Sculpting a Sustainable ‘Space of Actions.’ Philosophical and Neuro-Ethical Considerations of the Current Moral Action Overload.

Machiel Keestra,
Institute for Interdisciplinary Studies, U Amsterdam,
AIS San Diego, October 9, 2010

Classic tension: abstract and concrete moral norms

- Plato’s Idea of the Good
- Aristotle’s concrete & realizable moral good

Pluralistic account of virtue

"In order to become good and wise (agathos kai spoudaios) requires three things; these are

-nature

-habit

-reason

(physis, ethos, logos).” (Aristotle, Politics 1332 a 38)

Pluralism yet with coherence

Requirements of coherence and consistency of actions

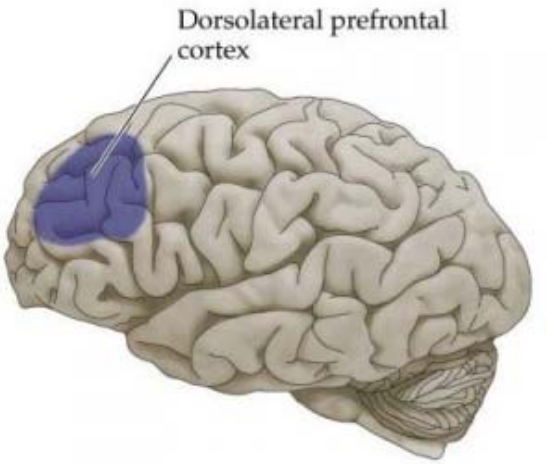
- over time
- across a person's thinking & willing

--> crucial role for moral habits

Action planning = “sculpting a space of actions”

Cognitive science perspective:

- Replacing goal-directed actions with stimulus-response actions
- Development of skills
- “action planning is like arming the cognitive system to behave like a reflex machinery” (Hommel, 2006)



Moral action overload

Enlarged space of action options:

- more potential action participants
- more -technological, instrumental, social- action options
- larger spans of time involved

Widened scope of action:

- globalization of action consequences
- globalization of involved participants
- enlarged temporal horizon

Reduction of complexity via action planning

Hierarchical account of intentions/desires:

- from desires to volitions and ideals
- increasing consistency & coherency
- supporting social & joint action
- including future situations & generations

(Harry Frankfurt; Michael Bratman)

Cognitively anchoring a hierarchy of intentions

Intentions:

- Distal (future-directed)
- Proximal (present-directed)
- Motor

(Pacherie, 2008)

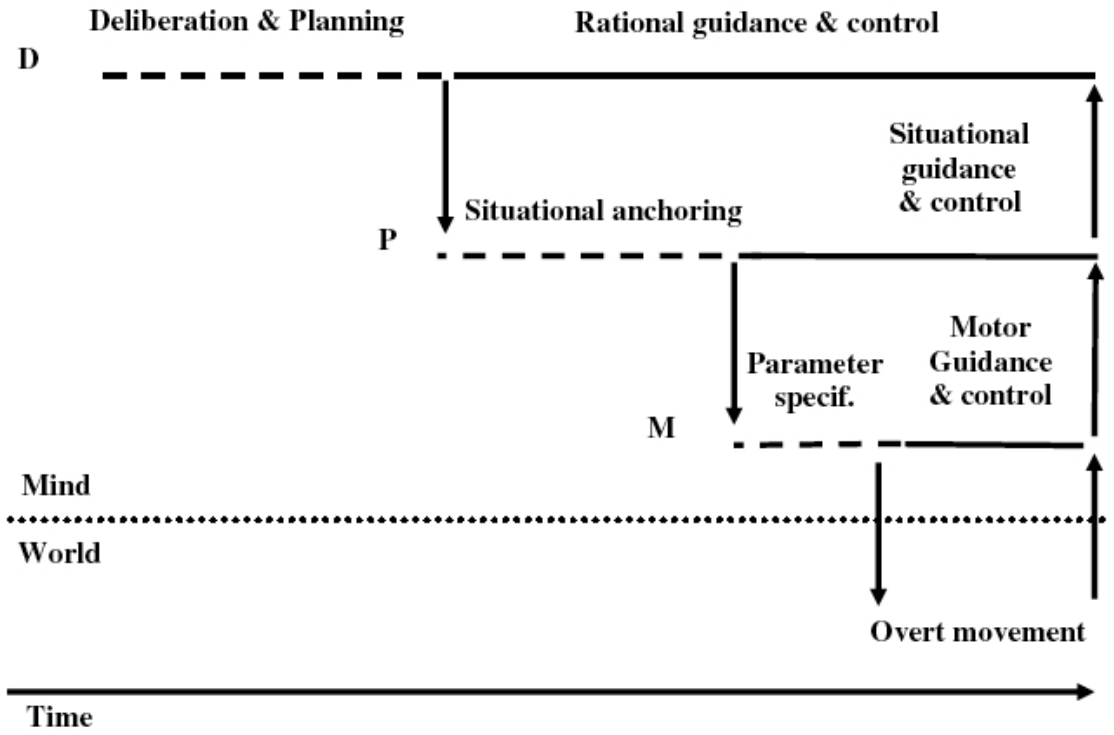


Fig. 1. The intentional cascade of D-intentions, P-intentions, and M-intentions.

Result of planning: ‘Sculpted space of actions’

Action space, sculpted by influences such as:

- environmental affordances
- motor primings
- motivation state
- intentions

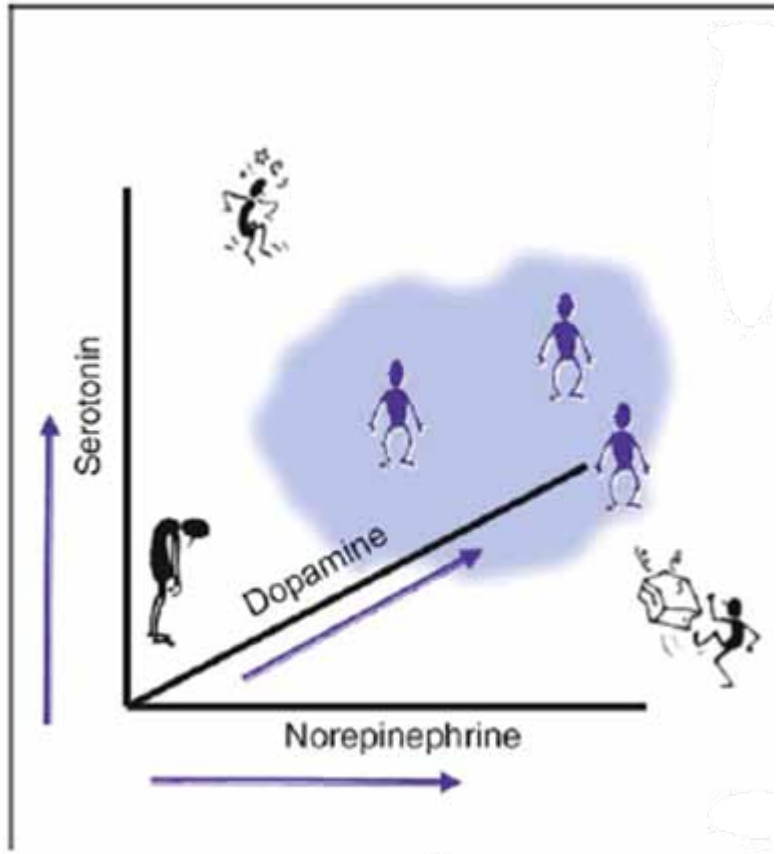


Figure 2. A 3D control space.

Cognitive challenges posed by moral action overload

Enlarged space of action options:

- more potential action participants
- more -technological, instrumental, social- action options
- larger spans of time involved

Widened scope of action:

- globalization of action consequences
- globalization of involved participants
- enlarged temporal horizon

How can this action space be processed, sculpted in a cognitively adequate way?

Politics are crucial for a sustainable "space of actions"

Politics as mediating between neural mechanisms and global responsibilities by:

- Arranging and determining sustainable political choices
- Anchoring distal preferences in proximal actions
- Facilitating the coordination of actions of individuals over time and of social interactions
- Providing the environment with recognizable affordances for action

(cf. Keestra: "Can neuroscience and political theory merge into a stable 'neuropolitics'? in: "Thinking about the Body Politic", ed. Vander Valk, to appear at Routledge in 2011)

Thanks!

//home.medewerker.uva.nl/m.keestra

m.keestra@uva.nl