**Your Mind on Moral Curiosity, with Dr. Jordan Wylie**

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0:00:11.9 Beth Fisher: Welcome back to Minds Matter, a podcast sponsored by the Monash Center for Consciousness and Contemplative Studies. I'm Beth.

0:00:12.9 Ava Ma De Sousa: And I'm Ava. And on Minds Matter, we explore research on neuroscience and psychology while talking through our own personal experiences.

0:00:21.3 Beth Fisher: And this week on the podcast I spoke to Dr. Jordan Wylie, who is a post-doctoral researcher at Boston College in the Morality Lab. And we spoke about her research on morality. We discuss how morality research looks in the sciences 'cause this is something that we usually relate to, philosophy discipline. She explains her work on moral curiosity and why we're always interested in morally bad people. And Jordan also talks us through her research on phantom rules. And these are rules such as jaywalking, which are only enforced sometimes and why do we enforce them in these situations. We also speak about Jordan's work on how our moral values influence how we feel about harm reduction policies.

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0:01:10.8 Jordan Wylie: I'm originally from Atlanta, Georgia, and I moved to New York City for grad school in part because I really wanted to go to grad school and learn more about psychology. And in part because I really wanted to move to New York City, [chuckle] that's one way to get out of the south for me and, you know, follow my budding passion. And even though I really don't like the cold, I found myself continuing to move north. So I'm now in Boston doing a postdoc with Liane Young and Gregg Sparkman, and in the lab, and my postdoc is really focused a lot on understanding how we evaluate prosocial agents and their prosocial signaling. And, you know, from my perspective as well, why and when we are curious about them, when we're curious to learn more about prosocial agents and the sorts of causes that they're signaling. So really broadly, my research interests are about rules and understanding when people break the rules, when we're interested in them, how we make evaluations about them, when our own rules are broken, how we evaluate and sort of understand and reconcile that feeling. And then when other people break rules, you know, not just in a negative way, but like do something exceedingly morally good, it's a rule breaking of a sort, when and why that makes us curious to know more about them.

0:02:45.3 Beth Fisher: Yeah, that's super interesting. Usually when we think about studying morality, we think of it more as something that you study in philosophy and think about, you know, what morality means and these kind of things. So it's really cool that you're doing this in a scientific setting. Could you explain how that field works? So how do we even operationalize morality? How, yeah, how do you do that really? [chuckle]

0:03:10.0 Jordan Wylie: Yeah. I mean, this is such a fun, big question and, you know, for better or worse, moral psychologists I don't think ask this question very frequently or interrogate this question frequently. It's fun to, yeah, think about really deeply what I mean. I think the field of, like really broadly the field of moral psychology is focused on why and how people are coming to the sorts of decisions that they do about others as actions, their character, also evaluations of their own actions and character. There's a ton of work in moral psychology on the developmental side, when kids care about moral rules, which rules they care about, when and how they differentiate between rules that are moral and rules that are conventional, and so much more. And there's so much work in the developmental space. And then there's this other really large amount of work in, and you know, so much ink has been spilled arguing over what kinds of content count as moral.

0:04:15.6 Jordan Wylie: So think whether it's all about harm perceived or sort of otherwise, things that relate... Whether it's actually about things that relate to a bunch of different domains like authority and fairness and, you know, these domains should emerge across different cultures. Whether the process by which we reason about our moral judgments has to do with intuition or deliberation. Like these sorts of like arguments are really constant and make up a lot a bulk even of the moral psychology literature. But, you know, in my own work, what I really mean when I'm thinking about morality is thinking about morality as relating to sort of the actions, the agents and the behaviors that seem like objective truths, that seem sort of self-evident and pertain to evaluations of good or bad, right or wrong, or blame worthiness or praise worthiness. That's what's really special about morality in my opinion, is that objective feeling, like it's so obvious that it's wrong to do X or Y.

0:05:22.3 Beth Fisher: So in terms of this objective truth, do you study that in terms of what... So do you first say, "Okay, I think an objective truth in morality is you should never hurt someone," or are you looking to see how we make our own objective truths through that?

0:05:39.4 Jordan Wylie: A lot of work has been done, work by Jeff Goodwin, for example, has been done investigating this objective sort of quality of the moral domain. And my work doesn't assess that feature of the moral domain very frequently. I've leveraged a lot of the work that's been done in the past when I'm operationalizing and thinking about the sorts of things that I need when I use the word morality, but some of my work in the harm reduction space, for example, when we try to measure what people's moral opinions are, we were really confronted with this question, how do you really get at this thing? And we pulled a lot from, you know, work by Jeff and work by Linda Skitka on moral convictions and this conviction quality of morality. And we find that you can sort of get at these opinions that people have by asking all of these questions that kind of pull from the aspect of qualities of morality alongside this feeling that things are objective and that those things predict these, you know, these judgments or attitudes that we have about things like policy, for example.

0:06:50.6 Jordan Wylie: And my other work, I don't measure morality as much as assess people's judgments about it. So people's judgments about the sorts of content that I think counts as moral, when people break a rule that seems to be a moral rule, do people say it's blameworthy? And if they do, then yeah, some moral sorts of reasoning processes are being sparked for people to come to that conclusion that it's not, it's not a neutral thing actually, this is blameworthy or this is praiseworthy or this is right or this is...

0:07:26.8 Beth Fisher: So some of your work has been on moral ambiguity and curiosity. Could you explain what those terms mean? So what is that?

0:07:35.6 Jordan Wylie: Yeah, so I'll start with curiosity because it's much easier. So, curiosity, there's a lot of work on curiosity that I learned a lot about while I was writing my dissertation or, you know, thinking about my dissertation studies and then subsequently writing about them. Curiosity is considered one of this larger suite of epistemic emotions. So emotions that relate to, you know, knowledge seeking or knowledge, things like doubt or confusion or other characteristic epistemic emotions, and curiosity is really that desire to approach information. So it's a strong desire to approach information. William James in one of his pieces defined curiosity as the impulse towards better cognition. And I really like that because the impulse word I think really captures something special about curiosity that's just like really tough to ignore, drive to seek out information or to reconcile the thing that's sort of like, you know, itching at you.

0:08:48.4 Jordan Wylie: I think about, you know, when somebody asks you, "Oh, who's that actor in, you know, X show or something?" And for some people you really have to look it up, really need to know who that actor was, who played that person. I just need, it's a need. And so curiosity in the moral domain and how I've been studying curiosity and thinking a lot about curiosity is doing all the same things. So, you know, driving us towards information or understanding something that has a moral flavor to it. So, you know, understanding why someone did something really morally bad, but again, that yeah, impulse towards acquiring some knowledge for knowledge's sake.

0:09:34.9 Jordan Wylie: Moral ambiguity is much more difficult to define. And I'll just give the two kind of bigger definitions that I pull on, including the one that I pulled on a lot in my dissertation work. So ambiguity can really refer to an actual action. So when we think about an ambiguous action, what we very likely mean by using that label ambiguous is that it's not really clear whether or not it's good or bad. Maybe there's something about the intentions of the person that have made your understanding of the goodness or badness of that action sort of unclear. But when we're thinking about someone's character, their moral character, which is the sort of ambiguity I've been studying a lot and what my dissertation work was on, then ambiguity can mean more things. So, you know, ambiguity can mean somebody who tends to do those kinds of sort of unclear things.

0:10:40.4 Jordan Wylie: So they do a lot of unclear things, you're not sure what their intentions are, so they're just ambiguous, right? It's not clear how to categorise them. And then there's another sense in which someone can be ambiguous and that's when they do both obviously good things and both obviously bad things. And so now the mean is, again, somewhere in the middle, it's not really clear whether they're in their essence good or bad. So they are, they sort of get the same ambiguous kind of label frequently. And in entertainment they're frequently referred to as ambiguous. So Tony Soprano and Dexter Morgan are just like this. They do egregious bad things, things that are very clearly bad, right? Like murder, and then they do a bunch of good things, things that are really clearly good, really value family. And so it creates this tension for the observer for, okay, do I think in their heart this person is truly good or bad, deep down and do I like them? All of those sorts of things are tied up in this, the poles of their character. And so most of my work focuses in on that kind of ambiguity, but I recognize that there are other ways that people can be ambiguous and actions can be ambiguous.

0:12:04.8 Beth Fisher: Could you explain a bit about the study that you did on moral ambiguity and curiosity, also getting kind of this data from Netflix and stuff? I think people will find that really cool. [chuckle]

0:12:16.4 Jordan Wylie: So this whole project was inspired by two different things. One is our fascination with bad guys, ambiguous characters in entertainment. And the other piece that really inspired a lot of thinking on this is Susan Wolf's piece on Moral Saints, in which she argues that it's really strange to be a moral saint, to be really morally good all the time in different ways. And you can be a moral saint in different ways, but it's sort of strange and we don't like it, there's something about it that's just like not cool at all. But then if you watch Tony Soprano, right, he is cool. So what is it that even though if you asked anybody who's better, it's so obvious who's better, if you ask anyone who they'd rather be, maybe it's a little less obvious actually who people would rather be like, since there's some coolness stuff and yeah, some other things going on there, but you know, it doesn't make a whole lot of sense really thinking about how people tend to make their moral judgements, how people tend to judge others and who they wanna affiliate with.

0:13:28.4 Jordan Wylie: It doesn't make a whole lot of sense how interested we are in people like Tony Soprano or Walter White. So those studies were really designed to try to figure out why we like these people so much. And there is work already on this that I want to make sure I point out. In the media psych space, there's a bunch of work on what makes a morally ambiguous character and why people find them engaging and when people identify with them, my studies look at this from a slightly different angle and we use a bunch of different methods. We pulled from, you know, methods that tend to be used in media psych and from social psych and all over. And we wanted to see if, even though people are willing to tell you that it's really effortful to engage with bad content, that they still want to and that they still do.

0:14:26.4 Jordan Wylie: So what we first said was look at some Netflix data. So at the end of 2021, Netflix started releasing this publicly available data about the hours watched for Netflix, for their top performing shows. Presumably the catalogue of Netflix is almost infinite. And so you have shows that have never been watched and things like that. So it's a subset of a subset of shows and movies. And so we just started collecting those weekly, so the top shows that were watched every week for a five month period. And so we have this really rich dataset of hours watched and we have some codes for like how long the show tends to be for the genre of the show or movie. And then we had a separate sample of, so independent raters rate those shows on a bunch of different things. So they rated them on how morally good or bad the protagonist was, and they rated them on how effortful it is to watch this show, how much they thought they learned from watching this show or movie and some other ones.

0:15:41.1 Jordan Wylie: And so then we just checked to see if there was a correlation between how immoral someone was and how many hours were watched, and there was, so the more immoral, the more hours spent watching shows and movies on Netflix. And this is true even when we control for things like the average amount of time watched, the genre for, how much learning, how effortful people think it is. And effort and immorality go in opposite direction. So the more effortful, the less people wanna watch, but the more effortful, the more immoral. So people find immoral things effortful, but they nonetheless want to watch them. [chuckle] So there's something that's pulling them up even though it's really effortful.

0:16:34.8 Beth Fisher: And then I guess the question is, why? So why would this be something that we do?

0:16:41.3 Jordan Wylie: Yeah, so that's really correlational. So it's hard to really point to why in that dataset. So we did some follow-up research that used a paradigm that's been used in the study of empathy. So it's a paradigm from Daryl Cameron's lab and it's a behavioral choice task where you, in our case we had it where you choose whether you want to have some description of the agent who's done something good, bad or ambiguous, or you want mind explanation information about somebody who's good, bad or ambiguous. And so we just had people choose between those things and we find that people, and this is actually the punch line of my dissertation is that I really thought this was gonna be about morally ambiguous stuff with the Netflix data and then these studies that we ran suggested it's badness, the moral badness that makes people really interested.

0:17:38.7 Jordan Wylie: So people wanna hear the explanations for the bad guys way more than they do for the the good or the ambiguous targets, though when we look in the fictional space, they want to learn about Tony Soprano and those kinds of characters more than, you know, captain America or something like that. But when we move it out of the fictional space, it's actually just the bad guys that people wanna learn a lot about. And so we had that data and then we are like, "Okay, really, why is this happening?" And so we have a different paradigm that holds the information constant and then people had to select between different targets that they want that piece of information for. And then in this paradigm, it allowed us to ask some of these follow-up questions, okay, how much do you expect to learn about this person?

0:18:26.9 Jordan Wylie: How curious are you about this person that you've selected before we tell you anything about them, before we reveal anything about them? And when we ask the questions in this way, we find that people expect to learn more about the immoral agents than they do the morally good ones. But after we've revealed this explanatory information, they say that they actually learned more from the good guys than they did from the bad ones. So there's some mismatch there that like, it's possible that it will be revealed to me something really unique and interesting for the bad guys in a way that isn't quite there for the good ones. But when we learn all the ways that people have been good in their life, you know, helped an old lady cross the road, you know, we're using very, very commonly used morally good and bad actions in these vignettes that we created. People say that they learned a lot from it. Oh, maybe I can help an old lady cross the road or, you know, whatever it is.

0:19:29.1 Jordan Wylie: So I think that this learning piece is playing a big role in driving especially curiosity. And there's some older work on curiosity that suggests that people expect that when they get their answer it's gonna be really satisfying, that the urge is so strong and when I get there it'll be so satisfying. But when they get there, it often fails to be as satisfying as expected. And that's kind of what we find with the bad guys. People say that they're really interesting, they select them very frequently. They wanna learn about them. They say they expect to learn about them. They say they're really curious about them, but they don't find the explanation of that satisfying. So we measure that at the final time point. And satisfaction is lowest for the immoral agents compared to the morally good ones. Yeah.

0:20:14.5 Beth Fisher: So could one of the reasons we wanna learn more about these bad characters, could that be motivated by the fact we assume everyone's good? So if someone's doing something off, that thing that is moral objective truth, we all think we should follow, we want an explanation to why.

0:20:34.0 Jordan Wylie: Definitely. So a lot of what I think, and a lot of what my dissertation, my introduction is about, is about like how people understand their worlds, who is good, how frequently people tend to be good, who is bad, and how frequently people tend to be bad. And so I think that although my studies don't have data specifically to speak to this, what I really think is happening is that people are motivated to maintain and understand the contours of their moral world. Make sense of, ooh, this person was egregious. I need some explanation for how this person or why this person was this way so I can help make sense of a world where I think that most people tend to be good. And it's true that most people tend to be good and that's a feature of moral badness, right? That you could be bad in way more ways than you can be good, than the amount of ways that you can be good, because people tend to be good.

0:21:34.7 Jordan Wylie: And so it's like a much smaller set of possible actions in that bubble. But we do find, and this is something that's really motivating a lot of my research or what I've been thinking about lately, we do find that when an agent seems exceedingly morally good, so moral saint, people are interested in them and they wanna learn about them. So, and I have some data to speak to this too. So it isn't just moral valence that is making people curious, but how typical the agents are, bad agents tend to be atypical. But if you can make a good agent look atypical, they're also pretty interesting.

[music]

0:22:27.1 Ava Ma De Sousa: One of the things that you were asking Jordan was why, Why would we be curious about these morally ambiguous or morally bad characters? And so one of the things that this reminded me of in general, this idea of people being curious about badness or wrongness is this research that in general looks at why people are curious about bad things. So not in the moral domain, but just bad things in general. And there's evidence that people, if they're in a study and they're told, you could see a really gross image of someone's wound open gash, that they wanna look at it and they wanna see very disgusting images, both in terms of they're morally disgusting images and also just bodily gross things. And so there's been some research looking at why that is. And I thought that it seems it could apply to some of the things that you were talking about specifically, Jordan was mentioning that she thinks one of the things going on is actually that people are interested in these extremes.

0:23:32.1 Ava Ma De Sousa: So not necessarily always morally bad agents, but also people who are weirdly good. So anything that's kind of out of the ordinary. And there's this one paper in the more general morbid curiosity domain that was trying to distill the motives that people might have to learn about gross things or just bad things in general. And they kind of broke it down into three different types of motives. And the first is these so-called informational motives where people are interested in just learning more and acquiring knowledge, which is basically what curiosity generally is. And so one of the reasons that they argue people might be interested in gross things or bad things in general is to reduce uncertainty. Because as you were saying Beth, a lot of the times people aren't really encountering people who are morally bad. So they might be wanting to better understand those people and reduce the uncertainty in their worlds to kind of be able to better understand why the people do what they do, especially when Jordan was saying that they're specifically interested in an explanation for why they're doing what they do.

0:24:31.6 Ava Ma De Sousa: And I also think in terms of the morally bad people, it really ties into this other motive that in this paper, which we'll link in our show notes, this is by Suzanne Oosterwijk and Esther Niehoff, where they talk about also another motive, which is a social motive where specifically they argue that people wanna know about bad things that happen to other people so that they can avoid it themselves and also so that they can get a better understanding, a kind of better theory of mind of how this might happen and why this might happen. And I think with morally bad characters, that's probably especially strong where you're kind of in an evolutionary perspective, if I'm motivated to defend myself from threats in the environment, then it's really in my best interest to be able to really kind of understand how this person might harm me. Because if I were to be harmed by this person, it would be really bad, as opposed to someone who's just run of the mill gonna do something average to you maybe.

0:25:26.7 Beth Fisher: Yeah, 'cause I think... I remember we spoke about this on one of our other episodes and wasn't that also why when people see an accident or something on the road, you wanna look and see, see what it is. And one of the explanations was, well, we wanna get information about that. So if we happen to be in an accident or experience, I don't know, be close to an accident, one of those things, we have as much information as we can so we can know what to do in those situations. And correct me if I'm wrong, but I think I remember this also related back to the people who were really interested in doomsday zombie scenarios and they were always interested in, you know, watching those movies, kind of prepper type people. But then it turned out during the pandemic they did actually overall cope better because they did have all this information previously about these kind of scenarios that we were in. So I guess that shows that it does work to do that.

0:26:23.5 Ava Ma De Sousa: Yeah, that's true. I actually forgot about that. But yeah, I do remember us talking about that, that people who were more likely to watch zombie apocalypse movies were faring better during the pandemic, which kind of proved this, maybe they were actually preparing, which is kind of interesting because it's, oh well, are people who are super weary of these kind of nefarious characters, are they more likely to be able to protect themselves against those type of people? But I also think that we have, I feel there's an image of a person who's maybe very avoidant and is really worried that everyone is out to get them and they see the world as morally bad, that I feel it doesn't necessarily feel those people are well prepared to deal with life perhaps. So I'm not sure, I'm not sure what Jordan's research speaks to on that point.

0:27:12.0 Beth Fisher: And another thing I thought, and we kind of touched on this a bit, but she mentions that it gets a bit confused with what coolness is, but I thought, well, why do we always love the bad guy? [chuckle] 'Cause it's not just we're curious about them. We love the bad guy. That's...

0:27:26.1 Ava Ma De Sousa: That's your personal question?

0:27:27.6 Beth Fisher: Yes.

[laughter]

0:27:30.0 Beth Fisher: That's... I don't know if everyone else relates. Yeah, maybe that's more of a Beth question.

[laughter]

0:27:36.9 Ava Ma De Sousa: Well, you know, so in this other paper where they talked about general reasons why people might be morbidly curious, one of their reasons is also, the third motive is emotional motives. And so that's specifically that people might just enjoy the arousal that they get from something bad, which maybe is, I feel intuitively that fuels the draw of a bad boy or a bad girl, if that's what we're talking about. And that there's this kind of positive relationship between the desire for thrill and adventure and there's a positive correlation there between people who are thrill seeking and people who are interested in negative content. And also people argue that there's a possibility that people might be curious about these things to experience those emotions and live those emotions and understand them in a safe space. So like you're... So in the context of a TV show for example, or a study, you know, you might be, oh, I wanna see what this gash looks like, or I wanna see what Tony Soprano is gonna do next.

0:28:41.1 Ava Ma De Sousa: But maybe if they were in your life, which I think Jordan was also hinting at, you might not want them close to you and you might not wanna stick around and see what happens unless maybe you're a thrill seeker like Beth. So one question that I had, because, so I think when we're talking about this in terms of, especially with the information seeking with negative content, there's this reason that we were talking about that you might want to explore that negative content, which is that you're just less likely to encounter it in everyday life, you're less likely to have a Tony Soprano in your life, so you maybe wanna explore because of that. And also specifically with the negative content, you have an incentive to explore it to protect yourself from potential threats. Specifically that threat part, I feel with the moral saints that she was talking about, I kind of was, maybe this is like new data that she wasn't ready to talk about yet, but she mentioned that people are also more curious about strangely morally good people, but people also find those people boring, right?

0:29:39.8 Beth Fisher: Yeah.

0:29:40.4 Ava Ma De Sousa: Did you catch any of that stuff that she was... Reconciling those two things?

0:29:43.3 Beth Fisher: Yeah, I did, and I also thought, yeah, I didn't really... Yeah, I kind of had the same question. If we find them boring then why are we also really interested in them? But I wasn't sure if maybe these moral saint people who are just extreme too much, then they don't fall into the, maybe it's the semi saint people that we find boring, but the extreme saints we don't, I wasn't really sure.

0:30:11.8 Ava Ma De Sousa: Yeah. And I also feel, because she was saying that, you know, a Captain America is less interesting than a Tony Soprano, but I feel a lot of the superhero movies, especially the recent ones, they try to paint heroes in not an only kind of hero light and maybe if it's a real person also. So in that point I'm saying that maybe Captain America isn't actually morally amazing all the time the way that they're depicting him in those films. I don't really know. I haven't seen a Captain America movie since like 2010.

0:30:40.7 Beth Fisher: Do you know I'm a massive Marvel fan.?

0:30:43.2 Ava Ma De Sousa: I did not know that.

0:30:44.6 Beth Fisher: I've seen like [0:30:45.5] \_\_\_\_ movies.

0:30:49.9 Ava Ma De Sousa: Okay. Tell us about... Really?

0:30:50.0 Beth Fisher: I'm like obsessed. Yeah.

0:30:51.6 Ava Ma De Sousa: Okay, then are they painted as like...

0:30:54.9 Beth Fisher: No, they're not, they're not moral saints. But I would agree that Captain America is less interesting than Tony Soprano. [chuckle] I think that's a fact. But they're not these, they all have something, you know, they're battling and they don't always do the right thing and... Yeah.

0:31:11.5 Ava Ma De Sousa: Exactly. So maybe they are more just kind of run of the mill people. I feel that's what... I mean, they're run of the mill people with superpowers, I guess.

0:31:20.5 Beth Fisher: [laughter] Yeah. Yes. So what would a... Do we even have an example of a complete moral saint? I don't know. I actually can't think of anyone.

0:31:31.7 Ava Ma De Sousa: I feel I know people in my own life.

0:31:36.4 Beth Fisher: Really?

0:31:37.7 Ava Ma De Sousa: Yeah, like someone's mom, you know, someone who's just been through a ton of stuff and they're just like, they never get mad at anyone. I had a friend who, when I was growing up, her mom was the sweetest person in the world. I could never picture her yelling or anything and my friend would always get so mad at her 'cause she would be, "Imagine living with this woman." Sometimes you're just mad and you want your mom to yell back and she'll never yell back. I feel I know especially some women like that who have just been dealt not the best hand and who handle it ridiculously well and I feel maybe it's just that idea that when people are really exceptional, you wanna know what's going on, again, because of just that rarity and wanting to understand the kind of boundary conditions of your world of why can some people be like this in a way that I can't even fathom? Maybe it works both ways at the extreme, but maybe in fiction it's not as interesting because usually in a fictional world you can build the world the way that you want as well in addition to the characters. Whereas a real person you know they're dealing with an imperfect world too. So, I don't know.

0:32:48.1 Beth Fisher: That's funny. I just don't think... I'm trying to think about these moral saints that you've... 'cause I know what you mean about the woman who always does the right thing and never gets angry, but for some reason I would assume a moral saint was something above that. For me it would be someone who's not just really lovely, but also going out of their way to do... Biasing themselves to do things. I think that's a moral saint. That's where my boundary is. My world boundary of a moral saint is someone who not only never gets angry and can handle anything, they sacrifice things in their own life to help everyone around them. That's who I would think.

0:33:29.4 Ava Ma De Sousa: I see what you're saying. Yeah. That's kind of interesting. I guess that's maybe also something Jordan studies with what do we categorise as praiseworthy?

0:33:39.0 Beth Fisher: 'Cause that, I think that's kind of also what was interesting and might come down to this as well of what we were talking about at the start is, well what are these moral values, objective truths? And is a moral value sacrificing yourself for the greater good? Or is it like, and I think those questions are so interesting and when we're trying to think about it in this scientific lens and our feeling towards the way we perceive moral values ourselves feel objective. But then, yeah, even me and you are very similar people, but we are just thinking about this moral state and we already have a different idea of what that looks like. Which I think says a bit about how we see morality.

0:34:22.9 Ava Ma De Sousa: Yeah. I think that's also something good to remember. And when we talk about moral psych, it's so different than when we talk about morality and ethics in general. Because I think most of the time when we talk about these types of topics, it's what are we defining as morally good and what are we defining as morally bad? And I think psychology really often tries to skirt those questions by being descriptive in the sense of what do people think? And normative in the sense of what do people think should happen rather than normative in the sense of what should this actually be? And I think also that's just a good thing to think about when we listen to Jordan talk about normative versus descriptive as normative really just means what people think should happen, not what actually should be. Which I think in other fields is definitely a different type of description. And yeah, I think that's what I like about psychology to be honest, is that we get to, a lot of times we get to leave the hard thinking to other people.

[laughter]

0:35:25.4 Ava Ma De Sousa: So this is what people think you as philosophers or other humanities can do with that what you will. But this is what people think.

[laughter]

0:35:38.5 Ava Ma De Sousa: Yeah. And I think it's interesting how psychology can kind of skirt those questions. And I think Jordan almost was, because she was answering how does psychology operationalize it? And it's just, oh, we operationalize it by kind of looking through the philosophy literature and saying this is one way to look at it. Maybe some people have this more utilitarian perspective, like Beth was saying, of the greater good and sacrificing things for the good for most people. Or, you know, philosophy also says that sometimes we should have these specific rules and then we say, okay, what do you guys think? What do you think is right? And then there's this other way of just what do you feel like is objectively wrong because we all have this kind of sense. And I think that kind of elusive feeling is really interesting too. And I feel her stuff would be so interesting to do cross-culturally as well. To look at.

0:36:26.1 Beth Fisher: Yeah, so interesting. I was thinking that, yeah.

0:36:29.3 Ava Ma De Sousa: What other cultures are watching on Netflix. [chuckle]

0:36:32.2 Beth Fisher: Yeah.

[music]

0:36:39.8 Beth Fisher: You've also done some research on phantom rules. Would you better explain what, 'cause I hadn't heard of a phantom rule before this, and then I was reading your stuff and I was like, oh, this is something that happens all the time. If you could just explain What a phantom rule is and what kind of work you've done around them.

0:36:56.5 Jordan Wylie: Yes. I'm so happy to talk about phantom rules. Sorry, pet project for my graduate career. I, yeah, I... It just got published also very recently, or accepted for publication very recently. So yeah, very excited about phantom rules. It's been such a generative space to think and... Yeah, so very excited to talk about it. So this all, so the inspiration, I'm very inspired by the things that happen in real life. That's a big place where I draw inspiration for my research. So the inspiration for phantom rules, so I played tennis in undergrad and I was a, how to say it nicely to myself, a less emotionally stable tennis player than I am a human.

[laughter]

0:37:51.1 Beth Fisher: Gotcha.

0:37:54.4 Jordan Wylie: And I always felt singled out even though other tennis players who are maybe predominantly male tennis players who expressed similar levels of anger didn't seem to be policed in the same way that I was. And so like, I always felt just like, ugh, I feel so singled out in this space. And, you know, that was fine. I got through it. You know, fast forward a couple years, I'm watching Serena Williams play, somebody who's been singled out, you know, to a very extreme extent for very different reasons, but I'm watching her play the 2018 US Open Final and she gets penalized in the final, you know, towards the end of the match for getting coached, which is something every person who plays tennis knows every person is getting coached all of the time. It's just a fact of the matter. It is true that it is against the rules technically, but it happens all of the time.

0:38:57.0 Jordan Wylie: And this is like being singled out, right? People are breaking rules all around you, but only you're really getting in trouble for it. And so I started thinking a lot about that, about what it means for something to be a rule, really, when nobody follows it. And when you think about it at all, you see them everywhere. So, you know, things like jaywalking, I'm living in New York City at the time, jaywalking is illegal, but people are doing it all the time. You don't have to be in New York for more than 10 minutes to see that it's totally normal to do this, this thing that's illegal. Loitering. I mean, there's so many of them. And so we really set out to see if it's, you know, an academic distinction. It's only really us who are thinking that these are sort of funky and weird, or if people are reasoning about these rules in different ways than they reason about similar rules.

0:39:51.7 Jordan Wylie: And so we define a phantom rule as a codified rule that's descriptively normative to break. So the like descriptive norm information and the codified information are sort of at odds of their intention with one another. And it's really conceptually interesting when one of them is gonna win out. When does the descriptive information win out? And you decide to jaywalk. When does the codified information win out? And you're like, oh no, I shouldn't jaywalk, or, oh no, that person shouldn't jaywalk. And so a lot of the work that we've done in the phantom rule space is to see whether, you know, other people have this intuition that these rules are sort of different, whether they have a unique sort of affective signature and whether they behave in unique ways such that they're more subject to motivated enforcement than other kinds of rules. And that's basically what we find that people do think that they're different somehow than other similar rules, than other similar social norm rules.

0:40:52.7 Jordan Wylie: So, you know, don't wear a tuxedo to a funeral or something, you know, something that's not actually codified, but it's similar in the norm space but it doesn't have that same codification. It actually has... It exerts some power over how people act. People don't tend to do that in a way that's really different from a phantom rule. So people are very able to distinguish those kinds of rules. And then they also distinguish them from rules that are codified but aren't normal to break. So stopping at a red light, for example, in terms of its severity. It's really similar to the kinds of things that we in the legal space have identified as phantom rules. But it is codified just like them, but people don't tend to break them. And so yeah, people will pull these rules apart.

0:41:41.2 Jordan Wylie: And then in terms of what that means, we find that phantom rules, these rules that are descriptively normal to break, are more subject to motivated enforcement. That when people are motivated, we've done this in economic games, we've done it in survey research, when you're motivated, because maybe in the economic games situation, maybe somebody acted selfishly. So what we do in a sort of modified version of the dictator game where one person is allocating some money, splitting money between themselves and another person who has no say, we added a third observer. So this third observer is the participant. And they're going to decide whether or not to enforce the rules of the game. And in one condition, the person who's allocating the money is really fair. They break a rule that everyone breaks. We tell the observers, everybody breaks this rule, they break that rule, but they're fair the whole time.

0:42:42.9 Jordan Wylie: And then in the other condition, they break the same rule that everybody tends to break, but they're not very fair. They're pretty selfish the whole time. And we find that people enforce the rule much more frequently for the selfish person than they do for the fair person, even though the rule is exactly the same. So you have this legitimate avenue for punishment when it suits your goals or your desires. We have some budding data on this in the real world as well, looking at 311 calls that end in arrest in New York City. So people call 311, they're non-emergency municipal calls. So people call 311 for things like noise complaint or ticket scalping, things of that sort. Things that are very phantom ruley flavor to them. And we find that looking, so looking in New York across 10 years, controlling for a volume of calls, controlling for everything that we could control for, we find that calls that are made in neighbourhoods where the census data tells us that there is a minority percentage of white residents, that those calls more frequently end in an arrest than they do in neighbourhoods where there's a majority of white residents.

0:44:03.5 Jordan Wylie: So we have some evidence in an experimental way that there is something special about these rules and their legitimacy and their seeming actually morally relevant at all is really determined by whether or not people are motivated to enforce them. And then we have some data on some of the consequences of these kinds of rules existing in the real world.

0:44:26.0 Beth Fisher: Yeah, I think that's really nice because we all see this happening, you know, with police and enforcement, everyone sees this, this is no question this is happening. So I think it's really nice to have this understanding of what this is, how this is playing out. Do you think then that we have kind of developed this phantom rule space, whether we did this or we were aware of it or not, to have something where we can do this kind of motivated punishment? Because it feels it is this kind of way we can seek revenge or do something and also then it's morally okay as well, which is weird 'cause it's a rule.

0:45:12.6 Jordan Wylie: Yeah. Yeah, I have thought so much about this question. I don't have a great answer honestly. But, you know, a charitable interpretation of the typical case of these rules is that they were maybe created for some social order function and it's like no longer relevant. Historically they might have been relevant and now they just are not, there are blue laws also that are kind of similar to that. Blue laws are, if you've ever watched Parks and Rec, they talk about blue laws like in Pawnee, it's illegal to, you know, hold a chicken or whatever. And that rule was probably created for a really specific thing that mattered then. And now it doesn't matter at all. Those rules are different obviously than phantom rules because people don't break them all the time. They seem sort of silly now, but you know, way back in history they might have had some relevance.

0:46:18.5 Jordan Wylie: And so, you know, for some phantom rules that might be true. For some of them it's hard to imagine that that's true. They just seem maybe more pernicious or something as a way to maybe police certain populations more than others. In the case of jaywalking, the history of jaywalking is really interesting and there's been work on the history of jaywalking, but jaywalking is a rule that was lobbied for by car companies to get people more interested in driving, and a jay, the derogatory term for somebody who was poor or somebody who was, you know, maybe a minority status, to get white women to wanna buy cars. So, you know, that one is, you know, maybe a little more clear that it was a very specific rule created to police a very specific population. But, you know, that they emerge across different domains, right? They really emerge in tennis. You can imagine them in academia, you can imagine them in the workplace kind of more broadly, you know, that they emerge across these contexts. I'm not sure all of the time they have that same very pointed nature, but you know, it's also possible.

0:47:41.7 Beth Fisher: Yeah, you spoke about this at the beginning, but you also have done research around moral beliefs and how they influence our harm reduction policies, which is super interesting. Also something that I think is super relevant in Australia around drug use and stuff. That's a big conversation and I think it's the same in, I mean, probably a lot of places. Yeah, so could you talk a bit about that work?

0:48:08.3 Jordan Wylie: So like I mentioned at the beginning, your question about how you operationalize morality is a hard one because it's really hard to measure these things exactly how you mean to measure them. And so part of this project was really about how do we assess the kind of thing that we mean to assess here. And so, like I said, to measure people's moral attitudes or moral beliefs about various relevant public policies. We pulled measures from a bunch of different moral researchers to create this composite that had some of that objectivity absolutism kind of features of morality and some of the more affective things like moral outrage kind of things. And so what we are interested in is building on work done by McCoon that suggests that moral outrage predicts less support for harm reduction policy. And so we wanted to build and extend that work and really try to understand how when people moralise something, when I'm holding it, you know, close to my heart, am I always against a policy that is reducing the harm associated with the thing that I've moralised?

0:49:28.2 Jordan Wylie: And we find similar to the McCoon paper and his work on the subject, we find that as people moralise something, as they hold it closer to them, not just outrage but feel like it's a matter of right and wrong and black and white, it's so clear that this thing is wrong, as they hold that close, people are more likely to have less support for policies that are explicitly aimed at reducing the harm associated with that behavior. And we find this across many domains. So we looked at gun ownership, we looked at unemployment, we looked at risky sex. That's another one people hate. And we looked at cigarette smoking as well. And one really cool accidental part of this project was we collected multiple samples of these same measures to try to hone our measure of moral opposition to these issues and collected them over time.

0:50:34.4 Jordan Wylie: And we started with the cigarette issue like, okay, the extent to which you morally oppose cigarette smoking. And we offered vaping as the harm reducing solution. And at time one we get the pattern that we would expect, the more people morally oppose cigarette smoking, the less they support vaping as a harm reduction policy. But then it changed because vaping changed and how people reason about vaping changed over the course of our data collection. And so we can see this inflection point in our data, which is really cool, especially as like moral researchers researching the kinds of things that people really encounter in day-to-day life compared to, you know, there's a lot of moral psychology on trolleys and dilemmas which are useful and can help us understand how people reason about these things. But it was sort of cool to be researching it while it's changing and while we're not sure how people are gonna form their opinions about this thing. And what we basically find was that when vaping was called into question as an effective strategy for reducing harm, it's no longer seen as an effective strategy. So yeah, we see basically that effect totally, or that relationship totally go away. Yeah.

0:51:55.0 Beth Fisher: Yeah. That's so interesting. It's also, 'cause when I was looking at your work and I was thinking about this, 'cause I was thinking if you think about your morals, you would think a really strong moral would be harm reduction. I really morally believe harm should be reduced everywhere. And I just thought it was interesting that there was this trade-off, well, if you really thought something was wrong...

0:52:17.4 Jordan Wylie: Then you shouldn't do it at all.

0:52:19.4 Beth Fisher: Yeah. But then it's, if you really care about, if you really also think that's wrong, then shouldn't you want more of the reduction? It just feels...

0:52:27.9 Jordan Wylie: Yes. Yes. I mean, exactly.

[chuckle]

0:52:32.0 Jordan Wylie: It's so counter to what you would hope people would want, right? If I really don't want people to be harmed by unemployment, by not having sufficient housing, by not having sufficient food, I really think that that's a problem, then I should support federal funding for unemployment. But there's something about letting people do something, that you let them continue to do something that you find it immoral that really bugs people, you know, I think when people talk a lot about aversion to harm reduction, they focus a lot on drugs and I think the intuition is particularly strong there that if I really don't like that, that you're doing drugs then a clean needle exchange, it's somehow making me complicit in your doing something I find morally wrong even though it's totally counter to what we know is effectual harm reducing, right?

0:53:37.2 Jordan Wylie: Like abstinence, getting people to totally stop, cold turkey kind of stuff doesn't work. This is the thing that works and it's just really hard to get people to break from their moral belief in that case. We also measured people's harm attitude. So how harmful do you think that this is? And when we ask them that question, so not the moral question, we ask them, how harmful is this? We see a positive correlation between how harmful and support for harm reduction policy. So the more harmful I think it is, the more I support you reducing the harm associated with it. But the more moral I think it is, the less I support it.

0:54:19.1 Beth Fisher: So what about something, there must have been circumstances where people thought it was really morally wrong and it caused a lot of harm.

0:54:29.3 Jordan Wylie: Yeah. We didn't look at the person level. We looked across people. But I mean, that is super interesting. Certainly there are people for whom that's true, but what we are expecting, we were expecting a lot of things to happen differently than they did. So moral attitudes and harm attitudes, they're super correlated and they're correlated in our data, but we find evidence that they're doing something different. They're just like getting at different pieces of people's attitudes for these things. And, you know, their attitudes for the harm stuff is explaining a positive part of the intuition and their attitudes around the moralness of a particular issue are predicting less support for whatever the given issue is.

0:55:15.9 Beth Fisher: Yeah. So interesting. And obviously when thinking about how people are voting and what they care about, this stuff is so cool to think about.

[music]

0:55:32.6 Beth Fisher: You morally think someone shouldn't be doing this and you know you can reduce it, but you're against it. It seems crazy.

0:55:39.0 Ava Ma De Sousa: Yeah. Yeah.

0:55:41.3 Beth Fisher: And just that I think what's so crazy is that we, so we probably all have these kind of biases, but we're not aware of that. So whether these people who, you know, are really against unemployment, which I was confused how you can be, well, I get... Anyway, if you're very morally against unemployment, but maybe you are unaware that that then influences your harm reduction policy belief. Maybe that's something that is just the way we have this bias, but we don't know that, so I think that that's super important research and then maybe if the education changes around that, they'll kind of get a bit untangled. I don't know.

0:56:24.7 Ava Ma De Sousa: Yeah, that's true. I think that's always an interesting question of like, if we know this type of research, if we can illuminate the fact that these biases exist, is it enough to tell people that they have those types of biases? Or is it just if someone feels drugs are bad, I have a strong moral conviction that drugs are bad and any amount, maybe it's because with some, and you probably, I feel I have encountered this with some friends where they feel they have a kind of moral rule or a set of values where any type of transgression, no matter how small, the degree doesn't matter, it's just the kind, and if you cross that boundary then it's bad. So like if you're using a needle, even if you're trying to reduce your consumption, that's still bad. It doesn't matter how much you're doing or what your goal is, it just matters that you're doing it.

0:57:18.9 Ava Ma De Sousa: And I kind of wonder if that correlates with other personality trait. I would assume that it does because I think that kind of all or nothing perspective is also something that's sort of ingrained in personality. A lot of that stuff in growth mindset versus fixed mindset, which is in growth mindset, I'm sure a lot of people are familiar with this because it's permeated a lot of spaces, in particular education, but with growth mindset, the idea is that you think that for intelligence, for example, is the paradigm that intelligence is something that you can work at. So being smart is about hard work and if you put in hard work, then you'll be smart, you'll be able to do well at your math test or whatever. And then a fixed mindset is intelligence is a fixed trait. And some people are smart and some people aren't smart.

0:58:03.4 Ava Ma De Sousa: No matter what you do, you're not gonna change that. So maybe if people have those types of fixed views of moral values or maybe fixed views of moral actions, if you take drugs once you're a drug addict or something. And if you do that one time versus if you do that 10 times, you're still in the same category and that's not gonna change, and progress, they don't view progress as happening from like you are addicted and then you get better and then you're in...

0:58:31.5 Beth Fisher: What's the word for that?

0:58:33.7 Ava Ma De Sousa: Not remission.

0:58:34.7 Beth Fisher: I think it is remission.

0:58:37.4 Ava Ma De Sousa: Is it? Okay, then you're in remission. I feel it's kind of that black and white thinking versus being able to be okay with some ambiguity and grayscale. And there's also evidence that some people are okay with, in eastern culture is that they're okay with two conflicting things being true, and maybe that could apply to, you're using a needle right now or you're using drugs, but you're on the journey to get better versus if you're using drugs, you're a drug addict.

0:59:04.2 Beth Fisher: Yeah.

[music]

0:59:12.2 Beth Fisher: Well, this has honestly all been amazing. I have loved this. But before we end, is there any new stuff you are working on or anything exciting you'd like to share?

0:59:21.5 Jordan Wylie: So I just started my postdoc in September, so I haven't had a ton of time to get a bunch of new research off the ground. But I'm really excited about curiosity. Very, very excited about understanding curiosity in the moral domain and when and why people are willing to put in effort, especially online workers, online MTurk, or you know, prolific workers, workers who are doing a ton of these surveys, getting them to put in effort for something I think is really interesting signal, this thing is especially interesting. So, you know, a lot of what I've been thinking about lately is trying to more deeply understand why people wanna put in that effort, what they're getting out of it, what is the utility of this. And then, you know, a lot of my postdoc is really focused on understanding that curiosity and that motive to engage and to approach content for pro-social agents.

1:00:19.9 Jordan Wylie: And it's exciting. We just piloted some real world social media messages where people are signaling charitable donations and other pro-social attitudes. And we're gonna follow up on that to see when people think it's good and authentic and when they wanna learn more about it. When does all of those sort of evaluative conclusions that I come to about a pro-social signal or a pro-social messenger, when do those, regardless of the conclusion I've come to, still spark curiosity for me to like, okay, well, I like the Wildlife Fund, let me learn about that even if I think you're doing this for virtue signaling or some more selfishly motivated kind of thing. So that's where I am spending a lot of my time thinking lately and I'm really excited to like actually get some data, which is coming through.

[music]

1:01:18.4 Ava Ma De Sousa: Our intro and outro music is Nobody Stayed For the DJ by Glassio. Our transition music is Back For More, also by Glassio. Minds Matter is mixed, edited and created by Beth Fisher. She's the Australian one, and me, Ava Ma de Sousa. We'll be back in two weeks with a brand new episode of Minds Matter. In the meantime, find all our episodes and show notes on mindsmatterpodcast.com.

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