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Natural & normative

The flood of recent books in the last decade or so by neuroscientists, primatologists, computer scientists, evolutionary biologists, and economists about issues traditionally considered of interest to the humanities – issues like morality, politics, the nature of rationality, what makes a response to an object an aesthetic response, and value theory – and the incorporation of such research methods by some academics traditionally thought of as humanists have provoked a great deal of discussion, some controversy, and a growing number of conferences about the "two cultures." The great majority of this discussion has involved a kind of invitation to humanists to make themselves aware of the new discoveries and new possibilities opened up by this research, and to reorient their thinking accordingly. As far as I have been able to discover, relatively little of the discussion has been concerned with what scientists working in this area might profitably learn from humanists, or whether becoming better informed about traditional and modern humanist approaches might suggest some hesitations and qualifications about just what the phenomena actually are that our friends in the sciences are trying to explain. I do not in any way count myself an expert in this emerging literature, but I do want to offer some initial and very general reasons to hesitate before jumping on some of these particular bandwagons.

I work within a strand of the modern philosophical tradition that can be said to have begun with two extremely influential essays by Jean-Jacques Rousseau. In 1749, Rousseau won first prize in a contest held by the Academy of Dijon in answer to the question, "Has the progress of the sciences and arts contributed to the corruption or to the improvement of human conduct?" Rousseau's answer, famously, was "corruption." In 1754, responding again to an Academy question, he wrote his *Discourse on the Origin and Basis of Inequality Among Men*, another blistering attack on modernization, including the presumptions of scientific and technical modernization. These two essays represented one of the first attempts to mark out the limits (in principle; not limits based on temporary empirical ignorance) of modern scientific understanding in contributing to human self-knowledge. The essays insisted on an unusual sort of necessary independence (unusual for not relying on theology or revelation, as in much of the Eu-

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ropean counter-Enlightenment, or any form of traditional metaphysical dualism), and they privileged the importance of moral and normative matters. In the way he argued for the distinctness of human beings, Rousseau became a major influence on German philosophy in its classical period from the end of the eighteenth to the first third of the nineteenth century, and many of the arguments, as formulated by Kant and Hegel especially, continue to be relevant to these new naturalizing enterprises.

Of course, those thinkers who later objected to the belief that the natural scientific paradigm is wholly and exclusively adequate for human self-knowledge were nowhere near as radical as Rousseau. He seemed to be decrying the ethical insufficiency of modernity itself, claiming that its social organization and division of labor were creating forms of human dependence that weaken and enervate, degrade and immiserate; that we were busily creating a novel way of life that was as unsuited for human flourishing as life in a zoo is to the animals therein. Yet there is a more common, narrower concern that often derived from Rousseau and that persists as a complex problem.

Let us say that the basic problem is the status of *normative considerations*, considerations that invoke some sort of "ought" claim. Two such claims have always been more important than any other: what ought to be believed and what ought to be done. For me, these claims are at the heart of what we in this country call the humanities (what elsewhere are called the *Geisteswissenchaften* or *les sciences humaines*), and they contribute to the traditional case that the humanities form the indispensable core of any credible university education. While these considerations seem like distinctly philosophical questions (and while philosophers have often been rightly accused of imperialist ambitions, treating everything else in the humanities as bad versions of philosophy, rather than as possible good versions of what they are), I don't think the questions are confined to philosophy. They turn up everywhere: how a text ought to be interpreted (that is, what it means to get a text right or wrong); how a character's professions of love in a novel ought to be assessed (is he lying, a hypocrite, self-deceived, honest but naive?); whether and, if so, how an abstract expressionist painting can be said to mean something, and, if so, of what significance or importance is such painterly meaning; what ought we to believe about the significance of the crisis of modernism in music in the late nineteenth century (why does so much contemporary art music sound so different from the way music had almost always sounded; what is of value in the new music?); and traditional philosophical issues, like under what conditions is the state's use of coercive power justifiable.

Before we reach any question of interdisciplinary cooperation with the sciences, I should note that it has become extremely controversial within the humanities to treat the humanities like this, as if all were contributing to the same conversation about various "live" normative issues. For instance, the idea that literary products or paintings could be said to imply, presuppose, or require truth or value claims has in itself very little purchase on the contemporary academic mind. The idea that these are truth claims about normative matters – that there simply *are* truth claims about normative matters that ought to be pursued – and that these ought to be discussed and assessed as such, rather than only as deeply historically contextual-

ized bits of evidence about what people believed at a specific time and place, now sounds like a rather stale humanism. It is often immediately assumed that any proponent of such views must serve a conservative agenda.

This is so for a number of complex reasons. One, there is a great suspicion about there being any one way to address or engage these normative issues (ought claims) at a first-order level, that is, by simply taking them on, trying to think about them and making up one's mind in conversation with texts and with others about what one ought to believe or what one, or some character, ought or ought not to do or have done. The idea is that this would be naive, uncritical, or unreflective, ignorant of the collapse of the notion of objective natural moral order, a hierarchical chain of being and of natural purposes linked in a harmonious whole that provides a basis for such normative judgments. Without such a secure natural whole and harmony, how could there be any objective basis, any independent truth makers, for such a conversation? I'm not saying that this is a particularly good objection; just that it has been extremely influential.

Another suspicion is that first-order normative claims have been so various and have changed so often that we have a better chance of explaining why people have come to have various views about what ought to be believed or ought to be done, rather than we have of assessing the quality of their answers. Paul Ricoeur once referred to the nineteenth-century thinkers who inspired this skepticism – Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud – as the "Masters of Suspicion." Such suspicion has had the most lasting impact in the Western academy on the study of art, literature, and some philosophy, prompting a kind of shadow scientism, which traces the meaning of various representative activities to the psychological or social conditions of their production.

I would suggest that this skepticism about the independent or autonomous status of the normative, the state of being "fraught with ought," as the philosopher Wilfrid Sellars described it, is something like a necessary condition for the ever more popular empirical study of why people have come to believe what they generally do, or did, at a particular time. That's all one would really think there *is* to study or research if there is no way to resolve first-order questions of normative truth. In addition, many people have also come to believe that a defense of any perspective on human animals other than a strictly naturalist one will unfairly and dangerously, and for many, immorally privilege the human animal above all others, thus playing an ideological role in how we farm, eat, and experiment on other animal species. Others believe that such an enterprise must be ideological, where this is understood to mean either uncritically accepting the views of the modern West, or being unaware of how contingent, possibly otherwise, such views are.

This is all understandable in a more general sense, too. A great deal of humanistic study is devoted to objects not created to be studied: not academic research projects, but Greek plays written for communal religious festivals, church music, wall hangings for the rich and mighty, commercial story writing, Hollywood films, and so on. It is only very recently in the long history of the university that it came to be considered appropriate to devote university resources to the study of not merely Greek and Latin classics, but vernacular art and literature; to study not just Christian texts and Christian apologists, but the issue of secular morality. It is perhaps then un-

derstandable that while we have some vague sense that an educated person should be familiar with some such famous objects, we have not yet settled on anything remotely like a common research program for studying them. And this sort of uncertainty (accompanied often by a vague lack of confidence) has recently led to these even more serious qualifications on any putative "independence" of such normative issues, all in favor of more naturalist accounts.

If truth claims are at issue – if we want to know why a particular picture of human life appeals to us, or not; why a certain character repels us; why we cannot make up our mind about another; whether a character's sacrifice of his self-interest for a greater good was rational or foolish; what form of pleasure we take in reading a poem or looking at a Manet – then, according to an often unexpressed assumption, why shouldn't we assume that some advanced form of the evolutionary-biological and neurological sciences, or at least the social sciences, will explain that to us?

I am not trying to dispute that there are valuable things that can be learned when some of the social and natural sciences take as their object of study various representational and imagination-directed human activities. It *is* a strange thing for people to gather in the dark and watch other people pretend to be people they aren't while doing ghastly things to each other (sometimes singing about it all); to care so much about what happens to little Nell or Hedda Gabler; to travel thousands of miles to stand in front of a temple in Kyoto. And these aesthetic appreciators, though human, occupy space and time like any other bit of extended, causally influenceable matter. The problem I am interested in is what happens when such explanatory considerations are understood to have *replaced* or superseded what I have been calling first-order normative questions (what *ought* to be believed and/or done), all in favor of so-called sideways on or second-order questions: what *explains* why people do this or that, believe this or that?[1]

"What problem?" you might ask. Well, simply that the two sorts of questions are logically distinct and irreducibly different. Normative questions, I mean, are irreducibly "first-personal" questions, and these questions are practically unavoidable and necessarily linked to the social practice of giving and demanding reasons for what we do, especially when something someone does affects, changes, or limits what another would otherwise have been able to do. By irreducibly first-personal, I mean that whatever may be our "snap judgments" or immediate deeply intuitive reactions, whenever anyone faces a normative question (which is the stance from which normative issues are issues), no third-personal fact – why one as a matter of fact has come to prefer this or that, for example – can be relevant to what I must decide, unless I count it as a relevant *practical* reason in the justification of what I decide ought to be done or believed.

Knowing something about evolutionary psychology might contribute to understanding the revenge culture in which Orestes finds himself in Aeschylus's *Oresteia*, or why he at once feels compelled to avenge his father's murder by his mother Clytemnestra and horrified at the prospect of killing her in cold blood. But none of that can be, would be, in itself at all helpful to *Orestes* or anyone in his position. Knowing something about the evolutionary benefits of altruistic behavior might give us

an interesting perspective on some particular altruistic act, but *for the agent*, first-personally, the question I must decide is whether I ought to act altruistically and, if so, why. I cannot simply stand by, waiting to see what my highly and complexly evolved neurobiological system will do. The system doesn't make the decision, *I* do – and for reasons that *I* find compelling, or that, at least, outweigh countervailing considerations. Of course, there are times when I cannot provide such reasons; perhaps I am even surprised that, given what I thought my commitments and principles were, I acted as I did. However, we cannot *leave* the matter there, especially when confronted by another's demand for a reason, and given that what I did affected what she would otherwise have been able to do. It is in this sense that the first-personal perspective is strictly unavoidable: I am not a passenger on a vessel pulled hither and yon by impulses and desires; I *have* to steer. Or as Kant put it: everything in nature happens according to law; human actions happen in accord with some conception of law.[2]

Freud's famous remark about psychoanalysis, and the third-personal, explanatory stance it seems to encourage persons to adopt toward their own motivations, provides another fine example of what I'm trying to suggest. His remark, in effect, confirms the unavoidability of the distinction we have been discussing, if one is actually to take up the position of, as we say, leading one's life: "*wo Es war, soll Ich werden*" ("what was It [or Id] should become I [or Ego]"). Such an "I," or ego, must make an evaluation of herself and of the attitudes that she should take up toward herself and others. Something is going *wrong* – haywire – if these determinations are the result of the "It," or id. Psychoanalysis tries to "cure" precisely what goes wrong when a subject experiences her own deeds as not hers, as the product of psychological forces outside her intentional control.

This is all compatible with the possible discovery of neurological dispositions toward certain attitudes or actions. My point isn't to dispute that, but to suggest that no such discovery can of itself count as a reason *to do or forebear from doing* anything; it cannot eliminate the agent's perspective whenever she has to decide what to believe or do. It is also compatible with the fact that people are often self-deceived, or even grossly ignorant, of why they do what they do, devising reasons or fables for their actions only afterward, in what we have come to call rationalization. But there is simply no translation or bridge law that will get one, qua agent, from those facts to a claim like, "Well, they have discovered at MIT that people often act without being able to explain or justify why, so the hell with it: I'm just going to steal Sam's idea and pass it off as my own." The claim is that *I* can no more answer the question, "Why did you do that?" with, "No reason; I just did," than I can answer the question, "What caused the fire to start?" with, "There was no cause; it just started."

Social relations make this much clearer. None of us, I would venture to bet, when we offer to a friend what we take to be compelling moral reasons concerning an action that friend is contemplating, would be at all happy for our friend to respond with an explanation of why such reasons seem to us compelling based on an account grounded in biology and evolution. Such a response is, in that context, an evasion, not a response, and we would justly feel "treated like an object" by such a claim, rather than as a co-equal subject.

The point I am making is a simple one: that the autonomy, or possible self-rule, at issue in these discussions is not a metaphysical one, but involves the practical autonomy of the normative. Yet the point still needs emphasis. Consider the book published by the Harvard biologist Marc Hauser called *Moral Minds: How Nature Designed Our Universal Sense of Right and Wrong*. Hauser made his reputation in animal communication, working with monkeys in Kenya and with birds, and his book is an almost perfect example of what often goes wrong with some of this purportedly "interdisciplinary" work. Hauser proposes that people are born with a "moral grammar" wired into their neural circuits by evolution, and that this grammar generates instant moral judgments, which, in part because of the quick decisions that must be made in life-or-death situations, are inaccessible to the conscious mind. Since Hauser argues that this moral grammar operates in much the same way as the universal grammar proposed by the linguist Noam Chomsky as the innate neural machinery for language, he has to claim some sort of common Chomsky-like moral universals for all suitably evolved human animals. This he does with breathtaking sweep, even while conceding some local variations of emphasis, or local "parameters." Human behavior is said to be so tightly constrained by this hard wiring that many rules are in fact the same or very similar in every society: do as you would be done by; care for children and the weak; don't kill; avoid adultery and incest; don't cheat, steal, or lie. Moreover, he claims that the now universal moral grammar probably evolved into its final shape at a particular stage of the human past, during the hunter-gatherer phase in northeast Africa some fifty thousand years ago. Here is a typical summary of his claim:

> We are equipped with a grammar of social norms based on principles for deciding when altruism is permissible, obligatory, or forbidden. What experience does is fill in the particular details from the local culture, setting parameters, as opposed to the logical form of the norm and its general function.

Or,

> The universal moral grammar is a theory about the universal suite of principles and parameters that enable humans to build moral systems. It is a toolkit for building a variety of different moral systems as distinct from one in particular.

And,

> Underlying the extensive cross-cultural variations we observe in our expressed social norms is a universal moral grammar that enables each child to grow a narrow range of possible moral systems. When we judge an action as morally right or wrong, we do so instinctively, tapping a system of unconsciously operative and inaccessible moral knowledge. Variations between cultures in their expressed moral norms is like variation between cultures in their spoken languages.[3]

Hauser is willing to concede that from the point of view of the agent one often does not do what one is powerfully inclined to do (however quickly comes the inclination), and that one can often do what one feels an aversion to. Nevertheless, he remains wedded to a view of our possessing a "core" or biological basis for moral response and motivation, never conceding that the perspective of an agent is – indeed cannot but be – that of a practical reasoner, not an animal responder. (Animals, of course, act for reasons – the feeling of fear providing a reason to flee or fight, for example – but not reasons such as deliberative considera-

tions that may be acted on or not, depending on the justificatory force of the reason.)[4] Not to mention that almost all great literature, from Sophocles to Shakespeare to Henry James to John Coetzee, is not just about moral conflict and tragic dilemmas, but concerns the extreme difficulty of moral interpretation, about which more in a minute. Only the hopelessly jejune assumptions operative here about what the moral point of view consists in could allow Hauser even to begin to make his simplistic case about moral universals and evolutionary fitness.

Indeed, the most obvious interpretive question that we would have to settle before Hauser's ideas could be entertained concerns what separates morality from other social proprieties, like etiquette and prudential reasoning.[5] Beyond that (and Hauser does very little to help us with this general issue, besides occasionally appealing to the greater emotional weight that attends moral questions), the very questions of, for example, *what we are doing*, what another is up to, or how to assess our own motives are far more complicated than ever admitted in Hauser's book.

Take Henry James's novel *Washington Square*. A father, also a widower, forbids future contact between his shy and not socially successful daughter and a young suitor. James leaves the reader to confront a number of interpretive possibilities. Is he protecting his daughter from a fortune hunter? Does he have some important stake in continuing to infantilize his daughter? Is he romantically jealous of the suitor because his daughter has become a kind of wife-substitute? Might he be simply reluctant to give up his companion, afraid of loneliness? Is he a tyrant, unable to accept any challenge to his authority and rule over his household? He is in fact a tyrant, and the situation in the novel is so complicated because each of these possibilities is a plausible explanation and potentially true. (To complicate matters further, the suitor *is* a fortune hunter; but it remains very hard to know just how that fact is relevant to the father's conduct.) It seems very unlikely that the father's avowed intention – to protect his daughter – is true, and it is quite possible that he has some sense that any one of the other possibilities might more correctly describe what he is after. But it would not be correct to say that he "knows" he is motivated by something other than his professed commitments, and that he is hiding that knowledge from himself. The situation is far too unstable, complex, and subject to too many various interpretations for that to be the definitive analysis. We – and more interestingly the father himself – will not know what view to settle on until we, and he, come to learn how he acts in many other situations. Even then, the matter will remain quite difficult.

What really takes one's breath away, though, is Hauser's claim that we are "hardwired" with moral universals: do as you would be done by; care for children and the weak; don't kill; avoid adultery and incest; don't cheat, steal, or lie. This banal list of modern, Christian humanist values was written by a Harvard professor in a contemporary world still plagued by children sold into slavery by parents who take themselves to be entitled to do so; by the acceptability of burning to death childless wives; by guilt-free spousal abuse; by the morally required murder of sisters and daughters who have been raped; by "morally" sanctioned ethnic cleansing undertaken by those who see themselves as entitled to do so – one could go

on and on. Again, Hauser concedes variations and local parameters, but he thinks the essential picture of our moral nature, governed by these moral universals, has now come into focus.

Hauser deals most directly with the problem of very wide variations in deep moral intuitions when he discusses the evidence that philosopher Jesse Prinz has brought against Hauser's claims of moral universals. It becomes increasingly unclear what Hauser would count as any sort of empirical disconfirmation of his basic claim:

> Prinz, for example, trots out many examples of close relatives having sex, of individuals killing each other with glee, and of peaceful societies lacking dominance hierarchies. These are indeed interesting cases, but they are either irrelevant or insufficiently explained with respect to the nativist position. They may be irrelevant in the same way that it is irrelevant to cite Mother Theresa and Mahatma Ghandi as counterexamples to the Hobbesian characterization that we are all brutish, nasty and short [*sic*].[6]

Prinz, though, cited not one or two individuals, but whole societies existing over many generations. What *else* could possibly count as counterexamples to Hauser's theory if such evidence can't? At least Chomsky's theory is open to possible disconfirmation, as the recent discussion about the putative absence of recursion in the Pirahã language studied in Brazil by Dan Everett makes clear.[7] Hauser seems to have arbitrarily insulated his theory.

And there is no need to appeal only to contemporary evidence. Well over fifteen hundred years ago, the Greek historian Herodotus reported with amazement about cultures where it was considered morally abhorrent to bury or burn one's dead relatives rather than eat them, and the many others where nothing could be imagined more abhorrent than eating one's dead relatives. If we are to talk about interdisciplinary collaboration on, say, moral universals in any meaningful way, perhaps the first, most reasonable suggestion would be that Hauser spend a quiet Sunday with Herodotus and Henry James. This is not what people usually have in mind when they encourage cooperation between contemporary science and the humanities. As noted at the outset, they usually mean something like "applying" "the exciting new discoveries" to that area of the academy that "does not seem to ever make any progress." I want to say that this attitude reveals a profound confusion about the humanities from the outset, and reveals especially a lack of appreciation for the permanently unsettled and irreducibly normative nature of much of the humanities.

ENDNOTES

1 Here I use "explains" to mean a nomological, ultimately causal explanation, as it does in the natural sciences. In the specific example I will discuss later, Marc Hauser's *Moral Minds: How Nature Designed Our Universal Sense of Right and Wrong* (New York: Harper Collins, 2006), the author is very clear about the "shift" for which he wants to argue: "This account [his] shifts the burden of evidence from a philosophy of morality to a science of morality"; ibid., 2. The book that undoubtedly has had the greatest influence in recent years is Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976). See also Frans de Waal, *Good-Natured: The Origin of Right and Wrong in Humans and Other*

Animals (Cambridge, Mass. : Harvard University Press, 1996), and his recent Tanner lectures, *Primates and Philosophers : How Morality Evolved* (Princeton : Princeton University Press, 2006) ; and S. R. Quartz and T. J. Sejnowski, *Liars, Lovers, and Heroes : What the New Brain Science Reveals About How We Become Who We Are* (New York : William Morrow, 2002). Especially revealing about the simplicity with which many such researchers treat the notion of "morality" is Laurence Tancredi's *Hardwired Behavior : What Neuroscience Reveals about Morality* (Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2005).

[2] I am not entirely sure of Hauser's final position on this issue. The extreme ambition of the book's title ("Our Universal Sense of Right and Wrong") and many of the things he says are to some degree undermined by his concession that he means something very restricted by the word "sense." At some points he opens the door to the concession that whatever "science" might teach us about our immediate moral reactions to events and persons, those reactions are quite preliminary and may not contribute very much to an explanation of our all-things-considered or final moral judgments. Cf., "Taking account of our intuitions does not mean blind acceptance. It is not only possible but likely that some of the intuitions we have evolved are no longer applicable to current societal problems" ; Hauser, *Moral Minds,* xx. This leaves open quite a lot that, in other respects, his book appears to want to fill with an evolutionary and biological account of our moral lives.

[3] Ibid., 190, 300, 410.

[4] Cf. the commentary by Christine Kosgaard, in de Waal, *Primates and Philosophers*, 98 – 119, esp. 112 and 117 : "Even if apes are sometimes courteous, responsible, and brave, it is not because they think they should be."

[5] This is a point made by Richard Rorty in his review of Hauser's book ; "Born to be Good," *The New York Times*, August 27, 2006. Rorty also points to the weakness of Hauser's analogy with Chomsky's program in linguistics. He notes that moral codes are not assimilated with the astonishing rapidity of language acquisition, and that the grammaticality of a sentence is rarely a matter of doubt or controversy, "whereas moral dilemmas pull us in opposite directions and leave us uncertain."

[6] I use "*sic*" here because I don't think Hobbes's point was that most of us are little people. We are not brutish, nasty, and short, life is.

[7] John Colapinto, "The Interpreter," *The New Yorker*, April 16, 2007.