

Response to “Think Again: Sociobiology isn't science.”

Jerusalem Post, March 22, 2006

Jonathan Rosenblum opens his essay by creating a straw man: he argues that our goal is “part of a larger effort to employ evolutionary psychology to refute religious belief.” Nothing could be further from the truth. Rather, our goal is to assess the extent to which there are components of our moral psychology that are universal and thus, independent of religious beliefs. To make our point clear, assume for the moment that nothing about our moral psychology is universal. When it comes to making moral judgments, we are like leaves in the wind, subject to the vagaries of the environment. If we run into a convincing argument from Judaism, we flip our beliefs. If we then run into a different one from the Muslims, we flip again. And of course, if we run into an atheist who convinces us of a non-religious perspective, we somersault one more time. This kind of perspective, which pushes environmental determinism, is as silly as one that pushes biological determinism.

Our view is different. We are not out to destroy religion, or the beliefs that people cherish and derive from religion. Rather, we are interested in uncovering the sources of our moral judgments. The dominant view has long been that morality is synonymous with religion. To be moral is to be religious. We are certainly neither the first nor the last to point out the dissociation between religion and morality. But what we are the first to push, with an increasing wealth of empirical evidence, is that when it comes to a certain class of moral judgments, religious background may have as little impact on the nature of these judgments as education, age, gender, political affiliation, and taste in sports, music or art.

This is not evolutionary psychology run amuck. In fact, this is not evolutionary psychology or sociobiology at all. In this particular instance, we are not interested in the fitness consequences or adaptive design of certain moral beliefs. Darwin is not our inspirational God in this case. Specifically, our research, soon to be published in several journals and one upcoming book (Hauser, in press, *Moral Minds*, Ecco/Harper Collins), is an attempt to uncover some of the unconscious principles mediating our moral judgments, and the ways in which cultural factors can push around the nature of these judgments. In some cases we are bound to uncover the impact of religious beliefs, and in others we are likely to find instances of universality. Appreciating that both exist is certainly not a dismissal of the importance of religion. It is an acknowledgment that some aspects of our moral psychology have nothing at all to do with religion, and in fact, are immune to religious belief. This should not cause dismay to religious believers, nor should it cause atheists and agnostics to gloat.

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