

Geometry and Geography of Morality[♦]

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S. Matthew Liao (ed.): *Moral brains. The neuroscience of morality*.
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Neuroscience is certainly one of the most complex and intricate areas of science, as is the reality it refers to. Although still in its infancy, it is undergoing a full swing of development, rich and promising. This contrasts with ethics, which is elaborate and diversified, but has long been a search for simple answers. In such a situation it is natural to ask whether the findings of neuroscience carry importance or relevance to the question of what we ought to do? Are scientific findings about the chemical and physiological processes which correlate with our decision-making process value-laden, do they lead to specific normative conclusions of what our goals should be? Or they are, as they presumably should be, value neutral, giving us only the explanation of what is happening and so better access to the means? Can we map brain regions responsible for different parts of moral cognition and agency? How does brain chemistry affect morality? Can we increase quality and reliability of our decisions by using findings of neuroscience? Can ethics become a science? Can we bridge the gap between normativity and factuality, between deciding and predicting?

These are the issues discussed and analyzed in the book *Moral Brains The Neuroscience of Morality*. It is a philosophically challenging book. It describes many currently prevailing scientific views and accompanying data, but there is also a real debate between philosophers and scientists who aspire to philosophize. Although it discusses matters in neuroscience it succeeds in keeping science and philosophy mostly apart.

The first part of the book contains several highly interesting and relevant chapters analyzing the role of emotions and reason in the structure of moral values. Jesse Prinz gives a rich analysis of “the challenge of interpreting imaging results” (especially in terms of activity in two prefrontal cortexes, VMPFC and DLPFC) insofar as what “undue faith in brain scan can

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reveal” regarding the role of emotions and reason in constituting our agency in general and moral competence in particular. J. Kennett and P. Gerrans show that processes of decision-making and evaluating are too complex to be well covered in experiments that have only limited relevance in the analysis of moral acts and moral judgments.

In one of the best chapters, James Woodward analyzes the “versus” in “emotion versus cognition” in moral decision-making. His persuasive conclusion is that this is a dubious dichotomy, if dichotomy at all: moral acts require both emotions and reasoning. This seems to be relevant, as it implies that psychopaths, being insensitive in a strong sense, must hide that the emotional *content* is *not* present in their perhaps very well calculated actions (if they are smart and intelligent, which could be the case). Woodward claims that “the moral judgments endorsed by special populations [like psychopaths] are to a substantial extent parasitic on the judgments of neurotypicals in the sense that those in [such populations] learn to make these judgments by mimicking those of surrounding neurotypicals... [Then] there is no reason to suppose [that] a population consisting entirely of psychopaths without any contact with neurotypicals would acquire on its own tendencies to moral judgment that even loosely resemble those of neurotypicals”[p. 112]. This, however, does not necessarily imply that moral *criterion* is different in different societies. Psychopaths may be unable to form a moral society, as they do not have the capacity to understand the central parts of that criterion, *respect/disrespect*. If there are, or if we imagine, different kind(s) of rational beings (extraterrestrials, advanced robots, angels), structured differently in physical and chemical terms, the difference in morality may be only a matter of *appearance*, e. g. what would *count as* humiliation or disrespect. This would depend on their “metabolism”, and would be very much different from what we experience as humiliating or disrespectful. But murder, lying, cheating, manipulation, exploitation, abuse, unfairness, etc. would all be the same or very similar to ours. The issue with psychopaths, unlike extraterrestrials and advanced robots, seems to be, *ex hypothesi*, that the psychopaths are not free, that they do not really decide but only calculate and conclude, pretending that the object of their calculation exists also as a moral parameter.

The second part, “Deontology versus Consequentialism,” begins with Joshua Greene’s defense of consequentialism against what he designates as “deontology.”The structure of the book indicates this should be the main part. I think, however, that this part is of least relevance, as it is immersed in a particular dual-process brain hypothesis and a seductive parable of

“automatic vs. manual mode” in our process of deciding to do whatever we do. The basic presumption of the hypothesis comes from the fact that consequences, as realized purposes and goals, are always contained in acts, opening the room for rational deliberation and scientific approach in explaining human agency. This approach presumably isn’t accessible to “deontology” which is taken as the “automatic setting” present in how intuitions and emotions guide our behavior (as opposed to the “manual setting” present in rational judgement). In many chapters, however, it is shown that this distinction does not reflect the reality either of the agency as such, or of the way in which we judge what we do.

I will briefly analyze only a few tenets of his rich treatise, as it provides an excellent opportunity to illustrate the scope and type of problems which the book covers. It has been observed that Greene is obsessed with mathematics or, rather, arithmetic (James Woodward’s wording on p. 104, cf. also Jesse Prinz’s, p. 57). The problem there is how to measure and compare what’s infinite (infinite numbers are not subject to ordinary arithmetical operations)? How compare the value of one life and two lives (taken as infinite values)?

On the other side, act consequentialism should take into account *all* factors, *everything* that is relevant, implying that some particular life might be more valuable than another one, or another two, or five. This is an enormous task for the “pusher and switcher” (in trolley examples Greene uses) to calculate, with their limited resources in information and time. How can they know all that is needed to know in order to make the correct decision? So, although Greene’s claim that act consequentialism isn’t “too tightly yoked to the ups and downs of unreliable automatic setting” might be correct, it seems to be incorrect to conclude that “[an] act consequentialist can know what she thinks about a case without knowing anything other than the answer to this question: Which choice produces better consequences?” [p. 139]. This might work only at the price of a simplification which presumes that what is “better” (i.e. for whom and for which purpose something is better) is *known in advance*. You can know exactly what makes something good, or better, as a means for whichever set end, on condition you have already set that end. Then “good” and “better” get their meaning in terms of efficiency. For example, a better poison is the one which poisons more efficiently. A better pusher is the one who is more efficient in pushing. Jesse Prinz is right in saying that “utilitarian deliberation is not just math, or any other form of pure reason” but a commitment to a particular normative theory based in positive feelings towards that theory in the comforting belief that it is reflecting the exactness of

mathematical reasoning. This is very natural, taking into account how attractive the prospect of the possibility of universal measurement might be.

A propos pusher, there is one point that is regularly missing: pusher might herself be fat *enough* to stop the trolley. She might consider jumping instead of pushing someone else who could, perhaps successfully, resist. It is rational to push only after due consideration of whether it is convincingly *obvious* that jumping is not promising solution.

Two other issues regarding Greene's approach are worth of brief analysis. One is his usage of the term "deontological", which to me appears incorrect semantically. Greene uses the term to designate not the sense of commitment to enacting an obligation to accept an established rule, but more to mean "impulsive" or "instinctive". The word "deontology" describes the study of duties and obligations, which are hardly synonymous with "emotion" or "instinct."

The second issue, definition of morality, is a more serious matter. I think that Greene is wrong in identifying morality with trying "to make things overall better"(p. 139). This implies that we are evaluated only as contributors to general welfare, with entitlement to intervene in anyone's life if we perceive that we could "make the world better" by doing so. Nothing is impermissible, i. e. immoral as such. But, shouldn't *permissible* be matter of legitimate freedom of choice? If so, there is a heterogeneity of (non-moral) values. Heterogeneity implies possible incommensurability. There is no other way to preserve two basic features of morality, non-tolerance and (normative) primacy. The levels of negative feelings, like disgust, are not particularly relevant here. If there is no normative difference between, e. g., eating dog's meat (or whatever might be experienced as extremely unpleasant and disgusting within a given culture) and, for example, committing a rape, then there is no morality in such a world. If rape is reduced to a feeling of disgust, then there would be no *necessary assignation of blame* for it and other immoral acts, and morality would be lost within broader sphere of general values.

Part II contains two powerful critical reviews of Greene's approach, by Julia Driver and Stephen Darwall. Driver points to an important part of normative logic, the difference between a standard of evaluation and the correct procedure in employing that standard; Darwall to the distinction between "deontic" and "evaluative," which are conceptually connected to accountability as the central part of the definition of morality. Deontic moral concepts ("right" and "wrong") are different from evaluative concepts (like "good," "efficient," "successful," or

“useful”), tying morality with blameworthiness (I would add: with *normative necessity* to assign blame).

Greene’s response does not look successful. His best attempt to connect with Darwall’s claim that reactive attitudes like moral blame should be equally “accessible to blamer and blamed alike”, is his thesis about “oversensitiveness” and “undersensitiveness” as normative modifiers. In the case of psychopaths it is undersensitiveness, as they cannot be humiliated but only pretend to be (the case of oversensitiveness is perhaps even more interesting, implying moralism, and all kinds of ideologies). But Greene immediately moves to the issue of irrelevance of “personal force,” introducing the relevance of expertise in moral decision-making (which is entirely consistent with act-consequentialism). Equipped with the principle of universal commensurability and leveling all objects of evaluation to make possible the employment of this principle, everything becomes “empirical” and, in the “manual mode,” answerable. This is comfortable, indeed. Normative theories become equivalent, becoming particular *calculi*, whose employment is the matter of convenience (ARC is better for automatic mode, and AC for manual mode). Utilitarianism is then marked as a “global meta-morality”, which should *guarantee* “to yield the best available consequences” (and even “regardless of what we mean by ‘good’”), and serve “as a public standard for resolving intertribal disagreements”. To me “meta-morality” sounds more like something theoretical than as a criterion for decision and evaluation. Intertribal disagreements *prima facie* are not moral issues, and could become such only in the course of morally wrong ways of solving them. This doesn’t seem like a valid answer to Driver’s and Darwall’s criticism.

Part III of the book is a continuation of part I, on a more concrete level in possible future usage of empirical knowledge in the geography and geometry of the brain. This knowledge will become more and more important. The function of expertise will be ever more relevant as the details of that knowledge are achieved. It will gain in importance as the scope of available means for achieving any goal grows. The technique and scope of control of dysfunctional behavior will be more elaborated. This should have an enormous impact on individual and social level (presumably making our life better). The usefulness of scientific research on rodents (chapter 11), for example, will certainly help in many ways, including facing limits contained therein. However, the final issue is what still remains outside the scope of explanations attained in this manner?

Part IV is a fine philosophical addition to the rest of the book, dealing with ‘is-ought’ gap and the question of whether moral issues are essentially heuristic (according S. Matthew Liao, they are not). Clearing concepts is always welcome, especially in such a muddy terrain as this. The hope that neuroscience can provide a refuge in solving problems that are seen as important might be irresistible. Revising intuitions by using new and better empirical evidence is a promising prospect in bettering us and our societies, although it might not go as far as to give a lead to utilitarianism in efficient determination of what we ought to do. G. Kahane doubts that “current scientific research actually supports any significant normative conclusions” (p. 283). But that’s a new issue: do new means bear the capacity to produce new (kinds of) ends. If they do, they *are* value-laden.