DIVISION OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES
READING GROUP FINAL REPORT

Section A
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WBS No: R-106-000-016-646
Date & Amount Received: 01/10/2008 & $5000.00
Amount Balance: $ 1 397.72

Signature of PI: Date: __September 28, 2009__

Section B

(1) Final Report Write up (Itemization of books/works discussed, principal participants, invited speakers, financial statement of expenditures. A couple of paragraphs summarizing themes and nature of discussion. Please also refer to the quality of participation and list of books/description)

The Moral Psychology Reading Group met bi-weekly from October to May during term time to discuss the contributions of recent evolutionary theory, cognitive psychology and cognitive neuroscience to the study of moral psychology, and their implications for traditional philosophical theories of morality. The readings were drawn from Walter Sinnott-Armstrong’s (2008) three-volume edited collection on Moral Psychology published by MIT Press:

Moral Psychology: Vol. 1: The Evolution of Morality: Adaptations and Innateness
Moral Psychology: Vol. 3: The Neuroscience of Morality: Emotion, Brain Disorders, and Development

The following faculty participated in the reading group, and made valuable critical contributions to the ongoing discussion of the readings.

John D Greenwood, Visiting Professor, Department of Philosophy, NUS
Professor of Philosophy and Psychology, City College and Graduate Center,
City University of New York
Klaus Georg Boehnke, Visiting Professor, Department of Psychology, NUS
Professor of Social Science Methodology, Jacobs University, Bremen
Ilya Farber, Assistant Professor of Social Science and Philosophy, Singapore Management University (Cognitive Scientist from UC-San Diego)
Justine Burley, Associate Professor and Deputy Executive Director, NUS Graduate School for Integrative Sciences and Engineering
Lo Yuet Keung, Associate Professor, Department of Chinese Studies, NUS
Kim Myeong Seok, Visiting Fellow, Department of Philosophy, NUS
Cecilia Lim, Associate Professor, Department of Philosophy, NUS
David Tien, Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, NUS
Axel Gelfert, Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, NUS
Neiladi Sinhababu, Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, NUS
Alexandra May Serrenti, Teaching Assistant, Department of Philosophy, NUS
Ben Blumston, Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, NUS
Loy Hui Chieh, Assistant Professor, Department of Philosophy, NUS

The sessions were well attended, and although many of us were critical of the rather hasty conclusions drawn by some of the contributors to the edited volumes, we all thought the research generated intriguing and important questions that ought to be addressed by contemporary philosophers and psychologists. Many of us found ourselves committed to new research projects as a result of the experience. These included the possible development of simulation experiments in moral psychology using virtual reality scenarios created in Second Life. Some of the group met with John Yap from the Dean's Office and the creative directors from Dream Axis to discuss the feasibility and costs of developing the relevant software. We also discussed the possibility of an international research project that would explore the social and cultural dimensions of moral psychology through experimental simulation.

The highlight of our year was a visit by Jesse Prinz, John J Roberts Distinguished Professor of Philosophy and Cognitive Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, now Distinguished Professor of Philosophy at the City University of New York Graduate Center. Professor Prinz held a workshop on moral psychology with the group, as well as giving a paper in the Department of Philosophy and meeting with graduate students.

Topics discussed throughout the year included the question of whether as a consequence of the evolution of neurocomputational systems in social environments we employ a different logic of inference for deontic conditionals (employing 'ought') than we do for ordinary conditionals. There was lively discussion of the question of whether moral prohibitions against behavior such as incest are grounded in sentiments or aversions that are byproducts of evolution, rather than social or cultural constructions, and whether familiar moral virtues such as kindness, fidelity, magnanimity and heroism could be products of sexual selection rather than social normativity.

We considered the possibility that human morality is a byproduct of the evolutionary development of symbolic thought, and the radical thesis that humans are possessed of an innate universal moral grammar analogous to a Chomskian universal linguistic grammar, or at least constrained by innate biases that make certain moral prohibitions and prescriptions far more likely than others. We also considered the equally radical alternative position, which is that there are no hard-wired biological constraints on morality, and that the only limits on morality are the limits of our creative cultural construction.

We also considered various theories of moral intuition, including those that claim that moral intuitions are special cognitive heuristics, subject to the same types of irrational biases and unreliability as cognitive heuristics in general, and especially vulnerable to framing effects in the conceptualization of moral situations; that claim that moral intuitions are analogous to Chomskian linguistic intuitions, universal moral
principles that are grounded in innate and unconscious cognitive mechanisms; and that claim that that moral intuitions are originally emotional reactions formed into moral judgments in the service of social goals.

We engaged the uncomfortable fact that there appear to be fundamental and intractable differences in moral intuitions between individuals and cultures, and the real possibility that our moral language is semantically incoherent, being employed for inconsistent purposes. We also had a lively discussion of empirical studies that challenge the “folk-psychological” assumption that our judgments about moral responsibility for action are based upon judgments about agent causation of action, by showing that judgments about responsibility and agent causation do not always converge. We considered the controversial proposal that deontological moral judgments are rationalizations based on emotion and that the only genuine moral judgments are those based upon consequentialist reasoning in terms of cost-benefit analysis.

We pondered the degree to which we can reasonably hold morality to be grounded in cognitive intelligence, given that psychopaths are not generally deficient in intelligence and seem to have no difficulty in forming third person hypothetical moral judgments. We considered intriguing studies that suggest that autistics lacking emotional empathy may nonetheless develop forms of disinterested concern for others that approximate Kant’s rationalist theory of morality. Finally we considered the challenging thesis that moral development is based upon social categorizations of behavior that have lost their social power in contemporary culture, and evidence suggesting that consequent disruptions to moral development in adolescence can lead to major moral transgressions that do not appear to be rooted in any discernable psychopathology.