



"ONE OF THE HOTTEST NEW TOPICS IN INTELLECTUAL LIFE:
THE PSYCHOLOGY AND BIOLOGY OF MORALS . . . FULL OF
FASCINATING NEW MATERIAL." —STEVEN PINKER



MORAL MINDS



THE NATURE OF RIGHT AND WRONG

MARC D. HAUSER

P.S.
INSIGHTS,
INTERVIEWS
& MORE...

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The Nature of Right and Wrong

Marc D. Hauser

 HarperCollins e-books

To five generations of extraordinary females

with the last name Hauser:

My grandmother, Lucille,

My mother, Alberta,

My wife, Lilan,

My daughters, Alexandra and Sofia, and

My cat, Cleopatra

OF ALL THE DIFFERENCES between man and the lower animals, the moral sense or conscience is by far the most important...[I]t is summed up in that short but imperious word ought, so full of high significance. It is the most noble of all the attributes of man, leading him without a moment's hesitation to risk his life for that of a fellow-creature; or after due deliberation, impelled simply by the deep feeling of right or duty, to sacrifice it in some great cause.

—CHARLES DARWIN

MORALS EXCITE PASSIONS, and produce or prevent actions. Reason of itself is utterly impotent in this particular. The rules of morality, therefore, are not conclusions of our reason.

—DAVID HUME

WHY DOES EVERYONE take for granted that we don't learn to grow arms, but rather, are designed to grow arms? Similarly, we should conclude that in the case of the development of moral systems, there's a biological endowment which in effect requires us to develop a system of moral judgment and a theory of justice, if you like, that in fact has detailed applicability over an enormous range.

—NOAM CHOMSKY

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PROLOGUE:

RIGHTEOUS VOICES

THE CENTRAL IDEA of this book is simple: we 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. Part of this machinery was designed by the blind hand of Darwinian selection millions of years before our species evolved; other parts were added or upgraded over the evolutionary history of our species, and are unique both to humans and to our moral psychology. These ideas draw on insights from another instinct: language.

The revolution in linguistics, catalyzed by Noam Chomsky in the 1950s¹ and eloquently described by Steven Pinker in *The Language Instinct*, was based on a theoretical shift. Instead of an exploration of cross-cultural variation across languages and the role of experience in learning a language, we should follow in the tradition of the biological sciences, seeing language as an exquisitely designed organ—a universal feature of all human minds. The universal grammar that lies at the heart of our language faculty and is part of our species' innate endowment provides a toolkit for building specific languages. Once we have acquired our native language, we speak and comprehend what others say without reasoning and without conscious

access to the underlying rules or principles. I argue that our moral faculty is equipped with a *universal moral grammar*, a toolkit for building specific moral systems. Once we have acquired our culture's specific moral norms—a process that is more like growing a limb than sitting in Sunday school and learning about vices and virtues—we judge whether actions are permissible, obligatory, or forbidden, without conscious reasoning and without explicit access to the underlying principles.

At the core of the book is a radical rethinking of our ideas on morality, which is based on the analogy to language, supported by an explosion of recent scientific evidence. Our moral instincts are immune to the explicitly articulated commandments handed down by religions and governments. Sometimes our moral intuitions will converge with those that culture spells out, and sometimes they will diverge. An understanding of our moral instincts is long overdue.

The framework I pursue in *Moral Minds* follows in a tradition that dates back to Galileo, has been accepted by most physicists, chemists, and a handful of natural and social scientists. It is a stance that starts by recognizing the complexity of the world, admitting the futility of attempts to provide a full description. Humbled by this recognition, the best way forward is to extract a small corner of the problem, adopt a few simplifying assumptions, and attempt to gain some understanding by moving deeply into this space. To understand our moral psychology, I will *not* explore all of the ways in which we use it in our daily interactions with others. In the same way that linguists in the Chomskyan tradition sidestep issues of language use, focusing instead on the unconscious knowledge that gives each of us the competence to express and judge a limitless number of sentences, I adopt a similarly narrow focus with respect to morality. The result is a richly detailed explanation of how an unconscious and universal moral grammar underlies our judgments of right and wrong.

To show the inner workings of our moral instincts, consider an example. A greedy uncle stands to gain a considerable amount of money if his young nephew dies. In one version of the story, the uncle walks down the hall to the bathroom, intending to drown his nephew in the bathtub, and he does. In a second version, the uncle walks down the hall, intending to drown his nephew, but finds him facedown in the water, already drowning. The uncle closes the door and lets his nephew drown. Both versions of the story have the same unhappy ending: the nephew dies. The uncle has the same intention, but in the first version he directly fulfills it and in the second he does not. Would you be satisfied if a jury found the uncle guilty in story one, but not in story two? Somehow this judgment rings false, counter to our moral intuitions. The uncle seems equally responsible for his actions and omissions, and the negative consequences they yield. And if this intuition holds for the uncle, why not for any moral conflict where there is a distinction between an action with negative consequences and an omission of an action with the same negative consequences?

Now consider euthanasia, and the American Medical Association's policy: "The intentional termination of the life of one human being by another—mercy killing—is contrary to that for which the medical profession stands and is contrary to the policy of the American Medical Association. The cessation of the employment of extraordinary means to prolong the life of the body when there is irrefutable evidence that biological death is imminent is the decision of the patient and/or his immediate family." Stripped to its essence, a doctor is forbidden from ending a patient's life but is permitted to end life support. Actions are treated in one way, omissions in another. Does this clearly reasoned distinction, supported by most countries with such a policy, fit our moral intuitions? Speaking for my own intuition: No.

These two cases bring three issues to light: legal policies often ignore or cover up essential psychological distinctions, such as our inherent bias to

treat actions one way and omissions another way; once the distinctions are clarified, they often conflict with our moral intuitions; and when policy and intuition conflict, policy is in trouble. One of the best-kept secrets of the medical community is that mercy killings in the United States and Europe have risen dramatically in the last ten years even though policies remained unchanged. Doctors are following their intuitions against policy and the threat of medical malpractice.² In cases where doctors adhere to policy, they tend to fall squarely within the AMA's act-omission bias. For example, in June of 2004, an Oregon doctor explicitly opposed to his state's tolerance for mercy killings through drug overdose stated: "I went into medicine to help people. I didn't go into medicine to give people a prescription for them to die." It is okay to help a patient by ending his life support, but it is not acceptable to help the patient by administering an overdose. The logic rings false. As the American response to the Terry Schiavo case revealed in 2005, many see termination of life support as an act, one that is morally wrong. And for many in the United States, moral wrongs are equated with religious wrongs, acts that violate the word of God. As Henry Wadsworth Longfellow noted, echoing a majority voice concerning the necessity of religion as a guiding light for morality, "Morality without religion is only a kind of dead reckoning—an endeavor to find our place on a cloudy sea by measuring the distance we have run, but without any observation of the heavenly bodies." I will argue that this marriage between morality and religion is not only forced but unnecessary, crying out for a divorce.

It is clear that in the arena of medicine, as in so many other areas where moral conflicts arise, the policy wonks and politicians should listen more closely to our intuitions and write policy that effectively takes into account the moral voice of our species. Taking into account our intuitions does not mean blind acceptance. It is not only possible but likely that some of the intuitions we have evolved are no longer applicable to current societal problems. But in developing policies that dictate what people ought to do, we

are more likely to construct long-lasting and effective policies if we take into account the intuitive biases that guide our initial responses to the imposition of social norms.

There is an urgency to putting this material together—in Martin Luther King’s words, “the fierce urgency of Now.” The dominant moral-reasoning view has generated failed policies in law, politics, business, and education. I believe that a primary reason for this situation is our ignorance about the nature of our moral instincts and about the ways they work and interface with an ever-changing social landscape. It is time to remedy this situation. Fortunately, the pace of scientific advances in the sciences of morality is so rapid that by the time you read these words, I will already be working on a new prologue, showcasing the new state of play.

1

WHAT'S WRONG?

You first parents of the human race...who ruined yourself for an apple, what might you have done for a truffled turkey?

—BRILLAT-SAVARIN¹

HUNDREDS OF SELF-HELP BOOKS and call-in radio stations, together with the advice of such American ethic gurus as William Bennett and Randy Cohen, provide us with principled reasons and methods for leading a virtuous life. Law schools across the globe graduate thousands of scholars each year, trained to reason through cases of fraud, theft, violence, and injustice; the law books are filled with principles for how to judge human behavior, both moral and amoral. Most major universities include a mandatory course in moral reasoning, designed to teach students about the importance of dispassionate logic, moving from evidence to conclusion, checking assumptions and explicitly stating inferences and hypotheses. Medical and legal boards provide rational and highly reasoned policies in order to set guidelines for morally permissible, forbidden, and punishable actions. Businesses set up contracts to clarify the rules of equitable negotiation and exchange. Military leaders train soldiers to act with a cool head, thinking through alternative strategies, planning effective attacks, and squelching the emotions and instincts that may cause impulsive behavior

when reasoning is required to do the right thing. Presidential committees are established to clarify ethical principles and the consequences of violations, both at home and abroad. All of these professionals share a common perspective: conscious moral reasoning from explicit principles is the cause of our moral judgments. As a classic text in moral philosophy concludes, “Morality is, first and foremost, a matter of consulting reason. The morally right thing to do, in any circumstance, is whatever there are the best reasons for doing.”²

This dominant perspective falls prey to an illusion: Just because we can consciously reason from explicit principles—handed down from parents, teachers, lawyers, or religious leaders—to judgments of right and wrong doesn’t mean that these principles are the source of our moral decisions. On the contrary, I argue that moral judgments are mediated by an unconscious process, a hidden moral grammar that evaluates the causes and consequences of our own and others’ actions. This account shifts the burden of evidence from a philosophy of morality to a science of morality.

This book describes how our moral intuitions work and why they evolved. It also explains how we can anticipate what lies ahead for our species. I show that by looking at our moral psychology as an instinct—an evolved capacity of all human minds that unconsciously and automatically generates judgments of right and wrong—that we can better understand why some of our behaviors and decisions will always be construed as unfair, permissible, or punishable, and why some situations will tempt us to sin in the face of sensibility handed down from law, religion, and education. Our evolved moral instincts do not make moral judgments inevitable. Rather, they color our perceptions, constrain our moral options, and leave us dumbfounded because the guiding principles are inaccessible, tucked away in the mind’s library of unconscious knowledge.

Although I largely focus on what people do in the context of moral conflict, and how and why they come to such decisions, it is important to understand the relationship between description and prescription—between what *is* and what *ought* to be.

In 1903, the philosopher George Edward Moore noted that the dominant philosophical perspective of the time—John Stuart Mill’s utilitarianism—frequently fell into the *naturalistic fallacy*: attempting to justify a particular moral principle by appealing to what is *good*.³ For Mill, utilitarianism was a reform policy, one designed to change how people ought to behave by having them focus on the overall good, defined in terms of natural properties of human nature such as our overall happiness. For Moore, the equation of good with natural was fallacious. There are natural things that are bad (polio, blindness) and unnatural things that are good (vaccines, reading glasses). We are not licensed to move from the natural to the good.

A more general extension of the naturalistic fallacy comes from deriving *ought* from *is*. Consider these facts: In most cultures, women put more time into child care than men (a sex difference that is consistent with our primate ancestors), men are more violent than women (also consistent with our primate past), and polygamy is more common than monogamy (consistent with the rest of the animal kingdom). From these facts, we are not licensed to conclude that women should do all of the parenting while men drink beers, society should sympathize with male violence because testosterone makes violence inevitable, and women should expect and support male promiscuity because it’s in their genes, part of nature’s plan. The descriptive principles we uncover about human nature do not necessarily have a causal relationship to the prescriptive principles. Drawing a causal connection is fallacious.

Moore's characterization of the naturalistic fallacy caused generations of philosophers to either ignore or ridicule discoveries in the biological sciences. Together with the work of the analytic philosopher Gottlieb Frege, it led to the pummeling of ethical naturalism, a perspective in philosophy that attempted to make sense of the good by an appeal to the natural. It also led to an intellectual isolation of those thinking seriously about moral principles and those attempting to uncover the signatures of human nature. Discussions of moral ideals were therefore severed from the facts of moral behavior and psychology.

The surgical separation of facts from ideals is, however, too extreme. Consider the following example:⁴

FACT: The only difference between a doctor giving a child anesthesia and not giving her anesthesia is that without it, the child will be in agony during surgery. The anesthesia will have no ill effects on this child, but will cause her to temporarily lose consciousness and sensitivity to pain. She will then awaken from the surgery with no ill consequences, and in better health thanks to the doctor's work.

EVALUATIVE JUDGMENT: Therefore, the doctor should give the child anesthesia.

Here it seems reasonable for us to move from fact to value judgment. This move has the feel of a mathematical proof, requiring little more than an ability to understand the consequences of carrying out an action as opposed to refraining from the action. In this case, it seems reasonable to use *is* to derive *ought*.

Facts alone don't motivate us into action. But when we learn about a fact and are motivated by its details, we often alight upon an evaluative decision that something should be done. What motivates us to conclude that the doctor should give anesthesia is that the girl shouldn't experience pain, if pain can be avoided. Our attitude toward pain, that we should avoid it whenever we can, motivates us to convert the facts of this case to an evaluative judgment. This won't always be the right move. We need to understand what drives the motivations and attitudes we have.

The point of all this is simple enough: Sometimes the marriage between fact and desire leads to a logical conclusion about what we ought to do, and sometimes it doesn't.⁵ We need to look at the facts of each case, case by case. Nature won't define this relationship. Nature may, however, limit what is morally possible, and suggest ways in which humans, and possibly other animals, are motivated into action. When Katharine Hepburn turned to Humphrey Bogart in the *African Queen* and said, "Nature, Mr. Allnut, is what we are put in this world to rise above," she got one word wrong: We must not rise above nature, but rise with nature, looking her in the eye and watching our backs. The only way to develop stable prescriptive principles, through either formal law or religion, is to understand how they will break down in the face of biases that Mother Nature equipped us with.⁶

THE REAL WORLD

On MTV's *Real World*, you can watch twentysomethings struggle with "real" moral dilemmas. On the fifteenth episode of the 2004 season, a girl named Frankie kissed a guy named Adam. Later, during a conversation with her boyfriend, Dave, Frankie tried to convince him that it was a mistake, a meaningless kiss given after one too many drinks. She told Dave that he was the real deal, but Dave didn't bite. Frankie, conflicted and depressed, closed herself in a room and cut herself with a knife.

If this sounds melodramatic and more like *Ersatz World*, think again. Although fidelity is not the signature of this age group, the emotional prologue and epilogue to promiscuity is distressing for many, and for thousands of teenagers it leads to self-mutilation. Distress is one signature of the mind's recognition of a social dilemma, an arena of competing interests.

But what raises a dilemma to the level of a moral dilemma, and makes a judgment a morally weighty one?⁷ What are the distinguishing features of moral as opposed to nonmoral social dilemmas? This is a bread-and-butter question for anyone interested in the architecture of the mind. In the same way that linguists ask about the defining features of speech, as distinct from other acoustic signals, we want to understand whether moral dilemmas have specific design features.

Frankie confronted a moral dilemma because she had made a commitment to Dave, thereby accepting an obligation to remain faithful. Kissing someone else is forbidden. There are no written laws stating which actions are obligatory or forbidden in a romantic but nonmarital relationship. Yet everyone recognizes that there are expected patterns of behavior and consequences associated with transgressions. If an authority figure told us that it was always okay to cheat on our primary lovers whenever we felt so inclined, we would sense unease, a feeling that we were doing something wrong. If a teacher told the children in her class that it was always okay to hit a neighbor to resolve conflict, most if not all the children would balk. Authority figures cannot mandate moral transgressions. This is not the case for other social norms or conventions, such as those associated with greetings or eating. If a restaurant owner announced that it was okay for all clients to eat with their hands, then they either would or not, depending on their mood and attachment to personal etiquette.

To capture the pull of a moral dilemma, we at least need conflict between different obligations. In the prologue, I described a classic case of moral conflict framed in terms of two incompatible beliefs—we all believe both that no one has the right to shorten our lives and that we should not cause or prolong someone’s pain. But some people also believe that it is permissible to end someone’s life if he or she is suffering from a terminal disease. We thus face the conflict between shortening and not shortening someone else’s life. This conflict is more extreme today than it was in our evolutionary past. As hunter-gatherers, we depended upon our own health for survival, lacking access to the new drugs and life-support systems that can now extend our lives beyond nature’s wildest expectations. Thus, when we contemplate ending someone’s life today, we must also factor in the possibility that a new cure is just around the corner. This sets up a conflict between immediately reducing someone’s suffering and delaying their suffering until the arrival of a permanent cure. What kind of duty do we have, and is duty the key source of conflict in a moral dilemma?

To see how duty might play a role in deciding between two conflicting options, let me run through a few classic cases. Suppose I argue the presumably uncontroversial point that the moral fabric of society depends upon individuals who keep their promises by repaying their debts. If I promise to repay my friend’s financial loan, I should keep my promise and repay the loan. This seems reasonable, especially since the alternative—to break my promise—would dissolve the glue of cooperation.

Suppose I borrow a friend’s rifle and promise to return it next hunting season. The day before I am supposed to return the rifle, I learn that my friend has been clinically diagnosed as prone to uncontrollable outbursts of violence. Although I promised to return the rifle, it would also seem that I have a new duty to keep it, thereby preventing my friend from harming himself or others. Two duties are in conflict: keeping a promise and protecting others. Stated in this way, some might argue that there is no

conflict at all—the duty to protect others from potential harm trumps the duty to keep a promise and pay back one’s debts. Simple cost-benefit analysis yields a solution: The benefit of saving other lives outweighs the personal cost of breaking a promise. The judgment no longer carries moral weight, although it does carry significance.

We can turn up the volume on the nature of moral conflict by drawing upon William Styron’s dilemma in *Sophie’s Choice*. Although fictional, this dilemma and others like it did arise during wartime. While she and her children are kept captive in a Nazi concentration camp, a guard approaches Sophie and offers her a choice: If she kills one of her two children, the other will live; if she refuses to choose, both children will die. By forcing her to accept the fact that it is worse to have two dead children than one, the guard forces her into making a choice between her children, a choice that no parent wants to make or should ever have to. Viewed in this way, some might say that Sophie has no choice: in the cold mathematical currency of living children, $1 > 0$. Without competing choices, there is no moral dilemma. This surgically sterile view of Sophie’s predicament ignores several other questions: Would it be wrong for Sophie to reject the guard’s offer and let both of her children die? Would Sophie be responsible for the deaths of her two children if she decided not to choose?

Because it is not possible to appeal to a straightforward and uncontroversial principle to answer these questions, we are left with a moral dilemma, a problem that puts competing duties into conflict. Sophie has responsibility as a mother to protect both of her children. Even if she was constantly battling with one child and never with the other, she would still face a dilemma; personality traits such as these do not provide the right kind of material for deciding another’s life, even though they may well bias our emotions one way or the other. Imagine if the law allowed differences in personality to interfere with our judgments of justice and punishment. We might end up convicting a petty thief to life in prison on the basis of his