Is There an Innate Moral Sense?  
By John Fockler, Jr.

What is a moral sense? Merriam Webster’s online service defines moral sense as “a feeling of the rightness or wrongness of an action or the ability to have such feelings.” Another way of putting it would be that a moral sense is the action or tendency to take action according to some code of morality. Morality, in turn, is defined by the online Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy as “a code of conduct that, given specified conditions, would be put forward by all rational persons.”

Almost every action we take affects one or more other person in some way or another, and therefore is subject to moral judgment. So we all have a moral sense, but where does it come from? Is it innate, something encoded in the human genes, or is it learned behavior we acquire first from our parents and eventually from the society around us?

In his most famous novel, Robert A. Heinlein states the case for the position that one’s moral sense is learned, not inherent. In the book, two characters are discussing the fact that another character, a human raised by nonhumans, considers cannibalism a natural and normal part of life.

It seems to me that, in our society, the basis for the opposite position—that there is, indeed, an innate moral sense—ultimately comes from Genesis. Genesis, chapters two and three, tells the story of Adam and Eve, and of the Fall caused by eating the fruit of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Chapter three, verses six and seven says:

When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food

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and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it. Then the eyes of both of them were opened, and they realized they were naked; so they sewed fig leaves together and made coverings for themselves. (New International Version)

Once the “eyes of both of them were opened,” they acquired a moral sense, for before that point, they did not know right from wrong. In verse 22, God says, “The man has now become like one of us, knowing good and evil.”

The May 2007 issue of Discover magazine, republished online, contains an interview with Marc Hauser, an evolutionary biologist at Harvard University, who claims that an innate moral sense is part of our evolutionary equipment. The article says, “Hauser argues that millions of years of natural selection have molded a universal moral grammar within our brains that enables us to make rapid decisions about ethical dilemmas” (Glausiusz and Gild). He cites two hypothetical situations on which, he claims, there is essentially universal agreement:

A trolley is coming down a track, and it’s going to run over and kill five people if it continues. A person standing next to the track can flip a switch and turn the trolley onto a side track where it will kill one but save the five. Most people think that’s morally permissible—to harm one person when five are saved. Another case is when a nurse comes up to a doctor and says, “Doctor, we’ve got five patients in critical care; each one needs an organ to survive. We do not have time to send out for organs, but a healthy person just walked into the hospital—we can take his organs and save the five. Is that OK?” No one says yes to that one. Now, in both cases your action can save five while harming one, so they’re identical in that sense. So why the flip-flop? People of different ages, people of different religious backgrounds, people even with different educations typically cannot explain why they think those cases differ. There appears to be some kind of unconscious process driving moral judgments without its being accessible to conscious reflection. (qtd. in Glausiusz and Gild)

One way in which the moral codes of different societies vary, or in which those codes evolve over time, is over the question of who is and who is not entitled to moral treatment.

If, as Hauser maintains, there is nearly universal agreement on these ethical decision points, despite differences in culture and other factors, we might fairly conclude that we are dealing with hardwired morality.

According to another study done at Yale University’s Infant Cognition Center, known as the Baby Lab, infants show a preference for good behavior over bad. In a puppet show, a baby sees two scenes, one in which a puppet identified by one shirt color performs a helpful act and one in which a similar puppet identified by a different shirt color performs a mean one. The study indicates that after this show, 87 percent of three-month-olds will choose the puppet that was helpful rather than the one that was not (Chun). Does a child so young really have a simple sense of justice?

Our system of laws seems to me to assume that there is a basic innate moral code in its attitude towards those who demonstrate the lack of such a base. The law excuses a defendant from responsibility for his or her actions on the basis of insanity. “Under the test for cognitive insanity, a defendant must have been so impaired by a mental disease or defect at the time of the act that he or she did not know the nature or quality of the act, or, if the defendant did know the nature or quality of the act, he or she did not know that the act was wrong” (“Criminal Insanity”). If cognitive insanity is a disease or defect, then this implies that a moral sense is the healthy, and therefore generally universal, condition.

Certainly, as we look around the world, there is a general agreement on certain moral points. All societies forbid the commission of murder. In every society, stealing is considered a crime. They all have rules against doing harm short of murder to others, or against damaging the property of others. But the various moral codes of different societies differ greatly over details, and in addition, societal codes of right and wrong have changed over time.

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question of who is and who is not entitled to moral treatment.

Today, in modern Western society, it is generally held that moral treatment is owed to anyone who is a human being, regardless of race, creed, ethnicity, or gender. But this has not always been the case. The most obvious example of this is the enslavement of African peoples, and before that, of native people of the Western Hemisphere, by Europeans in the times up to the middle of the nineteenth century. Poor European immigrants to America were indentured—treated essentially as slaves—for a set period after their arrival here in exchange for their passage. The record indicates that the same was true of the very first Africans imported to British North America, but this quickly became a sentence of lifetime enslavement. Even during the brief time during which the Africans were considered indentured, there remained the difference that the majority of European immigrants were voluntary, while the Africans most certainly were not.

I conclude that the difference is that the Africans, like the Native Americans before them, were not “people” in the eyes of Europeans. If they did not receive moral treatment, it was because those who ought to have accorded it to them decided they were not entitled to it. Naturally, right from the beginning there were some Europeans who opposed this doctrine, and over time, their numbers grew steadily while the numbers of the defenders of slavery shrank until the system was ended by violent action. In this way, the moral code itself evolved over time.

In some tribal cultures, including some Native American ones, the tribe calls itself by its word for “people.” We’re the only people, this linguistic pattern seems to claim; everyone else is something else. There is evidence to indicate that within the gang subculture found in this country today, moral behavior is held, practically speaking, to apply only to within the gang, not to those outside, and most especially not to other gangs in conflict with one’s own. This seems reminiscent of those tribal cultures.

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Since early in the twentieth century, there has been international agreement that war should not be used for gain. The League of Nations, founded just after the close of World War I, in 1919, required its members to aid one another against external aggression and to submit to arbitration before going to war. The history of the nearly a century since this time has shown that these ideals have often been honored only in the breach. So to some, at least, killing others in the perceived interests of their countries is not defined as “murder.”

Although most of Europe has abandoned the practice, the United States remains among the several nations that still executes convicted criminals. Even here, this practice is not universal. Eighteen states, plus the District of Columbia, have banned capital punishment in whole or in part, while the remaining thirty-two, plus the Federal system, still allow it. The continuation of the practice by the Federal government offers a loophole allowing a criminal to be executed even in states that do not permit it. Dzhokhar Tsarnaev, the surviving suspect in the Boston Marathon attack of 2013, was tried in June of 2015 on Federal, rather than state, charges in Massachusetts. As Massachusetts is one of the states that does not permit capital punishment, many assume that Federal charges were brought because a Federal conviction would permit the defendant’s execution. Tsarnaev was, indeed, found guilty and sentenced to death. The case is currently under appeal. Many Americans oppose capital punishment for a variety of reasons, but the practice goes on.

As Heinlein noted in the same novel quoted before, cannibalism is a widespread custom in human history, despite the fact that it is forbidden everywhere today (161-62). It was believed to have been practiced by some tribes in New Guinea as late as the 1960s, and at any rate, has been practiced in one form or another in every tradition. The victim may have been selected with a variety of different criteria, from within or outside the group, but under any and all circumstances, the act fell within the group’s concept of morality.

Another area of difference is whether morality requires a positive, beneficial act towards another person, or merely that one refrain from doing unnecessary harm. We all admire and celebrate the
philanthropist or the volunteer, but we seldom require such actions, of others or of ourselves.

We could look at many more such examples, but the point is probably sufficiently clear—all of these examples serve to show that the answer to the question, “What is moral behavior and who is entitled to it?” has changed as a function of time and culture. Because all of these different societies define the rules of morality differently and because even the definitions of who must be the object of moral behavior can differ, I still lean strongly on the side that says that morality is learned, not inborn. Hauser compares the ability to acquire a moral code with the ability to acquire language, and in that very limited sense, there may be a genetic or innate factor at work, but just as the ability to acquire language may allow a child to be taught French or English or Swahili, the ability to acquire a moral code would not dictate which moral code would be learned.

So what can we say?

First, a moral code must be considered a part of civil society’s survival equipment. In a different piece, Heinlein says, “I now define ‘moral behavior’ as ‘behavior that tends toward survival.’ I won’t argue with philosophers or theologians who choose to use the word ‘moral’ to mean something else, but I do not think anyone can define ‘behavior that tends toward extinction’ as being ‘moral’ without stretching the word ‘moral’ all out of shape” (“Pragmatics,” 171). He goes on to argue for a hierarchy of morality in terms of the complexity of the group whose survival is being ensured, from the individual, through the family, tribe and nation, to the human species as a whole. A moral code is an absolute necessity to protect against the friction of people coming into contact with one another. The alternative would be the Hobbesian war of “all against all.” Whether or not this is part of the individual’s “evolutionary equipment,” it is certainly part of that of a society.

Second, I feel it is safe to say that every individual wants to be treated with regard to his or her own wellbeing, to receive what we would call moral treatment.

Third, within the limits mentioned previously, all societies agree on certain basic, fundamental rules. Murder, defined narrowly or broadly is wrong, and so forth.

Fourth, individuals who do not live up to the expectations of their societies’ codes are treated as diseased at best and criminal at worst.

Fifth, even at a very early age, humans can distinguish between kind and unkind treatment. I am not sure I completely buy that “Baby Lab” study as proving what it purports to prove. Although we may hope that a three-month-old has not experienced deliberately cruel treatment, he or she has certainly experienced a delay in “instant gratification,” a feeding that is a bit late or a changing that is a bit overdue. This allows for the possibility, I think, that even this young, a preference for kindness over harshness may have been learned.

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So we can conclude that a moral sense is, practically speaking, a human universal with endless variations. We can conclude that most of us become aware of the code’s expectations from a very early age. And we can conclude that a case can be made for either answer to the question, “Is there an innate moral sense?”

Works Cited


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