

David Steinberg

The Multidisciplinary Nature of Morality and Applied Ethics

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“Morality can be a conversation stopper. In *The Multidisciplinary Nature of Morality and Applied Ethics*, David Steinberg expands the conversation. Drawing upon deep experience as a clinician and medical ethicist, Steinberg offers a rich interdisciplinary analysis of a topic that is easy to invoke yet difficult to define. To that end, Steinberg draws on philosophy, religion, evolutionary biology, psychology, anthropology and the law to paint a nuanced portrait of morality in both theory and practice. This is a beautiful book that will reward the thoughtful reader with its wisdom and erudition.”

—Joseph J. Fins, M.D., M.A.C.P., F.R.C.P., is the E. William Davis, Jr., M.D., Professor of Medical Ethics and Chief of Medical Ethics at Weill Cornell Medical College and Solomon Center Distinguished Scholar in Medicine, Bioethics and the Law at Yale Law School. He is the author of *Rights Come to Mind: Brain Injury, Ethics and the Struggle for Consciousness*

“David Steinberg begins his remarkable new book by quoting the philosopher who quipped, “If one starts by saying ‘morality is’...nothing one says afterward seems quite right.” This puzzle serves as both the theme and the motivation for his exploration of morality, taking the reader on a journey through a startling and contrasting variety of perspectives. Steinberg first explores morality through the eyes of evolutionary biologists. He then moves on to linguistic interpretations of morality, morality as seen through the powerful social constructs of culture, religion, and the law, and concludes with the insights of the great moral philosophers and how their work has influenced the practice of ethics in organizations, medicine, and healthcare. A true tour de force, and a fascinating read.”

—Robert Truog, M.D., Frances Glessner Lee Professor of Medical Ethics, Harvard Medical School. Director, Center for Bioethics, Harvard Medical School

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The Multidisciplinary Nature of Morality and Applied Ethics

David Steinberg
Harvard Medical School
Boston, MA, USA

Lahey Hospital and Medical Center
Emeritus Staff
Burlington, MA, USA
david.steinberg@comcast.net

ISBN 978-3-030-45679-5 ISBN 978-3-030-45680-1 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-45680-1>

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The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

*To my Grandchildren,
Ben, Emily, Alex, Sadie and Nora*

Introduction

Most people intuitively understand the nature of morality; this tends to belie the fact that morality is more complex and more interesting than is generally appreciated. Although morality has been discussed for centuries, its essential nature is still debated. That is because morality is an abstract concept, an idea that is not itself amenable to empirical examination, but is susceptible to various interpretations.

Despite having spent decades involved with both practical and theoretical ethics I found deciphering the essential nature of morality similar to solving an intriguing puzzle. Despite centuries of debate morality has not acquired a consensus definition and it encompasses many controversies: Should morality be known by reason or the passions? What should predominate rules and principles, the virtues, or the actual consequences of an action? Can morality yield objective truth? And, can these questions be answered?

The Multidisciplinary Nature of Morality and Applied Ethics is an exploration of morality from various perspectives. Each chapter concerns morality; that is the thread that ties everything together. My aim is to provide a comprehensive portrait of morality—a fascinating and challenging concept that, despite its uncertainties, has enormous influence on human behavior.

The literature on morality is vast, forcing me to be selective and write about what would best contribute to a comprehensive portrait of morality. Chapters 1–8 include an introduction and an examination of morality from a variety of perspectives including evolution, psychology, culture, religion and the law. Chapter 3, Social Darwinism concerns misguided attempts to emulate evolution. Chapter 9 illustrates the vulnerability of morality as evidenced by the persistence of evil. Chapters 10–14 are devoted to moral theories and moral motivation. Chapters 15–16 include discussions of morality as practically applied. Chapter 17 contains concluding remarks.

My primary intended readers are the many people who have joined a professional, governmental, or organizational ethics committee and people taking a fellowship or masters degree program in ethics. I have also written for the thoughtful general reader who wants to learn more about morality. I have tried to avoid the arcane language that often infiltrates philosophy books and have inserted historic examples and real-life ethical quandaries that testify to the enormous influence morality can exert on people's lives.

Contents

Part I The Multidisciplinary Nature of Morality

| | | |
|----------|---|----|
| 1 | Morality | 3 |
| | Morality and Intrinsic Objective Truth | 3 |
| | Moral Knowledge | 4 |
| | The Definition of Morality | 5 |
| | Moral Skepticism | 7 |
| | A Multidisciplinary Exploration of Morality | 8 |
| | Conclusion | 8 |
| | References | 9 |
| 2 | Evolution and Ethics | 11 |
| | Morality as Biology | 11 |
| | A Tentative Definition of Morality | 15 |
| | Moral Capacities in Animals | 15 |
| | Respect for Authority | 16 |
| | Caring | 16 |
| | Cooperation | 17 |
| | Incest Taboo | 19 |
| | Monogamy | 20 |
| | Reciprocity | 20 |
| | Thou Shalt not Steal | 21 |
| | Conflict Resolution | 22 |
| | Rules, Justice and Aggression | 22 |
| | The Limitation of Aggression | 23 |
| | Moral Indignation | 25 |
| | Is Human Morality Distinctive? | 26 |
| | Some Cynicism | 27 |
| | The Limitations of Evolutionary Morality | 28 |

| | | |
|----------|---|-----------|
| | Conclusion | 28 |
| | References | 29 |
| 3 | Social Darwinism | 31 |
| | Introduction | 31 |
| | Conclusion | 35 |
| | References | 35 |
| 4 | Immoral-like Behavior in Animals | 37 |
| | Introduction | 37 |
| | Thomas Henry Huxley | 40 |
| | The Mechanism of Biological Morality | 42 |
| | Conclusion | 43 |
| | References | 43 |
| 5 | Moral Psychology | 45 |
| | Moral Psychology and the Brain | 45 |
| | Free Will | 47 |
| | The Distortion of Rational Moral Deliberation | 48 |
| | Reason, Emotion and Confabulation | 48 |
| | Reason and Emotion in the Trolley and Footbridge Dilemmas | 49 |
| | Extra-Moral Factors: The Power of Language | 51 |
| | Framing Effects | 51 |
| | Incest | 52 |
| | Embryo Donation | 53 |
| | Terminal Sedation and Genetically Modified Organisms | 53 |
| | Fetal Research | 53 |
| | Definitions | 54 |
| | Other Extra-Moral Influences | 55 |
| | Heuristics | 56 |
| | Moral Obligation | 57 |
| | Conclusion | 58 |
| | References | 59 |
| 6 | Morality and Culture | 63 |
| | The Definition of Culture | 63 |
| | Culture and Evolution | 65 |
| | Stigma | 66 |
| | Multiculturalism | 66 |
| | Moral Relativism | 66 |
| | Cultural Practices | 69 |
| | A Response to Moral Relativism | 72 |
| | Conclusion | 73 |
| | References | 73 |

| | | |
|----------|---|-----|
| 7 | Morality and Religion | 77 |
| | The Definition of Religion | 77 |
| | Religion and Morality | 78 |
| | Religion: Another Perspective | 80 |
| | Jewish Ethics | 81 |
| | Tzedakah | 81 |
| | Freedom | 82 |
| | Tikkun Olam—Repairing the World | 82 |
| | The Book of Proverbs | 82 |
| | Ethical Ideas in the Talmud | 83 |
| | The Golden Rule of Judaism | 83 |
| | Comments on Jewish Ethics | 84 |
| | Conflict with Secular Law | 84 |
| | Christian Ethics | 85 |
| | Christian Fundamentalism | 86 |
| | Buddhist Ethics | 87 |
| | Islamic Ethics | 87 |
| | Islamic Fundamentalism | 89 |
| | Confucian Ethics | 90 |
| | Virtues | 91 |
| | Comments on Confucian Ethics | 93 |
| | Hindu Ethics | 94 |
| | Caste System | 95 |
| | Conclusion | 95 |
| | References | 96 |
| 8 | Morality and the Law | 99 |
| | Introduction | 99 |
| | Political Anarchism | 100 |
| | Natural Law and Legal Naturalism | 100 |
| | Legal Positivism | 101 |
| | Immoral Laws | 103 |
| | The Obligation to Obey | 104 |
| | Nuanced Morality | 105 |
| | Conclusion | 106 |
| | References | 106 |
| 9 | Evil | 109 |
| | Introduction | 109 |
| | Evil: Circumstances, Values and Beliefs | 110 |
| | God and Evil | 110 |
| | Evil: Obedience to Authority | 112 |
| | The Pathology of Imprisonment: The Stanford Prison Experiment | 113 |
| | “Ordinary” Germans | 114 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| My Lai | 115 |
| Doctor Mengele | 116 |
| The Roots of Evil | 120 |
| Situational Determinism Versus Individual Responsibility | 121 |
| Conclusion | 122 |
| References | 122 |

Part II Moral Theories

| | |
|--|------------|
| 10 Moral Theories and Moral Obligations | 127 |
| Moral Theories | 127 |
| The Objective of Morality | 128 |
| Conflicting Principles | 129 |
| Uncertainty and Conceptual Confusion | 130 |
| Challenges to Morality | 130 |
| Morality and Self Interest | 131 |
| Values and Morality | 131 |
| Other Moral Theories | 132 |
| Moral Obligations and Moral Ideals | 133 |
| Conclusion | 137 |
| References | 137 |
| 11 Moral Motivation | 139 |
| Introduction | 139 |
| Amoralists | 141 |
| Antisocial Personality Disorders | 142 |
| Conclusion | 145 |
| References | 145 |
| 12 The Moral Philosophers: Aristotle, Hume, Kant, Mill, and Nietzsche | 147 |
| Introduction | 147 |
| The Moral Philosophers: Aristotle | 148 |
| The Ultimate End of Human Action | 148 |
| Reason | 149 |
| Virtue | 150 |
| Doctrine of the Mean | 150 |
| Practical Wisdom-Phronesis | 151 |
| Bad Decisions: Akrasia | 151 |
| The Moral Philosophers: David Hume | 152 |
| Philosophy | 153 |
| Perceptions | 153 |
| Necessary Connections | 153 |
| Moral Philosophy | 154 |
| Rationalism Versus Sentimentalism | 155 |

| | |
|---|------------|
| The Moral Philosophers: Immanuel Kant | 157 |
| Immanuel Kant | 157 |
| Kant's Moral Philosophy | 158 |
| The Categorical Imperative | 158 |
| A Universal Law | 159 |
| Duty | 159 |
| The Moral Philosophers: John Stuart Mill | 159 |
| John Stuart Mill | 160 |
| Utilitarianism | 161 |
| The Moral Philosophers: Friedrich Nietzsche | 165 |
| Friedrich Nietzsche | 166 |
| Philosophy | 167 |
| Psychological Nietzsche | 168 |
| Values | 169 |
| Nietzsche and Marx | 170 |
| Nietzsche on the Nature of Morality | 170 |
| Conclusion | 171 |
| References | 171 |
| 13 Principlism | 175 |
| Introduction | 175 |
| Conflicting Principles | 176 |
| The Value of Principlism | 178 |
| Respect for Autonomy | 178 |
| The Principles | 179 |
| Autonomy | 179 |
| Justice | 179 |
| John Rawls and Justice | 180 |
| Beneficence | 182 |
| Nonmaleficence | 182 |
| Conclusion | 182 |
| References | 183 |
| 14 Common Morality | 185 |
| Introduction | 185 |
| A Critique of Common Morality | 187 |
| Are Moral Rules Really Universal? | 188 |
| The Objectives of Morality | 189 |
| Conclusion | 190 |
| References | 190 |

Part III Practical Ethics

| | |
|---|-----|
| 15 Applied Ethics: Organizations | 193 |
| Introduction | 193 |
| The Approach to Ethical Dilemmas | 194 |
| Professional Ethics | 195 |
| Applied Ethics: Organizational Cases | 196 |
| Business Ethics: Data Breaches | 196 |
| Engineering Ethics Case: The Challenger Disaster | 197 |
| Pressure to Launch | 198 |
| The Fatal Decision | 199 |
| The Ethics of the Challenger Disaster | 200 |
| Psychiatric and Political Applied Ethics: The Goldwater Rule | 201 |
| Hospital Ethics Policy: The Right to Refuse Blood Transfusion | 202 |
| Conclusion | 203 |
| References | 204 |
| 16 Ethics Consultation: Biomedical Ethics | 205 |
| Ethics Consultation | 205 |
| Hospital Ethics Consultation Services | 206 |
| Reasons for Biomedical Ethical Dilemmas? | 207 |
| Conceptual Disagreements | 207 |
| Conflicting Principles | 207 |
| Scarce Resources | 208 |
| Prognostic Uncertainty | 208 |
| Cultural Differences | 208 |
| Reasons for Ethics Consultation | 208 |
| Challenging Ethics Consultations: Three Examples | 210 |
| A Lobe of Liver for Their Physician | 210 |
| The Case of the Unresponsive Hermit | 211 |
| Request for Futile Treatment | 212 |
| Other Biomedical Ethics Consultations | 213 |
| Moral Expertise | 215 |
| American Society of Bioethics and Humanities | 216 |
| Conclusion | 218 |
| References | 218 |
| 17 The Multidisciplinary Nature of Morality and Applied Ethics: | |
| Conclusion | 221 |
| Moral Disagreement | 221 |
| The Nature of Morality | 222 |
| Evolution and Values | 223 |
| Natural Selection | 223 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Contents | xv |
| What Is the Origin of Morality? | 224 |
| References | 224 |
| Index | 225 |

Part I
The Multidisciplinary Nature
of Morality

Chapter 1

Morality



Abstract Although morality is widely embraced, often as a sacrosanct entity, it is a complex and controversial concept. The moral philosopher Bernard Gert implied the complicated nature of morality when he said, “If one starts by saying ‘morality is’...nothing one says afterward seems quite right”. Morality is a human concept that cannot be empirically evaluated; in any case science is not the proper source of moral values. Morality has been variously defined by respected ethicists and there are conflicting moral theories which are based on differing fundamental arbitrary assumptions. Philosophers who are moral skeptics deny the existence of moral truths. The value of morality may lie in its usefulness rather than its truth. An exploration of morality will be done from a multidisciplinary perspective that includes the relationship of morality to biological evolution, moral psychology, anthropology, religion, and the law.

Morality and Intrinsic Objective Truth

Morality, a term closely related to ethics, is widely embraced, often as a sacrosanct entity.¹ It is our most important yardstick for judging people and ideas. Most well-intentioned thoughtful people view an immoral person as a bad person and an immoral idea as a bad idea. Moral considerations trump other notions of how we ought to behave; duly enacted laws are suspect if they are deemed immoral. Despite the strong emotions often elicited by moral controversies questions concerning the nature of morality and its intrinsic objective truth are more complex, problematic and controversial than is generally appreciated.

The tightness of the relationship between the concepts we employ and empirically verifiable entities varies. The concept, water, corresponds to a substance with two hydrogen and one oxygen atom; these atoms can be observed and their existence in the physical world confirmed. Although the object of the concept, beautiful, be it a natural wonder, a painting or a musical composition may exist in the empirical world acquisition of the adjective beautiful requires the judgment of a human mind. A

¹Although others might make a distinction, because of common usage, I use the term morality as synonymous with ethics.

glacier with a tree lined, azure lake at its base does not become a beautiful scene until a human mind makes that judgment. The link between beauty and empirical reality is more tenuous than that between our notion of water and its observable reference substance. Similarly, the notion of morality is a function of the human mind. The consequences of an action with moral content may subjectively be judged relative to our personal preferences; however, the intrinsic truth of morality eludes empiric confirmation and is susceptible to controversy.

Philosophers have noted science, even if morality could be empirically examined, cannot establish the truth of morality. Science might describe the origins and nature of morality but cannot vouch for its intrinsic truth. David Hume noted what is, is not necessarily what ought to be. John Kemeny said “scientific statements in themselves cannot serve as a source of value judgments” (Kemeny 1959). G. E. Moore believed that no moral property could be the same as a natural property. The notion, for example, that what we observe in the world as pleasant or desirable, is what ought to be, has been referred to as the “naturalistic fallacy” (Moore 1903). Although empiric observations, such as those based on evolutionary theory, may demonstrate the results of certain moral decisions are preferable to alternative options, that is different than confirming the innate truth of morality.

The concept, morality, lacks empirical content and even if that was not the case science should not tell us how we ought to behave. This does not prove skeptics of morality correct, only that science, despite its potential to help us understand the nature of morality, cannot validate the existence of moral truths. This does not establish that we shouldn't be moral beings. If morality is a fiction that is believed, it may nonetheless serve a useful purpose, for example by influencing people to behave cooperatively.

Moral Knowledge

Writings on morality have ranged the gamut from the evaluation of morality as a God given sacrosanct entity to skepticism, even denial of its intrinsic truth. Campbell makes the disconcerting statement that “moral disagreements often resist resolution, however intelligent, informed and respectful the disputants may be, because moral knowledge is impossible”. A different view allows the existence of moral knowledge but, because of the influence of social groups, claims there may be moral knowledge but “no moral truths are known universally”. (Campbell 2011). The moral philosopher Bernard Gert declared the hazy nature of morality when he said, “If one starts by saying ‘morality is’ ...nothing one says afterward seems quite right” (p. 3, Gert 1988).

Although intimate involvement with a discipline typically leads to enhanced understanding, in the case of morality that wasn't my experience. In the practice of medicine I encountered many clinical ethical dilemmas. More than 20 years ago ethics became a second profession. I founded and directed the ethics program at a major medical center where I performed ethics consultations, wrote hospital ethics

policies, directed a program of ethics lectures and edited an ethics publication. I was for years immersed in both the theoretical and practical aspects of morality.

Instead of an enhanced understanding of morality experience left me with nagging questions about its nature. If morality is a solid discipline with a substantial foundation why are there multiple, sometimes conflicting, ethical theories and other significant disagreements amongst ethicists? When I searched for a consensus definition of morality I found there was none. That something as important as morality could not be uniformly defined was puzzling. I also began to doubt people who claimed ethical expertise.

Morality can be examined on at least three levels. There are specific ethical dilemmas; for example the wisdom of gene editing. There are multiple conflicting ethical theories that purport to provide moral guidance. Although I will address these issues my ultimate goal is the examination of morality itself.

The Definition of Morality

Similar to a blind man palpating an elephant, respected ethicists have a different perspective of morality depending on where they stand. Peter Singer defines morality as being about how we ought to live and what our goals should be (Singer 1994). Robert M. Veatch defines morality as the analysis of choices; to pursue a particular choice is to decide it is better than available alternatives (Veatch 1989). Gert, despite his qualms about defining morality, ventures that morality is “a public system applying to all rational persons governing behavior that affects others and which has the minimization of evil as its end” (Gert 1988).

Peterson offers a functional definition of morality- “to negotiate the inherent serious conflict between the self and others” and “enable inherently selfish individuals to live in social groups”. (p. 51, Peterson 2011). Ruse and Wilson define ethics as “the area of thought and action governed by a sense of obligation-a feeling that there are certain standards one ought to live up to” (p. 186, Ruse and Wilson 1986) and, according to Flack and de Waal, “that human morality is best understood as having arisen out of an implicit agreement among group members that enabled individuals to profit from the benefits of co-operative sociality” (pp. 1–29, Flack and de Waal 2000).

The social anthropologist Christopher Boehm’s definition is that “morality involves common agreement as to which behaviors are acceptable and it also involves a group’s overall conception of a satisfactory quality of social and political life” (p. 80, Boehm 2000). Joyce attempts a more comprehensive definition of morality but can only dance around its characteristics. According to Joyce moral judgments include moral beliefs that are inescapable with “no opting out”; they tend to “transcend human conventions”. They “combat rampant individualism”. They imply notions of “desert and justice” (pp. 45–73, Joyce 2006). Joyce lists the properties of morality as including virtue, obligation, fairness, and “inescapable practical authority”. Joyce also says, morality consists of “prescriptions that are independent of one’s interests”

and “To morally transgress is to violate the conception of ourselves that is most important to us” (pp. 179–219, Joyce 2006).

Joyce, who can’t provide a precise definition, identifies certain universals in moral systems. These include: 1. a negative view of harming others. 2. values of reciprocity and fairness. 3. behaving in an appropriate manner relative to one’s status in a social hierarchy. 4. regulations related to bodily purity. The first three items refer to interpersonal and societal relationships. Joyce makes it clear that it’s a struggle to define morality. He says, “much and perhaps all of morality can be disputed”, that morality is “vague around the edges and “almost anything specific one says on the subject will meet with howls of complaint” (pp. 45–73 and pp. 179–219, Joyce 2006). Many of us become indignant in the face of what we perceive as an immoral act yet when challenged to define morality thoughtful scholars face a dilemma similar to that of US Supreme Court Judge Potter Stewart who made the famous confession, “I can’t define pornography, but I know it when I see it” (Ohio 1964).

For Sober and Wilson, “The social function of morality is to get people to do things that they would not otherwise be disposed to do, or to strengthen dispositions that people already have in weaker forms” They add, “moral principles have functioned as ideological weapons, allowing some individuals to prosper at the expense of others” (Sober and Wilson 2000).

Leonard Katz begs the question when he says “I deliberately made no attempt to define morality more sharply than common language and understanding have left it, including our ordinary responses to right and wrong, but not all of the very diverse thinking about this and other practical concerns- and about what we should make of all these- that ethics encompasses” (p. xi, Katz 2000). In other words the best he can do is accept the common understanding of morality, whatever that is.

Flack and de Waal allude to the confusion about morality when they say, defining morality “is not an easy task-nor is it a task to be taken lightly-as many definitions, conceptions and versions of morality exist”. They view “morality as a sense of right and wrong that is born out of group-wide systems of conflict management based on shared values that constrains individual behavior through a system of approval and disapproval” (pp. 67–77, Flack and de Waal 2000). Pinker comes close to a definition when he says, “Moralization is a psychological state that can be turned on and off like a switch, and when it is on, a distinctive mind-set commandeers our thinking” (Pinker 2008).

The lack of a consensus definition of morality may be explained by its complexity with different ethicists focusing on a different one of its various dimensions. There may be a sense of mystery and confusion over the true nature of morality. Another reason for the inability of ethicists to agree on a definition is that ethics may only exist in the human mind. We cannot deny the total existence of ethics because it is a widely considered concept and is an entity of great concern to most people. The scholarship of morality has some semblance to the reverence of God. Both God and morality are extremely important concepts with huge implications. Yet some scholars have dared to question the existence of God as moral skeptics have questioned the existence of morality (Dawkins 2006; Hitchens 2007).

Moral Skepticism

Moral skepticism encompasses a complex collection of philosophical views that doubt or deny the existence of moral facts and moral truths. Moral skeptics “raise doubts about moral knowledge or justified moral beliefs” (Sinnott-Armstrong 2011). Dogmatic skeptics believe “that nobody ever knows a substantive moral belief is true”. Pyrrhonian skeptics have so much doubt they cannot say whether morality is possible or impossible. They don’t deny or make claims about morality; they just raise doubts about whether moral beliefs are ever justified.

Moral nihilists believe “there does not exist anything that is morally wrong. Epistemological moral skeptics deny there is ever an adequate reason for moral beliefs; practical moral skeptics deny a role to reason in morality and focus on action (Sinnott-Armstrong 2011). Some practical moral skeptics would allow that morality can be justified “in some way that is independent of truth”. If morality was a fiction that was generally believed the consequences of moral actions might be considered desirable despite the absence of moral truth.

Pinker establishes the reality of morality-though admittedly a “diluted version of the idea” by examining its consequences. He says it is in the nature of things that people would be better off if they were unselfish and could abandon “an egocentric vantage point” and adopt an “interchangeability of perspectives” (Pinker 2008). That morality may have practical advantages over immorality is a testament to its pragmatic value but does not define its basic nature. Also, the value of morality could be balanced by the fact that people who behave in a manner generally considered immoral may prosper. Most people don’t read the arcane theoretical arguments I’ve just described, and believe there are moral truths and that, for example, killing or torturing an innocent person is unquestionably immoral.

Emblematic of its epistemic fragility is that all moral systems given rational expression rest on the foundation of an arbitrary assumption. Utilitarian theory is based on the claim, that is best which brings the most net good. Kantian philosophy and other deontological theories define the essence of morality as adherence to certain rules and principles (pp. 336–343, Beauchamp and Childress 2009). Virtuous behavior and moral character are the basis of virtue ethics (Pellegrino and Thomasma 1993). Theologically based ethics assumes a God-willed morality. Other ethical theories include: cultural relativism which does not allow for universal moral truths with moral facts being “relative to the social group in which moral sensibility is formed”; and moral reality as *sui generis* existing in a realm that is neither natural nor theological where “we intuit moral truth directly” (Campbell 2011). That moral theories rest on an arbitrary assumption suggests morality is a contingent form of truth.

The locus of morality in man is the human brain where Darwinian forces have influenced human values. Street distinguishes moral truths from evolved tendencies that can bias our moral judgments. For example we can expect “overwhelming pressure in the direction of making those evaluative judgments which tended to promote

reproductive success”. She says, “evaluative judgments are saturated with evolutionary influence” (Street 2006). In other words the search for moral truth is distorted by deeply ingrained evolutionary inclinations. The strong and interesting relationship between evolution and morality is the subject of the next chapter.

Is all lost if we conclude, as moral skeptics claim, that moral truth is impossible. I don’t think so. Moral skeptics, if they are correct, leave us to judge the value of morality using parameters other than moral truth. The worth of morality may lie in its usefulness rather than in some presumed intrinsic truth; after all, scholarly moral skeptics do not typically behave immorally.

A Multidisciplinary Exploration of Morality

Morality possesses a complexity and compelling vagueness that has seduced many disciplines to attempt an unraveling of its essential nature. I will discuss morality from the perspectives of biological evolution, moral psychology, anthropology, religion, and the law. Moral behavior may also be influenced by personal experience and education. Humans are rational beings but not perfectly rational beings. Revelations from the discipline of moral psychology document that our decisions may be irrational. In morally identical situations we may take different actions for morally irrelevant reasons.

I will review and evaluate the major theories of morality and also discuss the writings of several venerated moral philosophers. I will conclude with chapters devoted to the practical application of morality.

There is a sense of vast complexity about morality because it has been analyzed by numerous disciplines and not infrequently influences how we live our lives. Because it is impossible to cover all that can be said about morality in a single volume I have tried to select aspects of morality based on their importance and intellectual challenge.

Moral beliefs are often presented in a strident, dogmatic manner. An appreciation of the nature of morality should make the reader more discerning about what moral advice to accept and hopefully instill in the self-styled moralist a degree of humility. I hope my qualms about morality don’t discourage the reader because the mysteries of morality make for fascinating and intellectually challenging reading.

Conclusion

There are stark differences in how morality is perceived. Most people consider morality extremely important; however, morality is a human concept that is not itself amenable to empiric verification and it is subject to the whims of the human mind. Because of its vagueness, there is no consensus definition of morality. For these reasons the objective truth of morality has been questioned.

I am writing this book to study morality from a variety of perspectives with the goal of clarifying its nature. I'm inclined to agree that an objective proof of the truth of morality is lacking. However, I don't consider myself an immoral person and would not jettison morality simply because it lacks objective truth. We can enjoy a beautiful painting in the absence of objective proof of its beauty. Similarly moral behavior can have advantages such as improvements in our quality of life in the absence of objective proof of its intrinsic truth.

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Chapter 2

Evolution and Ethics



Abstract Evolutionary biological antecedents have an important influence on our moral dispositions. Because of evolutionary adaptations we share moral behaviors with cooperative social primates such as chimpanzees. It's been claimed that our genes have created an illusion of objectivity to morality. Ruse and Wilson, who have studied social primates, claim there is no objective morality and ethical standards are relative to what a particular society or culture believes are right or wrong; they provocatively add, "morality is a collective illusion foisted on us by our genes". Moral capacities observed in animals have similarities to what is ordinarily considered moral behavior in humans. These behaviors include respect for authority, caring and cooperation, empathy, reciprocity, monogamy, conflict resolution, limitations on aggression, respect for the possessions of others, guilt, a sense of justice and moral indignation. We cannot fully understand human morality without being cognizant of its biological origins and the shape given by natural selection.

Morality as Biology

Morality is generally held in high regard and for most people possesses a near, if not actual, divine quality. A moral person is regarded as a good person; an immoral person is judged to be bad. Morality rests on a lofty perch from which my instincts would only reluctantly relegate it, even partially, to the banal level of a biological fact. Nonetheless, the origins of morality and the capacities that facilitate moral behavior likely have evolutionary biological antecedents, though perhaps not as exclusively as some evolutionary biologists might argue.

The locus of human morality is the brain; that is where decisions about what we ought or ought not to do are made. Ruse and Wilson note the brain has "a material base and originated during the evolution of the human genetic constitution and its interaction with the environment"; they add, "there appears to be no escape from the biological foundation of mind" (Ruse and Wilson 1986). de Waal who has interacted on a daily basis with monkeys and apes notes their similarity to humans. "They strive for power, enjoy sex, want security and affection, kill over territory, and value trust and cooperation". He also notes that although the human brain is three times

larger than a chimpanzee's, it contains no new parts. These similarities to humans suggest our psychological make-up remains that of a social primate and that "even the posturing and deal-making among alpha males in Washington is nothing out of the ordinary" (de Waal 2010).

Humans have certain natural tendencies that are laudable such as reciprocity relationships; but these co-exist with less admirable traits such as violence and cheating. Flack and de Waal believe "our moral systems rely on basic mental capacities and social tendencies that we share with cooperative primates, such as chimpanzees" (Flack and de Waal 2000). They call these "the continuities". "We are born with powerful inclinations and emotions that bias our thinking and behavior". In other words, the workings of the human brain is consistent with its evolution from the primate brain.

It would be overly conceited, if not grossly inconsistent, to consider the human brain the only organ in the animal and plant world exempt from the force of evolution. Although our tendency to label certain actions as right or wrong seems natural this capacity warrants explanation. Why do we have intuitions associated with strong emotional reactions that inform us that certain actions are right and others wrong?

Evolutionary biology does not explain all aspects of morality. Morality is also shaped by religious and secular culture, parental upbringing, the quirks of human psychology, education, experience and the ability to reason. But evolution has been an important, innate influence on the development of moral (and immoral) behavior. Greene notes, "Our most basic moral dispositions regarding others are considered evolutionary adaptations that arose in response to the demands and opportunities created by social life" (Greene 2007).

Evolution, as primarily formulated by Charles Darwin (1809–1882) refers to the change in the inherited characteristics of biological populations over successive generations (Wikipedia 2019). These changes result from genetic mutations which represent inaccurate gene replication. Natural selection is the operational mechanism of evolution. The term "natural selection" stands in contrast to the artificial selection of selective breeding and eugenic maneuvers using reproductive and other technologies. Biologic characteristics become more or less common as a function of the reproductive success of their bearers. Or, as Dawkins called us, "robot vehicles blindly programmed to preserve the selfish molecules known as genes" (Dawkins 1976). Human behavioral traits that enhance survival and reproduction are selected and tend to persist.

There is controversy over exactly where natural selection acts. Williams proposed that traits evolve because they promote the replication of genes (Williams 1966). Dawkins in his book, *The Selfish Gene*, first published in 1976, postulates natural selection occurs at the level of the replicating gene which he has perhaps unwisely cloaked with the anthropomorphic quality of being "ruthlessly selfish"; this is an unwarranted stretch of the imagination since genes do not possess consciousness (Dawkins 1976).

Dawkins states, "I shall argue that the fundamental unit of selection, and therefore of self-interest, is not the species, nor the group, nor even, strictly, the individual. It is the gene, the unit of heredity" (Dawkins 1976). His selection of the gene as