

# Moral Hermeneutics, Coherence Epistemology, and the Role of Emotion

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**Abstract:** Coherence requires more than logical consistency. Self-consistent viewpoints notoriously conflict with each other. Besides avoid logical self-contradiction, coherent viewpoints must of course be consistent with empirical facts, including any social and interpersonal emotional facts that may be shared by all humans. But since these sets of facts are inherently probabilistic, they again lend themselves to motivated hermeneutical tweaking to make them fit one's initial prejudices and presuppositions, trapping us again in the "hermeneutic circle" – the fact that we cannot know how much our previously-existing worldview motivates selective facts, proliferation of ad hoc hypotheses, choice of "moral intuitions," etc. The problem of ad hoc hypotheses thus becomes crucial. Proliferation of ungrounded assumptions is motivated emotionally in the same way that believing a "conspiracy" theory requires positing unproven assumptions. Moral theory requires studying the way our emotions play into these moral "conspiracy theories." Contemporary neuropsychology of emotion suggests that a certain kind of inner conflict model – one that grants autonomy to the exploratory drive, but in conflict with other hermeneutically relevant emotions – is especially useful in addressing the complexities of incoherence in ethical thinking.

**Keywords:** moral psychology; hermeneutics; political psychology; moral emotions; moral epistemology

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### 1. Hermeneutics in Ethics

The original theological meaning of "hermeneutics" (Schleiermacher 1998; Dilthey 1962) was that the meaning of a text depends largely on the interpretive presuppositions of the reader. For example, in the Hebrew and Christian versions of the Bible, Moses reveals God's ethical injunctions not to steal or kill. But a few pages later, beginning with the Book of Joshua, the Hebrews arrive to the Promised Land only to discover that it is already

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occupied by “a peaceful people” who even offer to convert to Judaism if this is a condition for making peace, since the Hebrew army greatly outnumbers theirs. So we must find a way to interpret the texts so as to choose between the apparently contradictory commands and devise some way to explain away the ones we reject, or interpret them in a way quite different from the superficially apparent “literal” meaning.

In the final analysis, what we believe about a text comes primarily from the overall philosophical worldview that we bring with us prior to any reading of the text. Currently, 44 percent of Americans have changed religious denominations during their lifetime (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2010), implying a good bit of changed interpretation. Even within the same denomination, people disagree on important ethical issues. Both slavery and the abolition of slavery were defended by quoting the same religious book.

This means there must be some philosophical beliefs that are *not* based on religion, and *on the basis of which* even the most religious people interpret their religious texts. The more general epistemological principle is that how we interpret a text or an experience – how we interpret reality in any domain – is affected by previously existing philosophical presuppositions. The presupposed worldview, in terms of which we interpret situations or texts, often acts as a filter through which we view reality, unaware of the prejudices and preconceptions that distort what we see. The psychiatrist Ludwig Binswanger (1963) understood this dynamic as an example of the “existential a priori,” which then was incorporated into Gadamer’s “hermeneutics” (Gadamer 2004) – the idea that perception is always interpretive, that facts tend to be selected or even distorted to fit preconceived categories.

Prasad (2009) interviewed subjects who still believed Saddam Hussein was connected to the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centers in New York. The interviews were conducted in 2004, long after it was well-known that this alleged connection had been factually debunked; President Bush himself had clarified that he no longer believed there was any connection. The 49 subjects in the study were presented with the contrary evidence, including Bush’s own admissions. Yet *only one* of the 49 subjects was willing to give up the opinion that Saddam must have been involved. The idea that President Bush would take the country into an irrelevant war in Iraq based on completely false intelligence did not fit into their overall worldview. When the facts do not fit our overall worldview (which is built up from a lifetime of experience and thinking), then we

either deny the facts, or find a way to modify our overall worldview while still retaining its general coherence. When we cannot think of a reasonable way to make the facts fit the worldview, or change the worldview, then we tend to ignore, explain away, or somehow reinterpret the facts.

What makes the hermeneutical process even more difficult, as recent postmodernists have been at pains to emphasize (Foucault 1994; Lyotard 1984), is that in principle our own hermeneutical maneuvers tend to remain invisible to us. It is difficult if not impossible to know what our own distorting filters are blocking out, because the very fact that they distort reality is itself blocked out. A racist does not appear as a racist in the mirror of self-reflection, precisely because the racist's worldview doesn't make such attitudes appear as racism. This problem is often referred to as the "hermeneutic circle." Obviously, the hermeneutic circle seriously complicates the problem of moral epistemology.

## 2. Hermeneutics and the Crisis of Moral Epistemology

Throughout the modern era, people have increasingly recognized that ethical beliefs cannot simply be grounded in the authority of a cultural tradition any more than a presumably literal interpretation of a religious text, and for the same reasons. Even if we want to accept a text or a tradition as a guide, the very choice as to how to interpret it must be supported by philosophical thinking. In this case, neither the text nor the tradition is the real reason for what we believe. The real reason is the entire conglomerate of philosophical thinking that is not dependent on any text or tradition, because it is what determines how we will interpret any of them. If philosophical thinking independent of the text is our real guide, then which version of the text we accept, or even whether we reject it altogether, must be determined by philosophical considerations that are independent of and thus outside of the text.

But at the same time – and for good reason – people are also mistrustful of the ability of any philosophical method to demonstrate the truth of ethical propositions in a purely logical or rational way. The three most obvious epistemological criteria that might claim to ground the truth of statements are *logic*, *empirical science*, and "*moral intuitions*." As far as the first two are concerned, philosophers from G. E. Moore (1900) to A. J. Ayer (1946, 1965) to the mainstream of the twenty-first century have argued that it is impossible to demonstrate any significant ethical principle either by means of empirical evidence *or* through deductive logic, or even

a combination of the two. And the fact that any “intuition” can contradict an equally consistent contrary intuition shows that none of the intuitions can serve as an adequate basis for believing something.

We have come full circle since Descartes’ dream of deductively proving philosophical statements based on unquestionable first premises. Attempts to prove moral principles through logic alone always fail, because logic alone is “garbage in/garbage out.” If I define God as a banana tree, then obviously I can prove the existence of God because there are banana trees. Nor can the addition of empirical facts (e.g., the fact that people sometimes feel altruistic) prove ethical principles; empiricism yields only descriptive statements. If the fact of altruism is our only guide, we will be altruistic when we want to, and not when we don’t; an ethical theory recommending such a principle is therefore vacuous, telling us we should do whatever we were going to do anyway. As for the third alternative of “moral intuitions,” even if submitted to the rigor of logical non-contradiction, they still yield only internally-consistent unfounded prejudices that are no more credible than their equally consistent contraries.

Given the minefield of opportunities for hermeneutical self-deception combined with this unfortunate genuine difficulty of moral epistemology, we may as well ask ourselves whether it is even appropriate to deal with these problems by means of any “foundationalist” theory of knowledge, in which we attempt to prove the truth of statements using unquestionable epistemological assumptions. Given these obstacles, we might consider ethics rather than economics to deserve the title of “the dismal science.”

But “dismal” does not entail “hopeless.” If foundationalist proofs are not possible, maybe a “coherence” strategy is better suited to the task. It might be time to admit to ourselves that there is no such thing as absolute proof when it comes to ethical viewpoints, but this should not mean that moral skepticism automatically becomes the default position in case of uncertainty. As Robert Almeder (1986) argues regarding scientific theories, the best we can do is choose what seems to be the most “coherent” of a number of theories, admitting that the process will always be fallible, but not arbitrary. Ethical egoism, relativism, and nihilism would be among the theories to be included in comparisons of the coherence of various positions; extremely skeptical viewpoints would have no special status as the preferred default positions in case nothing can be absolutely proven beyond a shred of doubt. If we demand foundationalist proofs in ethics, then it is all too easy for the skeptic to sit back and demand “OK, prove to

me that XYZ is wrong; if not, then XYZ can be assumed to be as justifiable as any other course of action.”

The central strategy of the coherence approach is that ethical theory should be structured more like science than math. There are no unquestionable initial axioms, nor uniquely deducible theorems. But there are facts in the constitution of human emotion, including the fact that humans cannot take the position that nothing has any value. Without value commitments, we would be unable to act. Beyond that, we can try to construe values as limited to our immediate family or tribe, or universalize them; we can try to construe them in terms of utilitarianism, retributive or distributive justice, emotivism, or some other coherent theory. When we notice that we value the well-being of certain people not just instrumentally, but intrinsically, we realize that we cannot coherently take the position that their well-being will not matter after we are dead, or that it did not matter before we met them. We then ask ourselves whether there is a coherent criterion for *which* people’s well-being has intrinsic value, and how to balance their demands on us. Blood relation is not the criterion, because we also intrinsically value close friends, comrades-in-arms, and sometimes even total strangers whom we try to help in emergency situations. At that point, we are involved in the coherence project of trying to hold together a theory that doesn’t depend on fallacious reasoning, nor contradict itself or our best honest assessment of the facts of human emotional life. Such a theory doesn’t merely describe what we feel, but rather reflects what our best assessment suggests we *ought* to feel – the best assessment being determined by examining the coherence of different theories.

We would also need a theory that eschews reliance on “moral intuitions” and proliferation of ad hoc hypotheses. This is no easy task, and criteria for the epistemological coherence of the resulting theories can be applied in ways similar to the way they are applied to scientific theories. This seems especially plausible if we acknowledge Thomas Kuhn’s (1964/2012) analysis of the way scientific theories are affected by hermeneutical standpoints and attitudes in much the same way as ethical worldviews, although perhaps not to as much of an extent.

### **3. Coherence Criteria and the Role of Emotion in Hermeneutical Inner Conflict**

It is important to notice that coherence requires more than merely logical consistency. Conflicting viewpoints may be equally internally

consistent, so we need further criteria. Minimally, a coherent viewpoint (1) must also be consistent with empirical facts (as best we can probabilistically assess them); (2) must fit somehow with any social and interpersonal emotional facts that may be shared by all humans (recent neuroscience suggests there are some; e.g., Panksepp 1998 – more on this point later). But since these last two sets of facts are inherently probabilistic, they again lend themselves to motivated hermeneutical tweaking to make them fit one's initial prejudices and presuppositions, thus facilitating the same hermeneutic circle that entrapped the believers that Saddam was responsible for 9/11. Egoistic personalities will stress that nature is a competition for survival, while cooperative personalities focus on the fact that, as Panksepp shows, there are innate altruistic tendencies and also a natural exploratory drive that makes us want to know the truth about ethics or anything else we are curious about, independently of whether knowing the truth serves the purposes of other emotions. The exploratory drive is not dependent on reinforcement of other drives, but is equally primordial and uses its own relatively independent brain areas and systems of neurotransmitters. For this reason, we want to know if there is a truth about how we ought to behave, regardless of how it affects other motives. My point for now is that which of these various psychological facts we tend to stress may depend on our own hermeneutic filtering system.

But there is another factor in a coherence strategy that can partly compensate for these limitations, and therefore becomes crucially important in evaluating the overall coherence of a moral viewpoint. One of the main focuses of Kuhn's analysis of why scientists tend to resist badly needed "scientific revolutions" is his emphasis on the issue of parsimony *versus* ad hoc hypotheses. Almost any false theory can be defended if we are willing to make the unproven factual assumptions required to maintain its consistency.

Consider any "conspiracy theory" – e.g., that President Obama was not born in the U.S. Currently, a surprisingly large minority of the U.S. population believe this theory. The theory must be reconciled with certain facts: The Governor of Hawaii, who was a Republican (and thus not particularly an Obama supporter), examined the official birth document and confirmed that it was valid; Obama released an official birth certificate, which was openly displayed to the media; a Hawaiian newspaper announced the birth of Barrack Obama in Hawaii on the date of his birth.

Now suppose we allow the proponent of the theory an unlimited number of ungrounded assumptions (“ad hoc hypotheses”). All the conflicting data can be explained away. Suppose the birth certificate was a forgery; that the Governor of Hawaii was lying; that the reason it is not implausible that a Republican would lie to support a Democratic president is that he is really a Democrat in disguise; the newspaper announcement can be explained by the presumed fact that Obama’s mother sent a telegram from Kenya (where the birth had really taken place) asking that the announcement be published, because she was already planning that her son would run for President and therefore need to be a natural-born U.S. citizen – although no evidence of this telegram exists; finally, the news reporters who viewed the birth certificate were predisposed to believe it was authentic because of a “liberal media bias.” Granted all these assumptions, none of which are logically impossible, the conspiracy theory can be defended. Yet obviously, the *more* such ad hoc hypotheses are needed to make the theory fit the facts, the *less likely* it is to be true – all else being equal.

The nature of this conspiracy theory, in a nutshell, illustrates the real basis for the “principle of parsimony” in epistemology and philosophy of science. The principle of parsimony is often justified by citing “Okham’s razor”: that which is explained by a few assumptions is explained needlessly by more. But of course, the fact that a famous Medieval philosopher said something is not a reason to believe it. The real reason is the statistical fact that it is easy to justify any theory, no matter how preposterous, if allowed enough unfounded assumptions. The *more* unfounded assumptions there are, the easier it is to make a false theory fit the available facts of the case. Conversely, the fewer unfounded assumptions a theory must make to make it fit the facts, the more likely it is to be true, all else being equal. This is an especially important point if the unfounded assumptions are generated only after it has become obvious that the preferred theory would fail without them.

In essence, the main reason proliferation of ungrounded assumptions is dangerous to the hermeneutic process is that it lends itself to being unconsciously influenced by emotional motivations, including the motivation to deceive ourselves when we feel that an already-operative worldview is being threatened. The hermeneutic circle prevents us from knowing to what extent this previously-existing worldview in turn was needed for purposes of maintaining whatever psychologically motivated “vital lies” we need to believe (Goleman 1985; Becker 1973).

The unreliability of moral emotions interacting with everyday hermeneutical gymnastics might not be so discouraging to the ethical theorist *if it were possible to ground ethical statements in rational proofs or logical inferences from non-controversial empirical facts* – e.g., facts about human nature that perhaps could imply theories of what is good for humans and thus (one might hope) how we ought to behave. But in the current intellectual climate – and for good reasons – both academic philosophers and the general culture have lost confidence in the ability of logic and/or empirical evidence to yield moral conclusions, unless we have already assumed moral premises. And this would mean that those premises themselves remain ungrounded and irresolvably controversial. The best we can do is to establish criteria for comparing the coherence of various theories – with acknowledgment that establishing such criteria *itself* is a probabilistic and ongoing project requiring the interaction of a diversity of voices able to criticize each others' unwitting prejudices and presuppositions.

Someone might insist that some relatively non-controversial premise such as “pain is bad” might be an acceptable starting point for a foundationalist theory of ethics. But such a premise immediately shows itself to be true at best only *prima facie*. That is, pain is bad, provided that there is not a more important value at stake. Every long distance runner knows that the secret to success is to value a fast time more than one disvalues the pain that must be suffered. Similarly, proponents of harsh criminal punishments posit that, although the convict's suffering is bad, giving people what they “deserve” to receive is a more important value. As soon as we acknowledge that various people can claim that various different values are more or less important than others, we must acknowledge that logic alone, or even logic combined with empirical evidence, cannot prove that one way of prioritizing values and deciding on an actual course of action is preferable to another. At that point, the practical impact is logic combined with empirical evidence cannot ground any one value system any more than another. As soon as we allow “moral intuitions” into the door – even seemingly innocuous ones – or definitions that equate moral with non-moral terms like “pain,” the ultimate result is that “anything goes” in ethics.

So an effective coherence approach must address head-on the factors that cause ethical thinking to be distorted by the various blinders that we all wear in our own individual “hermeneutic circles,” primarily as motivated by our own emotional concern. As a result, we must make a good bit of room

for both empirical affective psychology (including neuropsychology) and careful phenomenological clarification of our attempts to introspect into the emotional processes that complicate ethical thinking and influence our overall hermeneutical worldview. Justifications for cutting aid to hungry children, for instance, are motivated by an entire hermeneutical worldview that has been formed over a lifetime, partly as a means to serving our own emotional needs, and also partly as a result of the various emotions we have felt in our particular life histories. Many such worldviews may have been built up for complicated emotional reasons over the course of many generations, or even entire epochs of history. The emotional life per se may include general tendencies that are both prerequisites for and impediments to coherent moral thinking. Some of these crucial affective processes may be inevitable features of sophisticated conscious creatures – not merely accidental products of history.

Recent developments in the neuropsychology of emotion have offered some hopeful new directions toward this end. Naturalism in moral psychology no longer needs to imply an exclusive emphasis on the notoriously fickle “empathic emotions.” The contemporary neurophysiological emotion researcher Jaak Panksepp has observed that moral thinking, like any other everyday truth-seeking activity, is motivated not only by altruistic instincts or social conditioning, but also and more importantly it is motivated by a basic exploratory drive that makes us want to know what the truth is independently of whether we happen to feel altruistic or nurturing in a particular instance. Panksepp (1998, 2000, 2013) connects this relatively independent exploratory drive to what he calls an innate “SEEKING” system in the brain. An exploratory drive includes a desire to know what is true about reality. It naturally leads to curiosity (see Ellis 1995, 2005) as well as an aspiration to intellectual self-discipline (Frijda 2006). It can lead to what the earlier psychologist Robert White (1959) called “mastery” – a non-derivative desire to explore and understand.

On the other hand, even if there is a natural exploratory drive, it often would come into conflict with equally powerful incentives to confabulate, especially in the face of fear and anxiety. And there would also need to be a relatively independent motivation to *act* in ways that are consistent with what we take these moral truths to be.

The new emotion neuropsychologists like Panksepp and Frijda, and the earlier White, go even further than Maslow (1962/1970) in underscoring the independence and equiprimordiality of exploration. In Panksepp’s

analysis, the SEEKING system in the emotional brain may actually be in a sense *more* basic than the other drives because, at the level of subcortical arousal and action-initiating functions, the other drives depend on the SEEKING system to energize all of our actions and motivate the direction of attention. This is why most of us do not suffer from clinical depression. At the level of everyday phenomenal experience, shutdown of the SEEKING system would lead to an extreme absence of any feeling of inspiration – in other words, clinical depression. Depression shuts down our motivation to act by depriving us of all sense of inspiration to act, and especially our curiosity and desire to explore our environment in search of truth for its own sake.

Recent neuro-emotional research like Panksepp's and Frijda's increasingly shows that the desire to know the truth about our world is not merely a skill set in the service of the other emotions, but rather it is an endogenous and independent *emotion system* in its own right. Mother Nature in her wisdom engineered us so that this persistently driving emotional system is not derivative through reinforcement of other motives. This is what allows us (at least, part of the time) to resist the confabulatory whims that our other emotions tempt us so often to concoct. The desire to know the truth is also evident in other species of animals, except that the human intellect applies it to a wider range of often abstract questions about reality. Cats, for example, do not need to be reinforced for exploring their environment. There is an independent desire to know the truth.

Here is the advantage of this approach for moral psychology: Unlike other emotions, an endogenous and independent exploratory drive would motivate *that* we seek moral truth, but it would not predetermine *what* we take the guiding principles of action and morality to be.

This idea of an internal conflict between equally powerful exploratory drive and other driving motivations creates a more interesting way to think about the hermeneutics of moral psychology. When we act immorally or subscribe to harmful ethical and social viewpoints, these moral lapses may not result from a deficit of empathy or fellow feeling. The problem instead may often stem from a selective suppression of the exploratory drive. In our internal conflict, we may selectively suppress the "love of truth" in certain specific contexts. Proponents of Arian superiority, however intelligent or educated they may be, do not ask themselves some of the most critical questions about the factual and logical basis of their theory – questions that seem obvious to others.

Consider the example of a racist terrorist from the segregated days of

the Southern U.S., who on Saturday throws bricks at Blacks attempting to register to vote, and then gives generous charitable donations to his church on Sunday morning, perhaps also volunteering at a local soup kitchen in the afternoon. Such people often tithed generously to their churches and organized programs to help the poor or the hungry. The problem was not a shortage of empathy and compassion. The problem was the we humans seem to have a well-developed ability to shut down our curiosity about the truth when our overall philosophical worldview is threatened. In such cases, otherwise intelligent and empathic people can become extremely illogical with the result of extreme cruelty.

This selective shutdown can include broader social, political, and religious elements (Duriez and Soenens 2009; Altemeyer 2008). This is what make it so relevant and yet so complicated from a hermeneutic perspective. Cognitive dissonance, authoritarian tendencies, and many other interplays of different motivations can affect the way the conflict between truth-seeking and motivated confabulation play out. But what is hopeful about the new emotion approaches is that we are not *always necessarily* motivated to confabulate. Sometimes we are independently motivated to know the truth, even when it creates fear or dread that the truth may not be in the service of our other desires.

The new emotional neurophysiology of the twenty-first century, in which the exploratory drive is neither clearly hedonistic nor predominantly egoistic. Some elements of the new internal conflict approach were already present in neglected aspects of twentieth century research, tracing as far back as Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and Otto Rank's *The Trauma of Birth*, as will be discussed later. In light of the newly appreciated emotional neuropsychology, ethical beliefs need not be pre-ordained by any combination of emotional preferences – not even hardwired altruistic ones.

It is also evident that the new trend in emotion neurophysiology is sympathetic to phenomenological approaches such as those of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1941/1962, 1042/1963), Martin Heidegger (1927/1962), Max Scheler (1954/1970), Rollo May (1973) and, more recently, Eugene Gendlin (1962/1997; 1978/1982) and Sean Gallagher (2006). When phenomenologists reflect into the subjective side of experience, what they find is not merely hedonism; Scheler observed that we value the well being of at least some others intrinsically, not just as means to our own ends; we cannot feel that a friend's welfare will no longer matter the day after we die, as if the friend's value stood in need of our own egoistic motives to

ground it. This leads to a desire to develop a coherent overall value system in which we acknowledge that there are other intrinsic values other than our own well being. But the most daunting obstacle to the working out of such an overall coherent value system is the hermeneutic circle, with all the intricate conflicts that can re-direct our attention and cause us to systematically ignore or explain away considerations that would be taken more seriously if not for the hermeneutic circle. To deal with these internal conflicts, I have argued, requires acknowledging that ethics requires a coherence rather than foundational epistemology; and that our conflicting basic motivations create the most systematic distortions that lead to incoherence in our value systems.

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