

Protecting the Kantian Cult

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ABSTRACT: Joshua D. Greene, in his paper titled “The Secret Joke of Kant’s Soul”, argues a case against the deontological way of thinking. He criticizes Kant and his ideas heavily, and claims that they are nothing but ‘Moral Confabulation’. The intention of this paper is to critically analyze Greene’s arguments and to save the Kantian Cult from this unjustified scrutiny.

KEYWORDS: Kantian Cult, Greene’s arguments.

1 THE CLAIM AND THE ARGUMENT

Greene argues that deontology is based on application of an intrinsic moral code, a consciousness that lets us differentiate between morally right and wrong actions. Greene’s hypothesis is that this moral code is nothing but a culmination of actions that have been condemned in the society due to an evolutionary advantage. He then argues that evolution should not act as a basis for governing our ethics, since it causes our morals to be incoherent, inconsistent and consequentially detrimental at times.

2 THE DEFENSE

Greene’s claim does appear to be a reasonable one at first glance, but both his claim and his argumentation are unable to withstand deeper philosophical scrutiny. In my view, Greene commits several logical fallacies while arguing his case. Unjustified logical leaps, incorrect interpretation of the scientific data and an incomplete understanding of the deontological world view are some of these. Following are the reasons for my dissatisfaction with Greene’s argumentation:

2.1 SPECULATING THE CAUSE

Greene assumes evolution to be responsible for instilling a moral code within us. One of the problems I have with this hypothesis is that an argument that claims an evolutionary cause behind morals binds them under biological restrictions. What I am trying to argue here is, saying that moral inclinations are a consequence of evolutionary history essentially implies that these moral judgements are inborn in human beings. This effectively translates to saying that human beings are born with an inborn moral code, one that coincides with the deontological principles, and other factors like religion, culture, upbringing, etc. play no role in determining the moral principles people choose to associate themselves with.

One easy way to challenge this idea is by looking at the difference in moral ideas that cultural perspectives introduce. Let us look at incest for example. Incest is morally unacceptable in most cultures. But in certain cultures, like Islam for instance, marrying one’s cousin (if not sibling) is a common practice. By virtue of being constantly exposed to this practice, it is my hypothesis (and a reasonable one) that one would find much less hatred against incest in any psychological experiment conducted on Muslim subjects. Had the hatred against incest been a consequence of human evolution, it would not have been so easy for an entire culture to surpass that hatred and introduce a socially acceptable practice against it. No culture in the world can override classical evolutionary feelings (like sexual urge, etc.), and build an entire social structure over such practices. The fact that this is possible in case of incest only supports my claim that morals are a function of our experiences and not our genes.

To sum up, what I intend to do here is not say that I have the most rigorous explanation behind how morals are

developed but to bring it to light that Greene's interpretation is not so sacrosanct. In fact, the claim that I was not born with my morals but developed them through the course of my life seems to be a more reasonable one. Even if I accept all the scientific data and the subsequent interpretation Greene presents, even if I accept that deontological morals are not a result of rational thinking but are just instances of exercising pre-fabricated notions, I have no reason to believe that these notions were pre-fabricated by virtue of evolution, they could as easily have been shaped by cultural beliefs (or anything else).

3.1 CASES OF EXTREME MORAL CHOICES

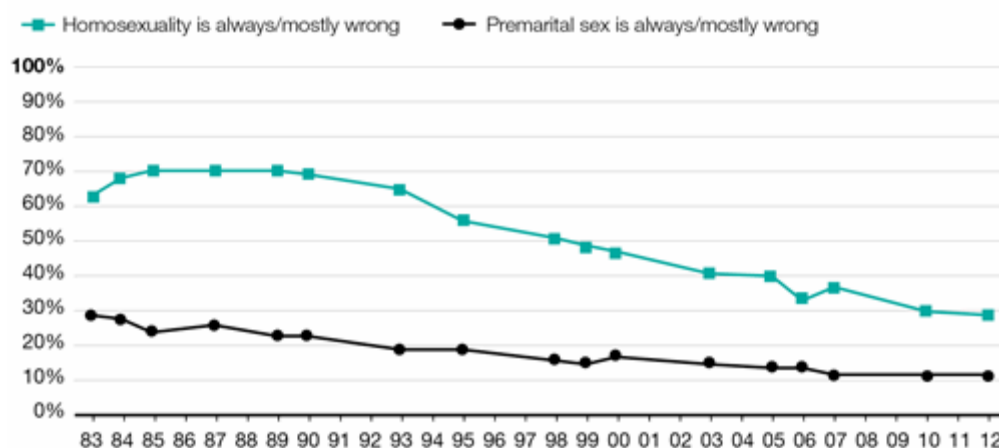
Another issue I have is with the way Greene (and most other philosophers) interprets people's response to moral dilemmas (trolley problem, infanticide dilemma, etc.). The best way to introduce this idea is by giving an example of the video titled "Drunk Questions with Kanan Gill", in which Kanan presents the guests with the following question: "Would you choose to watch your parents have sex every day for the rest of your life or would you choose to join in once and stop it forever?"

Now this question would bother any individual. What we are forced to do when we answer that question is choose between two completely morally repugnant situations, situations whose immorality cannot be measured. But every time someone answers that question, he makes some kind of assessment in his mind as to which act would be an instance of greater moral violation. Now this assessment is completely subjective and depends on the individual. In most cases, how he evaluates these instances and the choice he makes would be greatly influenced by the culture he belongs to and the other beliefs he carries (a lot of them maybe without any rational reason). This is exactly similar to the situation where subjects are presented with the trolley problem (or similar moral dilemmas). Everyone feels that deliberately killing one guy is immoral, at the same time not acting and letting five people die is immoral too. What follows is an assessment as to what act is immoral to greater extent. Everyone makes this judgement on the basis of certain pre-fabricated notions (that might have nothing to do with deontology at all), and this is precisely the reason why strong correlations are observed in the neuroimaging data and the psychological experiments. This is the issue I have with such an approach. I believe there is something fundamentally wrong with presenting people with two unethical choices and asking them to measure which one is immoral to a greater degree. In my view, it should not be deontology's burden to prescribe what immoral act is a case of greater moral violation. I believe the extent of deontology (or even consequentialism) should be limited to classifying acts as moral and immoral and we should not demand a way to make comparisons between immoral acts or try to quantify them in any way. Such a practice, if conducted, will inevitably be carried out in an incoherent manner. This incoherence, then, should not act as an argument against deontology as a school of thought (this is precisely what Greene is after).

4.1 EXPLAINING TRANSITIONS

Another issue with the Greene's model is that it fails to explain certain moral transitions. I'll use homosexuality as an example to illustrate this point. Have a look at the curve below:

Figure 1.4 Views on premarital sex and homosexuality, 1983–2012



The data on which Figure 1.4 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter

(From: http://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/38526/personal_relationships_figure_1_4.png?width=500&height=305.2851182197496)

This curve only reinforces the idea that we all are subconsciously aware of. We realize, that acceptance of homosexuality in society has seen a steep rise in the past few decades. How did this happen? Can we evolve out of our evolutionary moral

beliefs so quickly? Can ideas acquired over a million years of evolution be surpassed by just a few decades of propaganda? Turns out they can. This only reinforces my claim that they weren't evolutionary ideas in the first place. They were never our natural instincts. They were just ideas made popular by religion and society, among other factors. Ideas that lost their popularity once society and its people grew more aware and more sensitive towards homosexuals. Whether homosexuality is justified or not, or whether this acceptance was right or not is a completely different debate. But the fact that the morals regarding one of the societal taboos saw such a drastic change in a matter of few decades only suggests that such ideas are not a product of human evolution, rather pop culture.

5.1 THE CONSEQUENCES OF A CONSEQUENTIALIST CONSENSUS

Another idea that was touched upon by Peter Singer in his paper titled "Ethics and Intuitions" holds the potential to be a valid counter to the Greene's arguments against deontological thinking.

There is yet another problem associated with adopting a purely consequentialist world view. We should not look at the trolley dilemma as an isolated example, we should view it as a principle to be implemented everywhere. We are not just talking about killing this one guy or saving these five guys, we are talking about a principle that gives me the right to kill an individual because I believe his death brings benefit to the society (in this case that benefit is calculated using number of lives saved). What happens if I am allowed to apply this principle in all similar situations? What happens if everyone is allowed to implement this principle in all similar situations? These are some of the questions that we need to think about. We need also need to analyze what happens to a society in which such actions are appreciated. Even if I believe Greene and accept that morals have an evolutionary basis, it is very much possible that following these ideas (which we characteristically associate with deontology), have facilitated societies to function smoothly and live in harmony. If that is the case, then consequentialists have shot themselves in the foot by claiming evolution to be the cause of deontological morals, since disrupting the harmony of the society just to align our morals to extreme cases like the trolley problem is even consequentially unacceptable.

3 CONCLUSION

I believe I have fulfilled my target of casting a shadow of doubt on the claims and arguments of Joshua Greene. Although I haven't had the opportunity of arguing my defense in greater detail, I have tried to ensure that my claims be intuitively reasonable at least. I have left out the claims that were either less reasonable or required much greater explanation. I hope this paper served its purpose to some extent, that of protecting the Kantian cult.

REFERENCES

- [1] Joshua Greene, "The Secret Joke of Kant's Soul", 2007.
- [2] Peter Singer, "Ethics and Intuitions", 2005.