Beyond wrongdoing: How the folk parse the moral domain

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Introduction

An emphasis on normative judgments, and in particular on judgments of normative transgressions (i.e. judgments of wrongdoing), has created some distortion in the study of folk moral reasoning by ignoring other moral categories such as supererogation and suberogation, which are related to what is considered the discretionary (i.e., not normative). With this research, we provide the first attempt to overcome this problem. We propose a model that includes nine moral categories of commissions/omissions (see Figure 1), which we analyze in terms of the predicates right/wrong and good/bad (see Table 2; cf. MacNamara, 2006; Zimmerman, 1986). Using examples from the philosophical literature that presumably correspond to these categories, we devised a novel task to test the psychological reality of the model—that is, to probe the extent to which folk moral reasoning deploys these categories. Our results show that indeed one should expand the range of moral categories in the study of folk moral reasoning. We discuss some implications of our analysis and results for the literature on moral psychology.
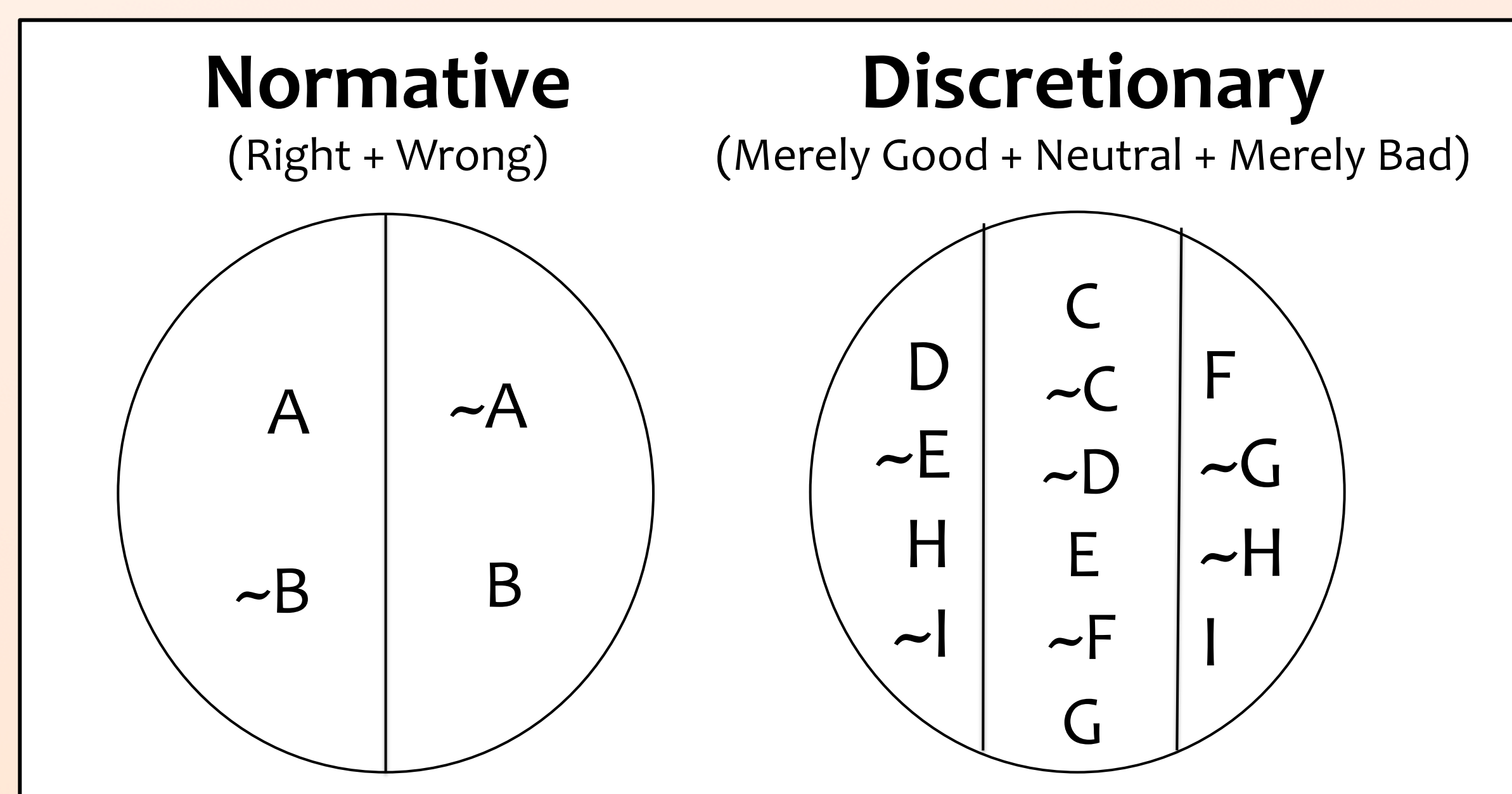

Figure 1. Nine moral categories. Capital letters denote commissions; capital letters preceded by tildes denote omissions. Definitions of the categories are provided in the first column of Table 2. ➡

Method

Ninety-eight undergraduate students completed a survey containing 24 vignettes in which an agent commits or omits a target action. Vignettes were supposed to be prototypical cases of the categories (A-I) in our model (many vignettes were inspired by examples in the philosophical literature on supererogation and suberogation—see, e.g., Driver, 1992; Mellema, 1987).

Sample Vignettes

A vignette (based on Urmson, 1958) representing a prototypical case of D:

Kevin is a doctor. He heard about a natural disaster in a faraway city. Doctors were badly needed to care for the sick and injured in the affected city. However, going there would be expensive and entail leaving his established practice for two weeks while working unpaid and putting his health and safety at risk. Kevin [helped/did not help] the disaster victims.

A vignette (based on Driver, 1992) representing a prototypical case of H:

Graham's close friend needed a kidney transplant. Graham went in for a test and found out he was a match and could donate a kidney to his friend. Graham had two healthy kidneys. The operation would be risky for Graham but would save his friend's life. Graham [donated/did not donate] his kidney.

Participants rated how bad or good it was that the agent did or did not perform the target action on a nine-point scale ranging from *extremely bad* (-4) to *extremely good* (4), centered at *neither good nor bad* (0). They also indicated whether they believed the agent's commission or omission of the action was *wrong* (-1); *right* (1); or *neither right nor wrong* (0). These responses were then coded according to our model in the manner described in Table 1.

We predicted that participants would rate the goodness and rightness of each agent's action according to the category (A-I) it was hypothesized to represent.

Code	Goodness Rating	Rightness Rating
Wrong	Bad (less than 0)	Wrong (-1)
Merely Bad	Bad (less than 0)	Neither (0)
Neutral	Neither (0)	Neither (0)
Merely Good	Good (greater than 0)	Neither (0)
Right	Good (greater than 0)	Right (1)

Table 1. Coding scheme for combinations of goodness and rightness ratings. All combinations not listed were coded as Other.

Definition of Category		Right	Wrong	Merely Good	Merely Bad	Neutral	Other
A. Obligatory Commission: Right (and good) to do; wrong (and bad) not to do.	A	**84%**	0%	5%	0%	2%	9%
	~A	0%	**87%**	0%	1%	3%	9%
B. Forbidden Commission: Wrong (and bad) to do; right (and good) not to do.	B	0%	**99%**	0%	1%	0%	0%
	~B	**71%**	2%	5%	0%	5%	17%
C. Indifferent: neither good nor bad (nor right nor wrong) to do or not to do.	C	20%	0%	34%	0%	**45%**	1%
	~C	6%	3%	3%	1%	**87%**	0%
D. Supererogatory commission: good (but not right) to do; neither good nor bad (nor right nor wrong) not to do.	D	28%	1%	**59%**	1%	7%	5%
	~D	4%	11%	5%	13%	**61%**	7%
E. Supererogatory omission: neither good nor bad (nor right nor wrong) to do; good (but not right) not to do.	E	14%	14%	4%	14%	**40%**	15%
	~E	22%	4%	**53%**	4%	13%	4%
F. Suberogatory commission: bad (but not wrong) to do; neither good nor bad (nor right nor wrong) not to do.	F	6%	36%	5%	31%	**19%**	2%
	~F	52%	0%	**36%**	2%	7%	3%
G. Suberogatory omission: neither good nor bad (nor right nor wrong) to do; bad (but not wrong) not to do.	G	65%	0%	31%	1%	**2%**	1%
	~G	1%	49%	0%	**34%**	14%	2%
H. Complementary supererogation: good (but not right) to do; bad (but not wrong) not to do.	H	49%	0%	**43%**	1%	5%	3%
	~H	2%	39%	3%	**33%**	20%	3%
I. Complementary suberogation: bad (but not wrong) to do; good (but not right) not to do.	I	10%	50%	5%	**11%**	20%	3%
	~I	48%	3%	**14%**	9%	20%	5%

Table 2. Definitions of nine moral categories, corresponding to those represented in Figure 1. Results are presented as percentages of responses corresponding to each code (see Table 1) for all vignettes presumed to be of each type of category. Expected responses are bolded.

Results

Chi-square tests confirmed that predictions for responses to vignettes representing categories A through E were accurate, showing that philosophical intuitions regarding supererogation are reflected in the conceptual system of the folk. Results for vignettes representing categories F through I were less consistent with these categories, as evidenced by greater use of deontic reasoning in participants' judgments. Detailed results by category are presented in Table 2.

The results also indicate that *badness/goodness* are separate judgments from *wrongness/rightness*—59% of responses fall into the patterns representing the relevant merely axiological codes: 19% were consistent with the a priori code *merely good*, 10% with *merely bad*, 20% with *neutral*.

Discussion

These results have methodological and theoretical implications for the literature on moral psychology: one should not operationalize questions about impermissibility by conflating wrongness with badness, as is sometimes done (e.g., Huebner, Lee, & Hauser, 2010). Instead, researchers should be detailed and explicit about which folk concepts are at stake when making claims about how the folk conceptualize the moral domain.

We also believe that the results provide stronger evidence for the existence of supererogatory categories than for the existence of suberogatory ones and that there may be more individual differences in the use of discretionary categories than in the use of normative ones. Future research will address this question directly.

References

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