

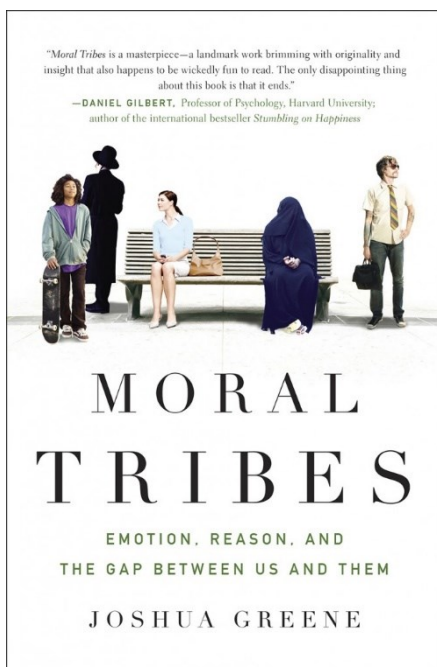
Review

Empirical moral psychology

Edgard Charles Stuber
Universidade do Vale do Rio dos Sinos
edgard.stuber@gmail.com
<http://lattes.cnpq.br/1838783218328303>

GREENE, Joshua. *Moral tribes: emotion, reason, and the gap between us and them*. New York: Penguin Press, 2013. 432p.

- [Publisher's website](#) • [Author's website](#) •



The aim of this review is to present and discuss some arguments from the book *Moral Tribes: emotions, reason, and the gap between us and them* by Joshua Greene, an associate professor of psychology at Harvard and the director of Moral Cognition Labor the recently field of Empirical Moral Psychology.

For about 2.400 years, philosophers have been discussing and building different theories and concepts about ethics, in their quest for answering one of the fundamental questions for human beings: what really matters, and why? What should one do? How should one proceed in different situations? Many theories were built in order to explain the human behavior: the ethics of virtues, deontology, utilitarianism, politics, sentimentalism, just to name some of them. Even the religious traditions took an important role trying to establish fundamental sacred dogmas to explain the divine laws to guide faithful people. Nowadays a new field is discussing these big questions: the

empirical moral psychology. Joshua is one of the leading researchers that is using cognitive sciences to shed new light to the theme.

The central questions brought by Joshua are: How can contemporary and diverse groups who disagree on fundamental and basic issues come to an understanding on matters like morality and public policy in a pluralistic society? What is morality and how is it implemented in our brains?

In his book Joshua sets himself to create a solid and scientific base to convince the readers that utilitarianism is one of the viable solutions, if not the only, to a modern and diverse society composed by groups who disagree on fundamental issues in the quest for coming to a common agreement on matters of morality. He brings to the discussion interesting evolutionary aspects to explain human nature and also contrasts them with cultural evolution to frame his final proposal

of a deep pragmatism. He also presents a lot of dilemmas and thought experiments with hypothetical situations as well as discusses moral judgements through many individual and group experiments to convince us about his theory. He shows evidences that we have innate tribalistic tendencies.

In the next sessions I will present three key issues to provide an overview of his book as well as my comments on them.

1. The paradox of cooperation and competition

Through a compelling and interesting fictional parable Joshua explains the “Tragedy of Commonsense Morality” using the “Tragedy of the New Pastures” and, from here, he builds his point that cultural aspects shape our behavior and moral judgement, despite the similarity of our minds. The idea of “me versus you”, meaning selfishness versus concerns about others, and “we versus them” meaning our interests versus theirs, represents our big contemporary moral challenge in such a complex world. The evolution and survival of our species as humans and social animals was guaranteed through the development of a set of psychological devices, like moral, that benefit us by means of cooperation; and cooperation makes life possible within the groups but not among the groups. In the latter, competition was, and still is, the rule.

The interesting argument built by Joshua here is about our social nature. He brings the fact that four billion years ago there were only cells formed by molecules put together. Later on, two billion years ago, these cells joined together to form more complex cells and one billion years ago the cells formed efficient multicellular organisms capable to spread the genetic material. In this context cooperation made it possible to do things that no single individual could do. Morality evolved with the purpose of ensuring cohesion amongst small groups of people.

Joshua claims that morality is the solution to the problem of cooperation because, from a biological perspective, we were designed to cooperate within small groups. He thinks that the human brain can be described as a set of automated impulses that defines the selfish and moral impulses.

The problem of new pastures resides on the fact that like all animals, we humans have selfish impulses and, on top of this, we have social impulses.

2. Morality

Joshua builds his moral structure upon trolleyology, the tension between the rights of the individual and the greater good, and many other recent psychological experiments to convey his final result to a kind of utilitarianism as part of the consequentialist philosophical category, something that he calls metamorality. It is interesting to mention that although he criticizes Kant, he also tries to come up with a universal philosophical solution similar to the categorical imperative of the German philosopher.

The trolley problem was deeply explored by Joshua. He explains that in the switch dilemma most of the researched people around the world find it morally acceptable to kill one instead of five persons, which leads us to an utilitarian result. In the footbridge dilemma, on the other hand, most of the people find it wrong to push the poor fat guy to death. His explanation to this phenomenon is that probably, while pushing a person off the footbridge you have physical contact with him or her, and this could represent a murder violation to the fat guy's rights. Joshua attributes emotional and rational decisions to the referred dilemmas. His team of researchers made laboratory experiments to come to a conclusion on the outputs of the specific brain's areas

involved in these decisions. Emotions vary in functions, origins and neural ways. They are automatic processes and incorporate lessons of past experiences. Reasoning, on the other hand, is a real psychological phenomena with fuzzy boundaries forming processes that leads to adaptive behavior and involves the conscious application of decision rules.

That leads him to draw conclusions on the dual process moral system similar to Daniel Kahneman's distinction between fast instinctive thought, that means emotions controlled behavior and slow thoughts deliberate reasoning.

Joshua compared human morality to the operation of a photograph camera with two modes: an automatic point-and-click mode and a manual mode in which we consciously and carefully adjust settings. That was a very interesting analogy used by him that is supported and grounded in scientific validation. We cannot get rid of experiencing emotions, because this is part of our brain's automatic processes that guarantee our efficiency and survival along the evolutionary history. It is important to say that emotions drive us to action and keep us alive instinctively. Reasoning is more driven to decision making and is a conscious process in our brain. The scientific basis of this argument is grounded on the fact that our brain works under the protocol of efficiency, which means using the least amount of energy, and that happens in the automatic mode. When we use our brain in the manual mode, that means, using reason, we can drain up to 25% of the whole body's energy.

Here he concludes that automatic settings controlled by emotions are shaped by our genes and they represent our human nature despite being also shaped by culture learnings determined by our tacit knowledge. On the other hand, the manual settings, meaning the capacity for controlled cognition that allows us to be more flexible, give us the possibility of solving problems that the automatic mode is not able to solve. That is the metacognitive skills that the author defined.

Despite the fact that Greene thinks that much moral reasoning is rationalisations of prejudices which happens in the automatic mode, he states that the manual mode moral reasoning can be essential for getting along in a pluralistic society. That's an interesting speculative evolutionary explanation.

3. Deep pragmatism

Joshua believes that utilitarianism, originally founded by Bentham and Mill, was rooted and driven by social and political reforms of their time and Joshua stresses the fact that they were not armchair philosophers. The proposed theory can be the solution for humanity to overcome the biological, tribal, intuitive and evolutionary patrimony we all carry in our cells. He thinks the concept of utilitarianism is a splendid idea, though not very well understood, which leads people to wrong conclusions about it, reducing the theory to a simple trade off transaction focused on a cost benefit analysis.

To clarify this misunderstanding he offers "deep pragmatism", a term that can avoid the confusion between utility and happiness in an impartial way. He also admits that measuring happiness is a hard work, which leads him to focus on people's experiences. Summing up the author is proposing a universal and reason-based solution for the moral choices combining them to the Golden Rule's impartial approach.

As part of his big effort to convince us about his proposal, he brings the common currency concept as an intertribal negotiation to replace other moral truths, like the religious, the mathematical/rationalist and the scientific models. He states that the three models work from a

fundamental principle of a priory axioms. For him we all become utilitarianists by using the dual-processing framework that our brains are equipped with. The common currency could be used to decide among competing values.

When we use our brain in the automatic mode we are non utilitarianists, but when we use the manual mode we get a utilitarian approach, because it is a cost benefits reasoning system that searches optimal consequences. This thesis is transcendent and not very different than the ones he criticized.

For Joshua utilitarianism goes beyond the biological and culture heritage from the automatic mode and it adds the problem-solving system from the manual mode. He claims that the theory is grounded both in happiness and impartiality as the two universal moral values.

Deep pragmatism is finally possible to be applied as a universal solution, according to Joshua in a six-step process: in the face of moral controversy, consult, but do not trust your moral instincts; rights are not forgot making arguments, they are for ending arguments (using rights as shields); focus on the facts, and make others do the same; beware of biased fairness; use common currency and give. A very pragmatic and direct set of rules, not very different from Kant's moral proposal and his claim related to the human capacity of using reason to control our instincts. His goal was to establish a set of norms to solve the cooperation dilemma among groups.

4. Conclusion

Why should we tackle moral choices in such an objective way? If evolution is descriptive why should we have a prescriptive approach to moral? Do we really need a set of moral rules and laws to be followed? Can we have a simpler approach to human affections in order to know how to act?

I do not want to be as radical as Nietzsche was. He criticized almost all moral attempts from philosophy. He pointed out the importance of our passions when faced with moral dilemmas and his approach was based on cultural evolution.

Since the Enlightenment moral philosophy has been trying to build a systematic and universal moral theory, like utilitarianism, deontology and virtue philosophy, but all of them have failed. Should we have a priory norms or empiric experiences to define what is good and what is bad?

I agree with Joshua's approach explaining that the evolution of life in complex organisms was possible due to cooperation within small groups but there is no such universal cooperation.

As a complex mammalian species human beings need affection to bond in order to survive. Our behavior menu is very broad and affections control us in order to guarantee our life in groups. This was an evolution strategy that allowed us to survive. We are biologically determined by our genes and, on top of this, we receive an extra cultural heritage. This heritage is a result of the interaction with the environment and with life within groups and among groups. We also have to consider our psychological subjectivity. This blend defines our moral judgements and our moral structure.

Life for complex organisms is an exercise of politics among the participants of groups. We are constantly trying to improve the way we live in communities by interacting with each other. The members of groups are making pressure on each other daily, and the result of these exercises is called politics. This is one of the missing parts from Joshua's proposal. He criticized Aristotle, with good arguments, but he forgot the lessons taught by the Greek philosopher who, in his studies of moral virtue, included the improvement of our character in a subjective level as well

as the need for interactions among people. The friction among people is crucial to improve their relationships in a social level. Moral, as a phenomenon of mutual requests, is an optional way of avoiding the need for prescriptive moral truths. Contrary to Joshua's theory we have to respect and better understand our biologically shaped instincts and the cultural aspect defined through social interactions.

We live in a very challenging era facing the possibility of getting big advances in the study of morality. New findings from experimental psychology and experimental philosophy, with the help of cognitive sciences, will help us understand and work on better moral decisions we have to take.¹

¹ I want to thank my colleagues from the course *Ethics and Culture* taught by Adriano Brito in 2014 at Unisinos for the rich discussions and debate we had.