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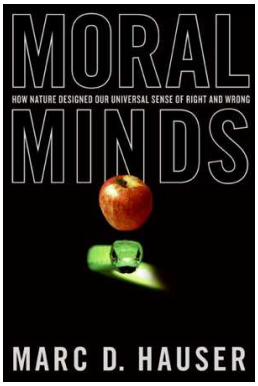
Is Morality Innate and Universal?

by Josie Glausiusz

Harvard psychologist Marc Hauser's new theory says evolution hardwired us to know right from wrong. But here's the confusing part: It also gave us a lot of wiggle room.

A healthy man walks into a hospital where five patients are awaiting organ transplants. Is it morally acceptable to kill the man in order to harvest his organs to save the lives of five others? If you instantly answered no, you share a near-universal response to the dilemma, one offered by peoples and cultures all over the globe. (http://moral.wjh.harvard.edu/index2.html) But how did you reach this conclusion? Was it a rational decision learned in childhood, or was it—as Harvard evolutionary biologist and cognitive neuroscientist Marc Hauser claims—based on instincts encoded in our brains by evolution? In his recent book *Moral Minds: How Nature Designed Our Universal Sense of Right and Wrong*, Hauser argues that millions of years of natural selection have molded a universal moral grammar within our brains that enables us to make rapid decisions about ethical dilemmas.

To arrive at this radical notion, Hauser draws on his own research in social cooperation, neuroscience, and primate behavior, as well as on the musings of philosophers, cognitive psychologists, and most important, the theories of MIT linguist Noam Chomsky, who in the 1950s proposed that all humans are equipped with a universal linguistic grammar, a set of instinctive rules that underlie all languages. Hauser himself, a professor of psychology, human evolutionary biology, and organismic and evolutionary biology at Harvard and codirector of the school's Mind/Brain/Behavior Initiative, has analyzed the antics of tamarins, vervet monkeys, macaques, and starlings in captivity, as well as rhesus monkeys and chimpanzees in the wild. This research led to his earlier book *Wild Minds: What Animals Really Think* (Owl Books, 2001).



You argue that humans have an innate moral faculty. Can you describe what you mean by this?

> The basic idea is to ask about the sources of our moral judgments. What are the psychological processes involved when we deliver a moral judgment of right or wrong? The crucial issue to keep in mind here is a distinction between how we judge and what we do. In some cases, our judgments may align very closely with what we would actually do, but on occasions they may be very, very different.
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> The second point is to draw on an analogy with language and ask whether there might be something like a universal moral grammar, a set of principles that every human is born with. It's a tool kit in some sense for building possible moral systems. In linguistics, there is a lot of variation that we see in the expressed languages throughout the world. The

real deep insight of Chomskian linguistics was to ask the question, "Might this variation at some level be explained by certain common principles of universal grammar?[1]" That allows, of course, for every language to have its own lexicon. The analogy with morality would simply be: There is going to be a suite of universal principles that dictate how we think about the nature of harming and helping others, but each culture has some freedom—not unlimited—to dictate who is harmed and who is helped.

What is the evidence that we draw upon unconscious principles when making moral decisions?

Let's take two examples. A trolley is coming down a track, and it's going to run over and kill five people if it continues. A person standing next to the track can flip a switch and turn the trolley onto a side track where it will kill one but save the five. Most people think that's morally permissible—to harm one person when five are saved. Another case is when a nurse comes up to a doctor and says, "Doctor, we've got five patients in critical care; each one needs an organ to survive. We do not have time to send out for organs, but a healthy person just walked into the hospital—we can take his organs and save the five. Is that OK?" No one says yes to that one. Now, in both cases your action can save five while harming one, so they're identical in that sense. So why the flip-flop? People of different ages, people of different religious backgrounds, people even with different educations typically cannot explain why they think those cases differ. There appears to be some kind of unconscious process driving moral judgments without its being accessible to conscious reflection.

What is the evidence that infants already have a moral code ingrained in their brains?

I don't think we're ready to say. Studies have shown that infants as young as 15 months are sensitive to the beliefs of others—true versus false beliefs. That's crucial to the moral domain.

There's also this from the work of Elliot Turiel [a cognitive scientist at the University of California at Berkeley]. He said, Look, there's a very important distinction between a social convention and a moral rule. Children by at least the age of 3 or 4 understand that distinction. Here is a simple way of putting it. If a teacher comes into a classroom and says, "Today, class, instead of raising your hand when you want to ask a question, just ask your question. Don't raise your hand." If you ask kids, "Is that OK?" kids will say, "OK, fine." If you tell them, "In our class, we raise our hands to ask questions, but in France they never raise their hands. Is that OK?" "OK." So it's basically open to authority; it's culturally variable.

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So that's a social dimension. But now imagine the following situation. The teacher comes into the class and says, "If you're annoyed by a child sitting next to you, just

[1] Universal grammar is a theory of linguistics postulating principles of grammar shared by all languages, thought to be innate to humans

punch him!" You're going to have moral outrage. You can't say that! If you say, "But in France they do," they'd say, "Well, the French are weird; the French can't say that." So it's completely not open to authoritarian override, in a sense, and it's not culturally variable. So you get this kind of fundamental distinction that's coming on fairly early. But first the question is: How does the kid know that it's in the moral zone as opposed to merely the social zone? We don't know.

Why would natural selection have favored the evolution of an innate moral code within our brains?

One possibility is that these principles that I'm describing were not selected for morality. They were favored for other aspects of social cognition and are simply borrowed by morality. What does morality do at a very general level? It sets up, either unconsciously or consciously, rules for navigating the social world. Now, why might it be unconscious? It might be unconscious for exactly the same reason that language is unconscious at some level.

Imagine that every time you would try to talk to me, you had to think about adjectives, nouns, verbs, and where they go. Well, you would never say anything. This conversation would take 10 years to complete. Whereas if it's unconscious, well, you're just jamming through all this information, because the structure of this stuff is just natural to you. My guess is that there is some aspect of morality which is very much like that. If every time you were confronted with a moral issue you actually had to work it through, you would do nothing else. So there's something highly adaptive to the unconscious aspects of not having to think about these things all the time.

Of course, one of the things that makes morality adaptive is that it does allow for a certain level of within-group stability and, therefore, allows for individual fitness to be enhanced from a genetic perspective. So if I live in a world of defectors, I have no chance, whereas if I can find the cooperators and cooperate with them, my own individual fitness will be greatly enhanced. So I want to know who are the individuals I can trust and those I can't trust. At that level, there's been, of course, greater selection for any kind of social group to have certain kinds of principles that allow for group-level stability.

You draw an analogy between Noam Chomsky's theory of a universal grammar and your own concept of a universal moral code. But moral rules, as described in your book, differ across cultures. For example, some societies permit intentional murder, such as honor killings of women who have transgressed that society's sexual codes. How do you explain this?

Let's focus on honor killings. In this country, in its early stage of colonization, the South of the United States was colonized in part by Celtic herders, Irish, and Scotsmen, whereas the North/Northeast was colonized heavily by German potato plow farmers. That kind of colonization set up very different cultural psychologies. The South developed this very macho policy toward the world—if somebody took your cattle, you were going to kill them. That was crucial to your livelihood. Whereas nobody is going to steal a crop of potatoes. If somebody takes a few, who cares? What that machismo led to were these cases where if a man's wife was caught with somebody else, it was not merely permissible

for the man to kill his spouse, it was obligatory. Now, let's take the Middle East. They, too, have honor killings in cases of infidelity. But who does the killing is completely different. There it's not the husband. It's the wife's family who is responsible for killing her. There are rules for permissible killing. Who does the killing is simply a parameter in that space of permissibility.

You mention honor killings in cases of infidelity, but sometimes the victim may simply have been caught in public talking to a man who is not her husband. As a Western woman raised in the liberal tradition, I think that is immoral. Yet in societies where honor killings are acceptable, the decision to kill the woman is deemed morally correct. Why?

Let's go back to language. You're a speaker of English. In French, the world "table" is feminine. Why? Isn't that weird? Isn't that incomprehensible? For an English speaker, that's the most bizarre thing in the world! It's incredibly hard to learn. Yet are the French weird? They're not weird. They speak another language.

The analogy to language is to me very profound and important. When you say, "Look, it's weird that a culture would actually kill someone for infidelity," it's no different than us making a language that's got these really weird quirks. Now, here's where the difference is crucial. As English speakers, we can't tell the French: "You idiots. Saying that a word has gender is stupid, and you guys just change the system." But as we have seen historically, one culture telling another culture, "Hey, this is not OK. We do not think it is morally permissible to do clitoridectomies, and you should just stop, and we're going to find international ways to put the constraints on you"—now, that's whoppingly different. But it also captures something crucial. The descriptive level and the prescriptive level are crucially different. How biology basically guides what people are doing is one thing. What we think should happen is really different. That just doesn't arise as a distinction within language.

Isn't there a big difference between nuances in language and the varying ways in which different societies define murder? A definition of murder seems much more fundamental to human behavior than whether the French language applies gender to nouns and English does not.

That's a great question. I think the way to unpack it is in the following sense. Look, everyone speaks a language. Everyone has a moral system. You can also say, "Look, every language has certain abstract variables, like nouns and verbs." That's true. Now, what I would say is that every culture has got a distinction about intended harms, about actions versus omissions. There are abstractions about the nature of action which play a role in the same kind of way as nouns and verbs do.

My guess is this: It's a hypothesis. There's a huge amount of other work to be done. In the end, I will bet that the analogy will only go so deep. Morality could not be just like language. It's a different system. But my guess is that there will be unconscious, inaccessible principles that will be in some sense like morality. They will not be part of a child's education, and there will be a richness to the child's representations of the world in the moral area that will be as rich as they are in language.

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Are there moral principles that hold true across all societies?

People want to say things like "do unto others [as you would have done unto you]." You see it everywhere. So there's some notion of reciprocity, and that includes both the good and bad. If I have been harmed, there is some notion of revenge which certainly seems to be part of the human psychology. Some level of, "If somebody does something nice for me, I should do something nice back to them" also seems part of the psychology. It may be evolutionarily ancient. Work that we've done on animals suggests some kind of reciprocity, some ancient level of cooperation. So is there a generic rule that says "don't kill others"? No, there's not, because that rule is always adjoined to a caveat, which says, "Well, we kill some people, but not everybody." It's always an in-group, out-group distinction.

What impact does religion have on moral behavior?

I think that for many who come from a religious background, religion is synonymous with morality. Some people think that if you're an atheist, you simply have no morals. That is just wrong. There are an awful lot of people who are atheists who do very, very wonderful things. As an objective question, do people who have religious backgrounds show different patterns of moral judgments than people who are atheists? So far, the answer is a resounding no.

Do you mean that people give the same answers to objective tests of moral reasoning regardless of religious background?

One hundred percent. So far, exactly the same. Here's an example that comes from MIT philosopher Judy Thomson. She was interested in a question of whether the fetus has an obligatory right to the mother's body. So she gives an incredibly apocryphal, crazy example: A woman is lying in bed one morning, and she wakes up to find a man lying in bed unconscious next to her. Another gentleman walks up to her and says: "I'm terribly sorry, but this man right next to you is a world-famous violinist, and he's unconscious and in terrible health. He's in kidney failure, and I hope you don't mind, but we've plugged him into your kidney. And if he stays plugged in for the next nine months, you will save him."

You ask people, "Is that morally permissible?" They're like: "No, it's insane. Of course not." Well, that makes [Thomson's] point exquisitely. It would be nice if she said, "Sure, I love this guy's playing; plug him in." But she's not obligated to do so. Now let me make it like the abortion case. She says, "Yes, I love this guy's violin playing!" Two months into it, she goes: "You know what? This really is a drag," and she unplugs. Now people all of a sudden have a sense that's less permissible than the first case. But here, people who are pro-choice or pro-life do not differ. So the point is, if you take people away from the familiar and you capture some of the critical underlying psychological issues that play into the real-world cases, then you find that the religious effects are minimal.

Do other species have any form of moral faculty?

Certainly sympathy, caretaking, cooperation; those things are there in some animals. The crucial questions are, "Do animals have any sense of what they ought to do?" and "To what extent will animals judge transgressions of others as being wrong in some way?" How we'd ever understand that, I don't know.

Notes

[1] http://discovermagazine.com/2007/may/the-discover-interview-marc-hauser