

Going out of Your Mind: Broadening the Social in Social Reasoning

Commentary on Wellman and Miller

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There has been increased interest in deontic reasoning among researchers studying theory of mind and a greater recognition recently that these two areas of research contain potential overlaps. Wellman and Miller's article therefore is a welcome and bold attempt to describe the interrelationships between theory of mind and deontic reasoning. We are in agreement with much of what they propose, and in this commentary, we point out some of the strengths of their conceptualization, as well as some areas where their proposal would benefit from further clarification and elaboration. To foreshadow our argument, we agree with Wellman and Miller's assumption that deontic reasoning and theory of mind overlap, but we question whether they are as interconnected as Wellman and Miller propose. Thus, we elaborate on when and how these two constructs may be related (and when they are not). We employ the perspective of social domain theory [Nucci, 2001; Smetana, 1995, 2006; Turiel, 1983, 2002, 2006] to examine some important limitations to the reach of deontic reasoning and suggest that distinctions among the moral, conventional, and personal domains of social reasoning may be important for understanding the relationship between theory of mind and children's reasoning about right and wrong.

Theory of Mind and Context

One of the important and insightful contributions of Wellman and Miller's paper is that they draw researchers' attention to the normative context of children's mentalistic concepts. Clearly, social norms do impact our reasons for behaving in certain

ways, as Wellman and Miller have so clearly illustrated. We would not attribute self-directed personal desire to behavior that is responsive to social norms or regulations; thus, normative expectations are essential to understanding much of our behavior.

They also usefully call attention to the role of culture. While cultural contexts have been influential in other areas of the developmental sciences, it is interesting that they have been relatively neglected in theory of mind research. This is especially surprising, given the social nature of theory of mind. As Wellman and Miller point out, theory of mind typically has been studied in decontextualized settings and rarely acknowledges the role of children's understanding of the normative social context, including social rules and obligations. Thus, we also agree that cultural contexts can be important when considering reasoning about others' minds. For example, Wellman and Miller rightly suggest that children's thinking about social acts that are obligated or permitted will depend on the particular regulations that exist in different cultural contexts. We welcome research that brings the cultural and contextual nature of social regulations more to the fore in the study of theory of mind. Of course, a crucial issue is *how* culture is instantiated.

We are wary of claims that theory of mind research has relied on Western, individualistic notions of agency. Descriptions of cultural differences have been much debated over the past 20 years, but increasingly, many psychologists and anthropologists have rejected the notion of broad (and stereotyped) cultural orientations like individualism and collectivism. While 'self-directed private states of unique individuals' (p. 107) may not explain every social situation, private states are useful and relevant to individuals in all cultures. It has been asserted that people in all cultures have a concept of self, which includes the idea that others may have different beliefs, desires, and feelings [Spiro, 1993]. Miller's [1986, 1987] research shows that children in very different contexts are concerned with both the state of the agent and contextual factors. Thus, Wellman and Miller rightly suggest that children's thinking about social acts that are obligated or permitted will depend on the particular regulations that exist in their cultural contexts, but considerations of private states are also important regardless of cultural context.

Developmental Evidence for Connections between Theory of Mind and Deontic Reasoning

Wellman and Miller review the parallel developmental paths of theory of mind and deontic reasoning. Their review provides compelling evidence that there are significant associations between them, and that interconnections increase with development, particularly in the early years. Their review shows that there is strong evidence that deontic reasoning relies on mentalistic understandings (especially regarding intentions). There is also tentative evidence that deontic reasoning influences inferences about others' minds in that the outcomes of norm-related actions can sometimes determine intentionality, but the empirical evidence for this is limited to a single study at present. However, it seems clear that developing theory of mind abilities can influence deontic reasoning and that more research should be focused on elucidating these influences. Still, the definition of *deontology* is problematic from our perspective. As we illustrate below, the concept could benefit from some restrictions and greater specificity.

Wellman and Miller define *deontic reasoning* as pertaining to actions that are either obligated or permitted. For Wellman and Miller, most social acts are either regulated by norms (obligations) or not (permissions). For example, Wellman and Miller state, 'personally chosen action is never absolute but rests on not being subject to social regulation' (p. 122). Their definition of deontology as obligation is consistent with philosophers' definitions [see Alexander & Moore, 2007], where deontology is defined in terms of adherence to norms. They differ from standard philosophical accounts, however, in their description of permissions. We suggest that clear and direct permission is necessary for acts to be considered socially right or wrong. Thus, a person is permitted to wave to a friend; the behavior would change or have a different meaning if it were not allowed. However, unless there is a clear and direct permission or obligation associated with waving, permission is not an important part of understanding why someone would engage in that act. Thus, permission and obligation are important considerations, but only in situations where permissions are targeted and specific (such as that one may walk but not run in the hallway at school).

There are other problems with the concept of deontology that are not in accord with some of the important precepts that Wellman and Miller assert (and which we also find to be central). The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* [Alexander & Moore, 2007] states that, 'For deontologists, ... norms are to be simply obeyed by each moral agent,' and acts are judged in accordance with norms, 'no matter how morally good their consequences' (Deontological Theories section, 2.1). Although Wellman and Miller emphasize that people actively reason, the concept as stated seems to imply that norms are obeyed blindly and because of their status as norms, not because individuals actively reason and evaluate them. In addition, the concept of deontology entails the notion that norms define what is right or wrong and that the consequences of actions (for example, their harm or injustice), independent of local norms, are not relevant. Thus, the very concept of deontology does not take into consideration distinctions between moral and nonmoral acts that a great deal of empirical, developmental science research has shown to be important. For instance, moral principles are not culturally variable, whereas conventions are. Wellman and Miller agree that some moral principles are universal; it is the concept of deontology that is problematic.

Despite these conceptual problems, we agree with Wellman and Miller that concepts of right and wrong are importantly related to theory of mind and that it is worthwhile to explore their association. They describe the relationship by stating that 'the mental and the deontic cannot be so simply distinguished, and that naïve psychology, properly understood, includes both concerns' (p. 106). We agree. However, the exact nature of the relationship remains unelaborated. In various places, they refer to 'fundamental overlap' (p. 111), 'conceptual intertwining' (p. 111), and intersections. In their characterization of the relationship, they acknowledge that not every mentalistic conception entails social regulations, but they see deontic understandings as having a psychological core, because these acts are inherently volitional. Thus, their specification of the associations is vague, and in some places, contradictory (see p. 108–109 vs. p. 129–130). While we also view an understanding of volition as very important to social reasoning, exactly how the boundaries between

theory of mind and reasoning about right and wrong are drawn needs further specification, and (despite their criticisms) we suggest that social domain theory provides a better and more precise theoretical model for specifying this relationship than does deontology.

Social Domain Theory, Theory of Mind, and Deontic Reasoning

In our view, an important limitation to the notion of deontic reasoning is that it does not differentiate between different types of social obligations. This concern pertains not just to Wellman and Miller, but more broadly to theory of mind researchers, who have come lately to appreciate the importance of obligations in understanding children's mentalistic concepts. We suggest that it is necessary to distinguish between acts that entail arbitrary, consensually determined, and contextually relativistic expectations for behavior (social conventions) and acts that are socially regulated because they have intrinsic consequences for others' rights and welfare (moral issues). Thus, for social conventions, the regulation defines the act as right or wrong, whereas for moral issues, expectations or rules are based on the nature of the act. And although both the moral and conventional domains entail obligations, they have different characteristics and different relationships to theory of mind development.

Social domain theory also has identified the personal domain as important to human functioning (for instance, as necessary for the establishment of human agency and uniqueness and as the source of rights claims [Nucci, 1996]). Permitted actions could be considered part of the personal domain, which we have defined as actions that are beyond the bounds of societal regulation and moral concern and pertain to privacy, control over one's body, or personal preferences and choices [Nucci, 1981, 1996]. Differences in children's, adolescents', and adults' moral, conventional, and personal evaluations have been extensively researched [for reviews, see Helwig & Turiel, 2002; Nucci, 2001; Smetana, 1995, 2006; Turiel, 1983, 2002, 2006]. We believe that these domain distinctions are also implicated in different relationships to theory of mind in at least two important ways: states of mind, and intentions.

Research on domains of social knowledge suggests that how individuals' actions affect others' *states of mind* may differ for moral versus conventional acts, a distinction not made by Wellman and Miller. Theory of mind is necessary to understand whether others perceive actions as harmful (and thus, as a moral issue), but perceptions are not as central to most conventional issues. Helwig and his colleagues have elegantly demonstrated this in their research, but perceptions about the effect of actions on others' state of mind are not as central to most conventional issues. Helwig, Zelazo, and Wilson [2001] examined young children's understanding of psychological harm in situations where it was necessary to consider an unusual desire. They asked young children what gift to give a birthday child who was afraid of puppies but loved spiders. Children as young as 3 years of age took into account the birthday child's unconventional desires and recognized that it would be wrong to psychologically harm the child by giving a puppy. Likewise, there are situations where theory of mind is necessary for divining the desires of those involved in situations of physical harm. Zelazo, Helwig, and Lau [1996] found that young children appreciate that

harm depends on the particular desires of the victim (for example, in the case of a puppy that cries when petted, but smiles when hit). Thus, it may be necessary to understand others' desires to make moral judgments about harm. In contrast, for conventional issues, an understanding of the effects of actions on others' states of mind is not essential to thinking about those actions. For example, someone may choose to use a salad fork to eat a salad without considering the effect of this action on others' minds (consider that this choice is made frequently even with no one around).

There are cases, however, where reasoning about the effect of one's actions on others' states of mind becomes necessary, as when violations of conventional norms result in physical or psychological harm to others. Reading others' states of mind would be needed to understand that someone feels disrespected by the violation of a conventional norm, thus resulting in psychological harm. For example, a woman might choose to wear a scarf over her head when going to mass with her grandmother to avoid distressing her grandmother. These types of cases, called second-order violations, are considered moral, as they involve psychological harm. Second-order moral violations require an understanding of others' minds to understand when a violation of a conventional rule can lead to feelings of disrespect. This type of mentalistic reasoning may thus be required to distinguish when a conventional act will be perceived as moral and psychologically harmful.

Wellman and Miller rightly point out that an understanding of others' *intentions* is relevant for understanding others' social reasoning, and we agree that intentions are important both in the moral domain and in regard to conventional social norms, but there are differences in how intentions are interpreted in moral and conventional acts. To take one example, Wellman and Miller cite a study by Kalish [1998] that shows that 4-year-olds, but not younger children, consider knowledge of the rule when making judgments about violations of social rules. However, other research has shown that rule violations are considered permissible if one does not know that a conventional rule applies, but moral violations are considered wrong, whether or not the actor knows whether a rule applies [Smetana, 1981]. Thus, the intentions of the actor, like the state of mind of the victim, play different roles in judgments of moral compared to conventional violations. Therefore, the distinction is important for establishing the influence of theory of mind in reasoning about right and wrong.

Personal issues also include unique considerations. Wellman and Miller suggest that personal issues are characterized as permitted because they depend on 'not being subject to social regulation' (p. 122). We agree, although an important part of our conceptualization is that personal issues are more than the sum of the issues left unregulated; they are acts that individuals actively claim as 'permitted' and up to the person to decide. Of course, this varies by cultural context, as Wellman and Miller acknowledge, but our research has shown that there are many tensions and conflicts, both developmentally and culturally, in drawing boundaries between what is permitted and what is obligated.

While Wellman and Miller suggest that domain theorists have not articulated the interdependence of the domains, domain overlap and coordination have been extensively investigated in previous social domain research. Instances of domain overlap are especially important for understanding the unique role of theory of mind. Social domain theory research has shown that the boundaries of the personal domain are sometimes contested. For example, Smetana's [1989] research has indi-

cated that adolescents and their parents – in different cultures [e.g., Yau & Smetana, 1996, 2003] and ethnicities in the USA [Fuligni, 1998; Smetana, Daddis & Chuang, 2003] – often have conflicts and disagreements about whether issues are legitimately regulated by parents or are personal and up to the adolescent to decide. In this type of contested situation, the boundaries between obligations and permissions are not so clearly drawn and depend on who one asks. Thus, an understanding of others' perceptions about what is regulated and what is permitted changes understandings about contested issues. Building on domain theory research, it would be useful to extend this research to younger children to examine Wellman and Miller's suggestion that early theory of mind development affects reasoning about authority mandates.

We also agree that reasoning about authority in contested areas could be expected to differ in different cultures, another area that is in need of further investigation. Issues of duty and prosocial behavior may be affected by social expectations, and perceptions of others' expectations should be examined in different cultural contexts.

Future research should also acknowledge and build on the substantial research demonstrating how informational beliefs (about facts and the nature of reality) affect moral judgments. In a rigorous program of research, Wainryb and her colleagues [Wainryb, 2006; Wainryb and Brehl, 2006] have shown that informational beliefs affect judgments of others' actions. Others' informational beliefs can influence evaluations of whether actions entail harm or not, and consequently, whether an act involves moral considerations. For example, spanking is usually seen as permissible when individuals believe that it is an effective method of discipline; without this belief, spanking is seen as harmful. One needs to know why someone does something (whether he/she has a relevant informational belief) to know whether it is moral or not.

It is clear that young children are concerned with both psychological issues of desire and belief and with issues of norms and morality and that these areas have important interconnections. We suggest that theory of mind is not foundational for all types of deontic reasoning, but that it is essential for some. We hope that Wellman and Miller will continue to refine the conceptualization articulated in this paper to clarify these interconnections. We believe that distinction between the moral and conventional domains helps to elucidate this relationship, as theory of mind may be differentially implicated in moral, conventional, personal, and contested issues. We applaud Wellman and Miller's prompting of research into the connections between theory of mind and social reasoning in different cultural contexts, and we hope the suggestions we have presented are useful in guiding future research.

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