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<http://www.protevi.com/john/Morality/Intro.pdf>

Intro lecture to Honors 2013: "Evolution and Biology of Morality"

OVERALL INTRO

The course description on the syllabus: " This is an introductory course in the current research into the biological underpinnings and evolutionary origins of morality. The course is interdisciplinary, combining psychology, biology, neuroscience, and philosophy. The course should be both an introduction to cutting-edge research and a chance to revisit perennial questions."

The course is not about any specific moral issues, that is, arguments for and against any issue. Rather, it's about how humans evolved the capacity to form moral judgments and to be motivated about moral issues.

Another way to put it is that the course is not about moral philosophy (the analysis of arguments for and against positions in moral issues), but about moral psychology (the psychological mechanisms at work in any sort of moral argument).

We take an anthropological, psychological, and biological viewpoint: objectively (philosophically and scientifically) looking at what humans do in discussing moral issues, rather than discussing the issues themselves.

BASIC VIEWPOINT

The basic viewpoint is that humans are bio-cultural: we have evolved to be open to our cultural imprinting: our nature is to have our nurture become second nature. However, there is a convergence of cultural training across cultures so that the default setting is that people are pro-social.

Pro-social means that most people are emotionally invested in the patterns of their society: they are happy when they are followed and angry or sad when they are broken. So pro-social does not mean "nice" since it also involves the willingness of people to punish those who break social rules.

Now of course this gets complicated in at least two ways: 1) why do some people buy into systems that hurt them? And 2) what about people who aren't emotionally involved in their cultures? That is, psychopaths, who may learn to follow rules, but aren't emotionally attuned to social rules.

We'll also talk about the relationship between intuition and reason. In some clear-cut cases, you can see right away when someone follows or breaks a social rule. But

in other cases, you need to discuss it with people: "is that a good or bad thing to do?" We'll talk about how experience shapes those intuitions and the arguments we find convincing. There's always the chance that we find an argument convincing because it accords with the intuitions that have been shaped by our experience. But then there's also the chance that people can have their intuitions changed by argument, or by having new experiences, meeting new people, moving to a new place, etc.

TOPICS TO BE DISCUSSED

The topics we will discuss follow the books, which we'll read in this order, starting with the current biology we have underlying prosociality and going back to discuss the evolution of it.

Maia Szalavitz and Bruce Perry, *Born for Love: How Empathy is Essential and Endangered*.

1. This talks about empathy, that is, the ability to care about other people, for the sake of those people.
 - a. We will distinguish empathy from two other sorts of feeling: 1) emotional contagion (the way emotions can spread among people, especially infants); 2) and sympathy (feeling something that someone else does).
 - b. We'll also distinguish helping motivated by empathy (helping them for their sake, because they need help) from helping motivated by stress relief (helping someone to alleviate the bad feeling you have from their distress).
 - c. The book also indirectly talks about our capacity to feel anger at non-empathic treatment of people: that is, anger at people who treat other people as things to be manipulated.
2. The book has case studies (so you sympathize / empathize with the people described) as well as discussions of current research into the way we are biologically shaped by our experience.
3. It also has some interesting things to say about how public policy can help the nurturing of empathy.

Evelyn Fox Keller, *The Century of the Gene*.

1. This is a nice treatment of developments in molecular biology leading up to the "Central Dogma" (DNA makes RNA, RNA makes proteins, and proteins make us").
2. It then looks at the notion of a developmental program (the Jacob and Monod breakthrough).
3. And finishes with the beginnings of epigenetics (the way in which cell conditions will determine gene expression).

Bruce Wexler, *Brain and Culture*.

1. This picks up the theme of neuroplasticity, as well as touching on some epigenetics as well.
2. Wexler makes a series of interconnected points: our sociality and our brain structure / function have co-evolved, such that humans have evolved for a long period (though young adulthood) of intense socially mediated neuroplasticity (16; 142). In fact, the most socially sensitive plastic parts of the human brain are precisely the ones whose proportions relative to other brain structures distinguish humans compared to other primates (e.g., frontal and parietal lobes, involved in decision making, impulse control, etc)(31; 105).
3. However, this neuroplasticity is relatively reduced in adulthood. In a formula, children need sensorimotor and social stimulation to form neuropsychological structures, while adults look to shape their world and / or at least to select input that reinforces previously generated structures, since they operate on a consonance = pleasure / dissonance = pain principle.
4. This difference in neuroplasticity sheds light on generational conflict, bereavement and immigrant experience, and social conflict

Susan McKinnon, *Neo-Liberal Genetics*.

1. This is a critical examination (okay, it's an outright attack) on some positions in Evolutionary Psychology.
2. It looks at the way in which economic language (return on investment) has crossed into evolutionary thought.
3. It also looks at neuroplasticity and at anthropological findings about cultural diversity.

Christopher Boehm, *Moral Origins*.

1. This is about the role that "social selection" (ridicule, exile, killing) plays in the evolution of altruistic prosocial behaviors and emotions, alongside the other mechanisms of kin selection, direct reciprocity, mutualism, and indirect reciprocity. It thus deals with the controversies around group selection.
2. Preview of some definitions:
 - a. Fitness = descendants living to reproductive age.
 - b. Altruism = helping behavior with a fitness cost (direct risk to life and limb, but also just time spent away from mate selection, child raising, resource provision, etc.). Self-sacrifice is a dramatic example, but it can be less than that. Further, prosocial and 3rd party punishment [punishing X for violating a norm affecting non-kin person Y] carries risks: you could start a feud; you eliminate a potential ally, ...
 - c. Kin selection, reciprocal altruism, mutualism, and indirect altruism are ways of explaining helping behavior that appears to be altruistic, but has hidden benefits that balance out (or outweigh) the fitness costs.

- i. Kin selection: costly helping behavior that helps genes in kin to survive ("I would sacrifice myself for two brothers or for 8 cousins.")
- ii. Reciprocal altruism: aid given back to donor by recipient with time delay ("I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine.")
- iii. Mutualism: working together so that immediate benefits (at end of successfully completed task) accrue to all parties compensating for any costs. ("Hey, let's all go hunting this woolly mammoth.")
- iv. Indirect altruism: aid given to donor by a third party (due to reputation gained by altruistic acts) ("Scratch an 'altruist,' watch a hypocrite bleed.")
- v. Sexual selection (qua mate preference vs male arms race): altruism as predictor of genetic quality. "Costly signaling": "think how much energy I have if I can waste it like this."

Sarah Hrdy, *Mothers and Others*.

1. This is an anthropology / primatology book about co-operative childcare. It has all sorts of interesting things to say about many of the topics we'll cover, so I think it will be a great way to conclude the course.
2. For instance, the book deals with the cuteness of babies; how humans allow much more handling of infants by non-parents than other primates; how the grandmother is one of the heroes of human evolution; and other topics.