Greene's *Moral Tribes* and Cooperation and Conflict in India

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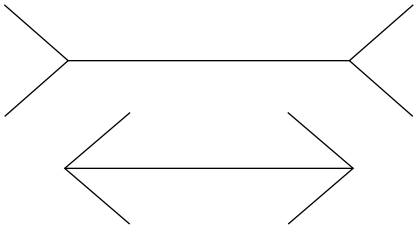
Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason, and the Gap Between Us and Them by Joshua Greene; *New York: Penguin, 2013; pp 432, $29.95*

Take a look at the two lines in Figure 1. Which horizontal line is longer, the one on top or the one at the bottom? If your brain works like most people's brains, it looks to you like the line on top is longer. But, it is not. The two lines are exactly the same length.

Figure 1



This is the Müller-Lyer optical illusion. Psychologists who study vision know that our brains automatically see the lines incorrectly because the corners cue depth. We can reason our way through the figure, especially once someone has explained it to us. But, even people who know the trick should expect themselves to feel the intuitive pull of the illusion. Usually, that is no problem, because when we see lines like this we really are seeing corners. Susceptibility to this illusion is a small price we pay for efficient, useful brains that were evolved to perceive a 3D world.

If Joshua Greene is correct in his important new book, *Moral Tribes*, many of our ethical and policy judgments and intuitions are equally illusory products of our evolved brains. Moreover, just like it would be silly to construct a detailed argument attempting to justify an intuitive claim that the line on top really is longer, we may be better off with ethical approaches that distrust our moral impulses.

Greene is both a psychologist and a philosopher. In this review, I will first summarise Greene's psychological research on moral intuition and judgment. His research has important implications for long-standing debates in ethical theory. Greene suggests that the tugs of conscience that provide the "evidence" for certain ethical views may reflect moral psychology that did not evolve to solve today's unfamiliar problems. If so, then moral disagreement might be better approached with moral reasoning and empirical facts, instead of with intensified insistence on our own intuitions. Although Greene does not himself consider it, his research has an immediate and important implication for India; a society so fragmented into social out-groups is a society where we can expect automatic moral intuition to be especially uncooperative. In such a society, explicit, shared attention to the well-being of everyone is all the more important.

Moral Psychology

The moral impulses that humans feel—like the many other workings of our bodies—were in part evolved to promote our ancestors' fitness. In particular, our automatic ethical feelings promote cooperation within groups. Part of being human is feeling that we should sometimes sacrifice what is good for "me" in order to do what is good for "us."

So far so good; it is useful to have brains that encourage us to sacrifice on behalf of the group. The problem is that these automatic cooperative feelings apply to our in-groups. Our moral feelings often stop at the boundaries of our own "tribe," whatever that may be. As Greene summarises, our intuitive moral psychology works well for dilemmas of "me versus us," but fails dismally for the challenges of "us versus them." Yet, such conflicts with strangers are exactly what a modern world makes so important.

Luckily, such intuition is not the whole story; our brains use "dual process" moral psychology. Dual process psychological theories recognise that our brains combine automatic, approximate systems, with slow, careful systems. Evidence for our dual process brains is accumulating not only in morality, but also throughout the psychology and economics of decision-making (Kahneman 2011). In many situations, we can rely on our rapid, automatic impulses. Sometimes, however, we need to think carefully and slowly, trade off costs and benefits using the evolutionarily newer parts of our brains. Such dual process psychology accounts for familiar experiences: our automatic impulses send us towards the chocolate cake, but our deliberative faculties sometimes redirect us to the fruit instead.

So far, this is psychology. Greene's philosophical insight is that characteristically "deontological" or rule-based ethical systems and judgments are generally produced by our automatic moral intuitions and emotions. Deontological approaches to ethics, often associated with Immanuel Kant, classify actions in terms of general rules about what is required and what is forbidden, irrespective of the consequences. Usually, our automatic impulses to follow moral rules are a good thing. For example, we should be glad that a mental alarm restrains us if we consider punching a friend. However, these automatic intuitions may not respond well to new situations that would have been foreign to our evolutionary ancestors. We feel no emotion when our cars contribute to air pollution that will slightly restrict the foetal growth of many babies.

Deontology is not the only important ethical school of thought. In contrast with rule-based ethics, "consequentialist" ethics recommends we do whatever evidence leads us to expect that will make things go as well as possible, for everybody. We should do what will produce the most good. More precisely, "utilitarianism" in Greene's formulation is the type of consequentialism that combines an impartial concern for the well-being of all, with a specification that what matters is the goodness or badness of experiences.

Greene's psychology experiments are able to match the character of the moral decisions (deontological or consequentialist) that people are making, with the brain systems they are using at the time

(automatic and emotional, or deliberative and reflective). He shows that—just as deontological judgments are supported by intuitive systems—characteristically consequentialist judgments are associated with the deliberative and calculating centres in our brains.

Although Greene does not make note of it, there may be a special consequence of his theory for the poor. Deliberation and cognitive control of decision-making are considered "depletable" psychological resources. When deliberative processes are temporarily depleted, people are more likely to make automatic or impulsive decisions. Many psychologists have shown that using self-control, making difficult decisions, being hungry or even being physically exhausted, all make us temporarily more impulsive, less patient, and less deliberative. Poverty—with its daily trials and hard choices—is one of many situations that deplete cognitive control (Spears 2011). If Greene is correct, then depleted poor people may be more rule-based and less consequentialist in their moral decision-making, other things being equal, than they would be if they had the opportunity to live less cognitively depleting lives.

Ethical Disagreement

Of course, thinking hard does not always lead to consequentialism. Deontology and utilitarianism are two broad, competing schools of ethical thought. Each offers complex and sophisticated proponents who have disagreed with one another for a long time. But, how can even advanced scholars of ethics so enduringly disagree, if truthfully there are ethically better and worse things to do? Does the sophisticated ethical disagreement between consequentialists and deontologists give us reason to doubt ethics altogether?

Greene does not think so. His psychological model is consistent with utilitarians using deliberative thought to overcome moral impulses with cost–benefit decision-making. However, motivated thinkers can turn their reason in other directions; clever philosophers can attempt to integrate our feelings and impulses in such a way that rationalises them. Such philosophers are like overeager statisticians. They take moral intuitions as their raw data, and attempt to build a sophisticated model that connects the dots. Like any good member of a political party, who can "prove" that any utterance by the minister is ultimately consistent with the party philosophy, perhaps a talented professor can "explain" that any surprising emotional intuition (or the absence of one) is properly understood, consistent with what Immanuel Kant or John Rawls had to say. Leading deontologists have constructed complex rules to match our complex moral intuition.

But, Greene asks a series of important questions: what is so good about our moral impulses? Should we really enshrine our intuitions as the ultimate guide to right and wrong? Are these evolved reactions good ethical data in today's world? Should we build our ethical theories upon them? Or, knowing what we do understand about the psychology of judgment and decision-making, is trying to rationalise our moral intuitions as moral truths equally misguided as trying to prove that the two lines in our optical illusion are, indeed, of equal length?

Many philosophers argue against utilitarianism by highlighting utilitarian conclusions that "feel" wrong. In some special cases it may promote the greater good to allow one person to be killed, the story goes, in order to save many others, if those truly are our only two options. Yet, our emotions tell us that this cannot be right; killing is wrong, and violates the person's rights.

To this old problem, Greene has a new answer: if utilitarianism feels wrong, perhaps the problem is with our feelings. Emotional moral intuitions serve us well when it is "me versus us," but not in other cases.

Philosopher Peter Unger (1996) reached a similar conclusion in *Living High and Letting Die*. Unger's "Liberationist Hypothesis" is that ethical decisions must be liberated from our misleading intuitions:

> In addition to being influenced by our Basic Moral Values, often our moral intuitions on cases are affected by contrary psychological factors. While our Values encourage us to respond positively to conduct that clearly does most to lessen the serious loss befalling innocent others, often these contrary factors inhibit us, or constrain us, from responding in that way (1996: 94).

In other words, our automatic psychology is useful and gets much right, but it has its own purposes and sometimes leads us to make mistakes. If this is true for optical illusions, tricky math problems, slips of the tongue, and impulsive overeating, why might it not also be true for moral intuition? After all, we already know that we are automatically disposed to favour members of groups that we arbitrarily categorise as similar to us, for no good ethical reason. If so, perhaps our automatic emotional judgments are not the basic moral truths that we typically believe them to be. Instead, they should be an invitation to careful thinking about how to resolve moral disagreements by sorting through what can make everybody better off.

Social Fragmentation and Caste

Greene's book is built on psychological facts that are widely shared by humans around the world. But, although he does not consider India directly, his theory may have an important implication for conflict and cooperation in India. Intuitively, Greene suggests, humans automatically tend to treat in-groups differently from how they treat out-groups. If so, we can expect to find intuitive discord and conflict in any society that is finely partitioned into many out-groups.

Greene presents evidence that we intuitively behave more cooperatively and more pro-socially with other members of our in-groups than with members of out-groups. Our automatic moral reactions are good, generous, and altruistic for "me versus us," but bad, stingy, and competitive for "us versus them." If so, such moral psychology may bode ill for India, where almost everyone is a "them." In deeply fragmented India, there is no dearth of social fissures that may divide any two people as the "other."

I am not an anthropologist or comparative sociologist, but experts and deep thinkers have long proposed that India is an unusually divided society. "India is quite undeniably the most stratified society in the world," Dipankar Gupta (2005: 410) summarises; "Over and above huge income disparities, there are caste, religious, and community

differences that are deeply engraved into everyday social relations." To this list we must add social differentiation and inequality by gender, age, and position within households. And, of course, most of these dimensions are not merely differences, but also hierarchies with better and worse positions.

If Greene's account of moral intuition is correct, then people in India would be expected to behave particularly uncooperatively compared with people in other societies, on an average and with other things being equal. To be explicit, this would not be because people in India are psychologically any different from people elsewhere. In fact, the same moral psychology that would be at work for people everywhere would interact perniciously with an exceptionally divided Indian society:

Premise 1 (Psychology; Greene): Humans everywhere have moral psychology that promotes cooperative moral behaviour with people like themselves and members of their in-groups, but not with "others" in out-groups.

Premise 2 (Society): Indian society is much more finely divided into social groups than other societies, so an arbitrary person is especially likely to be dissimilar on some socially important dimension.

Conclusion: Cooperative moral behaviour is likely to be less common in India than in other societies, on an average and with other things being equal.

This conclusion is only a conjecture, and is not one that Greene himself suggests. It should be subject to careful empirical testing. But, the idea that social fragmentation in India contributes towards a shared uncooperative disposition has a long history in Indian thought. B R Ambedkar (2003: 519–20) defines Indian society as "an innumerable collection of castes which are exclusive in their life and have no common experience to share and have no bond of sympathy." In the *Annihilation of Caste*, he observes

> Caste has killed public spirit. Caste has destroyed the sense of public charity…Virtue has become caste-ridden, and morality has become caste-bound. There is no sympathy to the deserving. There is no appreciation of the meritorious. There is no charity to the needy…There is sympathy but not for men of other caste (Ambedkar 1979: 56–57).

In *The Expanding Circle*, philosopher Peter Singer (1981) suggests that at the heart of ethical behaviour is the recognition that others are important, just like one's own self. Therefore, their interests deserve equal consideration. Yet, Ambedkar and other writers propose that Indian society teaches its members that almost all strangers are irredeemably dissimilar; they are of another sex, age, religion, or caste. If this is so, then among the many other profound social costs of the caste system (and other dimensions of Indian social inequality) may also be a general disposition towards uncooperative behaviour with strangers. And, if this divisive moral intuition is like other ethical illusions, then we can expect to find it justified by convoluted, highfalutin theory.

Unsurprisingly, philosophers can debate at length whether philosophy

can make progress over time. How can long-standing, sophisticated ethical disagreements ever be overcome? Greene points towards an answer, and offers a strategy whereby a gradually improving base of evidence can help ethical theory answer its own questions on its own terms (Greene 2014). The answers have deeply practical implications for issues that we all care about: poverty, pollution, climate change, population, and love. Perhaps, you will disagree with Greene's suggestions. If so, then reflecting on the psychology of moral intuition may help you figure out why, and may help you find an even better answer. Greene's book should be widely read; some of our automatic moral intuitions should be widely challenged.

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