

All in the Minds – ABC radio

25 November 2006

Moral Minds: The Evolution of Human Morality

<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/allinthemind/stories/2006/1793870.htm>

Natasha Mitchell: Hello, welcome to All in the Mind, Natasha Mitchell joining you on ABC Radio National, great to have your company.

This week - the moral mind - are we born with a moral instinct an innate ability to judge what's right and what's wrong? Regardless of age, culture, experience could we possess a moral machinery, written into our biology?

Montage of News archives:

Speaker: A federal court judge in the United States has started hearing a case about whether a brain-damaged woman should live or die...

Speaker: It is wise to always air on the side of life....

Speaker: Her husband says she'd rather be dead than live like this. Her parents think otherwise...

Speaker: The Hippocratic Oath which has bound doctors for two and half millennia begins with the words "First do no harm"....

Speaker: Because I don't want to play God and either way I go I feel I am....

Speaker: Sanctity of life, the sanctity of marriage...

Speaker: Having voted to ban cloning MPs have...

Speaker: At the same time a mother of an IVF baby has made a last minute plea...

Speaker: An islamic court in Nigeria has dismissed the appeal of a woman sentenced to death by stoning...The woman will be buried up to her head and rocks will be thrown at her until she's dead.

Natasha Mitchell: Deep moral dilemmas played out in the public sphere.

Brain death, honour killings, infanticide, different cultures have their own responses and rules of justice. But underneath the veneer of culture could morality be like language?

Linguist Noam Chomsky proposed a Universal, unconscious, Grammar for language, hardwired into all of us from birth - regardless of the dialect we're born into or learn.

Marc Hauser thinks morality might work the same way. Professor of Psychology and evolutionary biology at Harvard University he's just published a ripping read - *Moral Minds - How Nature Designed our Universal Sense of Right and Wrong*. You might know him from his earlier book *Wild Minds*, based on his trail blazing work with primates.

Richard Joyce, Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Sydney also has a corker of a book out this year on the same subject, *The Evolution of Morality*.

And they're my guests today on the show - taking on the moral mind.

Well, Marc Hauser and Richard Joyce thanks for joining us on ABC Radio National this week.

Marc Hauser: Thank you.

Richard Joyce: Yeah, glad to be here.

Natasha Mitchell: Look a question for you both really, I'm interested in your impressions. The thought of science being an arbiter over the nature of morality still makes many people uneasy. After all, this has traditionally been the domain of religion. So, why this nervousness about science engaging with the nature of morality. Marc.

Marc Hauser: From my perspective I guess this comes from a couple of different angles. One is that I think when most people hear the notion of human behaviour and biology in the same sentence, they almost instinctively jump to the conclusion that therefore if biology is what's in the driver's seat, then it must be fixed, it must be immutable, culture's irrelevant and there's no free will. And then of course if that's the conclusion, that's a very scary thought for anybody.

And fortunately that's not the way that most biologists or biological sciences approach the problem. It's much more at the level of trying to describe the nature of the kinds of moral judgements that people make and in the case of evolutionary biology, why - from the perspective of affects on our fitness or survivorship - those judgements may have evolved in the past.

Natasha Mitchell: Richard Joyce, the concern is that if morality is just something that evolved to help our ancestors breed more, and breed more successfully, then somehow the authority of morality might be undermined isn't it?

Richard Joyce: Well exactly right. This is a kind of fear that people have had I think right back in Darwin's time when Darwin speculated about the evolution of a moral sense. And immediately people were extremely worried about this, that this stripped morality of all its authority.

There was a similar fear when people tried to have a humanistic ethics - you know - to take God out of the picture. There was a fear that without God as a kind of guiding light driving our moral decisions that somehow we would lose our moral compass and there would be no authority left guiding our normative decisions anymore. And I think there's as very similar kind of fear at the idea that it may just be our biological natures that are giving rise to a lot of our moral thinking and moral deliberation. That if we think this way - if we engage in moral thinking because it had reproductive value to our ancestors, basically it helped them make more babies - then where's the actual practical authority?

Natasha Mitchell: Marc Hauser, let's have a bash at defining what we're talking about here, the moral mind. What do we mean by morality, is it something more than a sense of what is right and wrong in our world?

Marc Hauser: In my own work what we've been more centred on is the psychology that enters into a particular moral judgement, as distinct from what people actually would do.

Let me give a concrete example. One of the common kind of things that happens, certainly in certain places like where I live, in Cambridge, Massachusetts is you pass by somebody who's homeless, who's standing on the side of the street and asking for money. And this is a common event for me, I sometimes reach in my wallet and pull out a dollar bill or two dollar bills whatever it is, and sometimes I just walk on by.

Pretty hard to figure out if there's any kind of logic to what I'm actually doing. But if I asked the question, is it morally permissible for me to always walk by a homeless person and never give them money, I'm going to answer absolutely not. It's not morally permissible.

Natasha Mitchell: And yet you do it.

Marc Hauser: Well, and yet I do it, that's right. And what we've been uncovering is that when you focus more on the nature of people's judgements. How they judge a particular case as being morally permissible or punishable or whatever it is, often you get a complete split between how they judge and how they justify, and what they would actually do. So what we're trying to uncover here is what I refer to in my book as a 'moral grammar'. A set of principles that are completely unconscious but that nonetheless drive the nature of our intuitive judgements.

Natasha Mitchell: Look it's a provocative claim you're making that in a sense we're all born with an innate moral instinct, or an innate and universal faculty for morality. You've just called it a moral grammar. Isn't morality learned, isn't morality something that we pick up through our social institutions, through our parents, through religion?

Marc Hauser: Good. Here's where I think the analogy to language actually really helps. The idea is this. When you tell most people, as Chomsky told people in the 50s, "look you don't learn your language, you acquire your language in the way you grow an arm". Now for most of us that was the most stupid thing anybody could ever say - of course we learn language, we teach our kids what words to use, they go to school, they learn grammar.

The crucial distinction is that the Universal Grammar that underlies our capacity to acquire any of the world's languages doesn't dictate the specific kind of language - but rather is a kind of a tool-kit for building particular kinds of language.

In the same way, the universal moral grammar is really a tool-kit for building possible moral systems. The particular moral system are always filled in by the local culture.

So let me just give another kind of very simple example. There's some very nice work by a psychologist named Phil Tetlock in Berkeley. You bring somebody into a room and you say to them:

"Do you have any children?... I'm willing to give you \$1000 for your daughter".

They're, like, "what!?"

"How about a million dollars?"

People will pause just a little bit longer depending on how much money you've offered. And at that point there's kind of indignation and disgust that they've actually engaged in this trade off - which is just completely blocked.

Now the reason why I give this example is because every culture has certain kinds of trade offs they will just not engage in - but the content of that trade off will vary. For example lots, of cultures will engage in selling off their kids, right for dowries and all the rest. But the crucial point is that universally there are certain kinds of trade offs that are just blocked.

Natasha Mitchell: Yeah, certainly people who are challenged by your idea point to the fact that there seems to be so much diversity around moral beliefs across all human cultures so for us to try and extract from that a universal moral grammar that we're all born into the world with, is difficult for people to comprehend, isn't it?

Marc Hauser: Well, yes it is and I think it is. So where we're making progress on this is that we built about three years ago a website called The Moral Sense Test [see link below] which now after about three years has somewhere like 300,000 subjects from around the world. And on that website people log in and tell us where they're from, their religious background, or educational background, age and so forth. And then they proceed to take many of the kind of classic moral dilemmas that you know people like Richard and other moral philosophers have invented to try to get some purchase on the nature of people's intuitions. Here's some examples of the kind of things that seemed to cut across culture, at least with the sample we have.

As far as we can tell across this very large sample of people, people judge actions that cause harm as worse than omissions of an action that caused exactly the same harm. People consider a harm that is intended as worse than the same harm that is foreseen.

Natasha Mitchell: Moral fundamentals that Marc Hauser's research is revealing are common across all human cultures and you can you test your own response to some everyday moral dilemmas on his team's Moral Sense Test on the web and add to his data. Pop the words "moral sense test" and "Harvard" into Google and you'll find it.

Philosophers call this popular moral dilemma, The Trolley Problem.

Reading: *Denise is a passenger on an out-of-control train or trolley. The conductor has fainted and the trolley is headed toward five people walking on the track. The banks are so steep that they won't be able to get off the track in time. The track has a side track leading off to the left and Denise can turn the trolley onto it. There is, however, one person on the left hand track, Denise can turn the trolley killing the one, or she can refrain from flipping the switch letting the five die.*

What should she do? Is it morally permissible for Denise to flip the switch, turning the trolley onto the side track?

Natasha Mitchell: So now what would you do? Probably the same as most people. Marc Hauser?

Marc Hauser: Approximately 90% of all subjects say 'yes, it is permissible'.

Natasha Mitchell: So choose to kill one person rather than five.

Marc Hauser: That's right, if you just took that example you'd say look, that's looking like a utilitarian answer, right - you go for the consequences.

Let's make one small change in that dilemma. There's a man standing next to you who's heavy, and if you push this man onto the track he's heavy enough that he will stop the trolley, killing him but saving the five. Now if you're strict utilitarian and you're only paying attention to the consequences...

Natasha Mitchell: You'd push him.

Marc Hauser: You should push him, right. But here only 10% of our subjects say that it's permissible, they've completely flipped flopped. In this case if you simply had a rule that says 'it's not permissible to kill somebody' - well, that's true in both cases - so you have nowhere to go either.

So ultimately what's happening in these cases and in many, many other ones is that the principles that underlie people's judgements, which appear very quickly, almost like a grammaticality judgement, are not being driven by a conscious, reflective, rational kind of sense but rather a rapid, intuitive principle that's inaccessible to conscious awareness, but nonetheless drive the intuition.

Natasha Mitchell: And my guests today are Harvard evolutionary biologist Marc Hauser and University of Sydney philosopher Richard Joyce. Each have penned ripping reads on the evolution of morality and the human mind - both out this year.

All in the Mind here on ABC Radio National, I'm Natasha Mitchell, also on Radio Australia and hitching a ride on your mp3 player too.

Richard Joyce, can I bring you into the discussion - just thinking about what we're talking about here, do we have a tendency to confuse morality with goodness?

Richard Joyce: There's many different kinds of goodness. I mean there is moral goodness of course. And yet what's one thing that's very interesting is the fact that ordinary people make the distinction without really thinking about it really quite effortlessly. I mean, this comes on line at a very young age, even children as young as three distinguish between moral transgressions and conventional transgressions. And this is also a very robustly cross-cultural phenomenon. And yet it's still really quite challenging for a philosopher to articulate exactly what is distinctive about morality.

Natasha Mitchell: Yes, certainly morality feels like it's a social code or a compulsion, or an imperative to behave in a certain way, or a matter of human convention, doesn't it?

Richard Joyce: Well I'm not sure if it feels like a matter of human convention, I'll agree to all those previous things. I mean morality seems to press upon us you know guiding our actions, it seems to have a kind of practical force. If we feel that it's morally wrong to do something then this engages with our motivations. When one has sort of engaged in moral deliberation, I don't think it feels as if one is just dealing with human conventions. I feel morality feels as if it transcends conventions. It's kind of metaphorical here but it feels as if something is pressing upon one from the outside, so to speak.

Natasha Mitchell: Just going back to this linkage we make often between morality and goodness - being good - it is certainly part of one of the great explanations for why we might have entered this world with an innate moral instinct isn't it? And it comes back to the biology of altruism and reciprocity.

Richard Joyce: That's right. If one wants to give an evolutionary explanation for a moral faculty, what kind of evolutionary process would give rise to that kind of faculty, given that it requires one to make certain sacrifices to one's own welfare for the sake of others?

But then there's been a lot of work over the last few decades showing how evolutionary processes like you mentioned, reciprocity for example, when organisms engage in reciprocal exchanges of goods to each other - sacrifice some welfare for the good of another. But then if that's repaid at a later date both animals are up on the deal.

Natasha Mitchell: Well, you certainly argue that moral judgements in a sense bolster our motivation to cooperate, our motivation towards being altruistic to others, which we can only benefit from in the end.

Richard Joyce: That's right. If it's true that human ancestors lived in an environment where reciprocity was extremely important to them, which almost certainly they did, then there's a question of 'well, what does morality actually add to the reciprocal exchange'? And the idea that I've been examining is that it bolsters motivation. It's all very well to give something to somebody cause you like that person, but if in addition you feel that you're morally obligated to pay them back in exchange for something they gave you on a previous occasion - that is perhaps the evolutionary function of the moral faculty. That it bolsters motivation in the social sphere to make us better co-operators.

Montage of News archive items

Speaker: ...A lot of MPs have had to do a lot of soul searching to reach a decision...

Speaker: ...It should be an individual decision what happens to people's such as myself and my husband's embryos rather than politicians making those judgements...

Speaker: ...but often they involve the question of euthanasia. Some doctors oppose it...

Speaker: ...Others follow another medical maxim, "though shalt not kill but must not strive officiously to keep alive".

Speaker: ...Terry Schiavo told her husband when attending funerals of close family members who had been on life support that she would quote 'not want to live like that'...

Natasha Mitchell: Marc Hauser, where does emotion fit into this discussion about the possibility that morality is in a sense an innate instinct? Because certainly morality seems to be so bound up with emotions like guilt and shame and compassion, doesn't it?

Marc Hauser: Right. And let me give a very concrete example to give you my sense of where things stand. Let's think for a moment about a psychopath. So here's somebody who everyone agrees is doing something morally wrong, they're going about killing people. Now the question becomes this - 'do they do the wrong thing because they just don't know right from wrong', or 'do they have an emotional deficit that fails to block them from doing the wrong thing'? Perhaps they have perfectly intact moral knowledge and they go: 'I know consciously or unconsciously killing somebody is wrong. But when I'm given this opportunity I just don't care, I just go ahead and do it, I feel no remorse, I feel no guilt, I feel no shame'...

Natasha Mitchell: So emotions in a sense provide the constraint for the rest of us?

Marc Hauser: That's one reading of it. That's right. So on one view of morality, so emotions are playing this kind of inspirational role in our moral behaviour. That is a very dominant view, it's a view that basically derives from David Hume, it's a view that's come into vogue much more in the sciences now. So on the view that we favour, and that we're now pursuing, perhaps not all of moral judgements but much of moral judgement is done by what I like to call a kind of a cool, moral calculus - this moral grammar. The judgement then may or may not trigger an emotional response, that may or may not either constrain or facilitate a given kind of behaviour.

Natasha Mitchell: You're really bringing together reasoning and emotion. David Hume, the great philosopher, would have argued that really emotions were the ultimate arbiter of what we consider right and wrong.

Marc Hauser: Basically I'm not arguing for conscious reasoning so my moral calculus is a completely unconscious intuitive process. So it's very much in line with David Hume's thinking. The difference is that for me the crucial bit is not the emotional system but rather this analysis, unconscious, of people's intentions, their ability to foresee future consequences. This is completely unemotional. It may trigger emotions unconsciously again. But what's doing the work of the moral judgements is all our kind of rich psychology about other people's beliefs in their intentions and their goals. And this is where I think the sciences becomes terrifically exciting. There are people in the world who have certain kinds of deficits in these different kinds of psychological processes. Like autistic, Asperger's people, who lack the ability in some sense to understand the beliefs and desires of others. How does that impact upon their moral judgements?

So one can begin to move within the kind of neuropsychological sphere of people with various kinds of disorder to gain great insight into the nature of our moral judgements. At least in terms of the neurobiology and the psychology.

Natasha Mitchell: If our brain is indeed our moral organ - I'm really interested then to get a sense of - and you've been looking at childhood development, you've also been looking at how other animals function as social beings as well. You've certainly cast a wide net though of mental faculties that come on line very early in our lives. You even point to our ability to delay gratification is part of a moral system in a sense, or even our development of a number system early on...

Marc Hauser: Right, the really tricky part and this is where we're all struggling right now as scientists and more philosophers - what is strictly the moral domain? What are the computations that the mind engages and says 'aha, I'm in a moral domain right now', right - versus any other social domain.

Here's an example:

A teacher comes into a class and says: "Today class I know that when you ask questions you typically raise your hand but today you don't have to raise your hand. Just ask your question". Now most kids go "OK, if that's the rule today well we'll just go with that", right?

But if the teacher comes in and says: "Now look, I know that usually when some other child in the classroom is bothering you come and tell the teachers, we talk about it and we try to figure out the best way of the solution. But today forget about that, just punch the kid!". Now nobody goes "OK"!

Now what's the distinction? Social conventions tend to be much more culturally plastic, varying from culture to culture. They tend to be more open to an authoritarian over-ride, if the teacher or some wise elder says you don't have to do it this way, or you should do it this way - that's OK. In contrast, moral rules are exactly the opposite.

But there are many, many more distinctions within the moral sphere that go way beyond that. So, why is it that people think that using somebody as a means to an end is not OK, whereas something that maybe harms one but for a greater good, under certain circumstances, it might be OK.

So I think there's many more nuanced distinctions that we're now just beginning to go after.

Natasha Mitchell: Richard Joyce, even though you agree with the argument that we're born with an innate moral instinct - you do have concerns about how this might be interpreted, don't you, you caution against using evolutionary arguments then to define what's good and bad, how we should behave?

Richard Joyce: Right, I've never seen this work, I mean there have been various attempts trying to vindicate morality, either morality in general or specific kind of moral prescriptions or moral policies, based on this body, this growing body of empirical data. And, I've never seen it work.

Natasha Mitchell: For both of you, if we're to consider that we are born with a moral instinct, what are the ramifications for how we debate moral issues in the wider world? In our courts, in the media, in our schools?

Richard Joyce: Philosophers will have differing views on this. A little more disturbing or a slightly darker side of the debate - there's a possibility that then this might actually have a kind of undermining effect on our attitudes towards morality.

Natasha Mitchell: That's a bit of a free for all...

Richard Joyce: Yeah, or that you know these moral judgements aren't really justified in the same way that other descriptive beliefs are justified. I mean, if you take a descriptive belief about Paris being in France, we all believe that Paris is in France and you say "where does that belief come from?" And if you really trace it back "well I heard it, somebody told me, or I read it in a book". When you trace it back you come back to the *fact* that Paris *is* indeed in France.

Natasha Mitchell: But can we say the same for morality?

Richard Joyce: Exactly. When you give an evolutionary account of where our moral judgements come from they don't presuppose there are any moral properties in the world, or that our moral judgements ultimately are grounded in moral truths.

Natasha Mitchell: It casts us afloat somewhat doesn't it?

Richard Joyce: Yes, I mean it casts a lot into doubt. It means our moral judgements are in need of justification.

Natasha Mitchell: Marc Hauser, what about you, you have a very strong conviction that this work and this argument that morality in some sense has an innate quality can affect social debates quite vigorously?

Marc Hauser: Yes, I mean I think one of the questions that's opened up - certainly in the United States now, with all the fury about science and religion, is the one that I think has gained the most press - is the extent to which those people who believe that morality and religion are synonymous need to think twice about that.

Natasha Mitchell: Well you think that's wrong, you've been pretty clearly stated about that.

Marc Hauser: Well yeah, I think it's a completely a misguided view. I mean Peter Singer and I have written about this. But I mean what we're finding now is that in many cases when you ask 'do people with a religious background show different patterns of moral judgement from those who are atheists or agnostic?' The answer is no.

What we're interested in doing now, which is one of the projects that we're engaged with, is if you ask questions that are morally live right now like abortion, and euthanasia, and stem cell research, you'll pretty much find religious groups kind of lining up on one side and non-religious on the other side.

But the intriguing thing is that when you can conceal the dilemma in terms of the real role case and give a kind of an artificial dilemma that captures some of the crucial ingredients, there does not seem to be differences between people with a religious background and those without.

If I say, look, is abortion right or wrong? Well, pro-life or pro-choice will give different answers. Well, here's a case that Judy Thompson developed to try to get at the question of whether the foetus, no matter when you define its origins, has an obligatory right to the woman's body. Now clearly the foetus needs the woman's body in order to survive, but does it have an obligatory moral right to the body?

So here's a case - a woman wakes up one day and there's a man lying in bed next to her, and another man walks up to her and says, "look I'm terribly sorry, we're from The Society of Music Lovers, the man lying next to you in bed is a world famous violinist, he's in kidney failure and I hope you don't mind, we've plugged him into your kidney. If you stay plugged in for the next nine months he will survive and you will save the world's greatest violinist".

And you ask is it morally permissible for her to unplug, and everybody agrees - yeah, go ahead, unplug.

Natasha Mitchell: Well she didn't have a choice in the matter did she?

Marc Hauser: Well, she had no choice - why should she do that.

Now this is where it becomes interesting. It would be nice of her to stay plugged in, he can only survive if she stays plugged in, so at that level it's virtually identical to some cases of abortion where the foetus needs the woman's body, can only live with the woman's body. Now the difference of course is there's no commitment.

So let's take it now and change it one particular way.

She goes, "sure, let's stay plugged in". So for two months she makes the commitment to make - to really like the abortion case, the violinist is unconscious, so her commitment is to the guy from The Society of Music Lovers. She stays plugged in for two months and after two months she goes, "this is a drag, I'm unplugging". So she pulls the plug out and he dies.

Now you say is that morally permissible? Now here's the interesting thing, in contrast to the first case overwhelmingly most people say "that's less permissible" right? And they give you the reason 'well, look, she made a commitment and now she unplugs".

But the interesting thing is that people who are pro-choice or pro-life, religious or atheist do not differ on those judgements. The background people bring to an abortion case are not penetrating into this case, which has many of the crucial similarities that an abortion case has.

Natasha Mitchell: Interesting indeed.

Marc Hauser: So our point is to say "Look, let's step back from what religion or whatever group affiliation you have has told you to do". And let's now look at the intuitive judgements you're making to show there's a cross cultural kind of humanity running through this that is not something that is either penetrable by the local culture, or different by culture.

Natasha Mitchell: It's been a very rich conversation. Marc Hauser and Richard Joyce, thank you very much for joining me on the program this week.

Marc Hauser: Thank you.

Richard Joyce: Thank you Natasha - it's been fun.

Natasha Mitchell: And Marc Hauser's new book is called *Moral Minds: How Nature Designed Our Universal Sense of Right and Wrong* published by HarperCollins. He's Professor Psychology, Organismic and Evolutionary Biology at Harvard University. And Richard Joyce's book is called *The Evolution of Morality* published by MIT Press. He's Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Sydney. Both powerful reads, email your thoughts to us which you can do from All in the Mind's website, I'll put the references there too and the link to Marc Hauser's moral sense test - do it yourself into abc.net.au/rn/allinthemind. Also your one stop shop for the last four weeks of audio, podcast us or save us onto your computer, and a transcript there later in the week.

Thanks today to archivist John Spence, to producer Abbie Thomas and sound engineer Jen Parsonage. I'm Natasha Mitchell and next week - bodies in need, and brains getting intimate with machines. The Brain-Computer Interface. Bye for now.

Guests

Marc Hauser

Harvard College Professor

Professor of Psychology, Organismic & Evolutionary Biology and Biological Anthropology

Adjunct Professor, Graduate School of Education and Program in Neurosciences

Director, Cognitive Evolution Lab

Harvard University

Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA

<http://www.wjh.harvard.edu/~mnkylab/LPPI.html>

Richard Joyce

Associate Professor

Department of Philosophy

University of Sydney

Sydney, Australia

<http://philrssi.anu.edu.au/people-defaults/rjoyce/index.php3>

Further Information

[The Moral Sense Test](#)

Do the test yourself online! From the Cognitive Evolution Laboratory, Harvard University

Publications

Title: *Moral Minds: How Nature Designed Our Universal Sense of Right and Wrong*

Author: Marc D. Hauser

Publisher: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006, NY

ISBN: 0-06-078070-3

Title: *The Evolution of Morality*

Author: Richard Joyce

Publisher: MIT Press, 2006

ISBN: 0-262-10112-2

Title: *Primates and Philosophers: How Morality Evolved*

Author: Frans De Waal

Publisher: Princeton University Press, 2006

URL: http://www.emory.edu/LIVING_LINKS/de_Waal.html

ISBN: 978-0-691-12447-6

Title: *The Altruism Equation: Seven Scientists Search for the Origins of Goodness*

Author: Lee Alan Dugatkin

Publisher: Princeton University Press

ISBN: 978-0-691-12590-9

Presenter

Natasha Mitchell

Producer

Natasha Mitchell/Abigail Thomas

Radio National often provides links to external websites to complement program information. While producers have taken care with all selections, we can neither endorse nor take final responsibility for the content of those sites.