

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

Session 4: the latter half of chapter 2 (pp. 85-110)

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We read the latter half of chapter 2 in the fourth session. Hauser discussed how our principles of fairness had evolved and examined some unconscious parameters of them. Hauser also gave a caution about the status of moral principles: moral principles are not what we must obey. If principles of fairness are not good in terms of other perspectives, we need not always keep to them.

According to Hauser, we acquired principles of fairness through our hunter-gatherers past. But the principles of fairness at that time are egalitarian ones, and hence they are not the same as ours. Then, he changed the focus to our current principles of fairness, referring to Joe Oppenheimer and Norman Frohlich’s experiments which are designed to test how the Rawlsian approach is effective to determine a principle of distributive fairness. Subjects chose a principle which is similar to, but different from, Rawls’s difference principle. They chose a principle that maximized the overall resources of the group and set the minimum level of income. From these experiments, Hauser concluded that freedom of choice of principles of fairness is important for justice as fairness.

People in industrialized countries differ from current and past hunter-gatherers in another respect: punishment. Most of hunter-gatherers do not punish in the strong reciprocal way; that is, they do not punish in case it costs. On the other hand, we use many ways of punishment. We have not only punishment invoked by strong reciprocal intuitions, but also punishment installed in formal law. Hauser maintained that our intuitions about punishment, which principles of fairness underlie, can conflict with punishment enforced by law. In his opinion, our intuitions favor retributive punishment, but if we take a function of punishment as deterrence of a crime, we should not obey the intuitions. But, why should we adopt the deterrence function and abandon intuitions which principles of fairness underlie? Does Hauser think our moral principles are sloppy and untrustworthy? If he thinks so, he is saying that real morality is not in our innate “moral” faculty, but is elsewhere, say, in rationality. We have to consider rationally what is good or bad. Hauser may not be interested in such questions, but they would be very important for philosophers.

What I could not understand at all in the chapter is why he can infer an innate moral faculty from data provided in the chapter. For example, Hauser claimed

principles of fairness have a parameter of reference point. We decide whether a certain occasion is fair or unfair in reference to our standards. Then, he contended there must be a parameter in principles. But I think this can be explained without postulating any parameters, for example, in terms of a Humean position. Eliciting conditions of our emotions can be tuned to various situations, and we have judgments of fairness based on our emotions in a Humean view. Thus we have judgments which possess different reference points. It seems to me that there is thus far no strong evidence for principles and parameters.