

BOOK REVIEWS

**MORAL MINDS: HOW NATURE
DESIGNED OUR UNIVERSAL SENSE
OF RIGHT AND WRONG**

By Marc D. Hauser. 489 pp., illustrated. New York, Ecco, 2006.
\$27.95. ISBN 978-0-06-078070-8.

MARC HAUSER'S GROUNDBREAKING BOOK advances a new theory of moral judgment, synthesizing a great deal of work in neuroscience, psychology, and ethology, as well as the author's own recent experimental work. Hauser aims to demonstrate that morality is innate in the way that language is innate: not in its precise content, but in its form. Just as, according to Noam Chomsky, each child comes into the world with a brain wired for language acquisition, so is each of us born ready to acquire a moral system, Hauser argues. Just as the innate workings of the human mind tightly constrain the grammar of any possible human language, so do they constrain — without determining — the content of any possible moral system.

In Hauser's view, the moral faculty is triggered by the perception of an action or the omission of an action and automatically produces a judgment that is sensitive to the action's (or omission's) causes and consequences and to whether the consequences were intended or foreseen. Actions are perceived to have more moral weight than omissions, and intended harms are seen to be morally worse than foreseen harms. Using his ongoing Web-based surveys, Hauser has amassed an enormous amount of evidence demonstrating that these distinctions are made in the same way in all cultures, across all educational levels, and by both sexes.

But subjects are typically unable to articulate adequate justifications for their judgments. Hauser takes this inability to be evidence for his view that we have a moral faculty that operates below the level of conscious awareness. Once again he points out the parallels to linguistic competence. Just as it is easy for us to judge whether a sen-

tence is grammatical but difficult for us to justify or explain that judgment, so we are able to judge the permissibility of an action easily but find ourselves unable to explain that judgment.

Since our ability to make moral judgments outpaces our ability to justify them, moral judgment does not seem to be the product of rational reflection. Might it be the product of an emotional system instead? Hauser grants that moral judgments are typically accompanied by emotions, but he suggests that these emotions are the result of the moral judgment rather than the cause. Part of his evidence for this claim comes from studies of patients with damage to the ventromedial prefrontal cortex. These patients appear to have reduced emotional responses to moral harms, yet their judgments appear to be identical to those of normal subjects when confronted with most moral dilemmas. Hauser nonetheless believes that emotions powerfully influence moral performance — by influencing our motivation to act morally — but that the moral faculty itself is independent of the emotional system. Moral competence is the product of an innate moral faculty whose optional parameters and exceptions are determined by the culture into which each of us is born.

There is little doubt that this book, written for a general audience, is the most important attempt to date to explain the psychological mechanisms of moral judgments. However, Hauser has made the unusual decision to publish it well before all the experimental data are in. For this reason, the book is sometimes frustratingly vague on key questions. Is the moral faculty cognitively penetrable — that is, can a person gradually alter its parameters through reflection — or is it more like the visual system, which remains subject to visual illusions even when we know full well that they are illusions? What accounts for the differences in moral judgments among people who grow up in the same culture, a difference that has no obvious parallel in the linguistic sphere? It would be churlish to criticize Hauser for the lack of clarity and detail on such matters. *Moral Minds*

offers us the most important scientific contribution to moral psychology in many decades, and it is certain to inspire and inform debate across many fields for years to come.

Neil Levy, Ph.D.
University of Melbourne
3010 Parkville, Australia
nllevy@unimelb.edu.au

**SURGICALLY SHAPING CHILDREN:
TECHNOLOGY, ETHICS,
AND THE PURSUIT OF NORMALITY**

Edited by Erik Parens. 274 pp. Baltimore, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006. \$50. ISBN 978-0-8018-8305-7.

MOST PEOPLE DO NOT QUESTION THE BENEFITS of surgeries undertaken to give children a more normal appearance. Some recognize the tension inherent in making such decisions but nevertheless surrender to the social pressures of conforming to normalcy. They feel the need to do something, even when doing so may not be clearly advantageous for the child. They tend to yield to the dubious authority of the technological imperative. For these reasons, this compilation of essays edited by Erik Parens is vitally important.

In his introduction, Parens describes the book as an exploration of the tension between the desire to have surgery performed to spare children the pain and suffering of being different and the desire to spare children the pain and suffering of being subjected to surgery. But the book does much more. It explains the philosophical, psychological, and medical reasons why this tension exists, and it challenges the assumptions that embroil us in that tension. It provides an amazing wealth of practical advice that will help readers understand, confront, and manage the various forces that create the tension. Furthermore, it should give readers both the courage to resist seductive influences and the inspiration to arrive at decisions less likely to lead to remorse, disruption of family ties, or disappointment with unmet expectations.

Two aspects of the book in particular contribute to its success in presenting a balanced perspective on the general issue of “surgically shap-

ing children.” First, the book focuses on three conditions for which normalizing surgery is widely practiced, each giving rise to a different level of controversy. From most controversial to least, these conditions are ambiguous genitalia, dwarfism (achondroplasia), and cleft lip and palate. Through analysis of the justifications for surgery to repair a cleft lip and palate and the moral failings attending most operations on infant genitalia (and associated practices), the contributors develop useful guidelines for decision making. The other aspect of the book that most contributes to its usefulness is its inclusion of many different voices — those of scholars and professionals from different disciplines (including bioethics, medicine, social work, philosophy, psychology, and law), of people with opposing viewpoints, and of people affected by one of the three conditions (some who have been surgically treated and some who have not).

All the chapters are well written and engaging. The positioning of the personal accounts at the front of the book serves not only to engage the reader but also to bring to the fore hitherto neglected issues: How have our surgical practices affected those who have been subjected to them? Is conformity to social ideas about normality of more value than living one’s life differently but authentically? What might we be sacrificing as a result of our desires to protect children from the reactions of those who are intolerant of differences? If parents by nature want to protect, and surgeons by nature want to fix, we need to hear from those with first-hand experience of what is to be gained and lost, because they are the truest authorities.

Parents facing grueling decisions about surgical interventions for their children will find great solace in this book. Its purpose is not to preach but to encourage reflection and facilitate informed consent. It illuminates subtle dangers: the danger that the decision to obtain surgery can send the message that the child falls short of parents’ expectations, the danger that decisions made without the participation of children may alienate them from their parents, and the danger that expectations about the ultimate success or helpfulness of the surgery may be overestimated. Parents can learn to ask important questions, to better prepare their children for the world, to master