
In the last decade, philosophers have increasingly turned to empirical evidence for insight into theories of moral judgment. This shift in philosophical methodology has resulted in some skepticism about moral rationalism as a theory of moral judgment, the traditionally dominant account in moral psychology. Whereas moral rationalists have long thought that making a moral judgment involves a careful and deliberate weighing of principles, social scientific research on automaticity and moral intuition has challenged this traditional view. Empirical work by social scientists like Haidt, Kahneman and Tversky, Nisbett and Wilson, Bargh and Chartrand, and Philip G. Zimbardo has been taken by many to show that our particular moral judgments are mostly arbitrary and incoherent, in large part motivated by unconscious biases, prejudices, and sensitivities to morally irrelevant factors. However, some moral philosophers have argued that while the empirical data require a more complex understanding of reasoning and moral judgment than the traditional view of moral rationalism allows, reasoning and/or general principles still play important and recognizable roles in our moral judgments. I call this latter view “modified moral rationalism.” In this paper, I discuss one account of modified moral rationalism, as presented by Terry Horgan and Mark Timmons in “Morphological Rationalism and the Psychology of Moral Judgment.” My project here is twofold. First, I argue that though Horgan and Timmons’ modified moral rationalism explains the empirical data better than traditional rationalism, they fail to give good reasons to find the account compelling. Second, I show that the account excludes important cases of good moral judgment, giving further reason to doubt the success of the view.

Moral rationalism as a theory of moral judgment holds that moral judgments have two features: first, they are arrived at via conscious reasoning and second, they are deduced from general moral principles. Moral rationalism has been contrasted in moral philosophy to sentimentalism (which holds that emotions, rather than reason, play the central role in our moral judgments), intuitionism (which holds that gut-reactions, rather than reasons or principles, drive our moral judgments), and situationism (which holds that people’s moral judgments and decisions are primarily influenced by external circumstances rather than internal reflection, principles, or character). Recent empirical data has been taken to support these latter views over moral rationalism. However, two kinds of defenses of moral rationalism have emerged in the past several years. The first kind of defense is a defense of principles; this view grants that moral judgments might not be arrived at via a process of conscious reflection, but holds that moral principles still play a central role in our moral judgments. The second kind of defense is a defense of reason; this view grants that moral judgments might not include consideration of general moral principles, but holds that conscious reasoning still remains as a crucial component of moral judgment-making. These defenses aim to provide explanations of the empirical data that avoid the kind of arbitrariness and incoherence in moral judgments suggested by others.

Here, I evaluate an example of the first kind of defense. In “Morphological Rationalism and the Psychology of Moral Judgment” (2007), Terry Horgan & Mark Timmons appeal to the defense of principles, arguing that principles play an “important and perhaps ineliminable” role in moral judgment. Horgan and Timmons present a highly intuitive account of moral judgment which is presented as a competing theory to Jonathan Haidt’s social intuitionism. Horgan and Timmons grant that, as the empirical data suggest, much of our moral judgment and decision making is fast, automatic, and unconscious. However, they reject the claim that the automaticity
of moral judgment means moral judgments are uninfluenced by moral principles. Just because we do not call to mind moral principles every time we make a moral judgment, Horgan and Timmons argue, does not mean moral principles aren’t playing an important role. While Horgan and Timmons provide a nuanced account that blends automaticity and principles, they fail to give reasons to find the account compelling. For example, they introduce a “maxim of default competence-based explanation” which, if accepted, shows that their view is more plausible than Haidt’s; however they provide no reason for one to accept the maxim. Furthermore, Horgan and Timmons appeal to the “non-jarring” experience of moral judgments (a concept I cover in greater detail in the paper) which is better explained by their view than Haidt’s. However, the appeal to non-jarringness excludes important instances of moral judgment where jarringness appropriately occurs. For reasons such as these, I conclude that Horgan and Timmons’ version of modified moral rationalism does not succeed.