Sinnott-Armstrong, Walter, ed., \textit{Moral Psychology, Volume 1. The Evolution of Morality: Adaptations and Innateness}, Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2008, pp. xix + 583, US$30.00/£17.95 (paper).

This is volume one in an ambitious three-volume set that aims to survey the state of the art in empirically orientated moral psychology; roughly, the intersection of moral philosophy and cognitive science. This first volume focuses on innateness and on the question whether morality is an adaptation. The volume is organized as follows: a prominent philosopher or cognitive scientist contributes a substantive paper summarizing their research into a topic, or, in a few cases, arguing for a particular view. Then there are two responses, from writers who are themselves of sufficient prominence and quality that they could themselves have been authors of target articles rather than comments. Finally, there is a reply from the author(s) of the original article.

This is a format that can substantially advance a debate, allowing for well-focused discussion of a particular issue. In some cases, the debate is genuinely illuminating. For instance, many readers will already be familiar with the argument of Leda Cosmides and John Tooby for the view that we have a specialized mechanism for detecting violations of social contract rules (based on the fact that subjects perform much better at the Wason selection task when the rule that is being tested is a deontic conditional of the right form). Some will also be familiar with Fodor’s criticism of the Cosmides and Tooby experiments: Fodor claims that their finding is a materials artefact, based on the fact that indicative and deontic conditionals have a different logical form. Fodor (very briefly) puts the case here; he also adds the further claim that experiments Cosmides and Tooby have since conducted, that they take to put the issue beyond doubt, are irrelevant. Fodor claims that they need to show (1), there is no effect of logical form on inferential content when content is controlled; whereas they have shown only (2), there are effects of content when logical form is controlled. To my mind, Fodor is wrong on two counts: in claiming that Cosmides and Tooby are committed to (1), and in claiming that they have demonstrated only (2). As they show, nothing in the claim that there are domain-specific inferential processes requires that logical form has no independent effect; the claim is only that content has an effect independently of logical form (i.e. (2), and not (1)). Moreover, by testing different deontic conditionals, Cosmides and Tooby have tested (1). All this comes out clearly in their reply.
Other exchanges are less illuminating. For instance, Debra Lieberman apparently fails to understand Richard Joyce’s objection to her account of the origin of the incest taboo. Joyce shows that she mixes together aversions with moral responses: we might have an innate inversion to incest without having an innate moral sentiment that incest is wrong. Lieberman takes Joyce’s point to be entirely semantic: how do we classify a response? But Joyce’s point is substantive: it is, I take it, that a moral response would be functionally distinguishable from a mere aversion (it would license different inferences and motivate different behaviour). Similarly, her response to his claim that we need to more carefully distinguish emotions and judgments is off-base. Lieberman’s claim that it doesn’t matter what we call them, because they are the same thing computationally, is just false. Once again, they are functionally distinguishable, and this functional distinction must have a causal basis that will show up at the level of computation.

Unsatisfactory, too, is Geoffrey Miller’s response to Catherine Driscoll. Miller defends his view that moral virtues emerged via sexual selection, as costly signals of genetic quality. Driscoll objects that it is (proverbially) easy to fake virtue for the period of courtship; hence the signals would not be reliable enough sources of fitness information to be the target of sexual selection. In reply, Miller points out that in the environment of evolutionary adaptation hominids lived in small groups, in which potential sexual partners either already had a great deal of information about each other or could easily get such information; hence it would not be easy to get away with faking virtue. But this misses the point of Driscoll’s objection: in so far as displays of virtue during courtship add anything to the stock of information potential partners can easily access via other sources, these displays are easily faked. Either courtship virtue display is informationally redundant or likely to be deceptive; in either case, it would not be an apt target for sexual selection.

The last two exchanges are on the topic of moral nativism: is morality innate? In some ways, this is the most frustrating part of the book, despite the high quality of all the contributions. It is frustrating because the two target articles, by Sripada and Prinz, seem to talk past each other. The conception of nativism with which Prinz takes issue—a Chomsky-inspired principles-and-parameters approach—is rejected by Sripada as well, but the latter defends a nativism of his own, upon which morality is innate inasmuch as its characteristic features reflect innate biases of ours. For Sripada, the content of (at least the majority of) moral rules is not directly innate, but reflects biases of human beings that are directly innate; these biases give certain rules a greater fitness in cultural evolution than rivals. I suspect Prinz would not disagree that Sripada’s hypothesis explains the content of many moral rules, but would deny that this account is nativist (his remarks on a related explanation of religion suggest as much). Innateness is, notoriously, a difficult concept; many philosophers think it is actually incoherent. It would have been good to see more explicit discussion and defence of competing views. In the absence of such discussion, much of the disagreement looks merely terminological. It would also have been good to see Prinz responding not only to his commentators,
but also to Sripada’s, inasmuch as he shares with Sripada a rejection of poverty of the stimulus arguments for nativism, predicated on the claim that the content of the moral domain is not richer than the content of moral instruction. Sripada’s commentators take issue with this claim, adducing, especially, the doctrine of double effect as an instance of a moral principle that cannot be acquired via domain-general learning mechanisms. Sripada essentially concedes the point, though he denies it significance. It seems a big concession to me, and I wondered whether Prinz would be forced to follow Sripada.

Some of the problems that beset this kind of work are occasionally in evidence—for example, the inadequately suppressed urge, often felt by scientists, to set philosophers straight about philosophy. Peter Tse, for instance, after outlining a sophisticated and intriguing hypothesis concerning the emergence of domain-general thought from a formerly modular mind by way of the cross-modular binding of contents, and suggesting that the symbolic thinking thus made possible is a necessary condition of morality, launches into an uninformed and rather simplistic discussion of the nature of good and evil, complete with non-moral criteria for identifying acts which can be so described. It would be a pity if this regrettable appendix led to the neglect of Tse’s novel and powerful account of the emergence of morality. Philosophers are sometimes prone to the complementary error of thinking they can resolve a scientific issue without bothering to engage with the existing debate (though more rarely—the view that science does not require special expertise is far rarer than the same view about philosophy). Fortunately, this fault is not on view here.

Empirically informed moral psychology is one of the most fertile and rapidly growing areas of philosophy today, its growth an expression of the naturalistic tenor of these times. This volume and its two companions represent some of the best work in this vein available today. It is essential for those with an interest in the subject matter, as well as for those who want to know where philosophy is heading.

Neil Levy

University of Melbourne

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The normative aspect of morality creates multiple problems for a theorist trying to specify moral competence. There is a strong analogy with cognitive theories of rationality. Human reasoning performance falls well short of normative standards measured by logic or probability theory, leading to controversies about the use of these ideal standards as measures of competence. Another problem for the specification of competence is deciding which aspects of performance should be used: conscious explicit rationalization in optimal informational conditions abstracting away from