

DOES EXPERIMENTAL ETHICS HAVE A NORMATIVE ACCOUNT?*

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Abstract:

The first obstacle experimental ethics faces when it comes to its normative account is Hume's guillotine, also known as the naturalistic fallacy. My objective is to show how experimental ethics can answer to naturalistic fallacy with the help of normative projections.

In order to arrive at my objective, I will first explain what experimental philosophy (xphi) is, and how it is perceived as a movement against "armchair philosophy." In the second section, I explain why experimental moral philosophy or experimental ethics is immune to many of the arguments that are raised against xphi, and why it is not necessary to be against armchair philosophers. After this, I argue that discussing the meta-ethical grounding of experimental ethics will not help us to answer to the naturalistic fallacy. The last section contains my own proposal for seeing people's intuitions and decisions as normative projections that have an impact on normative ethics. In this way, Hume's guillotine is no longer an obstacle for a normative account of experimental ethics.

Key words: experimental philosophy, experimental ethics, Hume's guillotine, normative account, intuition, semantic intuitions, normative projections.

1. What is experimental philosophy?

In the last decade, experimental philosophy (xphi) has introduced innovative ideas about morality and pointed to some difficulties with so-called "armchair philosophy," i.e. conceptual approaches that ignore experimental findings. Fortunately for my objective in this paper, these difficulties do not apply to xphi's narrowest field, experimental ethics.

But first, let us examine what is meant by "experimental philosophy," what arguments have been raised against it.

Xphi developed surprisingly quickly in last few years, and there are signs that it will continue to capture more and more professional attention. The easiest way to describe it is to say that it is a new interdisciplinary enquiry that brings empirical evidence to bear on some of the answers philosophers have provided to philosophical questions. In this interdisciplinary enquiry we can identify methodologies that are easily recognizable as common to psychology, sociology, neuroscience, and behavioural sciences. But what exactly is the object of this interdisciplinary enquiry? The usual answer is that *intuitions* are at the core of the enquiries that xphi researchers are conducting. Some are questioning the validity of these intuitions, or examine them through empirical methods.

These xphi enquiries are seen as a movement against what they call armchair philosophy. According to xphi researchers, armchair philosophers rely on their own professional intuition without bothering to test if their intuitions are common to everyone else, or if they should or should not rely on them. Therefore, experimental philosophers believe that their new approach will help armchair philosophers to gain a better and more objective understanding of the world. Some of them even argue that philosophers should "burn their armchairs" and engage in experimental enquiries in order to better understand their subject matter.

On the other hand, armchair philosophers argue that some of the evidence that xphi researchers inject into philosophical discussion should not be trusted,

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for at least two reasons. First, it is easy to identify major flaws in the experiments upon which the new movement grounds its statements. Second, their research is quite irrelevant to philosophy and to its primary subject matter. In order to better understand these arguments, we should take as an example some research on semantic intuitions.

Machery et al. (2004, 2009, and 2010)¹ and Mallon et al. (2009)² conducted experiments designed to prove that intuitions about meaning and reference vary between East Asians and Westerners, mainly because of cross-cultural differences. This hypothesis is proved with the evidence collected from the answers people gave to an experiment similar to Kripke's Gödel thought experiment.

For those who do not know the Gödel thought experiment, I will summarize it briefly below. Saul Kripke, in *Naming and Necessity*, creates the Gödel thought experiment in order to show that proper names do not refer to descriptive definitions. In the experiment he asks us to imagine a possible world in which Gödel steals the incompleteness theorem from another person named Schmidt, who was found dead under mysterious circumstances. According to descriptivism, when you use the name Gödel, you refer to the person that proved the incompleteness of arithmetic, which in this hypothetical situation is wrong, because the person who proved the incompleteness of arithmetic is Schmidt. Kripke concludes that when we use the name Gödel, "...since the man who discovered the incompleteness of arithmetic is in fact Schmidt, we, when we talk about Gödel, are in fact always referring to Schmidt. But it seems to me that we are not. We simply are not."³ What Machery and others claim is that Kripke's intuition is simply wrong, and that we should engage in an empirical enquiry in order to answer the question posed by the Gödel thought experiment.

Max Deutsch argues against my earlier claim in his book: *The Myth of the Intuitive – Experimental Philosophy and Philosophical Method*. He explains that xphi researchers give no credit to armchair phi-

losophy, and choose to transform it into some kind of a non-empirical approach that rests only on a priori propositions. He says that "...the results of xphi studies do not... pose any challenge to any of the arguments or conclusions that analytic philosophers trade in."⁴ In another book, Herman Cappelen⁵ argues that what xphi researchers think about armchair philosophers—that they rely on their intuitions—is false. The book proceeds with meticulous care to show that armchair philosophers sometimes use the word "intuition" in a misleading way that does not affect their arguments.

Looking at these two books, we might wonder why it is necessary to pay any attention to this movement called xphi when its claims are so questionable. I would argue that there are at least two reasons. First, it is not the entire movement that suffers from these mistakes. For example, experimental ethics tends to differentiate itself from other forms of experimental philosophy, and can discuss, collaborate on, and even revise what their armchair counterparts theorize about. In the following chapter, I will describe Joshua Greene's dual-process theory as an example of experimental ethics to which the problems I have introduced earlier do not apply. Second, xphi can be seen less as a movement against a certain tradition and more as a new method of enquiry. I am now referring to something similar to cognitive sciences, where disciplines like psychology, philosophy, linguistics, artificial intelligence, neuroscience, and anthropology meet and try to answer the same question: *How does the human brain work?* In the next section, the focus will be more on the main topic of this article, which is experimental ethics.

2. How does experimental ethics, or experimental moral philosophy, fit in?

Experimental ethics fits in as a kind of enquiry similar to cognitive science without the need to question any tradition, or in other words, to burn any armchair. Joshua Greene's theory can be seen as this kind of enquiry.

In 2001,⁶ Greene published the results of an experiment conducted with an fMRI regarding the

¹ Machery, Eduard et al (2004). Semantics, cross-cultural style. *Cognition*, no. 92, pp. 1-12; Machery et al (2009) Linguistic and metalinguistic intuitions in the philosophy of language. *Analysis*, no. 69, pp. 689-694; Machery et al (2010) Semantic intuitions: Reply to Lam. *Cognition*, no. 117, pp. 363-366.

² Mallon, Ron et al (2009) Against arguments from reference. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, no. 79, pp. 332-356.

³ Kripke S. (1991) *Naming and necessity*. Wiley-Blackwell, London, p. 294.

⁴ Deutsch, Max (2015) *The myth of the intuitive*. MIT Press, Cambridge, p. 159.

⁵ Cappelen, Herman (2015) *Philosophy without intuitions*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

⁶ Greene, Joshua (2001) An fMRI investigation of emotional engagement in moral judgment. *Science*, vol 293, pp. 2105-2018.

responses that people give to ethical dilemmas. He claims that when we respond to the trolley dilemma,⁷ those parts of the brain that are thought to be responsible for cognition decide to sacrifice one man in order to save five, while in the footbridge dilemma, the parts of the brain that are responsible for emotion make us decide to not push the fat man, even if the consequences are that five people will die because of it.

For those who are not familiar with these two dilemmas, they can be described as follows: in the trolley dilemma you are at the intersection between two railways. On one railway there is one man tied up, while on the other railway there are five people tied up. At the same time you notice that a trolley that is impossible to stop is moving towards the line with the five men on it. The only option you have to alter the situation is to change the course of the trolley towards the line with one man by pushing the switch in front of you.

In the footbridge dilemma,⁸ you are crossing a bridge together with a fat man, and under the bridge there is a railway. On the railway there are five people tied up that cannot move. A train that is out of control is approaching on the railway, and the only thing you can do in order to save the lives of the five people is to push the fat man over the bridge and in front of the train. The fat man's body will stop the train, and the five people will survive.⁹

As I already mentioned, Greene discovered that this strange difference in behavior—that most people will opt to kill one person in the trolley dilemma in order to save five, but will not push the fat man in the footbridge dilemma, allowing five people to die—has its roots in the way our brains make judgments. In the articles that followed after this discovery, Greene articulated a theory that he called the dual-process theory,¹⁰ in which he explained that we use two different processes to make judgements, an

emotional one and a cognitive one. The emotional process is triggered when we are in situations like the footbridge dilemma, and the cognitive one when we are in situations like trolley dilemma.

The most controversial point, at least for philosophers, is the way Greene links his dual-process theory to other theories of morality. He claims that utilitarian moral judgments are the result of employing the cognitive part of the brain, while deontological judgments have their roots in the emotional part of the brain. It is not difficult to understand why this part of the theory is often dismissed, and even the reason why it is incorrect. I agree with Greene when he says that all moral theories try to explain the same thing—the phenomenon of morality—but that it is also normal for a theory to focus on a certain aspect of that phenomenon, while other theories focus on other aspects. One of the consequences of this is that it is possible to endorse two opposite moral theories as equally true, because they theorize about two different parts of the moral phenomenon. The only issue here, in my opinion, is that Greene misinterpreted the roles and aims of the deontological and utilitarian moral theories.

Both are normative moral theories that cannot be reduced to certain judgments that people make when they are faced with a moral dilemma. The two theories attempt to explain the phenomenon of morality, and provide distinctions which we can employ in order to solve certain ambiguities. For example, Kant's moral theory introduced the idea of a moral universal that subsumed an entire system of moral duties, such that it would not be moral to do *a* in one culture and *not-a* in another culture. Mill's utilitarianism is a more refined theory than the simple act-utilitarianism¹¹ to which Greene refers. Mill makes distinctions between higher and lower pleasures and reformulates the principle of utility; he explains how a person could make a right decision even when one does not have enough time to decide, and many other things. Without discussing any other details, the important thing for now is to keep in mind that Greene's reconstruction of deontological judgment and utilitarian judgment is neither true nor accurate.

Though I have only presented a small sample of the objections that were raised against Greene's ideas, I would like to show why, in spite of the

⁷ The dilemma that Philippa Foot poses to demonstrate that abortion could be acceptable in some cases due to the double effect doctrine. See Foot, Philippa (1967) The problem of abortion and the doctrine of double effect. Oxford Review, no. 5;.

⁸ This dilemma appeared for the first time in: Thomson, Judith-Jarvis (1985) The trolley problem. The Yale Law Journal, vol. 94, no. 6, pp. 1395-1415.

⁹ More information about the two dilemmas can be found in: Edmonds, David (2013) Would you kill the fat man? Princeton University Press, Princeton.

¹⁰ Greene, Joshua (2013) Moral tribes – emotion, reason, and the gap between us and them. Penguin Press, New York.

¹¹ Mureşan Valentin. (2015) How could Julian Savulescu still be a utilitarian. Uehiro Blog, <http://blog.practicaethics.ox.ac.uk/2015/01/how-could-julian-savulescu-still-be-a-utilitarian/>. Cited 30 September 2015.

above, I still consider his work to be extremely relevant. First, it opens a path at the end of which we might be able to better understand the way in which we make moral judgments. It is true that his research is far from perfect, but if the empirical examination of the moral phenomenon continues, it is very likely that in time many of the methodological difficulties will be overcome. Second, dual-process theory proves again that our emotions have a role when it comes to moral decision-making. It is true that Greene is not the only one who makes this claim, but he is the only one who provides empirical evidence of it, with the help of cognitive and behavioural neurosciences.¹² Jonathan Haidt¹³ is another important name in this discussion; he conducted research aimed at showing the importance of emotions for moral judgment. For more information about the role of the emotions in morals, see Jesse J. Prinz's book, *The Emotional Construction of Morals*.¹⁴

Could this empirical approach have a normative account, given the fact that the experiments provide only descriptive propositions? One might wonder if this is the case, and whether one could engage in an attempt to prove that experimental ethics could have a non-naturalistic agenda.

3. Does experimental ethics have a naturalistic or a non-naturalistic agenda?

It is extremely tempting to think that if we prove that experimental ethics could have a non-naturalistic agenda, then we would not need to talk about any kind of transition from descriptive propositions to normative propositions, because the enquiries of experimental ethics give us normative propositions. The meta-ethical status of experimental ethics is extremely controversial. This being the case, I want to examine two opposite ideas about the meta-ethical status of experimental ethics and argue why they do not help us very much.

The traditional core idea of philosophical naturalism is that all moral terms can be reduced to natural terms. Another important aspect of ethical naturalism is that it believes that there are objective

truths, but that these are truths that can be explained in non-evaluative terms. One form of ethical naturalism is Simon Blackburn's quasi-realism, in which he states that all the ethical sentences can be reduced to emotional attitudes.

Intuitionism and naturalism are both forms of realism, in comparison to subjectivism, non-cognitivism, or nihilism, which are forms of anti-realism. In his book, *Ethical Intuitionism*,¹⁵ Huemer proposes his own taxonomy in order to classify these meta-ethical traditions. The reason that I think it is useful to present it here is that it could serve us well in trying to understand the primary difference between naturalism and intuitionism. Huemer thinks that there is just one main distinction in a meta-ethical taxonomy: the distinction between dualism and monism. Dualists believe that there is a distinction between two different sets of entities, natural ones and moral ones, while the monists reject this idea, arguing that there are no moral entities. Intuitionism is the only meta-ethical form of dualism, while all the other meta-ethical theories are monist, theories such as subjectivism, naturalism, non-cognitivism, or nihilism.

Looking at Huemer's taxonomy, it is clear why many believe that if experimental ethics is a kind of naturalist meta-ethical stand, then it becomes difficult for it to have a normative account.

David Rose and David Danks (2013)¹⁶ see experimental philosophy as simply another instantiation of the long tradition of philosophical naturalism. Hence experimental moral philosophy has some naturalistic roots, and cannot avoid the arguments raised against traditional naturalism. This conception about experimental philosophy is, as the authors called it, a broad conception, with naturalism and cognitive sciences classified under the same general heading.

The answer given by Rose and Danks is very different than the answer given by Guy Kahane (2013),¹⁷ who asserts that experimental ethics can have a non-naturalistic agenda. His main idea is that our intuitions about certain dilemmas could track certain moral principles. Therefore, experimental

¹² Damasio was one of the first to prove that if certain areas of the brain responsible for emotions are damaged, then the patient will be unable to act as a moral agent. See Damasio Antonio (1994) *Descartes' error – emotion, reason, and the human brain*. Avon Books, New York.

¹³ Haidt, Jonathan (2012) *The righteous mind – why good people are divided by politics and religion*. Pantheon Books, New York.

¹⁴ Prinz, Jesse (2007) *The emotional construction of morals*. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

¹⁵ Huemer, Michael (2005) *Ethical Intuitionism*. Palgrave Macmillan, New York.

¹⁶ Rose, David and Danks David (2013) In defense of a broad conception of experimental philosophy. *Metaphilosophy*, no. 44, pp. 512-532.

¹⁷ Kahane, Guy (2011) *The armchair and the trolley: an argument for experimental ethics*.

ethics can have a normative account, because the examined intuitions track certain moral principles.

Kahane provides a solution which avoids the naturalistic fallacy. Though his arguments on the non-naturalistic agenda of experimental ethics are worthy of consideration, in order to show what is wrong with this argument, we need to go to Mackie's distinction¹⁸ between first-order morality and second-order morality. Mackie uses this distinction in order to present his own version of subjectivism, and to explain what elements he is most skeptical about. He is sceptical that objective moral entities exist, and is therefore skeptical regarding the second order, but he is not skeptical that there are certain rules which must be followed. In other words, if one disagrees with the intuitionist claim that moral entities exist, it does not mean he is against respecting moral norms. He gives different arguments for why they should be respected.

Now it becomes clear that if our argument is that experimental ethics has a non-naturalist agenda—and that therefore it has a normative account—we believe that the only way something could have a normative account is if it agrees with the claim that objective moral entities exist. But this is very problematic, because you can still have a normative account—slightly different from the first one, but still a normative account. Therefore the discussion of whether experimental ethics does or does not have a normative account is a meta-ethical discussion about the normative stand of different meta-ethical traditions. In other words, it does not matter if we show that experimental ethics has a naturalistic or a non-naturalistic agenda, as all that we are saying about its normative account in either case is that it has a *certain kind* of normative account.

The naturalistic argument against experimental ethics is much more important for the simple reason that it does not move the discussion about experimental ethics to other subjects. In the next section I will examine this argument and show how experimental ethics can have a normative account.

4. Descriptive and normative propositions

Hume's guillotine, also known as the naturalistic fallacy¹⁹—or simply as the gap between *is* and *ought to*—draws our attention to the fact that you cannot derive normative propositions from descrip-

tive ones. For example, if John is a doctor and treats his patients with respect, we cannot arrive from the proposition "John respects his patient's decisions," to "The patient's decisions ought to be respected by John." Though this is actually a moral duty, we cannot infer it from a descriptive proposition. One might say that there is an autonomy principle which states that "All human beings should be treated as autonomous agents." From this principle—which relies on no descriptive proposition—we *can* infer that "John ought to respect his patient's decisions," because otherwise he would violate the autonomy principle.

What the Scottish philosopher says is that *ought to* and *is* propositions should not be used interchangeably because they express different kind of relations. He wants to warn us against those systems of morality that suddenly start to use *ought to* propositions without ever explaining their transition from *is* propositions. If we look at the passage from the *Treatise*²⁰ in this way, we realize that Hume claims only that it would be inadmissible to give no explanation of why someone in his system of morality jumps from a descriptive proposition to a normative one. From this statement, we cannot conclude that it is impossible to have a bridge between the two different propositions, and—in a more controversial interpretation—he says nothing against arriving at normative propositions from descriptive ones *as long as we explain how we do so*.

Interpreting Hume's guillotine as an argument against any attempt to find empirical grounding for a moral enquiry is the result, Mackie says,²¹ of a non-Humean way of understanding the argument. First, according to Mackie, this interpretation assumes an objectivist or intuitionist view on morality that Hume definitively rejects. Second, it suggests that abstract science should talk about facts and what we *ought* and *ought not* do, and this runs counter to Hume's dictum from his *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*.²² Hume states quite clearly that number and quantity are the only subject matters in which the use of an abstract demonstration or science is allowed, while everything that

¹⁸ Mackie, J. L. (1977) *Ethics: Inventing right and wrong*. Penguin Books, England.

¹⁹ The term was used first by Moore in: Moore, G. E. (1903) *Principia Ethica*. Prometheus Books, England.

²⁰ In: Hume, David (1988) *A treatise of human nature*. Clarendon Press, Oxford, Book III, part I, section I, pp. 469-470.

²¹ Mackie, J. L. (1977) *Hume's moral philosophy*. Penguin Books, London.

²² In: Hume, David (2011) *An inquiry concerning human understanding*. Hackett Publishing Co, Inc, Cambridge, Section XII.

"...attempts to extend this more perfect species of knowledge beyond these bounds are mere sophistry and illusion."²³ We can find counterexamples to what Hume says with which he might even agree, but it is hard to argue that he would agree that the study of morality should be based on abstract reasoning. For him the conclusions to which we arrive from an abstract reasoning "...seem to vanish like the phantoms of the night on the appearance of the morning..."²⁴ especially when "...morality is a subject that interests us above all others..."²⁵

We can continue to debate these aspects of Hume's moral philosophy, but for the sake of the article's topic, it is more important to return to our main objective, and see what we can infer about experimental ethics from what was said about Hume's guillotine.

If one gives credit only to the non-Humean way of interpreting Hume's guillotine, then experimental ethics is doomed, simply because it denies the validity of any attempt to arrive at normative propositions from descriptive propositions. We know that descriptive propositions are the outcome of an experimental enquiry, and experimental ethicists rely on these descriptive propositions as evidence in their debates. Maybe this way of interpreting the *is-ought* to gap is the reason why so many focused on the task of proving that experimental ethics could have non-naturalistic agenda. But I have argued that this line of argument does not help us much, if we want to examine whether experimental ethics can have a normative account.

One might say that using a bridge to link these two different sets of propositions is acceptable, even in accordance with the interpretation I presented earlier. Max Black²⁶ is just one example of this. In his article, he thinks that it is possible to create a bridge between descriptive and normative propositions. Is important to distinguish this attempt and others like it from Ayn Rand's²⁷ project. She argues that it is possible to arrive at *ought to* from *is* without any kind of bridge or link. She attacks Hume's arguments and his guillotine, while I propose a way in which experimental ethics can have a normative

account *without* attacking Hume's guillotine. This is not the place to explain why I disagree with Ayn Rand; the important thing for the moment is simply to make clear that I do not refer to Ayn Rand, or agree with her, when I say that it is possible to arrive at *ought to* from *is* in experimental ethics.

Now I will discuss a more specific example of how a link can be made between a descriptive proposition and a normative one. Solcan²⁸ gives an excellent example in which a bridge, as a normative projection, could link descriptive propositions to normative ones. It is true that in his example he is referring to the way we use normative projections to arrive at *grammatical* norms, rather than ethical or moral norms, but I will explain later how his example can be used in experimental ethics.

The example reveals a way in which descriptions about Romanian history and some narrative projections give a certain normative projection. In the Romanian alphabet there are two letters, *â* and *î*, which do not stand for two different sounds, and are not pronounced differently, but are used differently. Inside of the words like *câmp*, *â* is used, while at the beginning of words like *învață*, *î* is used, though it is the same sound. Why do we have such a norm, since it serves no technical purpose? Why do some people think that if you write the word *cîmp*, you break a grammatical rule? The only reason is that Romanian history provides some evidence that it was conquered by the Roman Empire, and that the people from the conquered land formed a new nation together with the Romans, namely Romania. This narrative projection sought to show that there are also some resemblances between the Romanian and Latin languages. In the case of the word *câmp*, we can easily spot the resemblance with the Latin word *campus*. Unfortunately, this rule makes no sense in the case of the words *gând* or *rând*. It is a curious explanation, since this rule of writing *â* as opposed to *î* on the inside of words makes no sense for other Romanian words that do not have any resemblance to Latin. Solcan claims that the effect of normative projections, and particularly the idea that we ought to write *â* and not *î* inside words, are in the end negotiated at a social level. So in the final equation, we have a pile of descriptive propositions which cause us to assert a certain normative projection that can be socially negotiated.

²³ Idem.

²⁴ Hume, David (1988) A treatise of human nature. Clarendon Press, Oxford, Book III, part I, section I, p. 219.

²⁵ Idem.

²⁶ Black, Max (1964) The gap between "is" and "should". The philosophical review, no. 73, pp. 165-181.

²⁷ Rand, Ayn (1964) The virtue of selfishness: A concept of egoism. New American Library, New York.

²⁸ Solcan, Radu-Mihail (2012) Filosofia științelor umane: o introducere. University of Bucharest Publishing House, Bucharest.

Let us return to experimental ethics, and look at how all this is relevant to it. I think that when xphi uses empirical experiments to examine our moral judgments, our intuitions, how our brains respond to different moral situations, or how emotions affect our decisions, they are helping to explain the ways in which we make our normative projections. It is true that these projections are sometime contradictory, but then come debates and the other social negotiations that refine these projections in order to arrive at an ethical norm. For example, when we ask someone if he will push the switch in order to save five lives, he immediately has the ethical projection that he ought to activate the switch to save five people, whereas in the case of the footbridge, he has a different projection because of the influence of his own emotions. We debate about these projections, propose conceptual distinctions, definitions, or theoretical explanations—like the doctrine of double effect—but all of these are simply attempts to improve the initial normative projection, make sure that it is efficient, and enact some measures so that it will be internalized by the people.

The role of experimental ethics is to bring all these together so that philosophers can have a clear picture (provided by experimental data) of people's normative projections. After this is done, philosophers can collaborate with others in order to find the most efficient and practical solution to a problems. Another important role for experimental ethics is the examination of why people have certain normative projections, but act counter to them. The best example of this is the corruption phenomenon in some countries, in which everyone has a normative projection against something, and still choose to act as though it is a natural thing to (for instance) give someone money in exchange for special treatment. Experimental ethics could examine this paradoxical situation and try to better understand people's normative projections, what they have in mind when they talk about corruption, while other approaches will merely state that this kind of behavior is impermissible and ought to be avoided.

5. Conclusion

In the first two sections, I briefly introduced the subject matter and explained why experimental ethics is not affected by the arguments that are usually raised against the experimental philosophy movement in general, and that it might be possible for it to collaborate with its armchair counterparts. I then raised a few questions about the idea that en-

gaging in a search for the meta-ethical grounds of experimental ethics will help us to know if it has a normative account. In the last part of the article I proposed to take the normative projections Solcan used in order to talk about how a link can be made between descriptive grammar and normative grammar, and applied it to morality. Though this suggestion could raise a new wave of problems, it is obvious that ethics can increase its practical relevance by making use of experimental ethics to analyze these normative projections.

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