

The New York Times Book Review

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'Moral Minds'

To the Editor:

It is easy to fall into the trap of assuming that biological accounts of human behavior deny environmental influences and assume an immutable nature. Even Richard Rorty, a retired professor of comparative literature and philosophy, falls into this trap in his review of my book "Moral Minds" (Aug. 27). Contrary to Rorty's portrayal, the idea that we are born with a universal moral grammar, like the idea that we are born with a universal grammar for language, doesn't deny the role of culture, nor does it make certain outcomes inevitable. Rather, it lays out a framework for exploring which aspects of our biology enable us to acquire a particular moral system, and which aspects of our moral principles are universal and which vary across cultures. In the same way that something about the biology of humans enables us, uniquely, to acquire certain types of languages, something about our biology must enable us, but not other animals, to acquire certain types of moral systems. The point is not that the content of moral systems is identical across cultures; the point is that people in all cultures can switch into a mode of cognition

and emotion called "morality" with distinctive psychological properties. The men who stone witches or murder their unchaste sisters believe they are doing so for moral reasons, and it behooves us to understand the state of mind they are in. Rorty also misses the crucial distinction between how people judge moral actions and whether they would actually carry them out in the relevant situation; an exploding research literature shows that one does not imply the other. Furthermore, subjects with different cultural and demographic backgrounds often deliver identical moral judgments, while being unable to justify their choices. If people can't recover the principles that guide their judgments, then they certainly can't teach them to their children! This is the sense in which general-purpose learning fails and the analogy to language is significant. Contrary to Rorty, this doesn't mean that scientists should override parents, judges or teachers. But we all can benefit from a better understanding of the way that biological processes guide our unconscious, moral judgments and thereby exert powerful influences over how we perceive the world. By recognizing their influence we can better design our legal and educational systems.

Contrary to Rorty's pessimism about the contributions of the sciences to our understanding of morality, I think it is essential for scientists and humanists to collaborate in sculpturing the work that lies ahead. If we share a universal moral grammar that enables us to acquire any of the world's moral systems, this "should provide us with a sense of comfort, a sense that perhaps we can understand each other."

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