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The Moral Naturalists

By DAVID BROOKS

Where does our sense of right and wrong come from? Most people think it is a gift from God, who revealed His laws and elevates us with His love. A smaller number think that we figure the rules out for ourselves, using our capacity to reason and choosing a philosophical system to live by.

Moral naturalists, on the other hand, believe that we have moral sentiments that have emerged from a long history of relationships. To learn about morality, you don't rely upon revelation or metaphysics; you observe people as they live.

This week a group of moral naturalists gathered in Connecticut at a conference organized by the Edge Foundation. One of the participants, Marc Hauser of Harvard, began his career studying primates, and for moral naturalists the story of our morality begins back in the evolutionary past. It begins with the way insects, rats and monkeys learned to cooperate.

By the time humans came around, evolution had forged a pretty firm foundation for a moral sense. Jonathan Haidt of the University of Virginia argues that this moral sense is like our sense of taste. We have natural receptors that help us pick up sweetness and saltiness. In the same way, we have natural receptors that help us recognize fairness and cruelty. Just as a few universal tastes can grow into many different cuisines, a few moral senses can grow into many different moral cultures.

Paul Bloom of Yale noted that this moral sense can be observed early in life. Bloom and his colleagues conducted an experiment in which they showed babies a scene featuring one figure struggling to climb a hill, another figure trying to help it, and a third trying to hinder it.

At as early as six months, the babies showed a preference for the helper over the hinderer. In some plays, there is a second act. The hindering figure is either punished or rewarded. In this case, 8-month-olds preferred a character who was punishing the hinderer over ones being nice to it.

This illustrates, Bloom says, that people have a rudimentary sense of justice from a very early age. This doesn't make people naturally good. If you give a 3-year-old two pieces of candy and ask him if he wants to share one of them, he will almost certainly say no. It's not until age 7 or 8 that even half the children are willing to share. But it does mean that social norms fall upon prepared ground. We come equipped to learn fairness and other virtues.

These moral faculties structure the way we perceive and respond to the world. If you ask for donations with the photo and name of one sick child, you are likely to get twice as much money than if you had asked for donations with a photo and the names of eight children. Our minds respond more powerfully to the plight of an individual than the plight of a group.

These moral faculties rely upon emotional, intuitive processes, for good and ill. If you are in a bad mood you will make harsher moral judgments than if you're in a good mood or have just seen a comedy. As Elizabeth Phelps of New York University points out, feelings of disgust will evoke a desire to expel things, even those things unrelated to your original mood. General fear makes people risk-averse. Anger makes them risk-seeking.

People who behave morally don't generally do it because they have greater knowledge; they do it because they have a greater sensitivity to other people's points of view. Hauser reported on research showing that bullies are surprisingly sophisticated at reading other people's intentions, but they're not good at anticipating and feeling other people's pain.

The moral naturalists differ over what role reason plays in moral judgments. Some, like Haidt, believe that we make moral judgments intuitively and then construct justifications after the fact. Others, like Joshua

Greene of Harvard, liken moral thinking to a camera. Most of the time we rely on the automatic point-and-shoot process, but occasionally we use deliberation to override the quick and easy method. We certainly tell stories and have conversations to spread and refine moral beliefs.

For people wary of abstract theorizing, it's nice to see people investigating morality in ways that are concrete and empirical. But their approach does have certain implicit tendencies.

They emphasize group cohesion over individual dissent. They emphasize the cooperative virtues, like empathy, over the competitive virtues, like the thirst for recognition and superiority. At this conference, they barely mentioned the yearning for transcendence and the sacred, which plays such a major role in every human society.

Their implied description of the moral life is gentle, fair and grounded. But it is all lower case. So far, at least, it might not satisfy those who want their morality to be awesome, formidable, transcendent or great.

Notes

¹<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/07/23/opinion/23brooks.html>