

“Reading Marc D. Hauser’s *Moral Minds*”

Session 2: the latter half of chapter 1 (pp. 32-55)

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In the latter half of chapter 1, Hauser introduced his Rawlsian position. John Rawls, the author of *A Theory of Justice*, observed similarities between language and morality. Without conscious reasoning we can judge whether a sentence is well-formed. Our judgment about grammar is spontaneous and we often dumbfound when asked reasons for the judgment. In the same way, it is common in daily life that without well-justified reason, we determine with full confidence whether an action is morally good or bad. From these observations, Rawls concluded that we have a moral sense whose nature is beyond our commonsense or folk understanding of morality. Following Rawls and borrowing the Chomskyan idea in linguistics, Hauser also insisted that we are innately equipped with a moral faculty, which enables us to make an unconscious and rapid moral judgment. According to Hauser, we have a special moral faculty which is related to other mental capacities such as perception, memory, theory of mind, but is distinguished from them. The moral faculty contains a universal “moral” grammar which is analogous to a universal grammar in linguistics. We decide whether a certain conduct is good or bad in the light of the universal moral grammar, but these processes take place unconsciously.

Although Hauser pointed out many similarities between language and morality, we found a point where such analogies do not hold any longer. If you consider the distinction between syntax and semantics, our competence of grammaticality judgment belongs to syntax. Yet Hauser compared this capacity to the morally semantical capacity to make a judgment such as murder is bad. Good or bad is a semantical concept, and hence these kinds of moral judgments contain semantical components. Here Hauser’s analogy collapsed. If he wants to go through with his analogy, the corresponding moral capacity should be a morally syntactic one: the capacity to decide whether the morality of a certain conduct can be questioned. At least he should have distinguished two kinds of judgments: a judgment about moral assessibility and a judgment concerning good and bad.

It is interesting that Hauser’s position is almost opposite to Jesse Prinz’s. Hauser endorsed innate moral organs, but Prinz denied them. Hauser emphasized the universality of morality. On the other hand Prinz endorsed the relativity of it. Hauser

maintained that children acquire native morality fast and effortlessly, but Prinz argued for the importance of education for morality. Hauser thought the existence of psychopaths shows emotion is not required for morality, yet Prinz concluded the other way around. For now, we have no decisive evidence, but it seems that Hauser has the burden of proof because he endorsed a special module whose existence is not yet confirmed. But, Hauser's argument is still in its infancy. I expect that he will give more direct evidence for his view.