Books And Culture [1]

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Moral Minds
A second look at a controversial evolutionary psychologist.

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The past weeks have witnessed the unhappy spectacle of an academic star fallen into disgrace. Marc Hauser was placed on a one-year leave by Harvard, after a three-year internal investigation into scientific misconduct. Further sanctions are pending. Harvard officials are giving out few details, but the testimony of a former research assistant has leaked to The Chronicle of Higher Education, giving a sense of the character and magnitude of the misconduct. In short, Hauser claimed to have seen things (hypothesis-confirming things) in video footage of his experimental subjects (cotton-top tamarins) that his assistants repeatedly failed to see. And he insisted on publishing based on what he alone saw (or "saw").

Hauser's field is evolutionary psychology — in particular, the evolutionary roots of moral psychology. This is a field that sometimes provokes controversy, and Hauser has established himself as a gifted controversialist. He is — or has been — a widely and eagerly sought lecturer and interview subject. One can't say for sure what motivated the dishonesty, but it is tempting to guess that Hauser became too enamored of stirring the pot.

What eats at us when we hear of a case like Hauser's — one reason scientific misconduct is so severely stigmatized — is that it leaves us wondering if some other study (by the same author, or by another) is similarly tainted. Science is a self-correcting practice, over time. But Hauser's entire body of work is, for the moment, under suspicion. Which is too bad, because much of it is probably fine. A distinctive mark of Hauser's career has been his yen toward collaboration across sub-disciplinary and even disciplinary lines. And whatever pressure he applied to his assistants, he wouldn't have been able to apply that kind of pressure to peers.

It's not a bad moment, actually, to look again at Hauser's best-known work, with our guard up but also with the expectation that the ideas are worth considering. Such guarded optimism may, indeed, be the best frame of mind in which to consider works of popular science — as against the "gosh, professor, is it really so?" abjection with which such works are often received.

Hauser is represented by John Brockman, agent to many scientists in the public eye (including Stephen Pinker and Richard Dawkins, among others) and the founder of edge.com. Some have complained about Brockman books that they are produced too quickly, under pressure from the trade publisher who has often handed over a massive advance for a sure-thing nonfiction bestseller. Hauser's Moral Minds: How Nature Designed Our Universal Sense of Right and Wrong seems to confirm that misgiving.

Hauser doesn't have a book's worth of original research and argument, and so, a third of the way in, with his own ideas and research contributions before the reader, he turns to a critical summary of recent research by neuroscientists and other evolutionary psychologists: Antonio Damasio, Joshua Greene, Jonathan Haidt, and others. The remaining chapters read like — and, I strongly suspect, are — polished lecture notes from a (terrific) course: full of interesting content, frequently digressive, and without any big conclusions, or even any discernible movement toward such conclusions. (Who could expect a big conclusion, every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday morning?) These

chapters are also festooned with pop-culture references and Bartleby (and Dave Barry) quotes, of varying relevance, an instructional gimmick that transfers gratingly to the printed page.

The ideas, however — Hauser's own, in particular — are fascinating. For several years now, Hauser and his students have been conducting surveys of people from a variety of ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds, asking them to pronounce on what are known, in moral philosophy, as "Trolley Cases." In such cases, as the late R. M. Hare wrote, "trolleys hurtling down the line out of control have to be shunted into various alternative groups of unfortunate people." The purpose of such cases, first in philosophical reflection and now in human-subjects research, is to draw out people's intuitions — with nice, clean (necessarily contrived) cases — about whether to sacrifice a few for the sake of many, and whether or not it matters how such a sacrifice is effected. In one standard case, one must decide whether to redirect a runaway trolley from a track where it will kill five people to a track where it will kill one. In another, there is no opportunity to redirect, but one is asked to consider flinging a victim — standardly, cruelly, the victim is obese — onto the track, where he or she would supposedly interrupt the trolley. About such cases, Hare wrote, "I have myself, when helping to build a railway, seen trolleys run out of control, and therefore find the unrealism of the examples very obvious." But their attractions for laboratory psychologists are likewise obvious. And if it turns out that there are pronounced, cross-cultural convergences in people's judgments about such cases, well: that is interesting.

And it does turn out. Granted, Hauser's research subjects come principally from economically developed contexts — contexts in which someone can come across and complete an internet survey — but his subjects are otherwise diverse. And all major subsets of his subjects, to date, show three tendencies: 1) they decide cases by head-counting, when it is only a matter of redirecting a trolley; 2) they are unwilling to push someone onto the tracks, even to save a greater number; and 3) they are seldom articulate, regarding either 1) or 2), as to why they respond as they do.

Hauser notes that one can articulate for his subjects a principled justification: the most coherent, illuminating one is a variant of the traditional Catholic doctrine of double-effect, according to which one may participate in bringing about a bad effect provided that the bad effect is merely a foreseen consequence of what one does, and neither one's intended end nor one's chosen means to that end. So, one can redirect the trolley away from the five and toward the one, because one does not intend the death of the one (rather, one's aim is to minimize loss of life) and is not using the one as a means of stopping the trolley (rather, one saves the five by redirecting a trolley onto a track which, by unhappy accident, is occupied). The question Hauser asks, then, is how best to explain our convergence on a philosophical principle — or, more precisely, our being guided in our judgments by such a principle — given our inarticulacy about that principle?

His reply — his hypothesis — is that what Noam Chomsky and his followers say of human languages can likewise be said of human morals: they are as similar as they are because they reflect universal, innate, inherited structures of the mind; and they vary, from place to place, only within a range delimited by those structures. Chomsky posits a universal grammar, and argues that the variation we see among human languages occurs within a range of possibilities defined by this grammar. Thus one can divide artificial languages into possible and impossible — not with respect to mere internal consistency, but with respect to whether a community of human adults could pass them along to its children as natural languages.

Hauser posits, analogously, a "moral grammar," according to which some rudimentary principles about actions, consequences, and responsibility are universal, innate, and inherited. These principles, like the rudimentary constraints of Chomsky's universal grammar, are consistent with a

variety of particular moral codes, worked out in the context of particular cultures. Hauser calls this "parametric variation." But the variation is always within a range, and this is why principles like the golden rule and the principle of double-effect — or patterns of judgment that can be best described with reference to those principles — turn up all over the place. And with reference to these principles, we can distinguish (for instance) between legal codes that conform to these principles and codes that violate them, and predict the instability of the latter. (Inexplicably, Hauser thinks the distinction, in medical ethics, between killing and letting die — an application of the principle of double-effect — is unstable in this way. At this and at a few other points, he seems merely to be venting his political and [anti-]theological opinions, without bothering about whether they follow from — or even cohere with — his science.)

Not that most of us can articulate the principles by which we judge our own and others' actions. But neither can most of us articulate the principles by which we judge our own and others' utterances. We can't even do this, most of us, with the principles specific to our native languages, let alone those underlying all human languages. We know these principles, but unless a Socrates (or a Chomsky) presses us to reflect, we do not typically know that we know them.

What are the alternatives? What does Hauser oppose? Brockman's clients are — Brockman's brand is — overthrowers of settled views. The view Hauser is particularly concerned to overthrow is that moral judgments are mostly or entirely a matter of conscious calculation and inference — a view he claims has lots of adherents. It does not stoke confidence when Hauser cites the training offered by law schools (in distinctions! and arguments!), and the care people take, writing up contracts, as manifestations of this view. That people work hard to make and apply consistent policies, and that they carefully negotiate their agreements with others, is hardly tantamount to their believing that "' conscious moral reasoning from explicit principles is the cause of our moral judgments."

Nevertheless, Hauser can (and does) identify several 20th-century moral philosophers who hold the view he calls "Kantian" but which I would simply call "rationalist." As his terminology indicates, Hauser sometimes treats this view, not as a 20th-century aberration, but as the hidden essence of any moral philosophy that doesn't collapse into science. In any event, Hauser's research — and the other research upon which he draws — does effectively rebut rationalism.

What is at stake in this opposition, besides a storyline to interest an acquisitions editor at HarperCollins? More than might at first appear. The last few years have seen a raft of pieces of science journalism on this theme: science breaches the strongholds of philosophy and theology. I particularly like the action thriller quality of this line by Shankar Vedantam: "neuroscience has begun to elbow its way into discussions about morality and has opened up a new window on what it means to be good."

Vedantam's language is vivid, but all too familiar. In these tales of disciplinary derring-do, neuroscientists — and others — elbow their way in, throw open the windows, clear the air. But what do Vedantam and his peers and (some of) the scientists they quote think "discussions about morality" have been like, for the past few millennia? And what about work like Hauser's generates the sense that locked doors are being kicked in?

Some features of his research program — and the research programs of others, like primatologist Frans de Waal — are genuinely new, or render sophisticated what was crude in earlier work on "evolutionary ethics." When E. O. Wilson wrote in 1975 that "the time has come for ethics to be removed from the hands of the philosophers and biologicized," he ignored the distinction between the descriptive and the normative, between what we happen to tend toward and what we

can bring ourselves, on reflection, to approve. Judging from his press clippings, some in Hauser's audience are still of Wilson's party, expecting and applauding grandstanding remarks like "only the tools of science can shed light on this problem" (as against philosophical reflection). But Hauser and his fellow researchers generally acknowledge the interdependence of empirical and conceptual inquiries. They seek to characterize and explain our moral outlook, without pretending that we needn't also ask critical questions of it.

This deepens the puzzle, though. For it looks as though Hauser and company are less antagonistic or threatening than earlier theorists. What is neuroscientist Jordan Grafman getting at, then, when he cautions, "Eventually, you are bound to get into areas that for thousands of years we have preferred to keep mystical" ?

Part of the answer, it seems to me, lies in ignorance, on several sides of the discussion. On the side of some scientists and science journalists, there is ignorance of the history of moral philosophy (and theology), ignorance of thinkers like Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, and David Hume, all of whom regarded humans as animals, with animal instincts alongside or underneath their distinguishing traits. This ignorance helps sustain a self-serving fantasy that moral philosophy is inherently rationalist.

And yet, for far too long, moral philosophers themselves have shared in this fantasy. That is why there have been a number of attempts, in recent years, to bring together an acknowledgement of our animal nature with critical moral reflection. Some Christian philosophers — Alasdair MacIntyre comes prominently to mind — have contributed to this trend. Christians ought, in any case, to be receptive to a number of the things Hauser has to say. We said many of these things first. Hauser as good as declares the Pauline principle (do not do evil that good may come), on which the principle of double-effect is based, to be innate moral knowledge. In this and in other ways, he and his peers give new expression and sense to the idea of a "natural law," "written on our hearts."

We ought to be receptive, then: quite apart from our faith commitments, how could any moral philosopher not take an interest in the resemblances between us and other animals — in what our nature and tendencies actually are? Reading critique after critique of "naturalism" from Christian philosophers, I wonder if we have forgotten that the work of appropriation is also a work of creativity and charity. Aquinas knew better. We could do worse at the moment than to follow his example: sifting, appropriating, and synthesizing the best speculation of our day, noticing what is wrong about various views, but showing more interest in figuring out what's right about them. Again, guarded optimism. Working within a sub-discipline — moral philosophy — in which "naturalism" does not simply imply "atheism," I wonder whether we couldn't be at work on a Christian "naturalism."

There are precedents.

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Notes

[1] http://www.booksandculture.com/articles/webexclusives/2010/september/moralminds.html