Is Morality an Elegant Machine or a Kludge?\(^1\)

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In a passage in *A Theory of Justice*, which has become increasingly influential in recent years, John Rawls (1971) noted an analogy between moral philosophy and grammar. Moral philosophy, or at least the first stage of moral philosophy, Rawls maintained, can be thought of as the attempt to describe our *moral capacity* – the capacity which underlies “the potentially infinite number and variety of [moral] judgments we are prepared to make.” In order to describe that capacity, we must formulate “a set of principles which, when conjoined with our beliefs and knowledge of the circumstances, would lead us to make [the judgments we actually make] were we to apply these principles conscientiously and intelligently.” (Rawls 1971, 46) Citing Chomsky’s *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (1965), Rawls goes on to suggest that describing our moral capacity can be usefully compared to “describing the sense of grammaticalness that we have for the sentences of our native language. In this case the aim is to characterize the ability to recognize well-formed sentences by formulating clearly expressed principles which make the same discriminations as the native speaker.” (Ibid. 47)

Though Rawls’ analogy between our moral capacity and a Chomskian grammar of our language was new and insightful, the project of describing our moral capacity – of finding a set of principles (or rules or definitions) which entail the potentially infinite number of judgments we actually make – has a history that goes back to Plato. In *The Republic*, Socrates asks Cephalus to provide an account of justice, and then challenges the

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account Cephalus offers by showing that it does not coincide with the judgment we are actually inclined to make about what justice requires in the rather far-fetched case of a man who has stored his weapons with a friend and then asks for them back when he is not in his right mind. (The Republic, 1, 131) What unites the Socratic quest for “definitions” and Rawls’ project of describing our moral capacity is the assumption that there is an integrated body of information in the mind – perhaps something like a generative grammar – which underlies our moral judgments about a potentially infinite number of cases, many of which are unlike anything we have previously encountered.

Though Rawls did not push the analogy between the moral capacity and grammar much further than this, other writers have been bolder. According to Chomsky and his followers, the grammars of all natural languages share important features in common, and since the linguistic information available to children is not rich enough to enable them to learn these features, knowledge of the linguistic universals must be innate. Of course, Chomsky does not deny that there are some very important differences among grammars as well. To explain these, Chomsky has suggested that some of the linguistic universals are disjunctive – they specify two or more different patterns that some aspect of grammar can exhibit. Which pattern is actually incorporated in the grammar that a child acquires is determined by cues in the child’s linguistic environment. But these cues function only to trigger the adoption of one or another innate pattern; they do not contain any information about the pattern. If the moral capacity is like grammar, many writers have noted, we should expect that the moral capacities of all normal humans to have important features in common. And just as knowledge of linguistic universals is innate, so too is knowledge of moral universals. Deep moral differences, if they exist, can be accounted for by the hypothesis that some moral universals, like some linguistic universals, have a disjunctive structure, specifying two or more different patterns that some aspect of the moral rule system can exhibit. Environmental cues encountered during development would determine which of these options is actually incorporated in the “moral grammar” that an adult ultimately acquires.

2 Stich (1993); Harman (1999); Dwyer (1999); Mikhail (forthcoming); Hauser (forthcoming).