

I think I inadvertently left this out of the envelope I sent you! *Raf*

ef
R.D. Alexander (letter)

16 May 2006

Jason Przybylski
Editorial Intern
Columbia University Press
61 West 62nd Street
New York, New York 10023

Dear Mr. Przybylski:

I have looked at Maxine Sheets-Johnstone's manuscript, *The Roots of Morality*, and hereby submit my comments. I have not read the entire ms. in detail, but I read several chapters and many additional passages, and I scanned the rest. I do not wish any compensation for what I have done. I looked at the ms solely out of interest, and as I told you, I did it with some skepticism that I was an appropriate reviewer. My comments here will probably explain that attitude.

This is a fairly long and complicated ms. with a substantial and diverse set of references. The prologue promises much. It is not a book that I would likely read. I am, however, an evolutionary biologist, not a philosopher, and you should definitely take this into account.

When I started reading this ms, I desperately wanted the author to "get things straight." I wanted to be able to praise the ms. I wanted it to straighten out a whole lot of things that for various reasons remain fuzzy. I wanted it to march along, somewhere between the evolutionary biologists and – let's say, poets and artists and other non-scientists – and establish new and useful connections all over the place. I wanted that because I think the direct study of behavior, in the context of a strong knowledge of the process of evolution, is the way to reduce pain, misery, and suffering in the world – the way to eliminate for the future such horrendous statistics as the January 2006 National Geographic reported, of 50 million deliberate premature terminations of human lives during the 20th century from 48 instances of mass murders alone. Not included were all other murders, of individuals, families, or small groups – and as is usual, no one had a way of reporting the amount of pain, misery, and suffering caused by those 50 million deaths. But I am afraid that it doesn't really matter how many people read this book when it comes out – as I am sure it will – because it won't make that much difference.

notes on back

The author is obviously a highly intelligent, knowledgeable, and much-published individual with an impressive command of language. She covers an enormous range of topics, in a well-organized way, and she references her writing profusely.

The author seems to seek complicated wording, even to the extremes of (1) manufacturing new words, (2) mis-using words, and (3) generating excess verbiage of doubtful meaning. Her first sentence on p. 1 is an example, as is her almost incredibly (and needlessly) dense prologue. One does not "elucidate" [explain] an understanding of morality – at least not until it is generated. And what is the point of saying, "in the nature of human nature" repeatedly?

The second sentence is another dilly, repeating "bona fide" three times, again, needlessly. One cannot convince a perceptive reader by repeating that what she is about to say is true, true, true.

Her third sentence betrays a basic failure to understand biology. There is no way morality can "emanate from within rather than from without." Every trait of every organism emanates from both within and without – derives from the genetic materials (and the bit of cytoplasm and its inclusions in the zygote) and from the environment, internal and external. Morality: *a fortiori*. Indeed, her sentence (above) is in effect denied in the last sentence on p. 1, although the statement seems designed to imply that she (alone?) perceives – and introduces here for the first time – a view of morality that includes environment in the form of "moral education."

It is difficult for me, as a biologist, to grasp the writer's general intent. The title and the prologue seem to promise an exposition of the fundamental basis for morality in humans. To me this implies that the underlying reasons for the existence of morality, and its nature, will be explained. But the book is really about the feelings of humans with regard to morality – the feelings of those involved in moral behavior and the feelings expressed by an array of philosophers and other academics about morality. That would be fine, except that the ways she attempts to explain these feelings is to me quite unconvincing.

The author begins essentially every part of the ms. with quotes and interpretations of philosophers and others from the past, and continues by

following essentially the same procedure with recent authors from various fields. She claims in the prologue that her arguments are based on views that are "strongly empirical in the sense that, whether acknowledged as such or not [!!!], each is based on evidence from both personal and social expertise." It seems to me that this is a way of glorifying personal opinion as fact — a justification for selecting passages favorable to the selector's approach, or bias, and delivering them as if they represented substantial evidence. Anyone can go through the writings of the most famous and brilliant writers of the past and select tidbits worthy of further thought — as well as serious errors. I don't find this a persuasive way to proceed, and never have, though I have been aware of it since I was an undergraduate exactly 57 years ago this September. I rejected it then, with a considerable dismay that printed the incident in my brain, because I had begun the exploration of some assigned readings with enormous hope and enthusiasm. Eventually, however, I (a 19-year old) said to myself, in frustration, "These philosophers (the ones whose works I had been assigned to read) are no better off than the theologians: They have no decent theory."

Theories and arguments about life today must be grounded in modern biology. Biology is defined as the study of life (not physiology or genetics or anything else to be contrasted with learning or the special cumulative learning that we call culture), and as requiring consistency with the well-understood process of evolution -- or an explanation of its absence. No great analytical virtue derives from picking and choosing morsels from either ancient or recent narratives other than the occasional illumination of an intriguing or brilliant view established on other grounds -- or a clever use of language. Poetry is not science; nor is facility with language, no matter its sophistication.

Evolutionary biologists recognize adaptive function, proximate mechanisms, and incidental effects, the last including consequences from such events as novel environments and pleiotropies. Elucidating the roots of morality seems to me necessarily to involve searches for adaptive function, and it also seems to me that the proximate mechanisms underlying all adaptive functions cannot be thoroughly understood unless one has a fairly precise knowledge of the particular adaptive function they serve. Without these two facets of understanding, one cannot possibly interpret the significance of incidental effects.



Nowhere did I find evidence that this author has encountered the argument that the roots of morality involve ways of dealing with conflicts of interest, and that the importance of this ability to resolve conflicts lies in the reasons for obligate group-living in humans. Or that conflicts of interest – and all of the many behaviors that result from them and therefore characterize the organisms that express them – those “feelings” and attitudes and tendencies that the author stresses throughout the ms -- have their roots in the individuality of genomes produced as a result of sexual reproduction; or that the outbreeding which characterizes sexual reproduction and creates this situation is virtually universal because the random scrambling of genomes enables sexual organisms to outrace their much more rapidly evolving parasites and diseases.

The author has a special chapter on play. Nowhere does she make a significant argument about the possible or probable adaptive significance of play – for example, the argument that play is low-cost practice for the later full-cost real-life situation. Indeed, she not only avoids adaptive significance but seems to regard it as an empty concept, therefore not in any way relevant to the search for the roots of morality (e.g., for play, see p. 265). She asserts that “In short, to insist that learning one’s vulnerabilities is simply adaptive is to insist that learning one’s body and learning to move one’s self are adaptive, which is to insist that virtually everything in the end is adaptive, the bottom line being in its ultimate formulation a *reduction ad absurdum*: being alive has survival value and is adaptive for reproductive success!” To the contrary, the study of adaptation is extremely complicated and difficult, and two of the most important reasons are that not everything is adaptive, and we are quite often profoundly wrong in our initial suppositions about exactly how a trait is adaptive. And you cannot determine adaptive significance without hypothesizing it – in Steven Jay Gould’s phrase, making up a “just-so story,” (or, in Richard Feynmann’s phrase, “making a guess”) and then doing your best to falsify it. And then doing it again – and again. To stay with proximate mechanisms is to erase the possibility that you can ever discern whatever unity may exist with respect to adaptive function – to erase the possibility that you can ever discover something like the “roots of morality.”

The author believes (p. 266, 263) that “From this experiential-semantic perspective . . . rough and tumble play. . . or bodily play in general . . . [cannot] be adequately explained as motor training or practice for adult behavior.” And that . . . play is “not an accessory to a main event, but the

main event itself." She gives no argument on these points except that play is complicated and pleasurable -- "fun." It appears that the qualifiers, "From this experiential-semantic perspective" and including the word "adequately" in the phrase "cannot be adequately explained" are ways out in case the rest of the assertions turn out to be incorrect. I see no connection between the "semantic-experiential perspective" and the questions whether play is adaptive and whether its adaptive significance is in practice for later events. And in what sense can play possibly be "the main event"? What main event? And why do I see no argument, only assertion?

The author goes on to state, "To begin with, pleasure is not a kind of background music provided by wholly theoretical genes to keep us interested, focused, and on target -- whether a matter of mating, hunting, or eating." It is difficult for me to imagine how any academic person interested in the human species and purporting to take an evolutionary approach, as this author does, can make such a statement. Even a child can understand that pleasure leads to returns to the pleasurable act, and its repetition, and pain does the opposite; adults versed in biology know that in the environments of history pleasure correlates with reproductive acts and pain with the reverse. There are no other known reasons for the existence of pleasure and pain. The only thing that needs to be known about genes to understand this simple (but biologically profound) fact is that everything about every organism is a consequence of the interaction of genes and environment. And that's a fact. It is also a fact that addictions are wedded to pleasure, and that the presence and strength of some addictions vary with genetic variation.

The most important fact of all is that each of us emerged from an unbroken line of ancestors, and in our species only adults -- not juveniles, whether they play or not -- have the ability to become ancestors. Reproduction, and only reproduction -- whether we like it or not -- has been the "main event" across our entire history. All else is proximate mechanisms, incidental effects, ineradicable pleiotropies, and "errors" resulting from environmental novelties. The mission of the juvenile stage is to become the best possible adult. It is probably unfortunate that our consciousness did not evolve to know these kinds of things, and apparently even to reject many of them. But in 2006 we have no excuse for ignoring these things or rejecting them out of hand.

On p. 136 the author says that “. . . war is commonly conceived as a purely cultural phenomenon, never as an activity that sets ‘man’ apart from other animals – the ‘beasts.’ Accordingly, killing their own kind is never mentioned as a behavior that makes humans unique in the animal world.” On the contrary, biologists have gradually and extensively developed the precise theme at which she hints in these statements and have repeatedly specified what she says has never been mentioned. An example of this argument occurs on pp. 79-81 in a book she cites, *The Biology of Moral Systems* by Richard D. Alexander. The same author (1990), in *How did Humans Evolve: Reflections on the Uniquely Unique Species*, University of Michigan Museum of Zoology Special Publication No. 1, gives a history of the literature -- on the topic Sheets-Johnstone says has “never” been mentioned -- going back to Darwin, and to Sir Arthur Keith’s (1949) *A New Theory of Human Evolution* and Robert S. Bigelow’s (1969) *The Dawn Warriors*. Humans have for some time been specified as the only species that has members of its own species as its principal hostile force of nature (as a principal guiding force in its molding by natural selection). Humans have been described as the only species that has generated its particular brand and intensity of social cooperativeness – indeed, its morality(!) – as a system of defense and offense against competing and hostile groups of its own species.

“A hydrogen bomb is an example of mankind’s enormous capacity for friendly cooperation. Its construction requires an intricate network of human teams, all working with single-minded devotion toward a common goal. Let us pause and savor the glow of self-congratulation we deserve for belonging to such an intelligent and sociable species.” (Bigelow 1969)

I wonder if the author knows that only humans play competitively group-against-group? Has she ever considered how extensively and intensively humans have engaged in their unique team sports? Is she aware that an 18-year old newly graduated from high school recently received a contract worth almost 100 million dollars just to play on a certain professional basketball team? Has she considered how our preoccupation with our unique preoccupation with team sports – which begin in very young children -- might fit into the context of intergroup aggression in humans?

I am sad – very sad – to write this set of comments, because I think it is clear that this author has an unusual mind and a great deal of knowledge. And I would dearly love to have digested a few hundred pages of discussion of the significance of all those human “feelings” – that teeming profusion of

proximate mechanisms that means so much to us, and that perhaps more than anything else describes us in terms we grasp easily, and on which we thrive. But in today's world those discussions have to begin with or be harmonious with what we know about the evolutionary process. Even in the absence of science one must have a system for overcoming personal biases and identifying the kinds of harmony among ideas that reject our efforts at falsification, and eventually point us toward to correctness -- partly by driving us to flesh out the history of the relevant literature honestly and thoroughly.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Richard D. Alexander". The signature is fluid and somewhat stylized, with the first and last names being more prominent than the middle initial.

Richard D. Alexander
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