

Literature essay examples

[Sociology](#), [Ethics](#)



Constructing an account and an analysis of an argument

Pinker's Scientific Analysis of Morality

In the article, “ The Moral Instinct”, published in The New York Times Magazine on January 13 2008, Steven Pinker elaborates on our perception of moral and immoral behaviour, and attempts to show that it is a complex part of ourselves, which is influenced to some extent by our neurology and has evolved over a period of time to make life better for us. The title indicates that he looks upon our moral sense as instinctual rather than logical. The moral instinct has had an impact on “ man’s predicament” as it has the power to “ steer our actions.”

He tries to describe morality by differentiating it from other aspects of our psychology. Identifying right from wrong is a distinct psychological capacity which is not the same as merely separating our likes from our dislikes or our wise choices from the bad ones. While it is about the working of an individual mind and a “ psychological state which can be turned on and off like a switch”, it is also a universal phenomenon. Pinker supports this theory of universality with examples to show how most people reacted very similarly to questions on imaginary situations where they had to decide if the behaviour described is moral or immoral. They could not explain why they made the choice too. In this way Pinker asserts that the question is beyond simple solutions, is immensely complex, although all over the world people showed a propensity to moralise and appeared to have been born with this capacity.

Pinker uses the survey by anthropologists Richard Schwede and Alan Fiske to list out five common moral positions that seem to exist all over the world.

In spite of their belonging to diverse cultures, behaviour such as not harming others, being fair, being loyal to one's social group, respectful to authority and maintaining purity were considered by people from all over the world to be the most important moral standards, which make a man feel worthy.

While these themes are ubiquitous, their order of importance changes from one culture to another. For instance, westerners give priority to fairness over communal loyalty, while easterners tend strongly believe that loyalty to one's brother or religion is far more important than fairness.

Pinker's most interesting claim is that studying about morality among people and understanding that they may have different priorities, can improve human relationships. People from hostile camps would then become more tolerant of their enemies, as they realise that in their part of the world, it was the moral thing to prioritise communal loyalty to fairness or vice versa. They would not call them as unfair, immoral entities, but realise that they work on moral grounds too. This scientific approach takes us beyond our subjective position and shows that morality is greater and more complex than we realize, although we are born with a particular moral sense that is moulded by environmental influences just as our opponent's ideas are moulded by his. We do better by knowing ourselves.

Pinker has organized his ideas, by beginning with a detailed explanation of his title, whereby he lays the foundation for his argument. He does this by pointing out that the moral sense is innate and is triggered when we put ourselves in a psychological position. He makes the readers realize this by asking them at the outset to compare three people who have done deeds that are perceived as good and bad. Thus the reader's moral switch is on and

he is made aware of the complexity of morals. In this state of mind, the reader is curious to know more about the scientific analysis of morality. Plenty of examples from every day life are given by the writer to show how perception of morality and amorality change from place to place and from one period to another. Just as things that were taboo become lifestyle choices, some choices which were once considered personal options could with time, be looked upon as wrong. He talks of biological hardwiring and questions its implications. Along with him we wonder if morality is merely a neural network and as many scientific studies suggest, man is essentially selfish and our lives are nihilistic. But he quells our uneasiness by pointing out that human history is too complex and human nature has too much variety to believe that we are controlled by a selfish gene. By identifying morality, its themes and our positions, we get to understand each other. Pinker lists out names of anthropologists, psychologists, philosophers, biologists and cognitive neuro scientists and cites their studies as the sources that support his argument. He uses a quotation by Immanuel Kant on the complexity of moral law. He quotes Bertrand Russel to show how the universal perception of the immoral is always accompanied by the thought that the wrong doers should be punished. He talks of psychologist Paul Rozin's theory that psychological switches that put you on a course of action could be moral or rational. He compares the older approach to moral psychology by Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg to Haidt's moral rationalization. He refers to a wide variety of experiments ranging from web based ones in which two hundred thousand respondents from multi religious backgrounds participated to detailed M. R. I scans conducted in hi tech labs.

He uses a multi disciplinary approach that shows his ability to use various disciplines to develop his argument. Chomsky's concept of a universal grammar as an analogy to support anthropologists list of universalities which include moral emotions. Pinker's arguments are thus well supported and he draws from the ideas from experts from various disciplines to substantiate the flow of his thought.

Pinker begins to interact with the reader by using the second person in the first two lines of the article. He sets them thinking on their perceptions and asks them to re examine them. Throughout the essay, he points out how most people think, how most people responded and how most people would probably respond to the various questions he raises, and he raises a number of them. By picking out very intriguing dilemmas, Pinker retain the interest of the reader, who feels he is in the middle of a heated debate. He also makes the reader wonder if man is a moral or a selfish being. The everyday instances and moral dilemmas make the reader feel that it is not the writer's issues that are discussed but his own. That man is on the path of a moral evolution which would make him do better, is the writer's happy conclusion. The reader is also convinced that ideas of what is moral and what is not are constantly being re examined and would probably not be the same from generation to generation. The wealth of his supporting data would convince objective of readers.

Although Pinker has drawn on a wide variety of sources, there are some assumptions he has made. He, as a westerner, is careful to be fair in his arguments. But it is doubtful if a student of religious studies would recognise the validity of his arguments. An orthodox follower of religion might be

offended by his casual comment on God. To a student with an intellectual approach, his use of several opposing strands of arguments would be appealing and appear objective. Intellectuals would be fascinated by Pinker's deep analysis, obvious concern and scholarship. They would empathise with his concern for how far the perceptions of the majority are influenced by extraneous factors and how far they follow their gut feeling and how the common man usually behaves in a given situation.

After drawing from a wide variety of sources to enlighten the readers on what aspects of morality are universal and how juggling the five spheres could lead to a complex variety of behaviour, Pinker satisfies the anxious reader that there is indeed such a thing as morality; people are not bad, but just have different priorities. He closes with the recommendation that science and research do not suggest that moral studies are not important. Advanced studies of moral behaviour would go to help in the growth of human beings.

Sources

1. Bailey, Ronald. "Steven Pinker on the Moral instinct" www.reason.com
Web. January 14 2008