

Using a Linguistic Analogy to Study Morality

Gilbert Harman

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In his elegant discussion, Sripada distinguishes three possible innate bases for aspects of morality: (1) certain specific principles might be innate, (2) a less simple “principles and parameters” model might apply, and (3) innate biases might have some influence over what morality a person acquires without determining the content of that morality.¹ He argues against (1) and (2) and in favor of (3). Without disputing his case for (3) I will try to say why I think that his arguments against (1) and (2) are inconclusive and that it remains possible that all three kinds of bases have a significant impact on human morality.

Simple Innateness

In Sripada’s initial formulation, the Simple Innateness Model holds that *some* moral *norms* are innate but it is quickly reformulated as the claim that there are *many* innate *specific rules* whose content can be formulated *in a non-normative vocabulary*. He then notes that there is “much underlying variability” in what might seem at first to be universal norms, such as incest prohibitions.

My comments: First, denying the claim that there are *many* such norms is compatible with the claim that there are *some*.

¹Chandra Sripada, “Nativism and Moral Psychology: Three Models of the Innate Structure that Shapes the Content of Moral Norms,” this volume.

Second, I do not agree that either claim should be interpreted as referring to norms whose content is formulated in a *non-normative* vocabulary. For one thing, if norms are about what is right, wrong, good, bad, just, and unjust, then to that extent their content has to be formulated at least partly in normative terms, because those terms are normative.

If the idea is that it must be possible to identify in nonnormative terms what is supposed to be right, wrong, good, bad, just or unjust according to a given norm, that rules out norms relating norms, such as the principle that it is wrong to try to persuade someone to do something wrong.

Failing to consider such norms begs a question against the simple innateness model, since at least one of the proposals is that a principle of Double Effect might be a norm of the relevant sort. In one version of this norm, its content is that *it is worse to cause harm to someone (who has not consented to this) as (part of) your means to bringing about a greater good to others than to cause such harm as a side effect of doing something that will bring about a greater good*. This content includes several moral notions: at least, *worse*, *harm*, and *greater good*.

Consider the widely accepted claim that there are universal linguistic principles. Linguists do not suppose that the content of such principles can be formulated without appeal to concepts from linguistics. Why should a proponent of universal moral principles be committed to supposing that the content of the relevant moral principles can be formulated in nonnormative terms?

Third, Sripada suggests that “more or less *all* putative examples of norm univesals are actually associated with much underlying variability.” However, it is plausible that at least some moral norms are default norms which hold other things being equal, where social context is relevant to what counts as other things being equal. And it is not easy to distinguish the claim that different moralities have different default norms from the claim that they share the same default norms that interact differently with their different social contexts.

Fourth, certain underlying norms may be *implicit* in people’s moral judgments without themselves being explicitly known to the people whose moralities reflect those norms, just as there are under-

lying linguistic principles that are not known to speakers of a given language. For example, some theorists have suggested that our moral judgments reflect an implicit acceptance of the principle of Double Effect. Supposing there is widespread implicit acceptance of such a principle, it would seem that ordinary people have no explicit knowledge of it and it would appear not to be transmitted by explicit instruction. If there is no other obvious way for the principle to be learned, the hypothesis suggests itself that the principle is somehow innate and should be universal.

Principles and Parameters

The Principles and Parameters Model allows for universal moral principles containing parameters that can vary from one morality or another. So, for example, there might be a universal principle containing a parameter G forbidding harm to members of G , where different moralities have different specifications of the relevant G .

Sripada distinguishes two possible arguments for this model. First, the model might help to explain the complex pattern of commonalities and differences in various moralities. Even though all moralities may have a norm forbidding harm, moralities differ concerning to whom such harm is forbidden.

Second, the model might help to explain why all normal human beings acquire a morality in the face of a certain “poverty” in their experience. Normal human beings are born with an innate disposition to acquire a morality containing certain norms and need only learn the local values of certain parameters of the norms.

Poverty of Experience?

Sripada rejects this second consideration on two grounds. He says that a given moral system is a “far simpler” learning target than a language and, furthermore, that the learning resources available

in learning a first morality are “incomparably greater” than the resources available in learning a first language, because explicit moral instruction of relevant principles is available in the moral case in a way it is not available to someone learning a first language.

My comments: First, the poverty of experience argument might also be used in connection with the first model Sripada discusses, the simple innateness model.

Second, it is unclear how “simple” a given morality is, because we do not yet have even the beginnings of an account of the structure of morality in the way that we have at least the beginnings of an account of the structure of language.

Third, whether the child has sufficient learning resources for acquiring a certain moral principles may depend on whether those principles are explicitly invoked by others or are merely implicit in the judgments of others. Comparable linguistic principles are highly arcane and are not explicitly known to speakers of the language. The same might be true of relevant moral principles, if for example those principle are like Double Effect in not being something that ordinary people are aware of and able to teach to children acquiring a morality.

It might be said that the principle of Double Effect cannot be a moral universal since there are utilitarian moralities in which the principle is not accepted. But just as universal grammar is compatible with the existence of artificial languages like Esperanto, or pidgins that violate principles of universal grammar, universal moral principles are compatible with artificial moralities like utilitarianism. Universal grammar is about languages children can acquire in the normal way in which children acquire a first language. Similarly, universal morality would characterize the sorts of moralities that children can acquire in the normal way in which children acquire a first morality.

Children of parents who speak a pidgin not satisfying principles of universal grammar do not acquire that pidgin but instead acquire a creole that does satisfy such principles. It is an interesting question whether a child utilitarian parents will initially acquire a morality containing nonutilitarian principles like Double Effect and will have to be taught otherwise.

To be sure, it is no objection to utilitarianism that it might prove to be artificial in this respect, just as it is no objection to contemporary science that we are born accepting implicit principles that conflict with those of contemporary science.

In any event, it is unlikely that children require explicit instruction in order to acquire a first morality, anymore than they require explicit instruction in order to acquire language, although interaction with others may be necessary in both cases. It is quite possible that children who interact mainly with each other “invent” moral systems satisfying universal moral constraints in much the way that deaf children brought up by hearing parents invent sign languages satisfying universal grammatical constraints.

Explaining the Pattern of Variation in Harm Norms

The other argument for the principles and parameters model that Sripada discusses says that such a model might account for the complex pattern of commonalities and differences found in various moralities. He objects that there is too much variation to account for in terms of simple parameter setting. So, for example, although it may seem that moralities may all contain a constraint against harming members of a certain group G with different moralities defining G differently, in fact “the pattern of variation in harm norms is much more complex, subtle and variegated than” simply specifying a relevant group and indeed “the pattern of variation in moral norms across human groups is too extensive and complex to be accounted for in terms of a set of relatively rigid parameters” and its “best description” is in terms of “thematic clustering.”

My comments: First, a principle and parameters account of the pattern of variation of harm norms will allow additional parameters or factors over and above the specification of a single group G .

Second, the prohibition of harms to those in G is presumably a default principle rather than an absolute prohibition. So, some or even all of the variation that Sripada discusses might be to other differences in the moralities.

More generally, it seems to me that an evaluation of this particular case would require a more explicit account of even one person's morality than we currently have.

By the way, Dworkin discusses a different sort of example to which a principles and parameters account might be relevant.² Dworkin suggests that people generally accept a principle concerning the sacred value of human life as represented in the life of a human fetus, but differ as to when the life of the fetus has such sacred value and to how much sacred value it possesses in comparison with various other values. Whether his account is best represented as a principles and parameters account or in some other way is unclear.

Moral Psychology: the Linguistic Analogy

I do not know whether it will turn out to be useful to try to develop an analogy between languages and moralities or between linguistics and moral psychology. But some considerations suggest it might be.

For one thing, human morality differs in complexity from anything to be found in non-human animals, just as human language differs in complexity from systems of communication found in non-human animals. It has not proved illuminating to try to understand human language as an extension of systems of animal communication. It may similarly not be illuminating to try to understand human morality as an extension of social aspects of animal life.

As mentioned above, moral reasoning seems sensitive to complex principles of which most people are not conscious. It is unclear how such principles might be learned; one possibility is that they are built in ahead of time, perhaps in a "moral faculty."

Some theorists may believe that morality is determined by the acceptance of certain moral conventions, just as some theorists suppose that language is a matter of linguistic conventions. But there

²R. M. Dworkin, *Life's Dominion*, New York: Knopf, 1993.

are difficulties with such ideas, suggesting that the unit of analysis in each case is the internal state of the agent, the agent's I-Language and the agent's I-Morality.

The main difficulty in pursuing an analogy between linguistics and moral psychology is to come up with relevant moral principles beyond the most superficial ones. What are the principles that help to determine the outcome when the superficial principles conflict? Such principles, if there are any, might comprise a "moral grammar".

Such principles might be found in philosophical discussions of hard cases. In their important 1990 survey of research on "Moral rules: Their Content and Acquisition," Darley and Shultz refer (in part) to philosophical discussions, including J. L. Austin's "Plea for Excuses" and Hart and Honore's *Causation and the Law*.³ Thomas Aquinas formulated a version of Double Effect;⁴ and there has been further discussion of that principle and alternatives in connection with so-called "trolley problems," based on examples in Philippa Foot's "Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of Double Effect."⁵ Dworkin's "interpretations" of certain moral and legal disputes also provide possible source material.

Although there has been considerable emphasis lately in empirical studies of moral judgments of many subjects, with or without the use of fMRI, this may not be the best approach. Certainly, it was not the way generative grammar developed in its early days. Linguists tried for the most part to write explicit rules that would account for their own sense of what is grammatical and what is not in some small part of their own dialect or idiolect. It soon emerged that the explicit rules of the sort being developed required certain principles or constraints that no one had previously noticed and that it was hard to see how anyone might be taught them. This suggested that the relevant constraints might be part of a universal language faculty, not needing to be learned. If so, the constraints should be found in all languages. Or perhaps they should be default principles that

³Darley, J., and Shultz, T. R., "Moral Rules: Their Content and Acquisition," *Annual Review of Psychology* 41 (1990): 525-56. Austin, J. L. "A Plea for Excuses," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 57 (1956): 1-30. Hart, H. L. A., and Honore, A. M. *Causation and the Law*; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959).

⁴*Summa Theologica* (II-II, Qu. 64, Art.7).

⁵*Oxford Review* 5 (1967).

would be acquired in the absence of clear counter-examples. It was further thinking along these lines led to the principles and parameters conception in which much of grammar is assumed built into a child's initial state and language acquisition involves learning how certain switches are set, determining for example where the heads of phrases occur in relation to their complements.

It is an interesting question to what extent a similar research strategy might be relevant to the study of morality. The most straightforward way of pursuing such a strategy would be to consider whether it is possible explicitly to characterize (part of) one's own moral sense, one's moral idiolect (or I-morality), in terms of certain rules or principles. Such a study might begin by looking at traditional casuistry and other philosophical accounts of how to think about certain sorts of moral problems. Such accounts might appeal to principles that are not generally expressed and not available to children acquiring morality, so there might be an initial puzzle as to how such principles are acquired, one possibility being that they are innate or somehow based on innate principles. However, it is very difficult to evaluate this possibility in advance of the construction of such partial moral grammars.