Elements of Moral Cognition

Rawls’ Linguistic Analogy and the Cognitive Science of Moral and Legal Judgment

Is the science of moral cognition usefully modeled on aspects of Universal Grammar? Are human beings born with an innate “moral grammar” that causes them to analyze human action in terms of its moral structure, with just as little awareness as they analyze human speech in terms of its grammatical structure? Questions like these have been at the forefront of moral psychology ever since John Mikhail revived them in his influential work on the linguistic analogy and its implications for jurisprudence and moral theory. In this seminal book, Mikhail offers a careful and sustained analysis of the moral grammar hypothesis, showing how some of John Rawls’ original ideas about the linguistic analogy, together with famous thought experiments like the trolley problem, can be used to improve our understanding of moral and legal judgment. The book will be of interest to philosophers, cognitive scientists, legal scholars, and other researchers in the interdisciplinary field of moral psychology.

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Elements of Moral Cognition

Rawls' Linguistic Analogy and the Cognitive Science of Moral and Legal Judgment

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John Mikhail
Frontmatter
More information
To Sarah, Hannah, and Andrew; and to the memory of my parents,
Ramzy and Maryse Mikhail
Homo homini lupus;* who has the courage to dispute it in the face of all the evidence in his own life and in history?
– Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*

For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves.... They show that what the law requires is written on their hearts, their conscience bearing witness....
– St. Paul, *Letter to the Romans*

What we have been saying would have a degree of validity even if we should concede that which cannot be conceded without the utmost wickedness, that there is no God, or that the affairs of men are of no concern to Him.
– Hugo Grotius, *On the Law of War and Peace*

* Man is to man a wolf.
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At first glance, Freud and St. Paul offer two competing accounts of human nature. On Freud’s view, human beings are essentially predatory toward one another. On St. Paul’s more optimistic conception, principles of justice and fairness spring from their nature as social creatures. The apparent conflict between these two familiar accounts can be reconciled, however, by means of a competence–performance distinction. Freud describes how humans often do in fact behave toward one another. Writing a decade before the most vicious mass murder machine in history was unleashed on its defenseless victims, he correctly observes that under some circumstances “men are not gentle, friendly creatures wishing for love, who simply defend themselves if they are attacked … [but] savage beasts to whom the thought of sparing their own kind is alien.” St. Paul focuses on different behaviors, however, and he also seems correct to infer from them that certain basic norms of conduct are engraved in the mind as a kind of innate instinct. This influential idea, although promoted by the Stoics and embraced by many Jewish and Christian writers, is neither exclusively Western nor inherently religious. Substantially the same notion can be found in the Hindu concept of dharma, the Confucian concept of li, and the writings of the Mu’tazilites and other Islamic rationalists, for example. Likewise, the hypothesis of an innate moral faculty is what supplies the foundation of the jus gentium or law of nations in its traditional, secular formulation. In 1625, Hugo Grotius set the tone for the modern scientific analysis of these subjects and thereby heralded the emancipation of ethics and jurisprudence from theology with his famous etiamsi daremus remark (“even if we should concede”) in the Prolegomena to the Law of War and Peace, asserting that a natural moral law would exist even if there were no God, or human affairs were of no concern to him.

This book seeks to revive and develop aspects of the humanistic enterprise pioneered by Grotius and other Enlightenment philosophers by describing and explaining elements of moral cognition within a modern cognitive science framework. The linchpin is the analogy between rules of justice and rules of
grammar, and the gnomon or measuring device is the trolley problem and other artfully designed thought experiments. Just as repeated observations of the gnomon's shadow gave birth to the science of astronomy by enabling ancient astronomers to compile and organize vast amounts of information about the daily and annual variation of the sun (Kuhn 1957), so too can repeated observations of the moral capacities of human nature as reflected in a variety of common moral judgments provide a secure foundation for moral theory. This, at any rate, is the guiding assumption of the research program described in these pages.

This book began as my Ph.D. dissertation, “Rawls’ Linguistic Analogy: A Study of the ‘Generative Grammar' Model of Moral Theory Described by John Rawls in A Theory of Justice,” which was submitted to the Department of Philosophy at Cornell University in 2000. Most of the original research was done at Harvard University and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology from 1995 to 1999, beginning with a paper on moral competence I wrote for Noam Chomsky in the spring of 1995 and a series of illuminating conversations about moral theory I held with John Rawls later that summer, before the unfortunate event of his first stroke. The book also draws from the initial trolley problem studies I conducted at MIT from 1995 to 1999, when I was a visiting researcher in Elizabeth Spelke’s Infant Cognition Lab. Many of the book’s main ideas are therefore nearly 15 years old, although they have begun only recently to receive widespread attention, due in part to their popularization by other writers and to the growing use of trolley problems and similar cases to investigate the nature of human moral intuitions.

When I was in graduate school, moral psychology was not a thriving academic discipline, and moral philosophy was for the most part resolutely anti-empirical. As a result, I often found it difficult to persuade philosophers that combining some of Rawls’ and Chomsky's theoretical insights with actual experiments on people’s moral intuitions was a worthwhile dissertation topic. That would be psychology, not philosophy, is the essence of what I was told. Fortunately, things have now changed, and a new generation of philosophers that seeks to “introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects” (Hume) and thereby make contributions to cognitive science is receiving greater encouragement. Meanwhile, many psychologists now pursue research on moral cognition along the lines outlined in this book and related publications.

Legal theory has also undergone a transformation in the past decade. Many legal scholars now pay closer attention to the cognitive and brain sciences, and jurisprudence is gradually returning to its naturalistic roots as the attempt to systematize and explain the human sense of justice with the aid of a technical legal vocabulary (as both Adam Smith and Thomas Reid credited Grotius with doing; see The Theory of Moral Sentiments, VII.iv.37, and Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind, III). Likewise, cognitive scientists are increasingly drawing on the highly refined concepts of moral and legal theory in the design and analysis of their experiments. In light of all these developments, it
is gratifying to observe that one of the primary motivations of the linguistic analogy – to help promote greater collaborative and interdisciplinary research on human moral capabilities – has already begun to be realized.

It seems unnecessary to observe that much has been learned in the past decade about the topics discussed in this book. In editing and revising the original manuscript for publication, I have not attempted to incorporate what has been accomplished during the intervening period in any systematic fashion. Rather, with a few exceptions, I have sought to preserve and extend the basic structure and argument of Rawls' Linguistic Analogy as much as possible, despite certain inherent limitations of this procedure. If I were to begin again today from scratch, I would probably write a very different book, one geared less toward fitting my own ideas about moral theory into the format of Rawls' brief remarks on the linguistic analogy in A Theory of Justice and more toward the independent development of a naturalistic moral psychology within broad scientific parameters. On balance, however, I continue to believe that there are significant advantages to the synthetic approach adopted here, which begins with certain well-known ideas of two seminal thinkers and seeks to integrate and build upon them.

In addition to Rawls and Chomsky, the framework within which this study unfolds draws heavily on the work of Alan Donagan, Philippa Foot, Alvin Goldman, Elizabeth Spelke, Judith Jarvis Thomson, and other highly original researchers, and some familiarity with the fields of linguistics and cognitive science, on the one hand, and moral theory and jurisprudence, on the other, is presupposed. Because I hope to reach a wide and diverse audience, I have nonetheless tried whenever possible to write in plain English and avoid unnecessary academic jargon. However unrealistic, my role models in this regard have been such lucid writers as Descartes, Hume, Mill, and Russell, and as Einstein would have it, my aim throughout the book, however imperfectly realized, has been to render things as simple as possible, but no simpler. At the same time, because of their exceptional value in the clarification and development of scientific ideas, I have not hesitated to utilize symbolic notations, mathematical formulas, structural diagrams, or technical terminology where this has seemed necessary or appropriate. I have also sought to bear in mind Rawls' wise observation that, in explicating commonsense morality, one must learn from one's predecessors and recognize that “morals is not like physics: it is not a matter of ingenious discovery but of noticing lots of obvious things and keeping them all in reasonable balance at the same time” (Rawls 1951b: 579–580; cf. Kant 1993/1788: 8). Hence the ample use throughout the book of quotations, historical illustrations, parenthetical references, and other pedagogical resources. In this respect, my greatest ambition for the book will be realized if it can stimulate further research and serve as an accessible and useful resource for students of law, philosophy, and cognitive science to advance these fields of inquiry.

***
I have incurred enormous debts in writing this book and the articles and chapters from which it draws. Indeed, the list of individuals from whom I have received assistance in this regard is embarrassingly long. Some of these debts stretch back decades, and many of those to whom I am most indebted are sadly no longer alive.

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In 1995, I took my first course in linguistics and cognitive science with Noam Chomsky. Shortly thereafter I became affiliated with MIT’s Department of Brain and Cognitive Sciences, and over the next four years I was fortunate to receive critical feedback and assistance on this project from many linguists and cognitive scientists, including James Blair, Sylvain Bromberger, Stephen Chorover, Danny Fox, Ted Gibson, Dan Grodner, Kenneth Hale, Morris Halle, Alan Hein, Nancy Kanwisher, Jerrold Katz, Frank Keil, Howard Lasnik, Alec Marantz, Gary Marcus, Jon Nissenbaum, Camillo Padoa-Schioppa, Steven Pinker, Mary Potter, Liina Pylkkanen, Whitman Richards, Javid Sadr, Roger Shepard, Mirganka Sur, Tessa Warren, Kenneth Wexler, and Yaoda Xu. While at MIT, I frequently attended graduate courses in linguistics taught by Michel DeGraff, Irene Heim, Kai von Fintel, Alex Marantz, and David Pesetsky. I thank them for giving me this valuable opportunity. Despite a busy schedule, Sally McConnell-Ginet generously agreed to sit as proxy for Noam Chomsky during my final dissertation examination. She also provided many helpful comments on the penultimate draft of that manuscript, for which I am very grateful.

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