

# Behavioral and Brain Sciences

## Baselines for Human Morality Should Include Species Typicality, Inheritances, Culture, Practice and Ecological Attachment --Manuscript Draft--

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<b>Abstract:</b>	Empirical studies involve WEIRD but also unnested (raised outside humanity's evolved nest) and underdeveloped participants. Assessing human moral potential needs to integrate a transdisciplinary approach to understanding species typicality and baselines, relevant evolutionary inheritances beyond genes, assessment of cultures and practices that foster (or not) virtue, and ecological morality. Human moral reason (nous) emerges from all of these.

Joshua May (book author)

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**Abstract:** Empirical studies involve WEIRD but also unnested (raised outside humanity's evolved nest) and underdeveloped participants. Assessing human moral potential needs to integrate a transdisciplinary approach to understanding species typicality and baselines, relevant evolutionary inheritances beyond genes, assessment of cultures and practices that foster (or not) virtue, and ecological morality. Human moral reason (nous) emerges from all of these.

Dr. May has waded impressively through a great deal of empirical research and philosophical argument to propose an account of “optimistic rationalism.” He has many ideas about how to deal with the inconsistencies found in experimental research. Much of what he proposes aligns with my view of moral complexity where moral functioning involves the conscious deliberative mind interacting with numerous subconscious processes—including, preferably, *well-educated* intuitions built from appropriate experience (Narvaez, 2010). Still, I find his view of morality and human nature narrow and pessimistic because he does not address species typicality, baselines for morality, evolutionary inheritances beyond genes, cultures and practices of virtue, and ecological morality.

*Species typicality.* Dr. May implicitly adopts the common view that current psychological research assesses species-typical moral functioning, at least to a reliable degree. To his credit, Dr. May briefly mentions the WEIRDness (Western, European, industrialized, rich, democratic; Henrich, Heine & Norenzayan, 2010) of the persons populating most datasets. These samples are also the source for most theories and conclusions drawn about human nature. He does not take these facts to their conclusions—that the nature of human nature cannot be established from such samples. A broader scope is needed to establish species typicality. The rest of my critique focuses on several aspects regarding the need for setting transdisciplinary-informed baselines when discussing human psychology and morality.

*Baselines for morality.* Dr. May provides no real empirical baseline for typical moral functioning of the human species apart from experiments in (mostly) social psychology. Although

WEIRDness is important to realize, there are two additional features of most research participants that should influence the interpretations of these psychological studies. The first is a critique that others have raised—that participants in psychological experiments are mostly undergraduate sophomores (around age 19), which is especially important to note when studying morality. Undergraduates typically are not yet adults in their executive functions (e.g., foresight, empathy) or practical wisdom (Arain et al., 2013). So we should not expect to be able to assess typical adult moral functioning in this age group, for reasons of life experience and cognitive development (Rest et al., 1999).

But there is a less widely known reason to question empirical research results as representative of humanity. Most if not all participants have likely been raised outside of humanity's species typical developmental system—outside our evolved nest (what we can call “[unnested](#)”). Why does this matter? Humans are more immature than any other ape at birth (presenting like fetuses until 18 months of age; Trevathan, 2011) and have a several decade long maturational schedule. Early experience especially bears on neurobiological development, influencing health and wellbeing for life (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000) but also sociality and morality (Narvaez, 2014). The human nest in early life—whose long term importance is corroborated by developmental and neuroscientific studies (e.g., for reviews see Narvaez, Panksepp, Schore & Gleason, 2013; Schore, 2003a, 2003b)—includes soothing perinatal experiences (no separation of baby and mother or painful procedures), nearly constant (positive) touch, several years of infant-initiated breastfeeding, responsiveness that keeps the child optimally aroused, self-directed free social play in the natural world, positive social climate, and a community of responsive caregivers and support (Hewlett & Lamb, 2005). Humans who grow up in our ancestral environment (mobile small-band hunter gatherers, the type of society that represents 95-99% of human existence; Lee & Daly, 2005) are raised within the evolved nest and demonstrate greater sociality (e.g., greater self-control and cooperation) (e.g., Ingold, 2005; Narvaez, 2013). A violation of a child's “blueprint for normality” (Winnicott, Winnicott &, 1989, p. 264) or lack of experience-expected care (Greenough & Black, 1992) during sensitive periods (Knudsen, 2004)—i.e., a degraded nest—undermines neurobiological development, arresting or impeding social development (Schore, 2003a), pushing a child's trajectory toward relational disconnection and lifelong stress reactivity (Lupien, McEwen, Gunnar, & Heim, 2009). Thus, is it vital to take into account humanity's species evolutionary history and not attend only to contemporary culture, practices and behavior.

*Evolutionary inheritances.* Although May cites some evolutionary theory, there are critical aspects missed that bear on morality. Humanity's evolutionary inheritances beyond genes are multiple (Jablonka & Lamb, 2005; Oyama, Griffiths & Gray, 2001) and include not only basic needs and the evolved nest that fulfills them, but self-organization around experience because of a highly dynamic, socially-constructed human nature (Overton, 2013). The plasticity and epigenetic malleability of human brains and body systems, especially early in life, is a characteristic not shared with chimpanzees (Gómez-Robles, Hopkins, Schapiro & Sherwood, 2015). Further, Charles Darwin (*Descent of Man*, 1871) noted humanity's inheritance of the moral sense (social pleasure, empathy, concern for the opinion of others, habit control), which he found universal among preindustrialized societies. However, rather than being innate as Darwin implied, the moral sense appears to require postnatal experience that aligns with the evolved nest (Narvaez, 2017), as data from our lab is suggesting (e.g., Narvaez, 2016, 2018; Narvaez et al.,

2013; Narvaez, Wang & Cheng, 2016). Darwin found the moral sense less apparent in his British male compatriots (whose childhoods are far from supportive; Turnbull, 1984), perhaps in part because boys have less built in resilience and take longer to mature, and thereby are more greatly affected by early life experience (Schore, 2017). Postnatal early life shapes capacities critical for moral functioning such as self-control, empathy and cooperation (e.g., Kochanska, 2002; Thompson, 2012). The evolved nest extends beyond the mother and close caregivers to the community and culture.

*Culture and practice of virtue.* Dr. May makes no mention of a culture's influence on moral development and does not evaluate contexts for development. The lack of attending to the cultural level is a common problem within psychology too where psychopathologies have been normalized and societal members are instead helped to adjust to societal impositions of individual isolation, impersonalism, and disconnection, among other dehumanizing things outside of our species-normal experience (Kidner, 2001; Narvaez & Witherington, in press). In contrast, nonindustrialized societies would consider US culture to be quite harmful to the development of virtuous behavior because of a degraded evolved nest and missing practices (described below). Undermining human development and disrupting relationships in the ways described earlier foster relational and emotional disconnection, sources of danger for everyone because they lead to harm of others (Ross, 2006; Lee, 1979).

Among native American communities, virtue development is a lifelong practice. Although a person's ability to get caught up in ego or misguided behavior is assumed in virtually all societies, among traditional native American communities, humans are raised to be on a path of continued self improvement (Deloria, 2006; Four Arrows, 2016). In these societies, the evolved nest extends across the lifespan because human beings can become imbalanced outside of supportive relationships and require ongoing attention to relational harmony and balance. Community life in traditional societies entails rituals, practices and stories that keep members focused on humility and proper relationships with others. Morality is about living in the right way and acting in the right manner in every circumstance. Moral slippage can occur when an individual's ego inflates or her responsibilities to the community are forgotten. As these societies are aware, a person's mindset can be shifted away from (or toward) relational trust and connection, making it critical to keep the self in an appropriate mindset (gratitude, humility) and aware of relational connection to all entities (Windeagle & Rainbowhawk, 2003). A harmful behavior reverberates across the social fabric undermining trust, and so healing circles for expressing and mending harm are part of a process of restorative justice common in native American communities (Ross, 2006). Consequently, justice has to do with repairing relationships—restoring respectful and caring connection—toward self, others, community, landscape, and the unseen spiritual world. In contrast, societies like the USA assume disconnectedness as part of a capitalistic human life and set up institutions and practices that, perhaps mindlessly, undermine connection (e.g., person-to-person, person to community, person to natural landscape) (Kidner, 2001).

*Ecological morality.* Dr. May makes no mention of ecological morality—moral mindedness towards other-than-humans. The morality he describes seems to have no grounding in living on and with the earth. In contrast, for most societies across history, treating the local landscape with humble respect was part of the moral life (Descola, 2013; Merchant, 2003; Nelson, 2008). Indigenous or native science (Cajete, 2000) is holistic, understanding that everything is

connected (as, for example, Western physics and biology have noted at the quantum level and in terms of shared DNA), even into the future (seven generations), with a responsibility to promote flourishing of the landscape, not just of human individuals or communities. Indigenous societies are highly attached to and respectful of the landscape (Narvaez, Four Arrows, Halton, Collier & Enderle, in press). In contrast, unnestedness and disconnection are characteristic of industrialized, capitalistic societies, leaving their members detached from one another as well as from the natural world (Polanyi, 2001), driving the many ecological and social crises that threaten biodiversity and life on the planet (IPCC, 2014; Kolbert, 2014; Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005). Shouldn't this be part of the conversation about morality, especially in a discussion of rationalism? It is highly irrational in any way you slice it to be destroying planetary ecological systems and futures for the sake of money and power. One would hope that researchers and philosophers would enlarge their purview to include how individuals and communities live their lives within ecological systems on a day to day basis.

Finally, moral evaluation is not the same as moral decision making or virtuous behavior. Armchair, detached observance and judgment of the world do not have much to do with morality in the flesh. In this regard, Dr. May seems to miss a key notion from our historical past, the distinction between reason (Greek *nous/noos*) and rationality (Greek *logos/dianoia*). The former is shaped by experience and involves one's whole being (e.g., embodied cognition, including intuition) and was considered the prior and superior faculty to the latter. This form of reason is "evolutionary...makes use of forms of perceptual and motor inference present in 'lower' animals...mostly unconscious...largely metaphorical and imaginative...not dispassionate, but emotionally engaged..." (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999, pp. 4-5). In contrast, *logos* refers to the more explicitly rule focused, utilitarian, mechanical, detached, internally consistent type of knowledge, which unfortunately characterizes most moral psychological experiments. Perhaps the many human weaknesses or failings in moral functioning observed in experiments are tapping into a lack of appropriate cognitive, emotional and social experience to build embodied personal knowledge (*nous*), leaving individuals (including research experimenters) to rely on semantic knowledge (*logos*). The focus on *logos* instead of *nous* fits with the Western world's shift to a "left-brain" focus on static objects instead of on the shifting patterns of connection among living dynamic entities (McGilchrist, 2009; Muller, 2018), a focus characteristic of those with brain damage, not representative of human potential. David Kidner's (2001) question for psychology comes to mind as a question for philosophy too: "why should the social sciences be based on the "one power which separates humans from...other organisms"? Why not, instead base it on the *many* powers that *relate* us to other organisms?" (p. 59, italics in original). Indeed, why should philosophy dig itself into the same hole, especially when it appears that detached thinking has been instrumental in creating the ecological crises faced today?

In conclusion, a wider examination of human behavior across time and societies is needed when discussing human moral potential. Few people are well-educated or well-developed in virtuous morality in industrialized societies like the USA, for the reasons mentioned, making humanity appear to be innately morally flawed. Individuals and culture vary in their opportunities and support for virtue development, demonstrating that a focus only on the individual is inadequate. Cross-generational effects on development and cultural factors matter greatly. Perhaps in a follow up book Dr. May can take up a broader scope and include more of the factors that contribute to humanity's moral potential, focusing then on "optimistic reasonableness."

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