



Moral Minds: The Nature of Right and Wrong

By Marc Hauser

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In his groundbreaking book, Marc Hauser puts forth a revolutionary new theory: that humans have evolved a universal moral instinct, unconsciously propelling us to deliver judgments of right and wrong independent of gender, education, and religion. Combining his cutting-edge research with the latest findings in cognitive psychology, linguistics, neuroscience, evolutionary biology, economics, and anthropology, Hauser explores the startling implications of his provocative theory vis-à-vis contemporary bioethics, religion, the law, and our everyday lives.

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Moral Minds: The Nature of Right and Wrong By Marc Hauser Bibliography

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Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

How do humans develop their capacity to make moral decisions? Harvard biologist Hauser (*Wild Minds*) struggles to answer this and other questions in a study that is by turns fascinating and dull. Drawing on the linguistic theories of Noam Chomsky, Hauser argues that humans have a universal moral grammar, an instinctive, unconscious tool kit for constructing moral systems. For example, although we might not be able to articulate immediately the moral principle underlying the ban on incest, our moral faculty instinctually declares that incest is disgusting and thus impermissible. Hauser's universal moral grammar builds on the 18th-century theories of moral sentiments devised by Adam Smith and others. Hauser also asserts that nurture is as important as nature: "our moral faculty is equipped with a universal set of rules, with each culture setting up particular exceptions to these rules." All societies accept the moral necessity of caring for infants, but Eskimos make the exception of permitting infanticide when resources are scarce. Readers unfamiliar with philosophy will be lost in Hauser's labyrinthine explanations of Kant, Hume and Rawls, and Hauser makes overly large claims for his theory's ability to guide us in making more moral, and more enforceable, laws. (*Sept. 1*)

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From Scientific American

You are driving a train when you see five hikers on the track ahead of you and a siding with a single hiker. Is it okay to flip a switch and send the train onto the siding, killing one hiker but saving five? Most people say yes. Would it be okay for a doctor to harvest organs from a healthy person to save five patients? Most people say no. But they often do not have a clue why they think one of these choices is okay and the other is not. And that fact is a clue that we have an innate moral faculty. Like competent speakers who do not understand the grammatical underpinnings of language, people tend to have strong, gut-level opinions about what is moral but are unable to give coherent explanations. Marc D. Hauser, a Harvard University psychologist, wants to do for morality what Massachusetts Institute of Technology linguist Noam Chomsky did for language—he wants to discover the universal "moral grammar." Chomsky suggested that humans are born with a "universal grammar," a cognitive capacity that helps us acquire language and shapes the way we apply language rules. Hauser thinks our moral grammar works the same way, helping us isolate moral lessons from our culture and make judgments about right and wrong. In *Moral Minds*, Hauser reviews what we already know about innate human faculties—for instance, that even infants seem to understand that people and animals have intentions, whereas inanimate objects do not. And he presents evidence that our universal morality is probably based on rules about fairness, proportionality and reciprocity, among other things. The material is captivating and ranges from philosophy to anthropology to psychology, including some of Hauser's own original work. Hauser's main failing is that he sometimes loses the thread of his argument; he piles on the detail but fails to make it clear how his examples support his argument. The upshot, though, is that we do not yet know exactly how our moral grammar works or even which cognitive capacities contribute to our moral faculty. Hauser's achievement is to argue convincingly that such a faculty exists and to raise some of the many questions that have to be answered before we will fully understand it.

Kurt Kleiner

Review

"About one of the hottest new topics in intellectual life: the psychology and biology of morals. . . fascinating." (Steven Pinker, Professor of Psychology, Harvard University, and author of *The Language Instinct and How the Mind Works*)

“An account of the nature of the human moral organ . . . a lucid, expert and challenging introduction.”
(Noam Chomsky, Professor of Linguistics, MIT)

“An intellectual feast that provokes thought and should stimulate critical reflection . . . a major contribution to an ongoing debate.” (Peter Singer, Professor of Bioethics, Princeton University)

“The most complete attempt to bring together philosophy, anthropology, cognitive science and neuroscience... daring and wise.” (Antonio Damasio, Professor of Neuroscience, University of Southern California)

“The scientific exploration of morality has advanced at a breathtaking pace... [an] enjoyable book.” (Daniel Kahneman, Professor of Psychology and Public Affairs, Princeton University, and 2002 Nobel Laureate in Economics)

“For a wide audience...a superb overview of one of the hottest topics in the life sciences...a treat.” (Science)

“An audacious claim about moral thought...highly accessible to a general audience...a deeply significant intellectual contribution.” (Nature)

“Unlikely to disappoint.” (Nicholas Wade, New York Times)

“Pathbreaking... relevant to some of the most fundamental contemporary debates in philosophy and public life.” (New York Review of Books)

Users Review

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