Morality without a net: A reply to Pinker's avoidance of nihilism

Marc Krellenstein, 32 Duncklee St., Newton Highlands, MA 02461 USA' marc@krellenstein.com

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Abstract

Steven Pinker observes that an evolutionary basis for morality invites nihilism because of the nature of evolutionary adaptation, which happens by chance and persists because of its survival value. Pinker thinks nihilism can be avoided because moral behavior may have evolved in conformance with an objective morality grounded in the logic and benefits of reciprocal, cooperative behavior. Even if there isn't an objective morality, Pinker argues that our moral sense is 'real for us' and can't simply be dismissed. But the logic of reciprocal obligation ' the difficulty in arguing that someone has an obligation towards you' without your being similarly obliged -- only applies if we already accept someone having an obligation to do something rather than just finding it desirable. The net benefits of cooperation also do not imply obligations. While morality is still 'real for us,' this too falls short of the objective grounding of morality needed to refute nihilism. We can have morality, but we are on our own in defending it.

We seem to possess an innate moral sense ' some understanding of right and wrong and the inclination to judge certain acts accordingly. We have widely shared intuitions about the rightness and wrongness of specific acts. Our pleasure at doing the right thing or being in the right is often intensely experienced; it may be one of the fundamental human pleasures and motivations (perhaps along with sensual and intellectual pleasures). Right and wrong also seem for many to be a matter of fundamental, objective truth(s), even if we can't always see or agree on those truths and even if their source (Platonic realism? divine commandment? the rational discovery of what benefits us?) is a matter of contention or mystery.

Steven Pinker (2002, 2003; Wright, 2002) and others (e.g., Wright, 1994; Katz, 2000) have argued persuasively for the evolutionary basis of our moral sense ' the gradual, if accidental, development of moral responses and reasoning that provided net survival benefits and so persisted as human characteristics. Moral judgment and reasoning may just be one of our innate mental faculties, even if many of the specifics are subject to variation and change.

But an evolved morality is a morality that arose by chance. Pinker recognizes that this invites nihilism, the belief that there are no real or objective truths of morality. On this account of morality's origins, any innate moral reasoning or truths are just a set of intuitions and behaviors that we've stumbled upon (e.g., an inclination to sympathize with and help others) that provide certain benefits. These intuitions and behaviors can be further shaped or extended by a particular society and by individual choice, but their source remains the non-fundamental ones of genetic accident, culture and personal choice.

Pinker himself does not hold a traditional nihilist viewpoint and offers two arguments for avoiding nihilism. The first is that even if our moral sense evolved through chance adaptations, these adaptations proved useful because they were in conformance with an objectively real morality. This would be similar to the evolution of our 3D perception: although occurring by accident, it was the better fit to reality that gave that adaptation its survival advantage. The world really is 3D; that is what 3D vision hit upon and why we have it today.

Pinker's second argument for avoiding nihilism is that even if morality is not objectively real, it is still 'as real for us as if it were ' written into the cosmos' (2002, p. 193). Our pleasure at experiencing a sunset may also be the result of contingent evolution, but it is no less real for that.

But both of Pinker's arguments are flawed. Taking them in turn:

(1) Pinker believes that the objectively real morality for which we have evolved is based on a reciprocal point of view regarding treating other people, a view embodied in the golden rule, the categorical imperative and similar moral precepts. While there is evidence for an evolutionary basis to such reciprocal thinking, the argument for defeating nihilism hinges on the assertion that this reciprocity-based morality is objectively real. To demonstrate that, Pinker argues that this is the only possible morality, that its truth has an intrinsic, objective character based on how people reason:

> According to the theory of moral realism, right and wrong exist, and have an inherent logic that licenses some moral arguments and not others'. Given the goal of being better off, certain conditions follow necessarily. No creature equipped with circuitry to understand that it is immoral for you to hurt me could discover anything but that it is immoral for me to hurt you. (Pinker, 2002, pp. 192-193)
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> No particular person can argue that he occupies a privileged position in the universe whose well-being can trump the well-being of anyone else simply because that's a logically untenable argument as soon as one enters into rational discourse at all. (Pinker, 2003)

Moral realism is the philosophical position that there are some objective facts of morality that are true or false in the same way that other claims are true or false, and that at least some of them are true (Smith, 2000). The truth of moral realism would by itself refute nihilism. The idea of reason or rationality licensing morality is not really a consequence of moral realism, as Pinker's words might suggest, but one long-standing argument on behalf of it. This seems to be Pinker's main point: that morality is objective (and moral realism true) because of the inescapable logic of reciprocal behavior.

This argument for moral realism has a long philosophical tradition but a fundamental problem, which both Williams (1985) and Harman (Harman & Thomson, 1996) have pointed out: Although we might judge another hurting us as undesirable, that does not mean we must insist on their *obligation* not to hurt us. Even if we have evolved a moral sense that gives rise to such a judgment the question at hand is whether that judgment and the associated affective responses can be rooted in something other than contingent evolution. To assume the legitimacy -- and not simply the desirability -- of someone else's obligation is to beg the question at hand. The nihilist (or amoralist) does not in the first place accept the objective reality of particular rights or obligations or a need to define them.

This is not to deny that reciprocity and impartiality are elements of our moral sense, or that acceptance of another's obligations, or submission to a contract of rights and responsibilities, entails obligations for oneself. It's hard to argue that it's acceptable to park illegally whenever it's convenient while rejecting the view that everyone should be able to do that. One may similarly think one should not (without good reason) lie to or hurt another if one wouldn't accept that behavior by others. But choosing to accept or not accept certain behaviors, as opposed to counting them as desirable or undesirable, is to already grant the existence of an obligation regarding those behaviors. When obligations are foundational to a community we may demand that others respect them, and may feel, think and act as if they have an objective basis. But we can't ground that basis in logic everyone is compelled to observe by reason alone.

Pinker (2002) also sees support for the rightness of reciprocal behavior in the observation that 'one is better off not shoving and not getting shoved than shoving and getting shoved' (p. 187), i.e., in the actual benefits of certain reciprocal behaviors. These benefits are presumably the very survival benefits that led to the evolution of such behaviors given human goals and characteristics and the fact that we live in groups. But specific individuals (or nation states) may not accept obligations resulting from desired net benefits because they reason differently, rationally believing, for example, that shoving and sometimes being shoved may give them an overall advantage, or that they are or are not likely to be shoved regardless of their behavior. The egoist, the strongest or the already disadvantaged can reason this way without contradiction (Harman discusses the case of those at a disadvantage in Harman & Thomson, 1996).

(Arguments justifying moral realism by something other than reason alone continue but have done no better, though one sort of moral realism or another is a common belief, e.g., the existence of objective values based on religious beliefs. Much of the philosophical literature on this topic seems devoted to simply trying out the idea that there could be objective moral facts or intrinsic values. Such unobservable facts or values would be consistent with our ordinary way of speaking and with certain seemingly unassailable beliefs, e.g., that it is wrong to set a cat on fire, or to torture a baby. But the philosophical oddness of viewing these beliefs as 'facts' remains, and both the naturalness and apparent unassailability of some beliefs are more simply, if less appealingly, explained by a strong evolutionary grounding of our psychological responses combined with the effects of cultural forces.)

(2) Pinker (2003) himself seems less than convinced with the arguments for moral realism and open to the view that the apparent objectivity of our moral judgments might be a useful illusion. Such apparent objectivity may have evolved because it makes moral motivation more immediate and persistent. A pursuit for justice for its own sake, for example, is a better deterrent than having to always calculate and consider the benefit that might come from specific actions against wrong-doers, a calculation that might also be gamed by those very wrong-doers.

But Pinker (2002) has another argument for defeating nihilism. He suggests that if the idea of objective moral truth is 'too rich for your blood' (p. 193), then morality is still 'real for us' even if it is not objectively real. Pinker says that 'a moral sense is part of the standard equipment of the human mind' (p. 193) and 'it's the only mind we've got and we have no choice but to take its intuitions seriously' (p. 193). Our aesthetic pleasures may also be the result of contingent evolution, but are no less real for that. Pinker believes our moral and aesthetic reactions are as real as it gets.

However, strong intuitions and judgments experienced as inherently correct do not refute nihilism. The nihilist view is, after all, an empirical position about what is really or ultimately the case regarding value, regardless of what we may feel or intuitively believe. It is just our understanding of some ultimate grounding of value that is required, but still missing, to refute nihilism.

In the case of aesthetic pleasures our inability to establish some external reality does not much diminish our experience of them. Our interests in aesthetic pleasures are primarily about the experiences themselves and what triggers them. The foundational question of their objective reality is not paramount (though some may intuit or believe in objective, abstract beauty).

The experience of our moral sense is equally real, but it is the foundational question that is critical to nihilism. The nature of that moral sense ' its commanding character and the intuition that it must apply to all people ' makes the proper intellectual understanding of its foundations particularly significant. If our moral sense or intuitions are in some way arbitrary then we should not hold their intrinsic rightness as the reason we expect or decide to force others to adhere to them. We can and will likely still choose to enforce moral behaviors that affect us, but recognizing their ultimately arbitrary character may lead to more realistic expectations and strategies for

handling moral conflicts. We should not, for example, expect others to adopt our views simply because they are exposed to them and their inherent rightness, or are freed from what we might consider to be impediments to embracing them.

Pinker also finds support for refuting nihilism in the belief that a general moral sense is not only part of our innate psychology but can also not be eliminated. This might be true; we may not be able to fully escape reacting with judgments of right and wrong any more than we can escape judging things as beautiful or ugly. But moral judgment being inescapable implies nothing about whether there is objective value.

In fact, the very reciprocal nature of much of our moral thinking seems subject to modification. From Nietzsche to the egoism of Ayn Rand's objectivism there have been views critical of reciprocal compassion or generosity, views that have appealed to some as a welcome tonic to what they see as conventional practices that too severely limit the individual's freedom and creativity.

There are also the specific moral intuitions we have ' exactly what will count as right and wrong ' that Pinker says we must take seriously. But it is just such biologically-based tendencies that are not to be accepted at face value as fixed, determinate of a specific individual's behavior or desirable even if they help explain behavioral patterns and suggest the difficulties of changing them for many. Pinker himself repeatedly makes this point, arguing for the need to curb innate tendencies such as those towards revenge or rape. Limitations on such behaviors benefit us overall, even if not each individual each time, and societies have commonly evolved restraints on such tendencies, reinforced others and invented new behaviors that allow them to prosper. Intuitions have long been regarded as a source of morality, but have equally long been regarded as fallible. Our 'na've physics' may have similarly evolved to let us quickly make many accurate decisions about moving and acting in the world. But we come to recognize its limitations and resist its intuitions when other facts serve us better. Rorty (2006) speculates that morality may be entirely learned (or changeable?), but we needn't go that far to accept his observation that, faced with any putative cognitive limit on what desirable moral principles we can embrace we would almost certainly choose to test that limit rather than accept it. The key point is that moral intuitions, like most of our evolutionary psychological heritage, are subject to modification to as yet unknown limits.

The reality of any inborn moral capacity or intuitions also seems dependent on individual temperament. Affective responses to different kinds of distress are variable, and these responses are an important if not yet fully understood component of moral intuitions. 'Psychopaths, though rightly regarded as an extreme, may represent only one end of a continuum of moral sensitivity. 'Differential sensitivity to moral situations further limits moral intuitions as reliable indicators of behavior.

In summary, Pinker's efforts to avoid nihilism do not succeed. The argument that moral realism is a consequence of rationality has not worked. The claim that, absent such objective reality, morality is the only reality we know and a relatively fixed part of our nature may be largely true. However, this does not avoid the nihilism that results from our correctly understanding that our moral sense and strong affective moral responses are variable, modifiable to some unknown extent and ultimately contingent human characteristics based on an innate psychology together with the culture that shapes us and the choices we make. The innate characteristics have likely evolved because of the overall benefit they provide to humans living in this particular world. But that is not the same as saying they are objective facts of nature, that they form obligations that must be adhered to or that right and wrong have some transcendent, ultimate grounding. That does not mean that moral practice and discussion are unimportant or that we are not willing to live by, defend and enforce those practices. But our beliefs and their defense cannot be grounded in more than our individual and community determination to pursue certain goals and adhere to

certain norms of conduct. Accepting morality for what it is should make us better able to understand and reckon with our own moral codes and those of others.

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