Darcia Narvaez  


According to its introduction, Darcia Narvaez’s *Neurobiology and the Development of Human Morality: Evolution, Culture, and Wisdom* seeks to make three contributions to moral psychology. First, it provides an empirically-backed argument for the vital importance of early experience in moral development; second, it proposes a neurobiological developmental theory of moral motivation; and third, it lays out a transformed vision of moral possibility. Narvaez seeks to expand our understanding of morality to include not only reasoning, but also habits of emotion and behavior. In light of this, she is essentially arguing that care ethics has deep evolutionary roots and empirical evidence to back it up.

I should begin with a disclaimer: I am not familiar with the psychological and neurobiological literature to know whether there is countervailing evidence available, and not qualified to evaluate the cited research itself. This review will proceed on the assumption that the social and biological science is sound, and discuss the book’s implications from the philosophical point of view.

Narvaez presents extensive evidence that the reasoning and emotional capacities that are the primary focus of moral philosophy have “causal components ‘all the way down’” to the level of brain circuitry (p. 5). Narvaez notes her methodological affinity with Aristotle’s teleology: if we are to aim at human flourishing, we must understand human nature. (This is her answer to those who adhere to the dictum that we cannot derive “ought” from “is.”) She turns to small-band hunter-gatherer societies (SBHG)—which have been the form of human life for 99% of human history—in order to get a sense of the true baseline for human development and well-being, our true nature.

Narvaez argues that we inherit more than genes from our parents. Using developmental systems theory, Narvaez introduces six inheritances that go beyond genes: epigenetics (how environment and experience affect gene expression), developmental plasticity (the brain’s ability to reorganize itself in response to external events), basic needs, a microbiome, an ecology of (micro- and macro-) resources, and culture. Through the interactions and complex mutual influences of these factors, genes, and the care we receive, we become who we are. She paints a detailed picture of the human self as a dynamically developing system with cognition and emotion functionally unified, emphasizing how the responsiveness of early caregivers influences emotional patterns, which shape biological patterns, which build the neural circuitry of the brain. At times the details are mind-numbing for a non-scientist.
To define optimal caregiving, Narvaez points to childrearing practices common among small-band hunter-gatherer societies in today’s world, including: soothing perinatal experience; responsivity (meeting needs promptly); constant physical presence and touch; breastfeeding; multiple adult caregivers; positive social support; and free play in nature with multi-aged mates (p. 30). Throughout the discussion, she emphasizes the underlying physiology as well as the psychology of attachment. The secure attachment that results from responsive childrearing forms the basis for the development of an engagement ethic: an orientation to the world that involves social pleasure, presence, reverence, synchrony and intersubjectivity, empathy, mentalizing, and perspective taking. In the engagement ethic, as Narvaez puts it, “one lives with others in mind” (p. 103). From an engagement ethic, what Narvaez calls “communal imagination”—as opposed to “vicious” or “detached” imagination—can develop. According to Narvaez, communal imagination uses our abilities to abstract, and therefore solve moral problems, but maintains a focus on the Other.

Narvaez goes on to survey what can happen when suboptimal care results in excessive stress response. Suboptimal care results in underdeveloped brains, which in turn make it difficult for children to develop prosocial characteristics. Narvaez surveys the emotional systems that can be triggered by non-responsive (i.e. stressful) early care, then shows how they undermine the engagement ethic and moral imagination, even suggesting how some prominent domains of modern life—science and economics—embody principles that reflect the kinds of attitudes and behaviors that develop as the result of poor caregiving. Thus, she offers a kind of diagnosis of what ails us as a society, tracing the problem back to care in early life.

She then sketches an argument as to why the engagement ethic is better than other ethics, even though all can qualify as ethics, especially from the inside. The idea is that these better fulfill the human telos (as evidenced by SBHG societies). Better alignment with our telos leads to better flourishing (207). She claims that although self-protective “safety” ethics may make us feel good in the moment, they are ultimately damaging to self, community, and greater environment because they fail to engage empathy and downplay long-term consequences. If this is so, it is a good reason to prefer the engagement ethic and communal imagination. I think it is so; but I think further argument is warranted, because the issue is a complex one.

Narvaez’s claim, then, is that the shift away from cooperative consciousness in recent times “is a failure of human beingness” (p. 219). In a competitive mindset, we don’t do as well as human beings as those who occupy a cooperative mindset. She also presents evidence that cooperation is pervasive throughout the natural world, and symbiosis is probably a deep factor in