The Language of Utilitarianism in Economics and the Public Square

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Moral Tribes is the magnum opus (or at least, the first magnum opus) of rising neuroscience star Joshua Greene (2013), based on a decade’s work that takes on an important, timely, and truly enormous question: Where can we as humans find common ground that will lead to cooperation between “Us” and “Them” in a world full of intractable controversy? In particular, how will we override the design of our brains to cooperate only within select groups of like-minded others? How can we moderate our tendency to tribalism?

This book has been the subject of stellar reviews, with praises from the likes of heavy hitters such as Steven Pinker and Peter Singer. It was also reviewed by economist Aldo Rustichini in the Journal of Economic Literature; his abstract invites economists to take the challenge of reading the book and to consider the contribution economics can make to the questions posed. Almost ominously, Rustichini writes, “I believe there is [a contribution] and this insight is now in danger of being lost. This is my attempt to indicate where the research should look now. Maybe it is not too late.” (2018).

My attempt here is to both take the challenge, and to modify it a bit, asking, “What contribution might a Christian economist make to the conversation?”

The challenge of reading the book has been a valuable one. It covers a lot of ground, though not always as efficiently as this economist would like. It turns out that this book is instead a long, winding, well-researched defense of utilitarianism – a word that is (no doubt intentionally) left out of the five-paragraph description on the dustcover. In fact, the four blurbs on the back emphasize the originality of the book (“after two and half millennia, it’s rare to come across a genuinely new idea on the nature of morality…”) even as it seems Joshua Greene very clearly and unapologetically places himself in the tradition of Mill and Bentham. Greene is certainly extending the story, and arguing for it with new forms of evidence from neuroscience, but all with the intention of
returning us to what he sees as an underrated, misunderstood idea that ought to get a second look.

*Moral Tribes* is written in five parts. Greene begins by describing the moral problem at hand (not the Tragedy of the Commons, which our tribalism actually helps us with, but the Tragedy of Commonsense Morality, which tribalism inhibits). He then lays out many, many public goods (and related) experiments along with others to illustrate our moral complexity. This takes about 100 pages. The middle part of the book (parts II through IV) begins with a summary of the research on the “trolley problem” of philosophy in the context of experimental neuroscience – essentially trying to identify which parts of the brain activate in creative variants of this famous moral dilemma. He continues with his fresh description of utilitarianism (“a splendid idea”) and defenses of its common critiques. The final 60 pages of the 350 page book (part V) address what he calls “Moral Solutions” – providing an example of applying what he now calls “Deep Pragmatism” to a specific issue (abortion) and arguing that this is the best we can do in public policy-making.

If this book were a sandwich, I’d suggest that the contents are tasty but the bread has something to be desired – at least to an economist, and especially to a Christian one. The first section can really belabor the various experiments with which many economists are already familiar, and (ironically) was a slow read. The middle of the book is much more gripping, inspiring deeper thought and keeping one’s attention. But the ending is truly disappointing, as Greene sets aside any pretense of taking seriously certain tribes’ moral lenses, and does so with abundant snark. After what seems like a (not-terrible) description of the problems with the pro-choice and pro-life viewpoints, he strangely shoots down the pro-life argument on the basis of the one of the claims he first identified as a straw man.\(^2\) He thus moves from a position emphasizing common ground to a position that instead makes a bold and unapologetic case for his version of evidence-based policy-making, where the only legitimate evidence is, of course, that which is testable by the scientific method. For example, if pro-lifers believe in souls and pro-choicers don’t, the fact that pro-lifers haven’t yet proven that a person is “ensouled” at conception means...well...they lose. Greene is happy to consider evidence for our ensoulment, but can’t seem to find any. It’s clear that the spiritual bent of every human throughout history – the longing for God, the desire to worship – is inadmissible.
I’d like to provide my “contribution” as a Christian and economist by thinking primarily about the language in this book, which I found both troubling and symbolic of some of the difficulties in current dialog around moral issues in human behavior and policy-making.

First, the language of “better,” “good,” and of “what works best” is offered without definition throughout the book. This kind of language use is a common problem in economics, but we have a fairly widely-accepted response when someone asks what we mean by optimal: “revealed preference.” Interestingly, this phrase never appears in the book – and perhaps for good reason, since much of the book is dedicated to identifying why we answer things “wrong” in (say) trolley problems that ought to elicit identical responses. While an economist will acknowledge that real-world choices reflect both preferences and constraints, most lab experiments involve hypothetical choices and are meant to uncover preferences explicitly. It’s never quite clear how we would know that the “right” answer differs from what humans say they would do – we only know that in hypothetical scenarios, many people answer differently depending on small differences in the scenario. But that almost makes one wonder – perhaps those differences are not so small? Greene’s work in trying to lay out underlying mechanisms is interesting, but sometimes seems a little too conclusive about what is “best.” In a recent talk, Dierdre McCloskey argued that both Samuelsonian and modern behavioral economists make the same assumption – that a rational utility maximizer is the optimal way to be. Samuelsonians assume we are such; behavioralists try to nudge us toward it and away from our “mistakes.” She suggested that in fact our behavior itself may be a better – more human – measure of what it is we think is optimal. Greene finds much of our behavior – or rather, our hypothetical behavior – to be quite suspect.

Second, the language surround “utility” itself was a cautionary tale for those of us in economics. I was quite impatient as Greene danced around the meaning of the word, nervous to claim the mantle of utilitarianism, but then I realized that truly, most people do not know what we mean by this word. Strangely, he never substitutes “utility” with “well-being” as I do when I teach it; he insists on calling it “happiness” – which he then doesn’t seem willing to define in any meaningful way except “experience.” He makes clear it is not about wealth – as I’m sure we all do with our students – but he doesn’t go deeper. That said, what’s he supposed to do? An astute student in introductory economics realizes that when I say,
“We assume people maximize their utility,” this utility is implicitly defined simply as “the thing people maximize.” For heaven’s sake, it’s measured in “utils”! Perhaps we should stay away from definitions after all.

A third concern relates to a pervasive analogy used in the book, and that is of the human brain as a machine. I may not have noticed this if I hadn’t recently read Alan Jacobs’ “How to Think” (2017)(put it on your list – it is a wonderful little book). In fact, Jacobs’ book describes some of the same neuroscience and philosophy (minus the trolley problems) and conveys many of the same basic concerns. Jacobs and Greene seem to agree that thinking – really thinking – is hard work. Jacobs lays out the incentives we have to avoid thinking, and what it looks like to try to push back on them. Greene would say we have to use the manual (rather than automatic) modes in our brain. There is an important but subtle difference here: Jacobs explicitly rejects machine metaphors for the brain, and convincingly argues that we are unable to internalize these as the metaphors they are but instead end up using them as screens, believing we are actually (say) “wired” for things when in fact we are embodied. When we come to believe such things, he says, “we are in a bad way, because those screens become permanently implanted, and we lose the ability to redirect our attention toward those elements of reality we have ignored” (p. 104). Perhaps unsurprisingly, Greene, as a neuroscientist, seems fairly uninterested in our embodiment, but very interested in discussing stimuli that “activate values” in the brain, and “springs and levers in the brain” that lead us to moral conclusions about an action. In the end, we are to recognize that the “alarm system” in our brains that wants to stop us from doing the rational thing in one of the trolley scenarios – this “human antiviolence gizmo” that bristles against sacrificing one life to save several others – is indispensable but not infallible, and we ought not “elevate its operating characteristics into moral principles” (p. 249). It is no surprise, then, that when he later refers to human spirituality, he wonders at how strange it would be to think the human zygote becomes “ensouled” at some point in the conception process. Indeed, if one has reduced the world to a series of mechanical and chemical processes, the idea of souls can be nothing but bizarre!

My final thought about language is one that I think reveals the tension of holding the set of positions Greene holds. On the one hand, things like intrinsic rights, truths, or values are not allowed to be real in the world he posits (or, at minimum, they are not absolute, and are
certainly not suitable for the public square). And so the notion of created souls or divine purpose is absolutely rejected. On the other hand, as he describes the brain’s various parts and functions, he cannot help but (quite constantly) use words like “designed” and “purpose,” and he regularly uses language of cause and effect that implies intention (for example, about cooperation: “I’m saying that we have this [moral] machinery in our heads because of the role it plays in promoting cooperation (p. 64),” and about family loyalties: “To take a gene’s-eye view, genes that promote beneficence toward kin are enhancing their own survival, helping equally good copies of themselves inside the bodies of others (p. 31)” ). When rather deep into the book he mentions God for the first time, he suggests that perhaps God made us, or perhaps it was all an accident, but it doesn’t really matter. Of course, it’s very strange to imagine all that design and purpose in an accident; but again, it seems this is not admissible evidence. Instead, he takes the absence of God as axiomatic (at least for any decision in the public square), unless and until the believers offer proof – proof which appears to be impossible to provide not just in practice but in principle.

Greene closes his book by pushing us toward an approach to the public square that takes utilitarianism as our best option – where the philosophy is eased up a bit by his modifications and his kind permission to be a hypocrite. The two key requirements are a commitment to using happiness as the measure of success, and giving everyone identical weight in the social welfare function (though he doesn’t use the language of social welfare functions, which would have served him well in the book). His efforts to walk through the process of applying these commitments are surprisingly short and unsatisfying. My impression is that recent contributions like John Inazu’s Confident Pluralism (2018) give a much better account of a healthy public square containing believers and non-believers alike. However, my favorite part of Moral Tribes in terms of policy was actually a bit that seemed lost in the shuffle and isn’t revisited at the end the way I would have expected it to be. Greene points to survey evidence that when people are asked “why” they favor a policy, they tend to be even stronger on their position after answering – but when they are asked “how” such a policy works, they tend to be more circumspect about their position after answering. He recommends that instead of asking policy makers, pundits, or uncles why they favor a policy, we should simply ask, “Now, how exactly does that policy work?”
This strikes me as excellent advice in a political environment filled with posturing and moralistic rhetoric. It may actually get people thinking, and that would certainly be a good thing.

Endnotes

1. Perhaps that’s to be expected, as “efficiency” per se isn’t one of the values that shows up in Greene’s argument for important priorities in collective decision making.

2. Specifically, when first describing the view, he suggests that pro-lifers may argue that the problem is a “human life that never gets lived because of an abortion” and argues (correctly, I think) that this argument would equally apply to contraception and, indeed, abstinence – anything that prevents a person from ever existing. He quickly moves on, saying most pro-lifers are more likely to argue that there is a difference between potential lives and lives that are already underway. This is obviously correct. However, his final rejection of the pro-life position actually entails rejecting the first view, i.e. the straw man.

3. McCloskey gave the Volcker Lecture in Behavioral Economics at Syracuse University’s Maxwell School on April 8, 2019.

4. They even both talk about Mill – though Jacobs focuses on his defense of feelings and imagination!

5. Just for one basic example, he doesn’t seem willing to allocate any loss of happiness to people whose moral commitments “lose” in the public debate.

References


