The Role of Practical Reason in an Empirically Informed Moral Theory
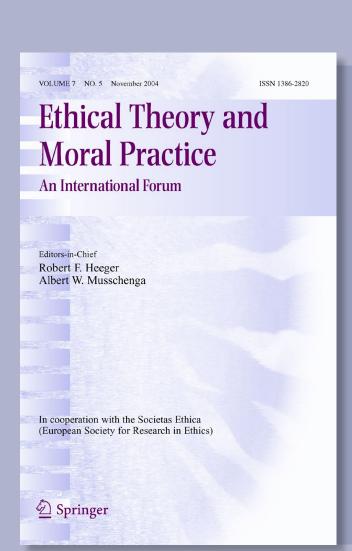
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Abstract Empirical research paints a dismal portrayal of the role of reason in morality. It suggests that reason plays no substantive role in how we make moral judgments or are motivated to act on them. This paper explores how it is that an empirically oriented philosopher, committed to methodological naturalism, ought to respond to the skeptical challenge presented by this research. While many think taking this challenge seriously requires revising, sometimes dramatically, how we think about moral agency, this paper will defend the opposite reaction. Contrary to what recent discussions lead us to expect, practical reason is not simply a philosophical fiction lacking empirical roots. Empirical research does not exclude the possibility that practical reason can play a substantive role; rather, there is evidence that it can help us both to determine our first personal moral judgments and to motivate us to act on them.

1 Introduction

Methodological naturalism holds that the methods of philosophy ought to be continuous with the methods of science. Many find the appeal of this approach to be obvious, particularly for moral theorizing whose focus in light of its normative aspiration is intertwined crucially with empirically verifiable claims about what people are like and how they tend to act. Yet it has proved frequently the case that when central claims invoked in moral theorizing are put to test empirically, they fall short. Perhaps the most notable example of this occurrence to date has to do with character traits, the existence of which is central to many moral perspectives, yet is nonetheless called into question by empirical research (Doris 2002). Emerging alongside this debate over character traits is a subtle, but equally challenging, line of disagreement with respect to the existence of practical reason, upon which my focus in this paper centers. Overwhelmingly, moral philosophers assign

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practical reason, understood to be our capacity to reason from normative beliefs to practical conclusions, a key role in their normative theories. But empirical research challenges this assigned role for practical reason, claiming among other things, that reason plays no substantive role in how we typically make moral judgments (Haidt 2001; Prinz 2006) or are motivated to act on them (Knobe and Leiter 2007).

What is the moral philosopher to do in the face of this research? The answer is not at all clear. From the start, we ought to recognize that empirical research can never discredit entirely the project of putting forward a vision of human nature as an ideal: just because most people do not act on the basis of character traits does not mean that they cannot, nor does it mean that there is no purpose to be had by reflecting on idealized pictures of human nature that bear little resemblance to ordinary examples of human nature. But those of us who do believe in methodological naturalism, and do believe that empirical research ought to inform and/or constrain moral theorizing, cannot get by with this kind of response. Working from within this framework commits us to taking steps to ensure that the assumptions invoked in moral theorizing are supported empirically; that the moral ideals we develop are psychologically plausible. Doing so requires that we take seriously challenges empirical research presents us with. When it comes to practical reason, many think taking these challenges seriously requires revising, sometimes dramatically, how we think about moral agency (e.g., Doris 2009). In contrast to these views, this paper will defend the opposite reaction. My paper will show that contrary to what recent discussions lead us to expect, practical reason is not simply a philosophical fiction lacking empirical roots. Empirical research does not exclude the possibility that practical reason can play a substantive role; rather, there is evidence that it can help us both to determine our first personal moral judgments and to motivate us to act on them.

I begin my argument by considering in detail the challenges empirical research raises with respect to the nature and role of practical reason. The worry, as I analyze it, begins with discussions of moral cognition which show that affect, rather than reason, plays a primary role in the formation of ordinary moral judgments. Running in tandem with this concern are discussions of a range of social psychological research that call into question the extent to which people deliberate prior to acting and so exercise practical rationality.

2 The Skeptical Challenge

In this section, I will explore empirical evidence that calls into question reason's capacity to determine the content of morality and to motivate agents to act. It is disagreement over reason's role in these areas of moral cognition and motivation that classically demarcates sentimentalist positions from rationalist ones; while solving that particular debate is not my direct focus here, my exploration into reason's potential role in moral theory will likewise focus on these two areas. As we will see, empirical evidence raises clear skepticism in both areas, suggesting that practical reason is of little use to an empirically sensitive moral theorist. While my ultimate aim is to contest this conclusion, in this section I examine the research upon which this conclusion rests. After laying out this research, I will go on in consequent sections to show that despite the skeptical challenge, and the evidence behind it, understanding practical reason to play a substantial role in both moral judgments and moral motivation is consistent with and supported by empirical research on self-regulation, and warranted by the disconcerting evidence of how we behave when we do not invoke practical reason.

2.1 Moral Judgments

Some of the earliest challenges to the existence of practical reason come from those studying the formation of moral judgments. A wide-range of empirical research, from a number of different disciplinary perspectives, supports the idea that affective processes drive our moral judgments. On this understanding, moral judgments consist in intuitive responses or emotional reactions; they are not products of a deliberative reasoning process. In this section, we will look briefly at three different perspectives supporting this general conclusion.[1]

Let us begin through consideration of one highly influential empirical account of moral judgment, which is the "social intuitionist" model developed by Jonathan Haidt (2001). Haidt studied people's moral reactions to controversial situations, such as incest, and found that on the whole most people do not reach moral judgments via a process of reasoning, but instead form moral judgments on the basis of intuition. The main support for this conclusion comes from participants' inability to provide reasons in support of their moral judgments. When confronted with a morally loaded situation, most people experience "flashes" which present themselves as moral judgments; however, when pressed for reasons to explain their judgments, they fall short. They judge that incest is wrong, yet struggle to find a justification of its wrongness, particularly given the well-crafted incest scenario they are presented with that eliminates from consideration most of the reasons typically appealed to in support of the immorality of incest.

This demonstrated inability to offer a reasoned account of moral judgments leads Haidt to conclude that moral judgments are more appropriately understood as moral intuitions. He defines moral intuitions "as the sudden appearance in consciousness of a moral judgment, including an affective valence (good-bad, like-dislike), without any conscious awareness of having gone through steps of searching, weighing evidence, or inferring a conclusion" (Haidt 2001, p. 818). Given that moral intuitions occur without rational deliberations, Haidt believes the process through which they are formed is "akin to aesthetic judgment: One sees or hears about a social event and one instantly feels approval or disapproval" (2001, p. 818).

In equating moral judgment with moral intuition, Haidt's model denies practical reason a role in the formation of moral judgments. Haidt allows that people may engage in post-hoc moral reasoning to *justify* their judgments and allows that people may also engage in reasoning as an adjudicative tool in cases where their intuitions conflict with prior, reasoned considerations. In neither of these cases, however, is the process of reasoning essential to determining the content of moral judgments.

The social intuitionist model advocated by Haidt has been validated from a second perspective, that of neuroscience. A series of neuroimaging studies conducted by Greene and colleagues wherein MRI machines track the areas of subjects' brains that activate when they are presented with moral dilemmas such as the trolley problem affirms the domination of automatic emotional processes over deliberative reasoning processes (Greene and Haidt 2002; Greene et al. 2001). The suggestion here again is that when people respond to morally-laden situations, their responses are not best represented as the product of reason: they consist primarily in intuitive, affective responses.

The phenomenology described through Haidt's model and affirmed through neuroscientific imaging—that of *feeling* that something is wrong, rather than *reasoning* that

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[1] For a more thorough analysis of the range of empirical evidence supporting this conclusion, see Prinz (2007, chap. 1).

something is wrong—is supported by a separate line of empirical research that looks specifically at the role affective processes play in generating moral judgments, and thus brings to the table a third perspective affirming the centrality of the emotions to moral judgments. The line of argument is relatively straightforward: If moral judgments are the product of reason, then individuals with impaired affective systems ought to be able to make moral judgments just as well as those who are fully functioning. But, research on psychopathy proves this thesis wrong: psychopaths possess an inability to make genuine moral judgments that appears to correlate with problems arising with affective, as opposed to rational, mechanisms (Blair 1995; Nichols 2002, 2004; Prinz 2006).

Psychopaths cannot distinguish violations of moral norms ("a child hitting another child") from conventional norms ("a boy wearing a skirt") (Blair 1995, p. 14). This, coupled with the psychopath's failure to be motivated or otherwise care about moral judgments they are presented with, leads many to argue that while psychopaths may invoke moral judgments, they do not truly understand what they are. Nichols suggests "they use the term 'morally wrong' only in an inverted-commas sense" (2004, p. 77). In a similar vein, Prinz writes that psychopaths "give lip-service to understanding morality, but there is good reason to think that they do not have moral concepts—or at least they do not have moral concepts that are like the ones that normal people possess" (2006, p. 32). According to Blair's research, the psychopath's inability to grasp (and so, to make) *genuine* moral judgments is directly traceable to disruptions in their affective processing systems and specifically a failure to experience sympathy, guilt, remorse, and empathy (Blair 1995).

While this analysis of psychopathy represents a dominant psychological view that has had substantial influence on philosophers, it has been challenged recently by Cima and colleagues (2010), who find that psychopaths are able to differentiate between different degrees of permissible harms in a similar fashion as do healthy subjects. This research suggests that psychopaths do understand moral right and wrong; what sets the psychopath apart, on this analysis, is only her failure to *care* about what is right and wrong. If Cima et al's findings are representative, disruptions to the psychopath's affective processing systems do not inhibit the formation of moral judgments, but they do inhibit their reactions to moral judgments. Thus, Cima et al. conclude that "normal emotional processing is likely to be most important in generating an appreciation of these distinctions and in guiding actions" (2010, p. 65). This analysis allows for a greater role for reason in the formation of moral judgments, yet maintains that emotions, rather than practical reason, drive moral motivation. Whichever side turns out to be the most accurate analysis of psychopathy, the verdict for reason looks grim: psychopaths—our best-known real-life examples of amoral agents—reason very well, yet have defective affective components.

2.2 Moral Deliberations

The research discussed above suggests that if reason is invoked at all in the formation of moral judgments, it is minutely so. The skepticism regarding practical reason does not end here, in debates over moral cognition. It extends (in perhaps an even more troubling fashion) to questioning reason's engagement in the deliberative process., It is natural to believe that when people think about what they ought to do, they engage practical reason in their deliberations and, though this process, form and consult reasons they have for acting one way or another. As we will see, however, empirical research into the causes of people's actions shows first, that very few acts are consciously motivated, and second, that beliefs rarely motivate behavior. Together, this research poses a skeptical challenge to reason's capacity to function as a source of moral motivation.

Research on "automaticity" supports the first claim, which is simply that the overwhelming majority of people's actions consist in non-conscious, automatic responses to environmental stimuli. On this model of human behavior, external stimuli triggers an "unconscious behavioral guidance system" whereby there is "no role played by conscious choice" (Bargh and Morsella 2009, p. 92); our actions are, in effect, simply dictated by external stimuli. Exposure to the word "rude" makes us more likely to be rude, exposure to the words "Florida, sentimental, wrinkle" makes us more likely to behave as an elderly person by walking slowly or exhibiting forgetfulness (Bargh and Chartrand 1999, p. 466). These kinds of scenarios lead Bargh and Chartrand to hold that "most of a person's everyday life is determined not by their conscious intentions and deliberate choices but by mental processes that are put into motion by features of the environment and that operate outside of conscious awareness and guidance" (1999, p. 462).[2]

These non-conscious "mental processes" operate in two stages: The first is automatic perception of external stimuli, which includes anything from physical objects to the behavior of others. This automatic perception triggers the second stage, which is the activation of the cognitive activity that directly produces behaviors. Because this process goes through without the person engaging in deliberation, nor even having any conscious thoughts about her behavior, we can say that her actions are automatic, and directly caused by external stimuli. Perception creates the essential link, which Bargh & Chartrand describe as a "direct and automatic route . . . from the external stimuli to action tendencies" (1999, p. 465). Our environment thus dictates our behavior: it generates automatic perceptions that then create behavioral tendencies automatically, without our even being aware of the perceptions motivating our behavior (Bargh and Chartrand 1999, p. 466).

One explanation of why we exhibit this tendency towards automaticity has to do with the limited cognitive resources we have to drawn on a day-to-day basis: deliberation takes work and research shows that the more conscious control we exert over any given act, the less capable we are to perform other tasks (Baumeister et al. 1998). The effect is so dramatic that Baumeister and colleagues estimate that only 5% of our daily activities is caused by consciously controlled deliberation (1998, p. 1252).

If Bargh and Chartrand are correct, an agent's beliefs typically play no role in motivating her to act; practical reason is thus not employed as a source of motivation. This conclusion is bolstered by further research exploring the connection—or lack thereof—between beliefs and behavior. Beliefs, it seems, have little to no causal influence on actions, particularly moral actions. In an article that (in part) explores the empirical support for a Kantian model of rationalist morality, Knobe and Leiter (2007) present empirical research that complements that of the automaticity theorists and shows beliefs and practical reasoning play little role in generating behavior. The evidence for this, they claim, is two-fold.

First, there exists no decisively strong correlation between the possession of beliefs and corresponding behaviors. If practical reason did motivate an agent's actions, we would expect her actions to reflect her beliefs, construed here as expressed attitudes; for example, we would expect someone who expresses a belief about the moral importance of promise-keeping to keep her promises, or that someone who expresses a particular stance for or against a race will act in accordance with that stance. However, a host of research challenges the expectation that there exists even a significant *correlation* between beliefs and behaviors. Knobe and Leiter note that one 1969 review (Wicker

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[2] See also Bargh and Ferguson (2000) for further development of this thesis.

1969) finds the correlation to be "shockingly low", while a 1995 review (Kraus 1995) finds a 14% correlation between beliefs and behavior (Knobe and Leiter 2007, p. 101). Although one could argue about the statistical significance of the former, we cannot deny the fact that beliefs simply are not the best predictors of behaviors; this conclusion calls into question the existence of a causal relationship between beliefs and behavior.

Second, it seems that the best explanation of those cases where there does exist a correlation between beliefs and behaviors is that *behaviors* have a causal influence on *beliefs*, and not the other way around. If practical reasoning is an essential part of a deliberative process that culminates in a specific behavior, then one's moral beliefs and judgments must in some sense be the cause of one's behavior. Recall, however, Haidt's discussion of the social intuitionist model of moral judgments. Haidt found that people engaged in only post-hoc moral reasoning and developed moral beliefs and attitudes as a means to *justify* their pre-existing intuitions and already established behavior. People immediately judge that incest is wrong, and then find themselves dumbfounded when they realize they have no explanation of the wrongness, that there were no reasons underlying their judgments. He suggests that moral beliefs and attitudes arise after the fact when people are "faced with a social demand for a verbal justification"; when this happens, "one becomes a lawyer trying to build a case rather than a judge searching for the truth" (Haidt 2001, p. 814). On this account, beliefs do not and cannot motivate actions, as they are only developed *upon* acting and not prior to one's actions.

Knobe and Leiter (2007, p. 102) explore similar research supporting this idea (that behavior impacts attitudes, yet not vice versa) and find it to have widespread support. The particular research they examine focuses on the tendency people have to adjust and, often, change professed attitudes in light of their actions. They focus specifically on a study by Fendrich (1967) that explored correlations between pro-black attitudes and attendance at NAACP meeting. Fendrich found that there was a greater degree of correlation between the two when attitudes were gauged following the behavior (i.e., after participants had attended or not attended the NAACP meeting) and concluded that people adjust their attitudes to align with their already established behavior. Such research suggests that, if there is a causal relationship between beliefs and behavior, it is the behavior impacting the beliefs and not the other way around. On this analysis, reason does not influence one's behavior; beliefs play virtually no role in motivating one's behavior.

Once again, it seems that there is no empirical support for the idea that practical reason plays any substantive role in causing one's actions or motivating agents to act for, when an agent's moral beliefs do come onto the scene, they serve a justificatory, but not *motivational* purpose. Moreover, as the earlier sections of this paper have demonstrated, those beliefs are likely to be the product of predominantly affective processes, not rational ones. The empirical landscape thus leaves little room for practical reason: most people, it seems, do not employ practical reason in their everyday experiences of morality.

If we accept that these conclusions follow from the lines of research we have considered, what follows on a philosophical level? Many empirically orientated philosophers invoke this line of research as a springboard for their defenses of neo-Humean sentimentalist accounts of morality, according to which morality is a matter of sentiments and moral judgments depend on our emotional responses (Nichols 2004; Prinz 2007). Their reasoning is straightforward: while empirical research cannot disprove a philosophical moral theory (in this case, moral rationalism), it certainly threatens it. According to these philosophers, the skeptical challenge presented makes it incumbent upon a responsible moral philosopher, and certainly on the responsible naturalistic moral philosopher, to put practical reason in its

place: reason ought to be seen as secondary to the emotions, as something that can at best help us to identify the object of our moral sentiments.[3]

Doris's proposed response to the skeptical challenge is even more extreme: he argues that since the capacity for and exercise of practical reasoning (what he calls "reflectivism") has become such an ingrained part of our understanding of personhood, taking seriously empirical research likely leads to skepticism about persons. His response stems from the fact that on many views, "failure to go in for reflection precludes one's membership in the community of persons" and on some views even more is required from practical reason, such as "that one correctly detect salient facts about oneself" (Doris 2009, pp. 60–61). The solution Doris proposes is that we change (radically) the way we think about persons and approach with "increased skeptical scrutiny" the view of persons that holds them to be reflective agents (Doris 2009, p. 79).

While these philosophical positions are by all means consistent with the empirical research we have considered, prior to embracing them we ought to think hard about: (1) what we give up by embracing them, and (2) whether or not there are alternative philosophical positions that are empirically supported. Exploring the latter is the topic of the remainder of this paper, but before moving to this stage, let us for a moment pause on the former. If we really do not give anything up by eliminating practical reason from consideration, then it seems we ought to look no further into its possible roles in an empirically informed moral theory.

Yet, before jumping ship on the idea that practical reasoning is an essential component of moral agency, we ought to consider why many philosophers do find themselves so attracted to the idea that the distinctive aspect of persons is their reflective capacity, and why so many are unwilling to give up on the traditional conception of rational agency that follows from this idea. While this idea may have its genesis in the ancient thought that reason is unique to the human species, I believe that what explains its enduring strength is what the use of reason has the potential to do for those who possess it. Consider the fundamental Kantian theme that through reason we can transcend the phenomenal world, ultimately enabling us to have true autonomy over ourselves. While no doubt Kant takes this theme too far, we ought not to deny that rational reflection upon our emotions licenses us with a degree of control over our emotions, entitling us to be agents rather than wantons. Rational reflection allows us to question whether that which we desire is worthy of our pursuit; whether our affective responses track something that really counts. Even when the answers to these questions speak in favor of following our desires, and trusting our affective responses, the fact that we have reflected upon them gives our consequent actions an intentionality, an authority, that we simply do not get when rational reflection is eliminated from the picture.

This basic idea is particularly powerful when it comes to the sphere of morality. As an inherently normative enterprise, morality works on the presumption that we have control over our actions; that we can deliberate and reflect about what to do; that we can strive to improve our behavior. We now know that most of us fail to invoke practical reason and so may very well fail to act as moral agents, as philosophers, at least, tend to conceive of them. But does this mean that philosophers have completely missed the boat? Do we need to go back to the drawing board, as Doris' line of argument suggests, and reconceive what moral agency is all about? Should we, for instance, understand moral reasoning to be simply a matter of automatic intuitive processes, as Haidt's model implies? And should we then understand moral agency in terms of our automatic responses to external stimuli, as Bargh and Chartrand's model suggests? In the following sections of this paper, I argue that the answer to this line of questioning has to be no.

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[3] For example, Prinz claims that "reasoning is integral to moral judgments", but only because "reasoning is often necessary to determine whether a particular form of conduct is an instance of some more general action type towards which we already have a moral sentiment" (Prinz 2006, p. 36).

Given all that we give up when we deny practical reason a substantive role, we ought to do so only if empirical research dictates that we must; that is, only if we cannot establish a role for practical reason that is empirically supported. If we can establish an empirically supported role for practical reason, then we should maintain a conception of moral agency that assigns a central role to practical reasoning, for this provides us with a more robust conception of moral agency and, as we will see, one that is further warranted given the dim consequences of what happens when we do not invoke practical reason.

The argument I invoke as a defense of this claim runs as follows: it argues from a philosophical perspective that the inherently normative domain of morality requires conceiving of moral agency in terms of deliberating upon and acting on reasons; simultaneously, it shows from an empirical perspective that this conception of moral agency is a psychologically plausible one, and not a work of philosophical fiction. There is, indeed, empirical research that practical reason can play a substantial role both in the formation of moral judgments and in moral motivation.

3 Responding to the Skeptical Challenge

Thus far, we have seen that most people fail to employ practical reason in their moral lives: they make moral judgments without engaging it, and they fail to be motivated by it. I will not here contest the empirical research driving the skeptical challenge, although doing so seems conceivable.[4] I do hope to put the research into perspective, however, and in service of this aim, it should suffice to point out that what the research shows us is how people tend to form their moral judgments, and how people tend to behave. While highlighting these tendencies provides a valuable descriptive analysis regarding how morality ordinarily presents itself in human behavior, I think, and suspect many will agree, that it is mistake to see this kind of descriptive analysis as dictating the content of our philosophical, normative, analysis of morality.

Most researchers would agree that the ways in which we act call for improvement, and would caution against taking their descriptive theories as a decisive basis that informs how one ought to behave. Haidt notes that people who follow their moral intuitions to make decisions regarding public policy "often bring about nonoptimal or even disastrous consequences"; he thus suggests that his social intuitionist model might be useful to "in helping educators design programs (and environments) to improve the quality of moral judgment and behavior"(2001, p. 815). Greene (2008) argues that because emotional responses largely dictate our deontological-type intuitions while rational processes give rise to consequentialist intuitions, we ought to reject deontology in favor of consequentialism. Automaticity theories agree: simply because their research shows that people *do* behave on the basis of automatic perceptions does not mean that we *should* give in to these perceptions.[5]

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[4] See, for instance, Huebner et al. (2009), as well as many of the articles in the 2006 special volume on Empirical Research and the Nature of Moral Judgment in *Philosophical Explorations* 9(1).

[5] However, they are skeptical about our powers to do so, given their recognition of the limited capacities we have for exerting conscious control over our behavior, a concern echoed in Doris (2009). This is a genuine concern, in response to which I have two main suggestions: The first is that, given the importance of morality to our lives and others, we are warranted in devoting our limited resources to deliberating over moral matters; the second (which I discuss in later sections) is that it is worth pursuing ways in which we can develop automatic action-sequences which we associate with our (reasoned) moral judgments, making it the case that once we deliberate upon what is the right thing to do, we set into motion automatic action-sequences, thus mitigating the cognitive energy requisite to doing the right thing.

However, while these psychologists are satisfied limiting their analyses to the descriptive, philosophical discussions that are motivated by a concern for empirical adequacy tend to blur the line between the descriptive and normative, giving the impression that descriptive empirical accounts must dictate the content of the normative accounts in order to maintain empirical adequacy. Knobe and Leiter (2007), for instance, critique those philosophers who engage in moral psychology without paying attention to the descriptive accounts developed by psychologists for not paying sufficient attention to the fact that "ought implies can". Yet Knobe and Leiter neglect to take seriously the possibility that there are many different senses of "can", i.e. many different ways in which people can engage with morality. Full appreciation of this fact suggests that descriptive accounts of our moral judgments and motivational tendencies must be put into perspective. As long as it remains possible for people to diverge from these ways of behaving, such descriptive accounts should not be mistaken for accounts of how we *should* make moral judgments and of what *should* motivate us. Rather, they should be treated as a starting point for normative considerations: given that this is how we tend to judge and act, what changes can we make to improve from this basis?

In seeking to answer this question in a way that maintains empirical adequacy, we can make profitable use of psychological research that tackles related concerns, such as how we can take control of and influence our otherwise automatic perceptions. This research is part of an emerging line of research on self-regulation that explores how people can best respond to their natural tendencies and regulate themselves by goals they have selected. As we might expect, the opportunities that call for self-regulation are vast: research on self-regulation has focused on everything from the pursuit of health goals (Maes and Karoly 2005), to success in the classroom environment (Zimmerman and Schunk 2001), keeping a budget (Faber and Vohs 2004), even, to maintaining successful interpersonal relationships (Vohs and Ciarocco 2004).

In focusing on how we can alter successfully our behavior, research on self-regulation straddles the line between descriptive and normative approaches in a way that makes its conclusions particularly suitable to the task of the paper. Theories of self-regulation are descriptive in their dependence on empirical evidence regarding how people *do* regulate, yet normative in their motivation to provide individuals with the best and most efficient tools to help them act the ways they choose to behave.

For the purposes of this paper, the most philosophically salient aspect of research in self-regulation is that many instances of self-regulation appear to invoke practical reason in two crucial areas: First, as that which enables people to formulate and choose their goals; and second, as that which motivates people to self-regulate. Both of these functions are essential to successful self-regulation; and, as I will argue, when what is at stake is a form of self-regulation that overrides competing impulses, both functions are explained best through appeal to practical reason. As the setting and pursuit of moral goals is most often of this nature, this suggests an important role for practical reasoning—even in, and especially in, an empirically informed moral theory.

3.1 Practical Reasoning in Goal Selection

Conceived most generally, self-regulation consists in a controlled process by which individuals alter their actions in the pursuit of a goal. In this process, goals both dictate the requisite course of actions and serve as the standards by which we monitor and evaluate our actions. While it is possible for self-regulation to occur automatically (Fitzsimons and Bargh 2004), most instances of self-regulation require conscious attentional effort and the

deliberate setting of goals.[6] This begs the question: to what extent is practical reason involved in the selection of goals?

Setting aside instances where goals are activated automatically and sticking to cases of active, conscious self-regulation, it appears that reason could be involved in goal selection in the following ways. First, reason may be invoked simply to determine which is one's strongest desire. This use of reason coheres with an instrumentalist understanding of goals, according to which goals just are one's strongest desires. Second, reason may be invoked to assess one's desires and to reflect upon the reasons one has to pursue any one of those desires.[7] This latter use of reason incorporates practical reason of the kind we have been exploring: it contributes, in a substantive way, to one's decisions about what it is that one ought to do. While it does so in conjunction with reflection on desires, in virtue of considering the reasons one has to pursue a given desire, the reasoning invoked in this kind of deliberation is of a very different nature than it is in the former kind. If we can establish that this kind of deliberation, that invokes practical reason in the assessment of one's goals, exists and so is empirically verified, and show that this kind of deliberation is likely to be invoked in the case of selecting moral goals, then we will have found an empirically verifiable role for practical reason in the formation of one's first-personal moral judgments and in the setting of standards for what one ought to do.

The process of goal selection, considered in isolation, is difficult to test empirically. In most of the experiments used to explore self-regulation, participants are assigned goals, thus by-passing the goal selection process entirely. When, on the other hand, we consider examples of self-regulation outside of the experimental setting, challenges arise with respect to how we interpret the scenario. Consider the binge drinking college student: while one explanation of this student's behavior might be a lack of self-regulation, as Heatherton and Baumeister suggest, an equally plausible explanation is that this student may instead be "almost too efficient" in her self-regulatory skills (Heatherton and Baumeister 1996, p. 92). These kinds of challenges make it difficult to study directly the process of goal selection. Nonetheless, there are many lines of study that provide indirect support for the claim that, in many cases, practical reason is invoked in the assessment of goals.

Consider, as a start, the very nature of self-regulation. Self-regulation occurs in the prefrontal cortex (PFC) of the brain, an area known as the "seat of consciousness", or the "chief executive" (Banfield et al. 2004, p. 62). The prefrontal cortex is responsible for executive and cognitive functions including memory, control of emotion, and decision-making. That self-regulation occurs in the prefrontal cortex does not preclude that goals are instrumental, thereby requiring a minimal use of reason, but it certainly opens up the possibility that practical reasoning does occur. This possibility is strengthened by evidence that shows those with damage to an area of the PFC (specifically, the ventromedial PFC) are unable to make decisions and struggle particularly with controlling their behavior in the face of strong desires. Individuals with this kind of damage are likely to demonstrate addiction, to engage in pathological gambling and other "compulsive or uncontrolled" behaviors (Banfield et al. 2004, p. 74). These are the kinds of behaviors that result when one is compelled. While in completely by-passing the executive functioning of the PFC, they present a more extreme form of compulsion than most of us are likely to experience

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[6] Conscious attentional effort is most important when committing to or pursuing new goals, as opposed to habitual goals, where a script has already been established and can be automatically activated (Banfield et al. 2004; Bargh and Gollwitzer 1994)

[7] There is a third possible use of reason in goal selection: reason could be invoked to select goals independently of any reflection on one's desires. I'm skeptical that we can find genuine instances of this in the empirical research.

when we pursue our strongest desires (i.e. our instrumentalist goals), the parallels ought to be clear enough: selection (and pursuit) of our strongest desires does not seem to be so crucially dependent upon the operations distinctive of the PFC. Indeed, as I will explain shortly, if all self-regulation consisted in the pursuit of instrumentalist goals, it does not seem that self-regulation would be a very interesting phenomenon worthy of paying attention to. Yet, psychologists highlight self-regulation to be a crucial component of how we understand the self, to be that which is "essential for transforming the inner animal nature into a civilized human being" (Vohs and Baumeister 2004, p. 1). Understanding self-regulation to consist solely in the procedure by which we pursue our strongest desires simply does not best capture the phenomenon identified to be of such crucial importance to human behavior.

This line of reasoning suggests it is likely—certainly, possible—that in many instances of self-regulation the goals invoked are not of the instrumentalist variety and instead are ones that are selected upon assessment. And this suggestion coheres with the most widely attributed function of self-regulation: to override one's impulses, to pursue desires that are not strong enough to drive us on their own, absent a regulatory mechanism that supplements its strength and allows us to direct our attentional control towards its fulfillment.[8] The instrumentalist conception of goals cannot make sense of this; indeed, some argue that the instrumentalist conception of goals cannot make sense of the label "goal": We tend to think of our goals and final ends as up to us, as things we choose, and so as reflective of not simply who we are, but of who we want to be. As Millgram observes, the problem with the instrumentalist conception of goals "is that it makes ultimate ends come out arbitrary: your ultimate ends are the things you just happen to want; they are beyond the reach of deliberation and rational control. But we know from experience that this is not what our lives are like" (2001, p. 9).

I propose that the best explanation of the process of goal selection, that makes the best sense of the phenomenon of self-regulation as well as of our own experiences, runs something like the following: When we select goals, particularly goals which require the overriding of other, more compelling desires, we reflect on the sorts of desires we have with the aim of determining which if any of these desires should be granted the status of a goal—i.e., as something that *ought* to be pursued. The reasoning involved here is not simply a matter of taking stock of one's desires and identifying the "strongest" one, but rather involves reflection on, amongst other considerations, the sorts of desires we want to endorse and what other reasons—beyond the fact that it satisfies a desire—we have to pursue the ends in question. Over the course of this reasoning process, we in effect determine whether or not there are pressing considerations that warrant assigning some desire or end the status of a goal.

What results from the end of this process may in fact be a desire, but it is a desire of a different kind than are desires as they present themselves prior to reflection. It is, as Joyce describes it, a "valued" desire (2001, p. 69) or, as I describe it, a desire plus a reason. The difference between these types of desires is made clear upon reflection on the desire for self-interest and the desire to act in accordance with morality. While the former may have a greater degree of strength than the latter, for most of us the latter is more valued. It is of a different nature than the former, desire for self-interest, precisely because it reflects the reasons an agent has for embracing the desire. Joyce argues that this reflection *privileges*

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[8] Indeed, many psychologists *identify* self-regulation with self-control, holding that self-regulation occurs only when there are competing influences that make self-regulation requisite. Others argue that self-regulation ought to be understood more broadly, to include cases where regulation is necessary in the face of a non-impulse, such as for the coach potato who lacks any drive (Carver and Scheier 1996).

the desire, yet this privileging has no impact on the brute strength of the desire (2001, p. 69). Considered just in terms of strength, the desire for self-interest is likely the stronger. However, the valued status of our desire to act in accordance with morality leads us to privilege this desire over the competing, stronger desire for self-interest.

When we select a valued desire as a goal, we do so on the basis of the considerations we identify to speak in favor of its value. In so doing, we implicitly agree to view these considerations as normative, making it the case that goals serve as standards, as reference values from which to decide how to both act and gauge success in our actions. Practical reason is invoked throughout this process and significantly so, for it is what enables an agent to reach the stage where she can meaningfully elevate some end or desire to the status of a goal.

This process of selecting non-instrumental goals invokes a form of conscious, deliberative reasoning akin to what Kruglanski and colleagues (2000) describe as the "assessment function." The assessment function "critically evaluates alternative goals or means to decide which are best to pursue" (Kruglanski et al. 2000, p. 793); as in the above depiction of practical reasoning, through assessment we look for considerations which count on favor or against a particular option, ensuring that what we choose is worthy of our choice. Kruglanski et al's research shows that the assessment function is an important aspect of self-regulation *and* that it is a distinct operation from the function that leads us to action, the "locomotion function". The locomotion function directs us to the means requisite to satisfying a goal, it "constitutes the aspect of self-regulation concerned with movement from state to state and with committing the psychological resources that will initiate and maintain goal-related movement" (Kruglanski et al. 2000, p. 794). If we analyze the current debate by appeal to the assessment and locomotion functions, we see that the assessment function drops out of the picture when dealing instrumentalist goals. Where goals are understood to be our strongest desires, locomotion ought to kick in without the interference of assessment. And while Kruglanski et al's research suggests that the degree to which both assessment and locomotion are required varies depending upon the individual and the situation, both are nonetheless important aspects of self-regulation: they are "part and parcel of any self-regulatory activity" (Kruglanski et al. 2000, p. 794). The best explanation of this is that self-regulation often involves the pursuit of non-instrumental goals that require assessment through practical reason.

We have seen reasons derived from both analysis of self-regulation and from empirical research of the process of self-regulation supporting the thesis that the best explanation of active, conscious self-regulation is that many of the goals invoked in the process of self-regulation are not instrumentalist goals and are goals arrived at through a practical reasoning process. If we grant this much, it is an easy—even, obvious—move from this thesis to the conclusion that moral goals are of this sort. In speaking of "moral goals", I refer to the first-personal standards one sets for one's behavior: to one's commitment to helping others, to treating them well, to developing virtues, to becoming a good person. These are goals that realistically are not adequately described as representing one's strongest desires, although they may very well be one's most valued desires.[9] They are goals that likely have their roots in some desire we have, and which we easily can see to have reasons speaking in favor of their pursuit.[10]

Consider the following example: An agent has many desires, including the desire to treat others well, and the desire to do what best promotes her interests. These desires often

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[9] For full defense of this claim, see Besser-Jones (in press).

[10] This analysis helps to explain the amorality of psychopaths: they lack the basic input (derived from affective components) from which to reason from.

conflict, and she often finds it the case that she doesn't, in fact, always treat others well. She reflects on this desire—to treat others well—and decides, for a variety of reasons, that she will make "treating others well" her goal. In so doing, she (implicitly or explicitly) determines on a cognitive level that she has more important reasons to treat others well than to always do what best promotes her interests, even though this self-interested desire is likely stronger than her other-regarding one. Practical reason enables her to reach this decision, and to elevate her desire to treat others well to the status of a goal, where it can serve to anchor an effective self-regulation process.

Other explanations of this kind of phenomenon are possible. It is possible that what happens through the privileging process is that the agent derives new desires from other desires. The empirical evidence we have considered does not necessarily exclude this, or other, possibilities. It has, though, allowed for the possibility that practical reason plays a substantive role in the formation of moral judgments (and, we will see in the following section, in moral motivation). I have argued that this reading constitutes the best explanation of the process of goal selection, making it the case that we have good reason to believe that in cases of self-regulation by moral goals, the selection of these goals requires assessment by practical reason. Regardless of where the input to this assessment process arises—be it from intuitions, sentiments, or conventions—essential to moral agency is assessing what we are given and selecting our own goals.[11] The research we have considered provides us with an empirical basis from which to base this conception of moral agency and from which to assign practical reason a central role in the formation of our first-personal moral judgments.

3.2 Motivation by Practical Reason

I hope to have established that assigning practical reason a substantive role in the assessment and consequent selection of moral goals is consistent with empirical research and that we have compelling reasons to embrace the more robust understanding of moral agency that this allows us. This takes us a long way towards removing the charge that practical reason is a philosopher's fiction. This section takes pursuit of this cause one step further, by arguing that practical reason can play an important role in *motivating* the process of self-regulation in the pursuit of moral goals.

A few qualifications are in order before moving to my argument. First, we need to recognize that at this point we are considering a particularly narrow range of cases of self-regulation: namely, self-regulation by moral goals, where moral goals are taken to be the product of assessment by practical reason and to have the status of a valued desire, as opposed to a strongly compelling desire. As we will see, the dynamics of these particular kinds of cases enable us to draw conclusions about the motivation requisite to them that would not be appropriate when considering self-regulation by other kinds of goals, especially instrumentalist goals.

Second, the current discussion maintains focus on conscious processes of self-regulation. We might wonder whether or not this limitation is apt; after all, it seems possible for moral goals to be pursued by automatic processes of self-regulation, in

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[11] This is true, even if we take the empirical literature to show that moral judgments are "cognitively impenetrable", that is, to show that moral judgments have their root in affective mechanisms *and* cannot be swayed by beliefs or reasoning processes. The process of goal selection takes as given moral judgments; reasoning is involved in deciding how one should regard and/or embrace one's moral judgments. My argument here thus does not depend on any particular view on the cognitive basis of moral judgments.

which it seems inappropriate to talk about "motivation" at all. My response to this thought is one of cautious optimism. As I do not believe that moral goals are ones towards which we are naturally drawn with enough strength to combat competing desires, I do think that regulation by them is going to require conscious attentional control (and so: motivation by practical reason)—at least in the beginning. However, research on the pursuit of habitual goals gives us hope that once moral goals and the action sequences we associate with them become routine, they will become automatic (Banfield et al. 2004; Bargh and Gollwitzer 1994). This possibility is promising, particularly given the widely acknowledged limits on our capacity for self-regulation. Given these limits, the more we can make the pursuit of moral goals automatic, the better for us all. However, the possibility that the pursuit of moral goals could become automatic does not mitigate the likelihood that practical reason is involved in the conscious self-regulation that occurs prior to this automation.

With these qualifications in hand, let us now turn to consideration of why we ought to think that self-regulation by moral goals requires motivation by practical reason. I first explore the picture of moral motivation that follows from understanding moral goals to be the product of rational assessment. I then argue that this account of moral motivation, that is reflective of a certain form of self-regulation, parallels the philosophical understanding of what Darwall (2006) calls "deontological motivation". As a result, we can conclude that this kind of motivation by practical reason is indeed consistent with empirical research.

Let us begin by reflection upon what we have learned to be an empirically supported explanation of the nature of moral goals, and the process through which moral goals are formed. I have argued that moral goals are most plausibly seen to be the product of rational reflection on relevant normative considerations, the agent's acceptance of which transform certain desires and ends into goals; moral goals are thus privileged or valued desires. If this is true, then it prima facie seems that pursuit of moral goals requires motivation by practical reason. In committing to a goal, an agent does not simply identify some pre-existing desire; rather, she recognizes that she has reasons to value a particular desire and so to pursue it as a goal. I will now argue that these reasons have the power to be motivationally efficacious, lending credence to the suggestion that when agents self-regulate in the pursuit of moral goals, they are motivated by these reasons. Practical reason is thus a candidate source of moral motivation.

I have argued that many goals, including moral goals, can be differentiated from desires largely on the grounds that they are selected, at least in part, on the basis of normative considerations (reasons). It follows from this understanding of goals that pursuit of such goals requires motivation by practical reason. This case is at its strongest when the goals in question are goals that *require* self-regulation as do moral goals. Such goals, we have seen, are goals that seemingly can be obtained only by overriding one's desires and impulses. While they are valued desires, they are not strong enough to motivate behavior in the face of competing, stronger desires. An agent who commits to these kinds of goals acknowledges that she has reasons to override her desires and impulses. To return to our earlier example, the agent who commits to the goal of "treating others well" acknowledges that she has *reasons* to pursue this goal, reasons that trump other, potentially conflicting, and likely stronger desires, such as the desire to do what best promotes her self-interest. If so, these *reasons* are what will motivate her to self-regulate, and necessarily so, for they will be the only source of motivation available for her to choose those actions that are conducive to her goals, yet go against her stronger desires.

This kind of self-regulation is well illustrated in the following example described by Darwall, who uses it to illustrate how we can be motivated by norms:

> Suppose, for example, that you can't get yourself to stop eating nuts at a party. On the one hand, you desire to keep eating them. On the other, you think you shouldn't. It doesn't matter for present purposes why. The reasons might relate to health, avoiding boorishness, not taking more than one's share, or whatever. The point is that some conflict exists between your desire for nuts and your normative conviction regarding what there is most reason for you to do. We know, of course, that frequently the nuts win out. But the point is that they don't always and that even when they do, there is usually some conflict. At least some motivation seems to come from accepting that there are weightier reasons to stop eating. (2006, p. 154)[12]

In this instance, we have a person who has selected a goal (not eating too many nuts) that requires regulation of her behavior (namely, that she regulate her snack choices at a party). When she succeeds in regulating her behavior, and does not over-indulge on nuts, it is not because she does not *desire* to over-indulge. It is because she has decided that there are compelling reasons for her not to do so. Her motivation to regulate her behavior derives from her decision to select this particular goal, a decision that, as we have seen, is explained best by appeal to a reasoning process that culminates in her acceptance of normative considerations granting some end or desire the status of a goal. Where goals are of this nature (i.e., are the product of rational assessment), and demand self-regulation (and so require overriding desires), as I have argued moral goals to be, we have powerful reasons to think that they require motivation by practical reason.

This motivational picture follows quite naturally from the specific kinds of self-regulation we are focusing on which require conscious, active regulation in the face of competing desires. In these cases, it is simply not clear how desires could serve as the sole motivation. When we consider what actually happens when an agent regulates her behavior by moral goals, when she regulates her behavior in the face of competing desires, on the basis of her endorsement of reasons that compelled her to select a particular goal in the first place, it becomes clear that this kind of self-regulation requires more than affective processes, that it requires motivation by practical reason.

This state of self-regulation finds a philosophical analogue in what Darwall calls a state of "normative acceptance". Normative acceptance refers to a state in which an agent regulates her conduct by normative principles, as opposed to by desires. She acts for the sake of norms, rather than desires. According to Darwall, in so doing, she thus invokes a psychology of the will—a "normative theory of the will"—that is distinct from a desire-based psychology largely in that it recognizes the motivational power of practical reason. Darwall argues that the psychology of the will distinctive of normative acceptance is one that involves "deontological", as opposed to "teleological", motivation:

> Normative acceptance thus motivates intention and action directly, not out of a desire for some state. Perhaps we should say that it motivates "deontically". Even when the norm is teleological, like "Bring it about that *p*," normative acceptance does not motivate teleologically. It can only motivate one to act in conformance with applicable norms or normative reasons, even when these dictate the very same acts one would be moved to by a desire that *P*. (2006, p. 158)

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[12] Darwall notes that Allen Gibbard first raised this example.

The central idea underlying this analysis of what is involved in normative acceptance is that, for an agent to be in a state where she governs her actions by norms, she must be motivated in a unique and distinctive way: she must be motivated by her acceptance of norms. Her will thus does not (and cannot) aim at desire-satisfaction; practical reasoning must be at work.

Deontological motivation captures what seems to me to be a distinctive aspect of the kind of self-regulation we are focusing on, which simply is not best explained in terms of desire-based motivation. There is a real sense in which the person who acts solely on the basis of desires is not self-regulating.[13] She acts instead according to her strongest desire, and it will become a contingent matter whether or not so doing enables her to attain her goal. This discussion gives us good reason to think that when self-regulation requires controlling competing impulses, the most successful forms of self-regulation will invoke practical reason as a powerful source of motivation and not just as an instrument of desire satisfaction.

The idea here is not that desire-based instrumental reasoning plays no role in self-regulation. Indeed, my argument has maintained that most, if not all, of our goals are based in desires that help to motivate us to work towards their satisfaction. My point is only that, insofar as particular goals represent valued desires that *require* active self-regulation, we have compelling reason to think that the agent must invoke practical reason to provide her with the motivational element that enables her to regulate.

An example will help to illustrate. Consider the agent who selects as her goal completing her first marathon. She is a casual runner whose longest run to date is three miles. In committing to this goal, she recognizes that, in order to attain it, she will have to engage in a rigorous training program and so commits to this goal as well. This latter goal is easily understood to be a goal of self-regulation, with the end-goal of completing the marathon. What motivates her to get up every morning and go out for a training run? If she is truly self-regulated, the answer must be partly that she has committed to the end-goal of completing the marathon and placed herself under a normative obligation to do so. The answer cannot be, on its own, that she desires to complete a marathon: this desire will at best motivate her through the marathon itself. This desire can work in conjunction with her acceptance of the normative obligation, but she cannot *regulate* herself as long as she depends exclusively on instrumental reasoning for her motivation.

Again, while other explanations of these kinds of scenarios are possible (it is possible that the desire we experience as being the strongest is not the one that has the most motivational force), the best explanation of them invokes practical reason. Goals that require self-regulation are ones that do not, on their own, have sufficient strength to override competing desires; they are those that, like the commitment to treating others well, seem to attain their motivation force by being supplemented by the reasons arrived at through rational assessment. If so, then these reasons must motivate in order for the process of self-regulation to be successful. Given the convincing case that can be made to show that moral goals are of this nature and so require self-regulation, we have good reason to believe that practical reason plays a motivational role in their pursuit.

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[13] Scheffler makes a parallel point, arguing that this person, who takes a "purely instrumental view of [her] own actions", quite simply does not see herself as being subject to the norms in question (2004, p. 231). To be subject to norms is to abandon instrumental reasoning; it is to *stop* assessing every action "in terms of its causal instrumentality", i.e. in terms of its immediate potential to satisfy her desires (Scheffler 2004, p. 231).

4 Conclusion

While it may be true that ordinary moral judgments have their basis in intuitive and/or affective processes, and that people exercise less control over their behavior than we would hope, none of this entails that the philosopher's traditional emphasis on our rational deliberative faculties is a fictionalized ideal that empirically sensitive philosophers, committed to methodological naturalism, have to reject. I hope to have shown that understanding practical reason to be a central component in the exercise of moral agency is supported by empirical research on self-regulation; that, moreover, the conception of moral agency it delivers is a compelling one that preserves the normative aspirations of moral theory. This possibility is one that has been largely overlooked by those working within empirically informed moral theory. While empirically informed moral theorizing must proceed on grounds that reflect a reasonable conception of how people tend to act, it should also explore how people can change their usual tendencies and act better. As earlier noted, the usual tendencies of people are not the most admirable nor productive ones and are ones that exhibit little if any degrees of agency: we have stereotypes that activate automatically and lead us to treat others poorly and judge them unfairly (Bargh and Chartrand 1999); intuitions "condemning evil" lead us to react towards terrorism with outrage and horror rather than to seek out a cause or explanation (Haidt 2003); intuitions telling us "do no harm" lead parents to refuse to have their children vaccinated (Baron 1998). Embracing a conception of moral agency that invokes practical reason to help us deliberate upon these intuitions, and to consider the reasons counting in favor of or against them, allows us to view our desires as inputs rather than directives, and encourages us to draw better conclusions about what we ought to do; using those reasons as a motivational resource enables us to increase the degree of agency we exercise. These are the kinds of things a moral theory should aspire for: to help people make better moral judgments and to become better people through exercising agency. A naturalistic moral theory need not give up these aspirations; there is a role within empirically informed moral theory for them.

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