer to members and descendants of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation because it is more familiar and easier to sound-out than other spellings/pronunciations. ‘Muscogee’ is how the people refer to themselves, and ‘Creek’ is a name given to them by colonial settlers because of their location near prominent creeks in the south eastern part of North America. The traditional Muscogee spelling is ‘Mvskoke’ (which refers to the language or the people) or ‘Mvskokvlke’ (which refers to the Creek people) (Chaudhuri and Chaudhuri 2001).

<sup>34</sup> As an example of one aspect of the structure of Muscogee societies, Sarah Deer (2015) – in her book on sexual assault against Native women – describes the structure as consisting in a “division of various powers, functions, and privileges” along gendered roles. These roles can be considered a “nonbinary complementary dualism, wherein binary gender lines are fluid without fixed boundaries. This is evidenced by the role that Two-spirit or gender nonconforming people played. Sometimes a man would perform a woman’s role, and vice versa. In a gendered epistemology, all persons have valued roles and duties, which balance one another” (p. 19).

<sup>35</sup> There are other aspects of life where promoting harmony is important, but for the purposes of this paper I’m using the land and culture merely as two examples.

There are, thus, at least three identifying features of this indigenous account of ethics (i.e., indigenous metaethics) that I will be focusing on: (1) the foundational role of the concept of harmony; (2) the view that existing necessarily means having and interacting with one's surroundings; and (3) the role that non-normative knowledge plays in determining the moral status of an action.

Drawing primarily from the cultural traditions and beliefs of the Muscogee peoples, I will provide an account of how harmony *can* play a foundational role in providing a structure to morality.<sup>36</sup> In the process of providing this account, I will begin (§2) by defining two key Muscogee concepts: 'energy' (§2.1) and 'harmony' (§2.2). I will also explain how the relationship between these two concepts can provide a structure for morality. Then I will explain the conditions that make promoting harmony a normative principle (§3) by explaining why promoting harmony is relevant to humans (§3.1) as well as a providing a prudential reason to promote harmony (§3.2). Finally, I will explain how harmony can be achieved (§4) by explaining two examples that highlight the importance of non-moral knowledge in promoting harmony. I will then conclude with some remarks about how the Muscogee concept of harmony relates to some contemporary metaethical concerns (§5).

## 2. ENERGY AND EXCHANGE: THE FOUNDATIONAL ROLE OF HARMONY

Before providing an account of how harmony can play a foundational role in understanding morality, some definitions and concepts need to be explained. Before turning to these explanations, there are a few things that need to be clarified. First, there is no Mvskoke word that *directly* translates to the English word 'harmony.' The relevant concept of harmony can be understood as 'living together peacefully,' and is expressed in Mvskoke by the phrase '*etemeyaske vpokat*.'<sup>37</sup> Second, I will only be drawing on Muscogee resources.<sup>38</sup> While there may be a lot of

---

<sup>36</sup> I'd like to say something about my place in this kind of conversation. I am an enrolled member of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation, but I do not claim to speak for all Muscogee peoples. Although I am an enrolled member, I did not grow up on a reservation (because our tribe doesn't have a reservation) or in Oklahoma (where our tribe is headquartered), nor do I speak the language (my grandmother remembers pieces of the language, but she, like many others, had her language stolen from her during her school years). There are people more familiar with, who have more direct, first-hand, knowledge of Muscogee culture, but this is an opportunity where I think I can use *my* training in western philosophy (and *my* experiences) to *help* share Muscogee beliefs. I see my role in this conversation as filling in argumentative gaps. My hope is to state some core features of (mostly) pre-colonial Muscogee beliefs – features from accounts that have been gathered by other Muscogees – and show how they could be justified or explain how they can be related or connected to one another. I am not trying, or claiming, to provide new, or first-hand, knowledge of Muscogee beliefs.

<sup>37</sup> In Mvskoke, the letter 'v' is pronounced like the letter 'u.' I have chosen to use the word 'harmony' because I think it's the most familiar term in English that captures the concept of *etemeyaske vpokat*. It's also the word most used by the Muscogees cited in the references. Mvto (thank you) to Rebecca Barnett at the Muscogee (Creek) Nation Mvskoke Language Program for helping me with this translation.

<sup>38</sup> Since most American Indian history was transmitted orally, there are comparatively few first-person, written sources on Muscogee beliefs. The sources I'll be drawing from, though few, offer a rich collection of oral stories and histories. Though only a few names will be credited in the citations, it should be noted that many more are responsible for the transmission and development of these beliefs. As Bear Heart is a healer, and David Lewis Jr. is a medicine person, their knowledge of Muscogee healing and medicine was

similarities between different indigenous or Native American groups regarding their understanding of ethics, I'm hesitant to label this as a broadly 'indigenous' or 'American Indian/Native American' approach because I worry it would be a form of ignoring the perhaps subtle, but important, differences between various indigenous groups. Although the Muscogee understanding of ethics may resemble other indigenous or Native American understanding of ethics, I want to maintain its independence from other indigenous approaches.<sup>39</sup> Relatedly, there are accounts of Muscogee living from the perspectives of white people and colonizers, but for this paper I won't be using these accounts. Although they may be interesting or even accurate, they are still outsider accounts and I'm trying to lessen the possibility of my explanations of Muscogee concepts being altered by the influence of other cultures. Finally, understanding harmony requires an understanding of some basic elements of Muscogee cosmology and religion. Though I can't provide a comprehensive explanation of these topics, my hope is to provide enough of an explanation to understand the concept of harmony.

## 2.1. SOME KEY DESCRIPTIVE ELEMENTS OF THE MUSCOGEE BELIEF SYSTEM

For the Muscogee, everything is linked by a single unifying source: energy.<sup>40</sup> Energy flows through all things. This concept of energy may be further explained by, or reduced to, some more basic or simple property, but doing so seems unnecessary to provide an account of how harmony can play a foundational role for morality. For the purposes of this paper, I'm going to be working with the understanding that 'energy' is something that is common amongst all things.

Collectively, all energy forms a single entity known as Ibofanga (*Epohfonko*) - which is the most sacred thing/being in all existence. Although Ibofanga is the most sacred being in existence, prayers are never addressed to Ibofanga. It's believed that Ibofanga is too busy and too sacred to disturb with our prayers. Instead, prayers and thanks were shared with Hesagedamesse (*hesaketvmese*)- the Maker of Breath. Hesagedamesse is one of Ibofanga's four assistants, or instruments, and helps to connect Ibofanga to the empirical world. In this case, Hesagedamesse

---

orally passed down. Joyotpaul Chaudhuri (2001), in the acknowledgements section of his and Jean Chaudhuri's book, *A Sacred Path: The Way of the Muscogee Creeks*, states, "I have depended considerably on oral history in this work. The majority of the informants as well as the primary author (*Jean Chaudhuri*) have passed away... Because many of the contributors have passed away, part of the reason for writing this work is to ensure that this body of shared knowledge does not disappear" (p. vi; emphasis mine). They go on to name many more Muscogee and Seminole elders who contributed to their ability to share this knowledge.

<sup>39</sup> Although I want to maintain that this is a Muscogee account without generalizing to other indigenous or American Indian/Native American accounts, there are resources that identify common themes in American Indian/Native American philosophy. These include Brian Yazzie Burkhardt's chapter in this collection, "The Groundedness of Normativity or Indigenous Normativity through the Land" as well as his book, *Indigenizing Philosophy through the Land: A Trickster Methodology for Decolonizing Environmental Ethics and Indigenous Futures*; Shay Welch's, *The Phenomenology of a Performative Knowledge System: Dancing with Native American Epistemology*; Viola Cordova's, *How It Is: The Native American Philosophy of V.F. Cordova*; Thomas M. Norton-Smith's, *The Dance of Person and Place: One Interpretation of American Indian Philosophy*; and Anne Water's collection, *American Indian Thought: Philosophical Essays*.

<sup>40</sup> Most of the knowledge in this section comes from Chapters 2, 4, and 10 of Jean and Joyotpaul Chaudhuri's book, *A Sacred Path: The Way of the Muscogee Creeks*. This book as a whole has served as an invaluable resource on Muscogee beliefs and practices.

represents wind while fire, water, and earth are represented by Pojasa, Wewafulla (*Yewofullv*), and Igana Jaga (*Ekonvovakv*), respectively<sup>41</sup>. Prayers may be made to any of the assistants, but they are most often directed to Hesagedamesse since it is The Giver and Taker of Breath (i.e., life), thereby controlling the energy that connects all *living* things. These assistants are *not* static entities. As they are instruments of Ibofanga, the ultimate collection of energy, they are changed *by* energy. In other words, energy flows through wind, fire, water, and earth, and these can take many different forms/shapes. As Jean and Joyotpaul Chaudhuri (2001) state:

The dynamics of Ibofanga's energy operate through four major elements: air, fire, water, and earth. These elements are *not* material atoms. The form of the energy gives them their personality. These four fundamental elements, with different combinations of energy running through them, account for all the phenomena of the universe. These elements, in turn, are not fixed material entities because they are constantly transformed by energy – the principles of transformation and reciprocity are important keys to the Creek mind.<sup>42</sup>

This explanation of these sacred figures and relationships is meant to emphasize the importance of the concept of energy. While there may still be metaphysical questions concerning the exact nature of such figures and their relationships, the fact that the totality of energy (Ibofanga) is held to be the most sacred entity, and its ways of interacting with the empirical world (the four assistants: wind (via Hesagedamesse), fire (via Pojasa), water (via Wewafulla), and earth (via Igana Jaga)) are also considered sacred highlights the importance of the concept of energy.

Interactions between things are explained as *exchanges of energy*. Taking food from the land and eating it, for example, is the taking of energy. Relatedly, planting food, caring for the land, and appropriately cultivating it is the giving of energy. This relationship is an example of how energy is exchanged. We are sustained and nourished by exchanging energy with the land.

When interacting with our surroundings, we are exchanging energy. For the purposes of this paper, the phrase 'exchanging energy' can be thought of as referring to interactions with other things. Thus, there is no need for a more basic or reductive definition.

## 2.2. A FOUNDATIONAL NORMATIVE ELEMENT OF THE MUSCOGEE BELIEF SYSTEM

So far these are just descriptions or explanations of features of the world. Nothing explicitly normative comes from these descriptions alone.<sup>43</sup> In order to account for the existence of 'good' and 'bad' ways of behaving or interacting within the world, there needs to be some

---

<sup>41</sup> Additionally, Pojasa is known as 'Grandfather Sun' or 'Grandfather Fire,' Wewafulla is known as 'Water spirit,' Igana Jaga is known as 'Holy Mother Earth,' and, as was previously stated, Hesagedamesse is known as 'The Giver and Taker (The Maker) of Breath.'

<sup>42</sup> Chaudhuri and Chaudhuri 2001, pp. 24-25.

<sup>43</sup> There may be some inferences about normativity that can be drawn from the existence of *sacred* entities. In other words, the very fact that some of these things are taken to be sacred may imply that they *ought* to be treated in some ways rather than others. If this is the case, the term 'sacred' can be removed from the preceding explanations, and the account of Muscogee world-view or their conceptual toolbox can be seen as purely descriptive of how the world is.

explicitly normative principle that provides a standard by which we can measure behaviors and interactions as good or bad.

Such a principle is provided with reference to the concept of harmony. I'm going to refer to this principle as 'The Principle of Harmony':

**The Principle of Harmony:** Harmony ought to be promoted, and disharmony ought to be avoided.

When energy is exchanged, there ought to be balance, and balancing energy means *reciprocating*. Reciprocation can take many forms, such as prayers, gift giving, cultivating, and providing care, which may or may not involve non-violence or peace. In other words, talk of reciprocity and balance is not synonymous with talk of any particular ritual or action, or with talk of peace.

Given that humans have relationships with many different aspects of their surroundings (e.g., other humans, non-human animals, plants, inanimate objects, etc.), and these aspects have various characteristics (e.g., the different tribal memberships or languages of humans, the various kinds and ages of non-human animals, differing roles of inanimate objects in their ecosystems, etc.), no particular ritual or act is going to always appropriately reciprocate the energy exchanged in the interactions with these different aspects of one's surroundings. How one reciprocates with a human may not be an appropriate way of reciprocating with a tree. This is primarily because of the different kinds of thing a human and a tree are, and, as such, the different relationships a human shares with each of those entities. Humans and trees require different things to survive and live well. Therefore, what counts as reciprocation is going to differ given the kind of existence these entities are displaying. Even amongst entities of the same class (e.g., humans), the different characteristics that each human possesses are going to influence their relationship with that person and what counts as reciprocation. The relationship I have with my parents differs from the relationship I have with my siblings, and each of these differs from the relationships I have with other people in my life (friends, co-workers, students, people from differing tribes, states, and countries, etc.). These differing relationships affect what qualifies as reciprocation. As an analogy, just because something is a good gift for one person doesn't mean it's an appropriate gift for everyone - a sensual or romantic gift may be a good way of acknowledging your love and appreciation of your partner, but it's probably not a good gift to give your mother.

Since reciprocity is a way of balancing energy, then reciprocating could conceivably sometimes take the form of actions that would otherwise, or most of the time, seem bad. Actions that may be bad most of the time may be justified if that action balances energy. For example, if a transgression (e.g., an act of war, assault, the taking of hostages, etc.) has occurred, then reciprocation may require similar actions (that would otherwise be bad) as a way of balancing energy.<sup>44</sup> In other words, seemingly bad actions may be justified if these actions balance an exchange of energy.

---

<sup>44</sup> This seems similar to Nietzsche's explanation of the origin of guilt in the second treatise of *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Moral behavior is a kind of creditor/debtor relationship. When someone does something wrong, it's as if they're indebted to the person they wronged. Guilt arises when someone is in debt. Whereas Nietzsche was discussing the evolution of guilt and other morally relevant emotions, he wasn't explaining the justification of any actions - i.e., he wasn't explaining how some actions could be justified by appealing to the existence or evolution of certain emotions. As opposed to Nietzsche, I'm explaining how certain actions can be justified by appealing to harmony or reciprocity.

As an example, consider an explanation involving corporal punishment from Sarah Deer's (2015) discussion of gendered violence against American Indian/Native American women. To show federal officials that the Muscogee were law-abiding, they began writing down their laws earlier than most tribes. In 1825 fifty-six criminal laws were written down with the thirty-fifth law addressing gendered violence: "And be it farther enacted if any person or persons should undertake to force a woman and did it by force, it shall be left to woman what punishment she should satisfied with to whip or pay what she say it be law."<sup>45</sup> As Deer (2015) points out, there are several important concepts highlighted in this law:

The word "force" (used twice) is an important clue that this passage describes a physical attack and the law clearly refers to women as victims (although it does not indicate the gender of perpetrators). There is a clear reference to corporal punishment ("whip or pay") – which is consistent with observed Mvskoke law in practice in the early nineteenth century. Perhaps most remarkable component of this law is the last six words: "what she say it be law." This phrase, suggesting a... victim had legal standing to participate in sentencing decisions, is fundamentally inconsistent with Anglo-American... law in the same time period.<sup>46</sup>

While the actions that are done in the name of corporal punishment aren't usually permitted, they're permitted as a punishment to rectify a wrong that has occurred (such as gendered violence). Given the Principle of Harmony, the severity of acts of gendered violence may be rectified by similarly severe (corporal) punishment. One important concept that I'd like to point out in this law regards the implied role of harmony in deciding on the punishment. As is stated, women (the victims) participate in decisions about punishment. The victim being given a say in punishment may be done as a means of promoting harmony. The woman wronged gets to decide which punishment would best rectify the wrong done to her.<sup>47</sup>

Although balancing energy exchanges requires taking into account our relationships with the various kinds of entities (as well as the varying characteristics between those entities), and although this is sometimes done using seemingly bad actions, these actions are all acts of *love*.

Harmony is a tolerance, a forgiving, a blending – subtle, soft, but very strong. In order to live in harmony, the common denominator that binds is 'loving one another' in its truest form.<sup>48</sup>

Love is an act, and acts that promote harmony are acts of love. In other words, when there's harmony, there's love. Love is a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for harmony. When things are in a state of harmony, or when an act promotes harmony, that act is then an act of love, or things are in a state of love. As was previously mentioned, seemingly bad actions can be justified

---

<sup>45</sup> Waring 1960, p. 24. As cited in Deer 2015, p. 17.

<sup>46</sup> p. 17.

<sup>47</sup> Deer (2015) goes on to point out, "For most of American legal history, [gendered violence] was framed as a *property* crime perpetrated against men... Yet the 1825 Mvskoke law – in the same era – ends with the phrase 'what she say it be law.' Somehow, despite the persistent effort and pressure to develop an American-style government and legal system, the Mvskoke law suggests a legal tradition that acknowledged the decision-making capacity of women" (p. 17).

<sup>48</sup> Heart 1996, 152.

if they are an act of love. For example, parents may discipline their children because they love them, and though this discipline may be unpleasant for the parents, it may still be necessary as a way of instilling certain values or behaviors or as a way of rectifying disharmony created by the child. However, disciplinary actions should only be taken when a wrong has occurred. Or, in other words, when an act by the child needs to be reciprocated. The discipline may be bad in the absence of any wrongdoing on behalf of the child, but in order to balance the energy created by the child's wrong – to reciprocate the wrong done by the child – discipline may be necessary. If the act of disciplining the child promotes harmony, then it's an act of love.

When energy is balanced – i.e., when an exchange of energy has been reciprocated – there is said to be harmony, and harmony is a state where living things live together peacefully. What it means to live together peacefully is to love one another. Again, what it means to live together peacefully or “love one another” differs based on the relationship that is shared with a particular entity. Loving a tree is very different from loving your father, and loving your father is very different from loving your co-worker. A sign of love for my father may be giving him tickets to a sporting event because he loves attending sporting events, but this doesn't mean tickets to a sporting event are a sign of love for my co-worker if they don't love attending sporting events (and giving a tree tickets to a sporting event is just stupid).

However, harmony is realized when love is successfully shared and conveyed. To live in harmony with a tree, I have to love the tree. If I love a tree – meaning, I reciprocate with it (e.g., care for it by watering it, protecting it, nurturing it, etc.) – then the tree will provide love back.

To summarize: we interact with our surroundings, and these interactions involve an exchange of energy. Harmony is present when an exchange of energy is balanced. Balancing energy means reciprocating an exchange of energy. Reciprocation takes different forms depending on the kind of relationship that's shared between two entities. However, all forms of reciprocation involve love. Therefore, harmony is present when love is shared in a particular relationship.<sup>49</sup>

While promoting harmony makes actions morally good, conversely, creating disharmony makes actions morally bad. Since there may be numerous different actions that could equally reciprocate and balance energy, then any one of those actions would be permissible as a way of promoting harmony. In other words, of the actions that are available, as long as those actions promote harmony, then choosing any of them would be a permissible means of promoting harmony.

However, there's a question concerning whether the goodness of promoting harmony itself implies that not promoting harmony is bad. For this implication to follow it has to be the case that every action is either good or bad. Or, in terms of harmony, every action would have to

---

<sup>49</sup> There may be a concern that love can come in degrees. For example, I may love a plant, but I don't love it as much as I love my family. However, with love being a state or an action, love either exists or it doesn't. It's binary. Like playing basketball, you either are or are not playing basketball. It doesn't come in degrees (e.g., you don't play basketball *a little*). I'm inclined to think loving something is similar. You either do or don't love something. However, how that love is expressed varies depending on the other entity involved and what kind of relationship is had with that entity. I can still love something *poorly* (e.g., by not providing care or upholding my commitments to what is loved), in the same way that I can play basketball poorly; but loving poorly still requires love to be present. So, with love being an action, it is either present or it's not.

either promote or disrupt harmony. Just because promoting harmony is good doesn't, by itself, entail that not promoting it is bad. It could be neutral.

The question then becomes are actions that fail to promote harmony, or actions that create disharmony, bad or merely neutral? It seems to make more sense to think that all actions are either good or bad instead of all actions being either good or neutral. In other words, there are no morally neutral actions.<sup>50</sup> Since harmony exists when energy is balanced, and energy is balanced when reciprocation has taken place, then harmony exists when exchanges of energy have been reciprocated. Given energy exchanges occur when we interact with our surroundings, then taking energy without reciprocating creates an imbalance. So long as every interaction is an exchange of energy, then every interaction either takes or reciprocates energy. There isn't a third option. That being the case, if we're trying to judge the moral permissibility of an action and we know that promoting harmony is good, that means that disrupting harmony (i.e., unbalancing energy, or taking energy without reciprocating) is either considered to be neutral or bad. Since it would be really unintuitive to claim that there are no bad actions, I'm inclined to think disruptions of harmony are bad instead of merely neutral.<sup>51</sup>

None of this, however, tells us what kind of property harmony is, nor does it tell us from whence the Principle of Harmony gets its normative force.

Harmony itself, as described above, is a property of the natural world. Since harmony is a relational property between exchanges of energy, and energy is a part of the natural world, then harmony is a property of the natural world that exists when energy is balanced.

Since 'harmony' is a property of the natural world, the Principle of Harmony can be seen as a kind of natural law. Similar to Aristotelean natural law theory in contemporary metaethics,<sup>52</sup> wherein goodness is non-subjective and the parameters for practical rationality (i.e., what is practically rational) are set by nature, the Principle of Harmony is non-subjective and helps sets the parameters of practical rationality with reference to the natural world. The Principle of Harmony is non-subjective in that it is a fact of the natural world that energy is exchanged and our intertwinement with our surroundings makes it such that our well-being is dependent on the well-being of our surroundings. The parameters of practical rationality are set by nature since every action is an exchange of energy and what practically ought to be done, given our intertwinement with our surroundings, depends on our surroundings (which can change and

---

<sup>50</sup> One interesting implication that I won't be exploring in this paper is whether this means that non-humans can behave rightly or wrongly; or, whether the actions of non-humans are good or bad. Since all interactions are exchanges of energy, and all exchanges of energy either promoting harmony or create disharmony, then it seems like the actions of non-humans would similarly be good or bad depending on whether they promote harmony or create disharmony. While I won't be offering an argument in support of this claim, I'm inclined to think this is correct. In other words, I'm inclined to think that the actions of non-humans are good or bad as well.

<sup>51</sup> In an attempt to explain how morally neutral actions could exist, it may be appealing to think that actions that promote harmony are good, actions that create disharmony are bad, and actions that merely fail to promote harmony (without creating disharmony) are neutral. However, as was just explained, since all actions involve exchanges of energy, there are no actions that merely fail to promote harmony without creating disharmony. All actions either take or reciprocate energy, thereby either promoting harmony or creating disharmony. As such, there are no actions that count as neutral.

<sup>52</sup> For examples of these kinds of accounts, see Philippa Foot's, *Natural Goodness* and Michael Thompson's, *Life and Action: Elementary Structures of Practice and Practical Thought*.

differ for groups of people). In this regard, it gets its normative force from the same place that other natural laws get their force: the natural world.<sup>53</sup>

In summary, harmony is a relational property of the natural world, and the Principle of Harmony is akin to a natural law. It's a brute fact of the world that doesn't have a justification.<sup>54</sup>

### 3. SITUATIONS AND SURROUNDINGS: THE NEED FOR HARMONY

Although the Principle of Harmony provides a structure to morality by providing a standard by which we can assess the moral permissibility of actions, it hasn't yet been justified. In other words, it's not yet clear *why* we ought to promote harmony and avoid disharmony. This 'ought' can be understood as a moral-ought or a prudential-ought. When understood as a moral-ought, then the question concerning the normative force of the Principle of Harmony is non-sensical. It's just a brute fact of the world. However, even if the Principle of Harmony is a brute fact of the world, we can still explain why the Principle of Harmony is relevant to us (humans). This won't provide a *moral* justification for the Principle of Harmony; however, it can provide us with a *prudential* justification and help to explain how such a principle could exist.

To that end, I will provide an argument that we have a prudential reason to follow the Principle of Harmony. Although this prudential reason is not meant to be a moral justification of the principle, it's still morally relevant because it can motivate people to act on the Principle of Harmony.

#### 3.1. CONDITIONS FOR THE PRINCIPLE OF HARMONY

The Muscogee healer Bear Heart provides the beginning of an explanation of a prudential reason to follow the Principle of Harmony when he states: "Our existence is so intertwined that our survival depends upon maintaining a balanced relationship with everything."<sup>55</sup> In this section I will elaborate upon this idea that the Principle of Harmony is relevant to us because of some essential conditions of existence.

These conditions concern relationships that are inevitable for any human. For humans, to exist requires being in some surrounding, and it requires interacting with that surrounding. The

---

<sup>53</sup> I take the question of normative force to be a question about why we *ought* to follow or adhere to the principle. As will be discussed in §3, this 'ought' can be understood morally or prudentially (i.e., it can be a moral-ought or a practical-ought). In §3 I will offer an argument for why, *prudentially*, one ought to follow the Principle of Harmony.

<sup>54</sup> As opposed to Aristotelean natural law theories of, e.g., Foot (2001) and Thompson (2012), natural law theories that make reference to God (see Aquinas 2014) may not claim that natural laws are brute facts. Instead, the natural laws are issued from God. Given that the Muscogee conception of God (either Ibofanga or Hesagedamesse) is constituted by the natural world, it *could* be said that the natural laws issue from God (since Ibofanga and Hesagedamesse are part of the natural world – not removed from it). However, given these differing conceptions of God, it can also be said that the natural laws (e.g., the Principle of Harmony) are just brute facts of the natural world since they aren't issued from a God that is removed from the natural world. Overall, like natural law theories that make reference to God, the Principle of Harmony is a normative principle that is based in the natural world, but, unlike natural law theories that make reference to God, this principle is simply a brute fact (though, again, it *could* be said to issue from divinity given the intertwinement of divinity and the natural world).

<sup>55</sup> p. 190

nature of that surrounding can differ, but existence entails existing somewhere. I cannot conceive of what it would mean to say that something exists absent of any surrounding. We, thus, have a necessary relationship with our surrounding – our place of existence (whatever or wherever that surrounding may be). And, existing in that surrounding entails that we necessarily interact with or in that surrounding.

Thus, there are two essential conditions of existence for humans:

**Condition 1:** *Surroundings* – to exist requires you to exist somewhere; or, to exist means you have some surroundings.

**Condition 2:** *Relationships* – to have surroundings requires you to interact with that surrounding; or, to have a surrounding means you have some relationship with that surrounding.

Given that these relationships (the ones with our surroundings) are inevitable, promoting harmony helps us to survive. Since we necessarily exchange energy by existing, our survival, as well as every other living thing's survival, depends on promoting harmony. If our surroundings are destroyed, we may be negatively affected. Likewise, if our surroundings are doing well, we're more likely to do well. The well-being of the things we're in relationships with is tied to our own well-being. This isn't meant to be an egoistic or individualistic justification.<sup>56</sup> In other words, the idea isn't that each individual will live their best life by promoting harmony. Rather, 'us,' 'our,' 'we,' refers to the collective of things within the surroundings. So, it's not that it's in our individual best interest, it's in the best interest of the collective.

These situations and relationships that we inevitably find ourselves in *help* to provide a structure to morality. However, these conditions by themselves don't entail anything about how we ought to react to our surroundings or how we ought to interact in our relationships.

Since existence entails existing somewhere (i.e., having surroundings), and having surroundings entails having relationships or interactions with those surroundings, it is necessary to care for those surroundings *in order to* collectively live well. 'Care,' in this case, means promoting harmony.<sup>57</sup> This means that promoting harmony (following the Principle of Harmony) is constitutive of living a good life or living well.<sup>58</sup>

Living well entails promoting harmony because of what it means to 'live' or 'exist.' To exist requires that you exist somewhere, and existing somewhere requires that you have a relationship with that surrounding. These requirements, by themselves, don't entail anything specific about how that relationship ought to function (or, how we ought to conduct ourselves in

---

<sup>56</sup> As will be explained in §3.2, this view is tied to a non-western conception of 'self.' Using this non-western conception of 'self,' we are able to offer a prudential reason to act on the Principle of Harmony. This could be seen as a kind of egoism; however, the conception of 'self' in this case makes it a different view than what we may normally consider 'egoistic.'

<sup>57</sup> This emphasis on care is similar to some approaches in feminist ethics. As an example, see Nel Noddings's, *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*.

<sup>58</sup> This is a similar claim to Philippa Foot's argument in *Natural Goodness*. According to Foot, moral goodness is constitutive of being good at being human. What is good for humans is objective and descriptive, and being morally good is part of what makes us good at being humans. On the account I'm explaining, living in harmony is constitutive of living well. What it means to live well, at least partly, is to promote harmony.

that relationship). However, given the assumption that someone wants to live *well*, the Principle of Harmony arises as a means of how to live a good life. Living well means living in harmony with your surroundings.<sup>59</sup>

### 3.2 PRUDENTIAL REASON TO FOLLOW THE PRINCIPLE OF HARMONY

The normative force of the Principle of Harmony isn't a command that comes from sacred beings (e.g., Ibofanga or Hesagedamesse), nor does it issue from those things with which we exchange energy (e.g., the land, ourselves, or other animals). It's just a brute demand that is relevant for us because we exist in the world. However, we can still provide an argument for why individuals ought to follow or be motivated by the Principle of Harmony.

Considering the points made in §3.1, we can provide the following argument (the brackets contain the justifications for the premises):

**Premise 1:** We interact or have a relationship with our surroundings. [Given the conditions for existence]

**Premise 2:** We want to live well. [Assumption]

**Premise 3:** If we interact or have a relationship with our surroundings, and want to live well, then we ought to promote harmony. [Our living well depends on our surroundings doing well – given the intertwinement of our existence]

**Therefore,** we ought to promote harmony. [From premises 1, 2, and 3]

As was mentioned at the beginning of this section, the justification just offered is meant to offer a prudential reason for people to accept the Principle of Harmony that can motivate us to act. What motivates people to act on the Principle of Harmony is a distinct question that can be separated from the question of the moral grounds of the principle. So, there's a prudential reason to follow the Principle of Harmony that provides the principle with one type of normative force, but this doesn't qualify as a moral justification for the principle. In other words, although this argument may provide some normative force to support actions in accordance with the Principle of Harmony, this normative force isn't necessarily a moral force.

As was mentioned in footnote 22 of §3.1, this may be an egoistic reason to follow the Principle of Harmony. It may be egoistic because the normative force comes from an appeal to what's in the agent's own best interest. Since *I* have a relationship with *my* surroundings, then *I* ought to promote harmony. This is what makes it a prudential reason.

---

<sup>59</sup> Although Bear Heart merely mentioned 'existence' and 'survival,' I think his claim is best understood as a claim about existing or surviving *well*. It seems plausible that someone could live for awhile without being in harmony with their surroundings. However, it's less clear how long someone could live well without being in harmony with their surroundings. Additionally, his claim could be about our species as a whole rather than individuals (e.g., for humans to survive, they need to be in harmony with their surroundings). Presumably, this implies the survival of our species over an extended period of time – which would seemingly require, however, our species to live well. Again, it's plausible that a species can exist for a while without being in harmony with their surroundings. As such, I think his claim is best understood about the quality of existence rather than mere quantity.

However, 'self-interest,' in this case, means something different than what it means in other discussions of egoism because there's a different conception of the self. Part of what constitutes the self, in this conception, is the surroundings. *I* am not separable from *my surroundings*. And, since having surroundings entails having relationships, *I* am not separable from *my relationships*. Therefore, at least part of what constitutes the self is our relationships with our surroundings. Appealing to this wholistic conception of 'self' may still be a type of self-interest, but since the self is partly made of surroundings and relationships in those surroundings, considerations of harmony will appeal to those surroundings and relationships. In other words, if someone's interest in harmony stems from self-interest, she must also be interested in her surroundings and relationships since they are constitutive of the self.

Given the explanations in §3.1 and §3.2, promoting harmony is constitutive of a good life in two ways. First, it's constitutive of 'living well' because our *existence* is so intertwined with our surroundings. Second, since *our* existence is so intertwined with our surroundings, it's also constitutive of the 'self.' Taken together, our living well and our self are partly constituted by relations to our surroundings. This makes it so that it's hard to separate oneself and one's life from its surroundings. In some sense, explaining ourselves independently of our surroundings (or vice versa) doesn't make sense. What it means to live well is to have your surroundings do well, and you don't have a self without surroundings. Similarly, it doesn't make sense to talk of *our* living and *our* self as if these were two separable concepts. What it means to live is to have a self, just like what it means to have a self is to live.<sup>60</sup> I've tried to appeal to each of these as separate entities or concepts, but I've only done so in order to explain the existence and force of the Principle of Harmony. To do that in terms of contemporary terms, I have to explain how these separable, western concepts are related.

To conclude this section, the explanations in the previous section (§2) show that the Principle of Harmony can play a foundational role in providing a structure to morality, and the explanations in this section (§3) show that actions recommended by using the principle are prudentially rational given the situations and relationships we find ourselves in. One way of understanding the structure of this paper is that §2 defines the Principle of Harmony, §3 prudentially justifies the Principle of Harmony, and §4 will explain how to use the Principle of Harmony.

#### 4. NATURE AND NORMATIVITY: THE WAY TO ACHIEVE HARMONY

The previous two sections were about the first two of three core features of this account of indigenous metaethics: (1) the foundational role that the Principle of Harmony plays in providing a structure to morality, and (2) that our relationships - which result from situations that we necessarily find ourselves in - prudentially justify the Principle of Harmony. This section is about the third core feature of this account of indigenous metaethics: (3) the role that non-moral knowledge plays in determining the moral status of an action.

In order to bring about harmony, one has to know about one's relation to the thing they're reciprocating, or in a relationship, with. In other words, knowing how to bring about harmony requires knowing how to reciprocate, and knowing how to reciprocate depends on knowing

---

<sup>60</sup> My use of the concept of 'self' is meant to capture individuation. I don't intend for 'self' to indicate some psychological capacity or a *sense* of self. By 'self' I am referring to individuals as distinct from their surroundings.

about the relationship. To illustrate the role of non-moral knowledge in bringing about balance and reciprocating, I will explain two examples: hunting and the practice of medicine.

Achieving harmony when hunting is encouraged by hunting for the right reasons. Hunting is supposed to be done out of necessity for the purpose of providing nourishment. As such, actions during a hunt that don't aim towards these purposes are actions that aren't taught or encouraged because they didn't encourage good skills. And these skills are those that promote harmony. Hunting for anger, sport, or pride was not something that was taught by Muscogees. "Never kill out of anger, nor for sport to see how many animals you can kill. Take just enough for survival and always be respectful of the four-leggeds. *If you must kill, present an offering and talk to the animal, explaining, 'I need you for my family.'*"<sup>61</sup>

Having and developing the right reasons can promote harmony by helping to establish good traits or practices. Those traits or practices, then, help to ensure that when hunting occurs the actions taken are those that are done with love and promote reciprocity. In other words, the actions that result from having the right reasons are traits or practices that help promote harmony *each time* a hunt occurs. That's what makes them the *right* reasons: they are the reasons that help to promote harmony.

The ritual and process of how one ought to hunt is explained by Bear Heart:

Children were not allowed to hunt until they became skilled with their weapons. We were taught the anatomical structure of each animal and exactly where to hit so it would die quickly and not suffer more than it had to. When we brought back the kill, even that was a ceremony. We gave an offering to the animal, honoring it and explaining why we took its life.

Young boys were taught never to eat their first kill – they were to give it to an elder. If you just killed and ate it yourself, that's about all you'd be able to do – you would not become a great hunter because you weren't showing much respect for the animal that you killed. But if you killed and made a sacrifice, giving that meat to others, then the motive for taking that life was based on generosity and respect. Those were the traits of a good hunter.<sup>62</sup>

The thing I want to emphasize about this description of how to hunt is the importance of non-moral knowledge in developing the right reasons. To be a good hunter, the hunter needs to be motivated by generosity and respect. In order to develop these as motives a few different practices were encouraged.

Before discussing these practices, however, I want to point out an important assumption here: that a person can develop certain motives by acting in certain ways. This is a non-moral belief regarding how humans learn and how they develop motivations. By encouraging and teaching young boys to hunt in certain ways, those young boys would then develop the appropriate kinds of motives. This is a distinctive assumption: actions can be used to develop motives. While motives can influence actions, the ability of actions to influence motives creates a feedback loop. Good actions and behaviors are encouraged and supported until good motives are developed. Then, those good motives make it more likely that good actions occur.

---

<sup>61</sup> Heart 1996, p. 22. Emphasis not mine.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

The practices that were used to develop the motives of respect and generosity required only non-moral knowledge. These practices included being skilled with weaponry, minimizing suffering, giving the first kill to an elder, and making an offering to the animal. Being skilled with weaponry requires knowing about the weaponry (e.g., how it's constructed, how to store it, how to repair it, etc.), and knowing the human body well enough to know how use the weapon (e.g., how to move the body in such a way – the motions and forms - as to use the weapon). These are both non-moral beliefs. Minimizing suffering requires knowing how to most efficiently and effectively use weaponry as well; however, it also requires knowing the anatomy of the animal being hunted. Since hunting was done out of necessity, and the pain of the hunted animal was an unfortunate side-effect of this necessity, the pain that accompanied the death of the hunted animal was to be minimized. To do this, a hunter had to know how to effectively use their weaponry to strike the hunted animal in such a way as to end its life as quickly and painlessly as possible. After an animal had been killed, there was a ceremony and offering as a sign of gratitude towards the animal (and Ibofanga). Since the hunted animal is a part of the natural world, as was Ibofanga and other sacred entities or concepts, the knowledge required to appropriately conduct a ceremony and make an offering was natural knowledge. The first kill for a young boy was given to an elder because it encouraged the motives of respect and generosity. As was mentioned earlier, this is a non-moral assumption or belief about human psychology and how to best instill, teach, or encourage particular motivations. It helped develop generosity in the hunter. Killing an animal for yourself isn't done out of generosity and respect. However, killing an animal as quickly and painlessly as possible out of necessity for others demonstrates generosity and respect towards the animal.

Let me summarize the hunting example by using terms from earlier in the paper. All this non-moral knowledge is for the purposes of developing the right reasons or motivations when hunting, and the right reasons or motivations when hunting are generosity and respect, and these motives encourage acting in the right ways. These are the right reasons because actions done while hunting for these reasons promote harmony. Taking the life of an animal creates an imbalance of energy, but this imbalance can be minimized by killing the animal quickly and as painlessly as possible. To fix the remaining imbalance killing the animal creates, there are ceremonies and offerings made to the animal. These ceremonies and offerings are means of reciprocating to the deceased animal for giving its life for others' survival.

In Muscogee medicine, a medicine person's role is to help sick people bring themselves back into balance.<sup>63</sup> They do this by helping to lead the sick in prayers, speaking through songs and chants, and applying herbal remedies (made from local resources) to ailments.<sup>64</sup> Sickness occurs because there's some sort of imbalance in the individual, and the way of treating the sickness is to do things to bring them back into balance.<sup>65</sup> "If we [medicine people] are to do the *complete* good, we must harmonize ourselves, make ourselves sensitive to the powers, energies, and influences of creation."<sup>66</sup>

---

<sup>63</sup> This knowledge about the function and workings of Muscogee medicine comes from David Lewis Jr. and Ann T. Jordan's (2002) *Creek Indian Medicine Ways: The Enduring Power of Mvskoke Religion*.

<sup>64</sup> The concept, 'medicine,' for Muscogees, refers to more than just ingestible remedies. Songs, prayers, fasting, water, and other things used for promoting balance within an individual are considered medicine.

<sup>65</sup> 'Health,' on this understanding of sickness, can be understood as existing when a person's body and mind are in balance or harmony with other parts of their body and mind.

<sup>66</sup> Lewis and Jordan 2002, p. 119. Clarification mine.

This quote illustrates the role of Muscogee medicine people, but it also illustrates the importance of the medicine person living in harmony with *their* surroundings. Individuals should be in harmony, and medicine people help individuals with that task. Sickness is the result of disharmony or imbalance, and medicine people help individuals get back into balance by using and applying their knowledge of medicine to an individual.

For the medicine person to fulfill their role they need knowledge of their surroundings, as well as knowledge of practices, rituals, songs, and prayers that are used in a variety of contexts. Different roots and herbs, for example, are used for different ailments – as are particular songs and chants.<sup>67</sup> Using the appropriate roots and herbs requires non-moral knowledge about the land (the roots, herbs, and other plants), how people respond to certain remedies, and how the human body operates. Using the appropriate songs and chants requires non-moral knowledge concerning cultural practices and rituals. Both of these kinds of knowledge are examples of medicine people needing to understand, and practice medicine, *within* their surroundings. They have to be able to locate and recognize the plants that are used as remedies, they have to make remedies with what they have available, and they have to know what the ailment (diagnosis) is so that they can apply the appropriate remedies (ingestible and spoken). For the medicine person to fulfill their role, they need to work with their surroundings. As David Lewis Jr. (2002) states:

[C]reation is here for us to use, not to misuse, not to conquer. It is half the way, for it already has *its* powers, energies, and intelligence. We humans must align ourselves through fasting, prayer, and taking the cleansing medicines to come half the way with all respect, for it is sacred. For the Indians, the words have already been told and are to be passed along but with the same preparation. By this we do our part and come half the way. This is like an agreement with creation and when we do this, we are in harmony and can have good success.<sup>68</sup>

For the medicine person to have success, they need to be in harmony with their surroundings.

Harmony is emphasized in at least two ways in this example. First, the understandings of the medical concepts sickness and medicine make reference, or are defined by reference, to the concept of harmony. Second, for the medicine person to fulfill their role, they need to be in harmony with their surroundings. To bring about harmony, in others as well as their surroundings, the medicine person needs understand and work with their surroundings.

## 5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

While this paper only provides a brief sketch of one tribe's, the Muscogee's, approach to indigenous metaethics, my hope is that it helps to highlight some distinctive features that are either lacking or under-emphasized in contemporary accounts of metaethics. Trying to explain an indigenous approach to ethics within the framework of contemporary metaethics (i.e., trying to answer questions of contemporary metaethics in indigenous terms) may lead to misconstruing the indigenous approach. For example, some distinctions in contemporary metaethics (e.g., between moral and non-moral knowledge) may not make sense when the domain of morality is so closely related the "non-moral" domain. Similarly, being unable to distinguish between the moral and non-moral domain may make it more difficult to distinguish between various

---

<sup>67</sup> For a list of herbal remedies that the Muscogee use, see chapter 7 of Lewis Jr. and Jordan 2002.

<sup>68</sup> p. 118.

competing views in metaethics (e.g., naturalism and non-naturalism, non-cognitivism and cognitivism, realism and anti-realism, etc.).

However, there are at least three implications that I think follow from the three core features of this indigenous account of metaethics. First, given the Principle of Harmony, more things are worthy of moral consideration. In contrast with social contract theories (or other metaethical accounts that place an emphasis on cooperation), moral consideration is tied to more than just rational agents. Harmony, being a more wide-ranging concept than something like cooperation, is something that would apply to the land, ecosystems, non-human animals, and collectives. While social contract theories can find indirect ways of explaining why these things get moral consideration, focusing on harmony provides a more direct explanation.

Second, harmony, unlike 'goodness,' is a transparently relational property. Like the concepts of 'taller,' 'to the left of,' etc., harmony requires more than just one entity.<sup>69</sup> Bringing about harmony requires that there is something to be in harmony with. That's what relationships bring about. To be in a relationship, there has to be something to be in a relationship with. The same goes for harmony. To live in harmony means there has to be something that is being lived with. Harmony, then, differs from simple, irreducible, unanalyzable properties, like G.E. Moore's concept of goodness.<sup>70</sup>

Third, the dependency of moral facts on non-normative facts differs in the kinds of natural facts that the moral facts are tied to. The degree or level of influence that non-moral facts or judgments have on moral facts or judgments differs because other naturalistic accounts don't, for example, require the same kind of knowledge of non-human animals, plant life, the components and workings of ecosystems, interactions between plants and humans, the land, etc. This dependency is not reductive in the sense that the concept of harmony is reducible to some natural kind, phenomena, or property, but particular facts about harmony are grounded in the natural phenomena that we are born or placed in (i.e., certain kinds of situations and relationships). In this way, knowing that something is morally right or wrong requires knowing the natural world sufficiently to know how to reciprocate and bring about harmony.

While each one of these implications is only briefly mentioned here, more robust arguments would be needed to justify or substantiate these claims. However, I think these implications are interesting enough that they warrant further investigation. One of my hopes, in addition to bringing to light an indigenous, particularly Muscogee, account of metaethics, is that these implications receive more attention in discussions of contemporary metaethics.

## REFERENCES

Aquinas, Thomas. (2014). *Aquinas: Basic Works* (The Hackett Aquinas). Edited by Jeffrey Hause and Robert Pasnau. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.

---

<sup>69</sup> In this way, something can't be in harmony with itself. To use the concept of health mentioned earlier, humans are healthy when the components of their bodies are balanced. In other words, when the components of our bodies are in harmony, there's health. But, the components of our bodies can't be in harmony by themselves. There needs to be other components to be in harmony with. We could say that are bodies are in harmony with themselves, but this would just be a way of saying that the components that make-up our bodies are in harmony with one another.

<sup>70</sup> Moore 1994.

Burkhart, Brian. (2019). *Indigenizing Philosophy through the Land: A Trickster Methodology for Decolonizing Environmental Ethics and Indigenous Futures*. East Lansing: Michigan State University Press.

--. (2019). "The Groundedness of Normativity or Indigenous Normativity through the Land." In *Comparative Metaethics: Neglected Perspectives on the Foundations of Morality*, edited by Colin Marshall. New York: Routledge.

Chaudhuri, Jean. & Chaudhuri, Joyotpaul. (2001). *A Sacred Path: The Way of the Muscogee Creeks*. Los Angeles: UCLA American Indian Studies Center.

Cordova, Viola F. (2007). *How It Is: The Native American Philosophy of V.F. Cordova*. Edited by Kathleen Dean Moore, Kurt Peters, Ted Jojola, Amber Lacy, with Foreword by Linda Hogan. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.

Deer, Sarah. (2015). *The Beginning and end of Rape: Confronting Sexual Violence in Native America*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Foot, Philippa. (2001). *Natural Goodness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Harjo, Joy. (2015). *Conflict Resolution for Holy Beings: Poems*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Heart, Bear. & Larkin, Molly. (1996). *The Wind is My Mother: The Life and Teachings of a Native American Shaman*. New York, NY: The Berkley Publishing Group.

Lewis Jr., David & Jordan, Ann T. (2002). *Creek Indian Medicine Ways: The Enduring Power of Moskoke Religion*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

Moore, G.E. (1903/1994). *Principia Ethica* (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition). Edited by Thomas Baldwin. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Noddings, Nel. (1984). *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Norton-Smith, Thomas M. (2010). *The Dance of Person and Place: One Interpretation of American Indian Philosophy*. Albany: State University of New York Press.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. (1887/1991). *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Translated and Notes by Maudemarie Clark and Alan J. Swensen. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.

Thompson, Michael. (2012). *Life and Action: Elementary Structures of Practice and Practical Thought*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

Waring, Antonio J (ed.). (1960). *Laws of the Creek Nation*. Athens: University of Georgia Press.

Waters, Anne (ed.). (2004). *American Indian Thought: Philosophical Essays*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing Ltd.

Welch, Shay. (2019). *The Phenomenology of a Performative Knowledge System: Dancing with Native American Epistemology*. Switzerland: Palgrave MacMillan.