Mind Your Morals

by Susan Dwyer

Morality is so steeped in the quotidian details of praise and blame, of *do*'s and *don't*'s, and of questions about the justifiability of certain practices it is no wonder that philosophers and psychologists have devoted relatively little effort to investigating what makes moral life possible in the first place. In making this claim I neither ignore Kant or his intellectual descendants, nor the large literature in developmental moral psychology from Piaget on. My charge has to do with this fact: Morality is an ineliminable feature of human life and human beings are *biological* creatures. Hence, what wants explaining is how a biological creature — a creature with an evolved mind/brain — can be a normative creature of a particular kind, that is, a creature that cannot help but engage in moral appraisal and evaluation. It does no good to try to wring such an explanation from the 'very concept' of agency (whatever that might be) à la Korsgaard (1996). Such a strategy merely delays the inevitable: How is it that biological creatures are agents? And while we can understand the practical value of charting the trajectory of babbling infants to toddlers to adolescents to adults, absent an account of the foundations of the capacities whose emergence constitutes this trajectory, we will still not have addressed the central question.

Sociobiology and evolutionary ethics fare no better. The apparent puzzle of cooperation amidst competition can and has been addressed via the notions of kin selection and reciprocal altruism. But these accounts are motivated by, and hence pitched at, the level of overt *behavior*. However, being a moral creature, in the sense that makes such entities apt subjects for deep intellectual investigation, has very little to do with whether they behave well (sometimes? often? on average? ever?) and everything to do with being capable of a certain kind of *cognition*.

Moral creatures are distinguished by the possession of moral *minds*. Or, to use Chomsky's preferred term, which serves to keep us honest, moral creatures are distinguished by their possession of moral *mind/brains*. Animals with moral mind/brains are built to cognize the world in a particular way; namely, as populated by objects of moral concern, by subjects of moral expectations, and by targets of moral evaluation. We replace description with explanation only when, taking the fact of our biological nature seriously, we come to know what capacities comprise moral cognition and then to discover what makes their

possession and operation possible. And while the story we tell about the underlying psychological mechanisms that constitute moral minds will have to be intelligible from an evolutionary point of view (once shorn of problematic adaptationism), that constraint leaves open more possibilities than are envisioned by extant sociobiology and evolutionary ethics.

This is a profoundly interesting and exciting research project. If it turns you on — which it should, or if it raises your skeptical hackles, which it may — then you can do no better than to read Marc Hauser's (2006) superb book *Moral Minds: How Nature Designed our Universal Sense of Right and Wrong*. It is a wonderful compendium of a vast array of empirical work — developmental cognitive psychology, ethology, neuroscience, experimental economics, and brain science — bearing on two major issues: (i) What is at the core of morality (i.e., what mechanisms and processes are distinctively involved in moral capacities) and (ii) which aspects of morality are unique to human beings? More importantly, *Moral Minds* is also philosophically sophisticated, engaging substantively with the long-standing debate in moral philosophy concerning the relative causal contributions of reason and emotion to the etiology of moral judgment and the action such judgment is thought to motivate. In the emerging field of empirical moral psychology, it is rare to find a work that is at once so comprehensive, accessible, fair-minded, and non-condescending to any discipline as *Moral Minds.* The bottom line: If you are new to the field, read Hauser's book before your read anything else.

In developing his central idea that humans "evolved a moral instinct, a capacity that naturally grows within each child, designed to generate rapid judgments about what is morally right or wrong based on an unconscious grammar of action" (p. *xvii*), Hauser exploits more fully than anyone to date the so-called linguistic analogy (see also Dwyer 1999, 2006, 2007, and Mikhail, in press). First posited, with a distinctly epistemological bent, by John Rawls in his *A Theory of Justice* (1971), 'the linguistic analogy' refers to one among several nativist approaches to moral psychology. For the empirically-minded moral philosopher, the striking parallels between the nature and development of moral competence and the nature and development of linguistic competence render the appropriation of certain concepts and a particular methodological approach from theoretical linguistics most appealing.

Very roughly, the parallels in question are:

- language and morality involve distinctive human capacities that appear to arise early in all individual members of the species relatively effortlessly;

- language and morality are both normative systems in the sense that they involve constraints on human judgment;

- moral creatures have moral intuitions that appear to be as natural, automatic and certain as speakers' linguistic intuitions (e.g., Trolley Problem data);

- despite the universality of morality and language there is diversity among the world's moralities and the world's languages.

In addition, what we know about the development of children's moral capacities — that is, their capacities to judge moral saliency and to attribute moral praise and blame — suggests that in the moral domain, as in the linguistic domain, we are faced with a set of phenomena that emerge relatively independently of variations in the child's environment. Children across the globe grow into moral creatures in human (thus morally-inflected) environments. However, the capacities they develop develop whether or not they receive lots of explicit moral instruction, whether or not they mature in a religious culture, and so on. Hence, as is the case with language, poverty of stimulus considerations appear to be apt (see Dwyer 2006).

The motivating idea behind the linguistic analogy, then, is not that morality is "like" language, presuming that notion even makes sense. Nor is it merely that morality and language appear to be two species-wide and species-specific phenomena. Rather, the deep reason for looking to linguistics for help in thinking about morality is that the fact of our being moral creatures — like the fact of our being speakers — is underpinned by a normative faculty.

We can usefully think of any normative faculty (and there might be such for logic and aesthetics, too) as a structure of constraints in the mind/brain that carves out a possibility space with respect to a certain domain. It may be characterized in terms of principles that 'express' the constraints it imposes. *Very crudely*, just as Universal Grammar constrains how a child acquires the grammar of her language and that grammar in turn constrains what meanings she can assign to what signals, so too, we might imagine a Universal Moral Grammar that constrains how a child acquires the grammar of her morality and that grammar constrains what evaluations she can assign to what bits of the world. And just as the acquisition of a particular grammar is dependent on local conditions (namely, the child's linguistic environment), we should predict that the acquisition of a particular moral grammar will bear the marks of the moral environment in which it occurs.

Given the success of the Chomskyan program in linguistics and the parallels between morality and language of the sort just sketched, inquirers would be crazy not to push the linguistic analogy as far as we can. For, this is the best going approach to addressing what I said at the outset is essential: To explain how biological creatures can also be moral creatures. That said, this approach is still very new. And while Hauser makes considerable progress, he is cognizant that, at present, pursuing the linguistic analogy sets up interesting research questions rather than answers them.

The capacity to judge that an action is permissible, obligatory or forbidden is just *one* capacity involved in moral competence. Others include attributions of praise and blame and (perhaps) the capacity to conform one's behavior to moral judgments in the face of significant temptation to do otherwise. Still, if we are trying to investigate the nature of an alleged moral faculty the above-mentioned judgments (which I shall dub collectively Permissibility Judgments) are a good place to start, for they are easily obtained in naturalistic and experimental settings.

Hauser and his collaborators have made good use of the Permissibility Judgments of subjects who have signed on The Moral Sense Test (see

http://moral.wjh.harvard.edu). The Moral Sense Test deploys familiar Trolley Problem thought experiments to elicit judgments from subjects and also asks subjects to provide justifications for those judgments. We may take such data as starting points for considering what principles (if any) people use in making Permissibility Judgments. For the past twenty-five years or so, many philosophers have pursued this project (see Fischer & Ravizza 1992), some emphasizing a morally asymmetric distinction between acts and omissions, others the so-called Doctrine of Double Effect, according to which an act with a good and bad effect may yet be permissible if the agent does not aim at the producing the bad effect and that effect is not a necessary means for realizing the good effect. The articulation of such distinctions and principles is useful, but it is just a start. We would like to know how it is that human beings conceive of actions and scenarios such that they could appeal (implicitly or explicitly) to such distinctions and principles in making Permissibility Judgments at all. Clearly, the capacity to make Permissibility Judgments is contingent on the possession and operation of other perceptual, cognitive, and (perhaps) affective capacities.

A central and crucially important contribution of Hauser's book is his careful exploration of what we can call the *parsing* of actions. "When [a creature with a moral mind] evaluates an action vis-à-vis its permissibility, it is unconsciously and automatically assessing the causal and intentional aspects of the action and its consequences" (p. 267). In Chapter 6, Hauser articulates the most basic principles whose possession is necessary for the very recognition of an action — as opposed to a mere happening. At the very least, such recognition involves the attribution of primitive agency and the disposition to identify the causal consequences of the operation of agency.

That the capacity to make Permissibility Judgments requires the possession of other capacities should strike anyone as a no-brainer as soon as the claim is noted. So the lack of attention to this fact by the vast majority of Anglo-American moral philosophers is breathtaking. But the real import of Hauser's work here is not the revelation of philosophers' inadequacies. (Indeed, Hauser has a deep and evident respect for the necessity of philosophical work in moral psychology.) Rather, his analysis allows us more clearly to address questions about what capacities had by the morally-minded are uniquely moral and about whether non-human animals are can be moral-minded. More generally, Hauser makes vivid the fact that moral philosophy simply cannot be an armchair enterprise. Progress in the discipline demands a methodology that integrates conceptual and empirical considerations. He is not the first to emphasize this point, but *Moral Minds* is the first work of this length to illustrate comprehensively how such a methodology is to be conducted and to reveal, with a suitably critical eye, its fruits to date.

At the very least, the making of Permissibility Judgments implicates the identification of agents and a theory of mind. Arguably, it also involves a particular suite of emotions or affective capacities, say, those required for the identification of relevant notions of harm. Now, some non-human animals clearly manifest some of these capacities, but these capacities are adjuncts to and not uniquely in the service of moral competence. Human beings, in contrast, possess all the relevant adjunct capacities. Still this alone does not support the existence

of a moral faculty, namely, a dedicated part of the human mind/brain. Indeed, one might think that once we have identified the cognitive and affective capacities a creature must possess in order to make Permissibility Judgments, we have effectively provided a reduction of sorts; there is no need to posit a moral faculty *per se.*

This thought would appear to be behind one of the late Richard Rorty's worries, as expressed in his review of Hauser's book for *The New York Times* (Rorty 2007). Rorty complains that, in order to argue for a moral faculty, one needs to show "a bright line separating […] 'the moral domain' — one that nonhuman species cannot enter — from other domains". To my knowledge, no one has been able provide the asked-for criteria. Elliot Turiel (1983) attempts to do so in his much discussed posit, the moral conventional distinction. (See Kelly *et al.* 2007 for critique.) But, really, it is peevish to demand them. Human beings make moral judgments all the time. What we need to get a Hauser-like project going is a list of the explananda for moral psychology — namely, a list of the capacities, dispositions and so on that *characterize* our moral life.

Absolutely central here is the capacity for *judgment.* Human beings do not merely believe that certain actions are permissible or obligatory and others not. They *judge* them to be so — either when actually confronted with them or when considering them hypothetically. Moreover, human beings produce such judgments about indefinitely many cases in systematic ways, where the systematicity here has to do with the fact that *all* human beings make moral judgments, and that there appear to be culturally-specific differences in the content of moral judgments. And, finally, all 'normally' developing children acquire the capacity to make moral judgments in environments impoverished in crucial dimensions. (A child's socio-cultural and familial environment will undoubtedly influence the *content* of the moral judgments she is apt to make. But they do not determine the very *capacity* to make such judgments themselves.)

The virtues of adopting some form of the linguistic analogy seriously are manifest. We do not (or, at least *should* not) demand of linguists that they provide a list of necessary and sufficient conditions for what counts as the linguistic domain before we ready to take seriously various hypotheses about syntactic rules. This point is related to Chomsky's long-standing but remarkably overlooked admonition that there is no serious scientific inquiry to be done with respect to E-languages (Mandarin, French etc.). The targets of the relevant science is I-language (what is in the mind/brain of particular individuals that accounts for the acceptability judgments they make) and the language faculty (what is part of every human being's mind/brain that accounts for the universal acquisition of an I-language in relevantly impoverished environments). And the project is to uncover what principles characterize the operation of the moral faculty.

Now, one should not be misled by the mention of principles here into thinking that Hauser's idea is that principles like the Doctrine of Double Effect are innately encoded in the human mind/brain. As he himself notes (p. 295), these principles are far too coarse grained. And, as in the case of language, there is really no reason to expect that the principles that do characterize the operation of the moral faculty would be recognizable to the creatures with such a faculty. Ordinary speakers are not consciously aware of a principle about the violation of

island constraints. And professional linguists, who are perfectly familiar with such a principle, do not explicitly consult in speaking. (See Dwyer 2007.)

Admittedly, it is tempting to think that moral principles are readily accessible to the layperson and the professional alike. It seems to us that morality ought to be more articulable. However, I think this is merely symptomatic of the fact that contemporary moral philosophy is comprised of a good deal of normative ethics — the discussion of whether particular practices, like voluntary active euthanasia, say, are permissible. These discussions readily trade in explicit principles, such as that killing is morally worse than letting die. I have no doubt about the pragmatic importance of such talk for debating and formulating public policy and in the education of undergraduate philosophy students. However, it would be curious indeed if such principles were innately given in the human mind/brain.

Skeptics can, if they wish, deny the reality of morality altogether and insist that there is nothing to moral philosophy really except the articulation of some local conventions, that there is nothing to moral experience except the explicit inculcation of such conventions and of a fear of the sanctions attaching to their violation; in short, that there is nothing deep for science to uncover about moral minds, for there are no moral minds. Hauser's book will not appeal to such folks, but I do wish they would read it! Everyone else, however, should be stimulated by the empirical project Hauser has begun to explain the fact that human beings are both biological and normative creatures.

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