

Morality – Nature or Nurture

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Thank you for letting me to speak again. I promise not to play any music.

I am not going to give a lecture on morality because I don't feel qualified to do so. As a first-born I thought the world was my oyster, and when my siblings came along my parents did a poor job of correcting that. I commandeered my sister's bicycle to carry papers on my paper route. I pilfered and shoplifted when it suited me. My workplace was also my office supply store. Before this becomes a confessional, let me introduce my topic.

I have been thinking about morality, from a non-religious point of view, for some time; reading Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens among others. I have pondered the basic questions of morality: Are humans moral or evil? Are some born good and some born bad? Are we all some of both? Is it nature or nurture? If nature, how? If nurture, what are the roles of parents, teachers, religion and government? Is religion needed to promote morality, and if so why is so much immorality practiced in its name. Are laws are needed to enforce morality and if so why are so many immoral acts done under the laws of states and nations.

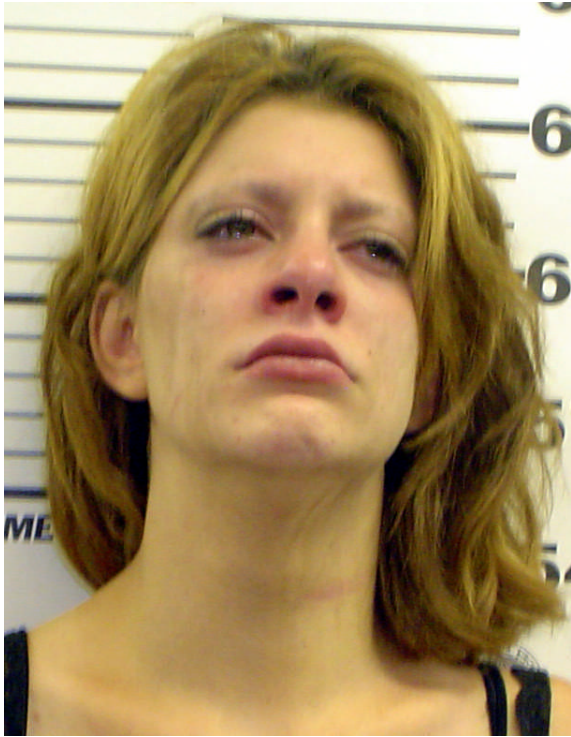
I proposed these questions to Rev. Daniel Budd, minister of the First Unitarian Church of Cleveland. Once a year Rev Budd offers a sermon topic for auction, so for \$200 I got lunch with the Rev. and a sermon. My take-away from that Sunday is that he is pondering the same questions and has no more answers than I do.

What I really wanted to know was the origins of morality. Are we born good or evil? What focused my interest has been the lives two young women that I know personally. Both are now in their mid-twenties.



Tabitha Messina was a neighbor. We have known her since she was about 6. She lived on the street behind our house. She had a reputation as a troublemaker at home and at school. We were warned to keep our doors locked because she allegedly entered unlocked houses in our neighborhood. I encountered her once roaming on our property. Police made numerous calls to their house for noise and domestic disturbances. When she was still attending the local middle school her step-mother was required to walk her to the corner and watch her enter the school building. This was reversed in the afternoon. When our cat became lame and the vet found a pellet in its leg, Tabitha was the natural suspect. I visited her and her parents and asked, non-accusatively, if they had seen anything suspicious in the neighborhood. No confession came from this but the cat shootings stopped.

Tabitha got involved with drugs and dated a drug dealer. One evening she and her boyfriend broke into her parent's home and beat her father and step-mother to death. They are now in prison for those murders.



On the other hand there is Sophie Umazi.



Sophie is from Kenya. When she was 13 she was captured and threatened with death by members of her own tribe. They thought her skin was too light. She

talked her way out of harm by naming members of her family. Sophie gave a TEDxTeen talk in 2013 where she cited this as the pivotal event in setting her goal of reducing tribal tension in Kenya. She founded “I AM KENYAN”, a Facebook campaign to replace tribal identity with national identity. She encouraged people to post their picture on Facebook holding an “I Am Kenyan” sign. She is credited with promoting the peaceful elections in 2013.



Sophie attended The African Leadership Academy, a college preparatory high school in South Africa and is now attending Oberlin College. We are proud to be her host family here in NEO.

What failed one woman so badly and served the other so well? Was one born with a natural morality, and the other without morality? Was it nature or nurture?

Personally I agree with authors like Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins that morality is based on logic; that atheists can be moral. The Golden Rule: Treating others as you would have them treat you seems like a reasonable bargain, and from there naturally follow many of our laws against theft, slavery, torture, murder, etc.

To quote Sam Harris “A rational approach to ethics becomes possible once we realize that questions of right and wrong are really questions about the happiness and suffering of sentient creatures. If we are in a position to affect the happiness or suffering of others, we have ethical responsibilities toward them and many of these responsibilities are so grave as to become matters of civil and criminal law.”

Sam is, of course, a crusader for liberal causes and goes on to say, “Taking happiness and suffering as our starting point, we can see that much of what people worry about under the guise of morality has nothing to do with the subject. It is time we realized that crimes without victims are like debts without creditors. They do not even exist. Any person who worries about the private pleasures of other consenting adults has more than just too much time on his hands; he has some unjustifiable beliefs about the nature of right and wrong.”

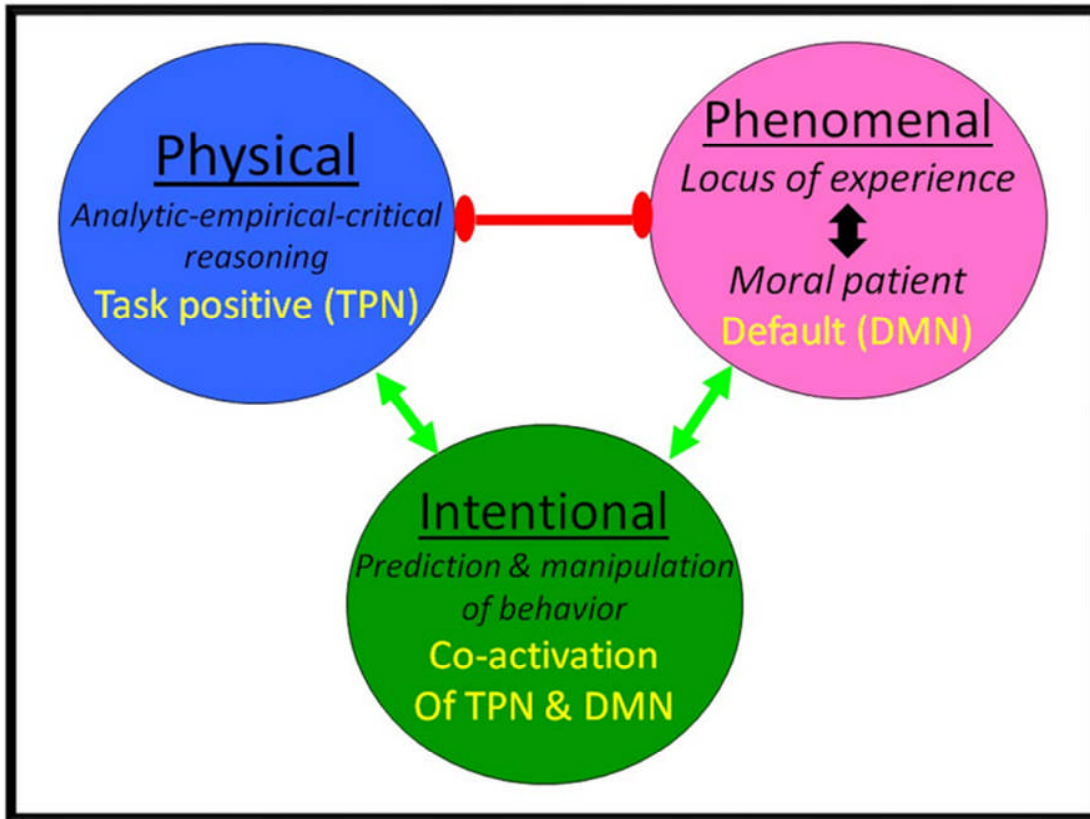
Another contemporary writer on morals is Edward O Wilson. You may remember in the 1970s he created quite a stir by suggesting that ethics should be taken out of the hands of the philosophers and be given to the biologists. He writes “Centuries of debate on the origin of ethics come down to this: Either ethical principles, such as justice and human rights, are independent of human experience, or they are human inventions. The distinction is more than an exercise for academic philosophers. The choice between these two understandings makes all the difference in the way we view ourselves as a species. It measures the authority of religion, and it determines the conduct of moral reasoning.

Every thoughtful person has an opinion on which premise is correct. But the split is not, as popularly supposed, between religious believers and secularists. It is between transcendentalists, who think that moral guidelines exist outside the human mind, and empiricists, who think them contrivances of the mind. In simplest terms, the options are as follows: Either you believe in the independence of moral values, whether from God or not, (or)... you believe that moral values come from human beings alone, whether or not God exists.

Wilson goes on to say that he is an empiricist (the second view). "... the idea of a biological God, one who directs organic evolution and intervenes in human affairs (as envisioned by theism), is increasingly contravened by biology and the brain sciences."

Nice to read, but where is that evidence, put in a way laymen can understand it?

I got a new lead on that brain science last year when I heard CWRU Professor Anthony Jack speak on "Your Brain on Faith and Fear: What Cognitive Science Tells Us". Prof Jack mentioned that fMRI showed that pleasure centers in the brain were activated when a moral act or thought occurred, similar to the positive responses of the physical mind to music that I talked about last year.



Further research lead me to his articles “More than a feeling: Counterintuitive effects of compassion on moral judgment” and “A scientific case for conceptual dualism.”

Professor Jack’s scientific papers are beyond dense, although his presentations to the general public are more accessible. Perhaps we should invite him here to speak. Jack’s papers deal with the dial nature of our minds, and not the duality you might think – my bad angel says grab that cookie but my good angel says share it with my sister – but a duality between how we think about the real world and how we think about thoughts. This is more like the duality between mind and brain, or spirit and body.

To phrase the question more eloquently, I quote Emily Smith, writing in *The Atlantic*:

“Where does morality come from? Are human beings born with an innate moral sense, something like a conscience that helps us tell right from wrong? Or are we

born as blank slates and learn morality as we make our way through life from infancy to childhood and beyond? If morality is innate, are we born good and corrupted by society, as Rousseau thought? Or are we born as brutes and civilized by culture, as Huxley thought?”

“The prevailing view for hundreds of years—championed by intellectual giants like John Locke and Sigmund Freud—was that human beings are born as blank slates and acquire knowledge about right and wrong through their parents, teachers, and other civilizing engines of culture.” This is closely related to the “Veneer theory” that civilization is thin and the beast lurks within each of us.

“But over the last decade, a growing body of evidence has challenged both the blank slate view of morality and veneer theory. Morality, it seems, is hard-wired. Chimps, who lack the tools of civilization, have the building blocks of morality and moral goodness. Primatologists have shown that our closest kin in the animal kingdom, from chimps to bonobos, treat each other with empathy, compassion, and self-sacrifice. “

Ms Smith was reviewing [Just Babies: The Origins of Good and Evil](#) by Paul Bloom.

Bloom is the Ragen Professor of Psychology at Yale University, and a frequent contributor to *The Atlantic*. He works with his wife Karen Wynn, Director of the Infant Cognition Laboratory in the Psychology Department at Yale.

Bloom starts with a quote from Thomas Jefferson “The Moral Sense, or conscience, is as much a part of man as his arm or leg. It is given to all human beings to a stronger or weaker degree....”

Their work has shown moral tendencies in children as young as six months. The older infants were shown a puppet play with a good puppet and a bad puppet and allowed to interact with the puppets afterwards. They expressed care for the good puppet and aggression and punishment toward the bad puppet. Bloom was reluctant to work with younger children. At that age, Bloom wrote, “babies really are slug-like,—they’re ‘mewling and puking in the nurse’s arm’, as Shakespeare put it.” But his more recent work has been done with babies as young as three

months, using eye movements as indicators of reaction, and they seem to be producing the same results.

There is a double entendre in that title but do not feel bad if you did not get it immediately; Bloom has had to explain it in every interview I have read.

This dependence on science to explain our minds, and even morality and religion, leads to accusations of scientism, or to put it another way, of science as a religion.

Wikipedia: Scientism is belief in the universal applicability of the scientific method and approach, and the view that empirical science constitutes the most "authoritative" worldview or the most valuable part of human learning - to the exclusion of other viewpoints.

PBS in the series Faith and Reason: Unlike the use of the scientific method as only one mode of reaching knowledge, scientism claims that science alone can render truth about the world and reality.

I do not have much defense to that charge except to say that I am open to other views of the world. For example, I do not think science will explain, in my lifetime, more about the universe than religion, which already explains it all. But the scientific view will be observable and verifiable and therefore in my mind true. But just because you cannot observe something does not make it untrue – I think of my late friend Bill Alcorn – but when you believe something that rejects the solid evidence of science, such as the world is flat or just 6000 years old, than you are acting out of ignorance.

Patricia Churchland in her book Braintrust: What Neuroscience Tells Us about Morality lays out the biological platform of morality, including neural, genetic and neurochemical components. Another spousal credit is due here, Mrs. Churchland works with her husband Paul M. Churchland. Both are currently professors at UC San Diego. *The New Yorker* magazine observed that, "Their work is so similar that they are sometimes discussed, in journals and books, as one person."

Defending against charges of Scientism, she says “When we speak of the possibility of linking large-scale questions about our mind with developments in the neurosciences, there are those who are wont to wag their fingers and warn us about the perils of scientism. That means, so far as I can tell, the offense of taking science into places where allegedly it has no business, of being in the grip of the grand delusion that science can explain everything, do everything. Scientism, as I have been duly wagged, is overreaching.”

“The complaint that a scientific approach to understanding morality commits the sin of scientism does really exaggerate what science is up to, since the scientific enterprise does not aim to displace the arts or the humanities. Shakespeare and Mozart are not in competition with protein kinases and micro RNA.”

To return to Tony Jack for a moment, he quotes a colleague J D Greene “The mission of social neuroscience, as the offspring of social psychology and neuroscience, is to understand all of human subjective experience in physical terms. The rise of social neuroscience is the demise of the soul.” Jack counters to say : scientific thinking fails, in some way or another, to capture important aspects of the mental.”

Prof Jack says “In recent years, a number of scientists and philosophers have suggested that the psychological and neural sciences provide support for, and are committed to, reductive physicalism – the view that all aspects of the mental are best explained by the physical processes of the brain. Here I suggest a different view. Emerging research in neuroscience and psychology suggests a dualism in human understanding. Our capacity for understanding physical processes appears to be in fundamental tension with our capacity for thinking about the inner mental states of others.”

Bloom takes this further. In his article in *The Atlantic* “The War on Reason” he states “Aristotle’s definition of man as a rational animal has recently taken quite a beating.”

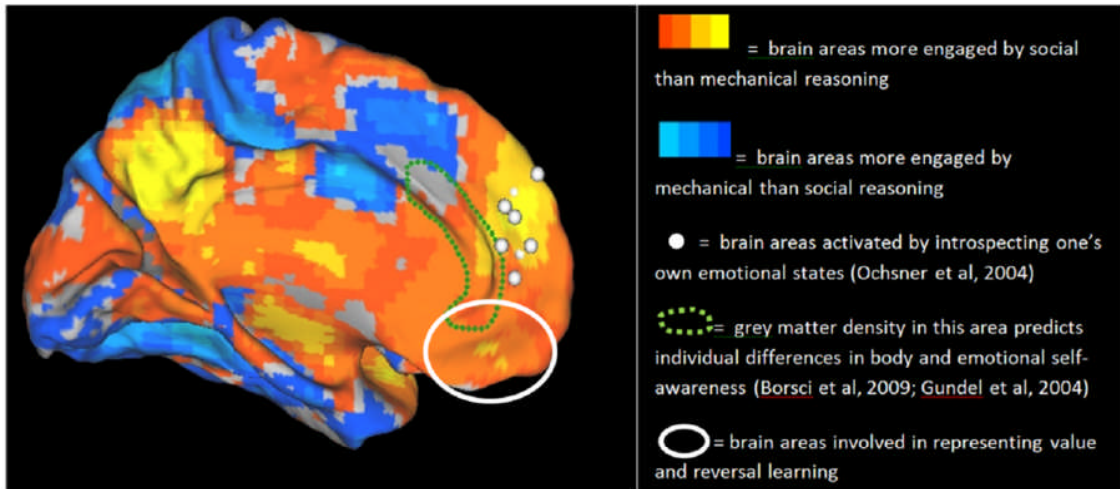


Figure 1: Illustration of the relationship between social cognition and other cognitive processes in medial prefrontal cortex. The figure depicts the medial surface of the left hemisphere. The red and blue coloring shows the contrast between social and mechanical reasoning tasks taken from (Jack et al., 2012).

“Part of the attack comes from (social) neuroscience. Pretty, multicolored fMRI maps make clear that our mental lives can be observed in the activity of our neurons, and we’ve made considerable progress in reading someone’s thoughts by looking at those maps. It’s clear, too, that damage to the brain can impair the most-intimate aspects of ourselves, such as the capacity to make moral judgments or to inhibit bad actions. To some scholars, the neural basis of mental life suggests that rational deliberation and free choice are illusions. Because our thoughts and actions are the products of our brains, and because what our brains do is determined by the physical state of the world and the laws of physics—perhaps with a dash of quantum randomness in the mix—there seems to be no room for choice. As the author and neuroscientist Sam Harris has put it, we are “biochemical puppets.”

Bloom counters “While Scientists have reached no consensus as to precisely how physical events give rise to conscious experience, few doubt any longer that our minds and our brains are one and the same. “ But “The genetic you and the neural you aren’t alternatives to the conscious you. They are its foundations.”

So my conclusion is that we have built-in moral instincts from birth. It goes beyond our self-interest to our interest for those near to us. I involves Love. Our

society has developed further tools for developing that morality, and religion and the law have codified the rules of morality. Morality is both nature and nurture.

But certain people, whom we call psychopaths and delusionals, have no moral compass. (Ted Bundy was a psychopath, Charles Manson was delusional.) Patricia Churchland notes “The data available so far suggest important differences between the brains of psychopaths and those of healthy controls in the areas regulating emotions, impulses, and social responses. Specifically, the paralimbic regions of the brain are different in psychopaths both in size and function.” This raises moral and ethical questions beyond the scope of this talk. As Paul Bloom puts it “What about individuals, such as certain psychopaths, who appear incapable of empathy and compassion? Should that diminish their responsibility for cruel actions?” I leave that thought for another day.

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