

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

Session 6: the latter half of chapter 3 (pp. 139-159)

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In session 6, we read the latter half of chapter 3 (pp. 139-159). Hauser continued to consider permissible violence. He particularly focused on honor killings, and crimes of passion on these pages.

An honor killing is a sort of killing conducted to retain one’s honor against a violation of a social norm, typically a sexual violation committed by a woman. Thus, an honor killing is a premeditated killing. In contrast, a crime of passion is a crime committed impulsively, typically when a person observes his partner’s infidelity.

Both types of violence are regarded as permissible under some circumstance. Honor killings can be seen in many areas of the world, and according to Hauser, they are thought to be permissible in these areas, particularly in Arabic countries. Crimes of passion are not punished in formal laws as heavily as crimes which have the same consequences (e.g. a person’s killing).

Considering cross-cultural and historical research, Hauser concluded that these permissible killings are deeply influenced by social norms. These killings illustrate how social norms set parameters of permissible violence.

What was really interesting to me in this chapter was its final part: Hauser recognized the limit of his linguistic analogy. He admitted that in a linguistic case, knowing a universal grammar makes no difference to language performance, but in a moral case, it does make differences in moral performance. People would change their reasoning or behavior when underlying principles are revealed. Here, it became clearer what the moral status of “moral universal principles” is for Hauser. He regards the moral faculty as an organ which delivers “naive” moral judgments, so that we need not obey these judgments. In other words, according to Hauser, some of moral judgments delivered by our moral faculty might be ethically wrong, and hence they are, perhaps should be, surmountable.

This moral improvement Hauser envisaged may seem plausible, but it raises further questions: How do we achieve it? Is a more sophisticated judgment such as “the initial judgment is not so good that we should change it” a judgment delivered by the moral faculty? Or is it delivered by some other faculties such as rational consideration?

Formulating this problem in a general fashion, I call it the boundary problem: what kind of moral judgment is delivered by the moral faculty and what is not. I think this problem is crucial because it relates to the specialty of the moral faculty.