Letter to the Editor

The Role of Empathy in Ethics

Dear Dr. Brown:

David Nash has given us much to reflect on in his perspectives article, “Ethics, Empathy, and the Education of Dentists,” which appeared in the June 2010 issue of the Journal of Dental Education (vol. 74, no. 6, pp. 567–78). He calls out writers in evolutionary biology and philosophy who have made large places in their theories for the capacity to sense others’ interests and to act on them. A “natural history” of empathy and many of its cognates is offered. He concludes that dental schools should screen out candidates for admission who are insufficient in the biological property of ethics. The essential construct in this essay is empathy, which is associated in various places with cooperation, reciprocity, altruism, emotional intelligence, character, care, and ethics itself. Nash concludes: “The thesis of this essay is that emotional empathy, as it has evolved in human evolution and developed existentially in the socialization of children, is an important determinant of moral behavior” (p. 575).

I am in strong agreement with Nash that ethics is best understood as being built, inescapably, on empathy. The currently fashionable approaches to ethics based on rationalism and familiarity with principles and codes leave too large a gap between the academics of ethical theory and the practicality of moral behavior. However, Nash believes that ethics can be explained in terms of evolutionary biology; I believe ethics cannot be reduced to scientific claims and that those who adopt this position fool themselves by selecting evidence that supports their views. Nash believes that emotional identification with others in an altruistic fashion is either ethics or a correlate of ethics; I believe that empathy as the ability to see situations from others’ perspectives is only a part of ethics. Nash proposes some applications of evolutionary biology that I find objectionable.

I am baffled by Nash’s naturalism. The naturalistic position in philosophy is that all statements in philosophy regarding what is knowable, true, and good can be fully understood using the methods of science. This is evidence-based practice on steroids! But the reach of this approach exceeds its grasp, and its advocates often fall back on unacknowledged selective naturalism. As the philosopher David Hume, whom both Nash and I respect, noted, there is no way to get from what “is” to what “ought to be.” The trap of naturalism is to begin with what one feels ought to be the case and then select evidence to justify that position. Simon Blackburn provides the standard refutation of ethics as evolutionary biology: “The third confusion to guard against is to read psychology into nature, and in particular into the gene, and then read it back into the person whose gene it is” (p. 42).

Herbert Spencer, the Victorian naturalist whose name is so prominently associated with Social Darwinism, was opposed to health clinics and other public assistance because he saw them interfering with nature’s plan to weed out dysfunctional habits through natural selection. He reasoned that it had taken millions of years for human nature to evolve to its current level and in a few million more it would be different. For Spencer, we cannot say it would be “better” because that would involve smuggling in nonscientific ethical standards.

We know, for example, that evolutionary biology has equipped children with a strong craving for sugar and all of us with neural pleasure centers that are responsive to drugs. But the way we are in these regards does not justify soda vending machines in schools or the drug culture that is wracking many parts of the world. The Milgram studies demonstrated that a majority of Americans will continue to deliver what they believe to be nearly lethal electric shocks to others when told to do so, at the same time they express great empathy for the hurt they appear to be causing. Several students might demonstrate effective cooperation and admirable fidelity to each other in not defecting when confronted with accusations of their cheating. Nash overlooks such evidence that unsettles his argument. Something more is needed beyond genetic capacity for empathy to make it “ethical”; but the additional premises are usually unnamed and not discoverable naturalistically. (See Elliott Sober’s Evidence and Evolution for a discussion of the limitations on the scientific foundations of evolutionary biology.)
I do not believe Nash compromises his position at all by skipping the early sections of his article, entitled “A Naturalistic Ethic in Historical Context” and “Evolutionary Ethics.” What matters is that most humans do have a functioning capacity to take others’ perspectives.

Regardless of how empathy evolved, it is still the nub of the difference between Nash and me. We agree that it “is an important determinant of moral behavior.” By this I understand that the capacity to understand others’ interests plays a particular, necessary role in building moral communities.7 I do not know what Nash has in mind. He seems to be saying something like empathy is ethics, or is at least a correlate of it. Consider these quotations: “Darwin demonstrates how a constitutional moral sense, based on empathy, could have evolved through natural selection” (p. 569); “an evolved moral sense rooted in empathy” (p. 569); “biologization of ethics” (p. 569); “when distress is empathized with, helping behaviors are elicited” (p. 573); “An ethics of caring is one with an attitude rooted in receptivity, relatedness, and responsiveness” (p. 573); “Ultimately, understanding empathy’s role in human behavior leads to an ethics of caring for health professionals” (p. 574); “Understanding the ultimate causation of human behavior is rooted in humanity’s evolutionary history” (p. 576); and “Morality evolved as an empathy-based system of fair cooperation” (p. 576). Nash either believes that empathy is both necessary and sufficient to explain moral behavior (in its guise as cooperation, altruism, and professionalism) or he believes that it is necessary but has not told us what role it plays.

Let’s see whether it is possible to further develop my earlier published position that gives an essential role to empathy without saying that it constitutes or corresponds with moral behavior.6,9 I define ethics as the study of mutually satisfactory behavior that is sanctioned by communities of interest. By “mutually satisfactory,” I mean neither party is deceived or coerced, both can expect promised follow-through, and neither would choose to behave differently under such circumstances. As a community, we cannot do better than to be ethical. In dental practice, an ethical relationship is one in which no alternative provides more satisfaction to both the patient and the dentist. Society, the communities of interest, sanctions such relationships and provides protections against incompetents, opportunists, charlatans, and quacks who might seek to distort relationships.

The way to work out such joint maximally satisfactory relationships has a well-developed literature under the heading of game theory,10-14 (a regrettable unfortunate name). It even has a popular movie (based on the biography by Sylvia Nasar): A Beautiful Mind tells the story of John Nash (presumably no relation to Dave Nash), a Nobel laureate who proved that for all relationships, such as those between dentists and patients, there is at least one optimal, mutually best combination of actions.15 The job of ethics is to clear the trash so these best-all-around arrangements can flourish.

One of the requirements in John Nash’s proof is that the parties assume that others are capable of recognizing each other’s desires and they treat each other as equally capable of meaningful interaction. We recognize each other as mutually sapient beings rather than objects of abuse or altruism. Stephen Darwall describes this in The Second-Person Standpoint: Morality, Respect, and Accountability,16 making the point that moral interaction presumes the capacity to act as moral equals, including understanding the situation from others’ perspectives. A useful word for this capacity is “empathy.”

But David Nash and I will quibble over what to cover by that term. Nash distinguishes between cognitive and emotional varieties of empathy and between understanding the situation from another’s perspective (empathy) and feeling what the other feels (sympathy). This distinction becomes very important for him when looking at the evidence from medicine showing that empathy, measured as knowledge, does not sort practitioners as Nash would like. He leaves us with what is at best a hope and certainly no evidence that emotional empathy or sympathy (in and of itself) will do better. By contrast, empathy as the capacity to appreciate others’ values, when added to the game theoretic structure, has been proven useful, both theoretically and empirically, so many times that it is no longer a hot research topic.10-14

The role I assign to empathy in the game theoretic approach to ethics would be welcomed by some with an evolutionary biological bent.17,18 As a species, we are neither homo moralis nor homo rationalis; we are homo sapiens, meaning capable of conditional valuing (as distinct from feeling) and even of recognizing what others might value. Game-theoretical ethics provides a valid account for the relevant parts of evolutionary biology, but evolutionary biology does not provide a valid account for ethics.
Three details and then I am finished. Nash’s summary of Axelrod’s research on game theory is selective. The conclusion Nash quotes, “cooperators are more successful,” does not generalize. Axelrod used computer programs that were incapable of learning from each other playing a tournament with one set of predetermined stakes. Research on humans does not confirm the claim.\textsuperscript{10-14} Axelrod is clear that “Altruism is not needed: successful strategies can elicit cooperation even from an egoist [who is nevertheless rationally empathetic]” (p. 174) and “As previously suggested, there are situations in which one wants to do just the opposite [from cooperating]” (p. 125).\textsuperscript{10}

Nash selects out Rapoport’s strategy called “tit-for-tat” (from Axelrod’s computer tournament) as being most desirable. This approach seeks to promote cooperation through punishment. If applied to dentistry we would immediately sanction every dentist for every minor infraction of ethical standards—a strategy I regard as unsound. Further, Nash proposes that candidates for dental school be screened out if they are not evolutionarily fit because they lack sufficient emotional empathy. I regard this as a similarly unsound application of the naturalistic “ethic.” If this strategy had any merit at all, it should be applied first to all practicing dentists and faculty members.

Finally, I am aware that many readers will find Nash’s article and my reply challenging to understand. It may be challenging for dentists to grasp philosophical arguments when they have not spent as much time studying that body of literature as they have various dental topics. But it matters a great deal how we treat each other.

It should be understood by readers that David Nash shared early versions of his manuscript with me and we corresponded for months regarding it. Further, I have shared this reply with him. I am aware that he will want to say that his and my views are just two alternatives, each with our own supporters. That would be helpful if only he and I mattered. We must lay out our views for dental educators to compare directly. I have empathy for Nash’s work, but that means only that I feel obligated to point out what I consider the shortcoming in ethics based on selective evolutionary biology.

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REFERENCES

The author responds:

It is always fun—and challenging—to engage in thoughtful conversation with my friend Dave Chambers. He and I entered dental education at approximately the same time, and because of our common interests we have communicated with some degree of frequency about issues such as the current one. As Chambers indicated, I sent a manuscript to him of the article “Ethics, Empathy, and the Education of Dentists” for comment before submitting it for publication. We have corresponded frequently since that time about that with which we agree and disagree.

It is important to note that Chambers and I agree on most aspects of the discussion of ethics and moral behavior. We are both opposed to a Kantian rationalist approach to understanding ethics, and we are both strong admirers of the work of the Scottish philosopher David Hume. We both believe that science provides an epistemological foundation for ethical reflection. Both of us believe that the foundations of morality are rooted in the capacity of humans for empathy. As Chambers indicates in his letter, “ethics is best understood as being built inescapably on empathy.”

Just as in many aspects of clinical dentistry where distinctions emerge as dentists become more finely focused on how best to perform a technical procedure, so also distinctions emerge in ethics as two individuals engage in discussing the nuances of their philosophical positions. Ironically, while Chambers and I share many common views about ethics, it is actually in defining the term “ethics” that some of our differences emerge. I define it as the “science of the moral,”

that is, taking the scientifically validated evidence we have for what it means to be a human being (human nature), and framing an understanding of how one ought to live given the opportunities and constraints of that nature. This scientific tradition in philosophy began with the pre-Socratic philosophers, continued through Aristotle and Epicurus, extended to Adam Smith and David Hume, and reaches to such contemporary notables as E.O. Wilson, Frans deWaal, Peter Singer, Daniel Dennett, and Brian Skyrms. This philosophical approach is consistent with the empiricism of Hume. That is why I spent considerable effort in the article to lay a foundation for empathy by looking at evolutionary biology. Our evolutionary heritage provides us with important information as to the ultimate versus proximate motivations to our behavior: “Human morality is an artifact of human evolutionary history.”

Chambers argues that I am guilty of committing what is known as the “naturalistic fallacy” when I introduce an “ought” based on an understanding of human nature; that is, it is not possible to develop a normative statement from a naturally existing “is.” However, I do not accept his perspective. Critical to the differences between him and me is that I understand ethics to be about how one should live one’s life consistent with the nature of being human. Ultimately, that means how human beings cooperate with one another in order that all may live the good life and fulfill their potential as human beings. Human aspirations for the good life are as important to my understanding of ethics as are the obligations humans have to others; there is an “ethics of aspiration” as well as an “ethics of obligation.” Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics focuses on natural human desires, the desire for eudaimonia—that is, well-being or happiness. The Aristotelian ethical tradition of attempting to understand the nature of the good life continues through a long line of philosophers until today, when it manifests itself in such individuals as Alasdair MacIntyre and Martha Nussbaum. The psychologist Abraham Maslow’s emphasis on “being all one can be in one’s potentiality” is a statement of the importance of an ethics of aspiration.

Philosopher Daniel Dennett challenges the so-called “naturalistic fallacy” by rhetorically commenting: “if ought cannot be derived from is, just what can ought be derived from.” Dennett goes on to say: “Ethics must be somehow based on an appreciation of human nature—on a sense of what a human being is or might be, and on what a human being might want to have or want to be. If that is naturalism, then naturalism is no fallacy. No one could seriously deny that ethics is responsive to such facts about human nature.”

Chambers challenges several of my statements by suggesting I am saying that empathy is ethics; I am not. I am saying that the motivation to moral behavior is rooted in our evolved empathic “moral sense,” as Hume acknowledged. It is only in understanding empathy as a motivating force for moral behavior that one can affirm what Chambers has affirmed in agreeing with me, that “ethics is . . . built inescapably on empathy.” Chambers defines ethics somewhat differently than do I. He says ethics is “the study of mutually satisfactory behavior that is sanctioned by
communities of interest.” He supports his view by game theory, which he defines as the “way to work out joint maximally satisfactory relationships.” He continues by saying that the “job of ethics is to clear the trash so these best-all-around arrangements can flourish.” However, he provides no guidance as to how this is to be accomplished. Additionally, I cannot accept his definition of ethics, for it focuses on specific communities not the universe of humankind. Based on my understanding of human nature, I believe there are universally applicable moral rules that apply to all, regardless of a specific “community of interest.”

In my article, I cited the work of Bernard Gert and his explication of what he considers universal moral rules, such as don’t deceive, don’t steal, don’t cheat, don’t kill, don’t deprive others of freedom or opportunity, don’t deprive people of pleasure, etc.16,17 These rules are essentially rules of cooperation: rules that we agree to abide by in an implied social contract, for we know that if we do not abide by them we cannot expect others to do so, with social chaos resulting. However, Gert is careful to point out that while these moral rules are universal, they are not absolute. Said another way they are hypothetical, not categorical. All of life is lived in situational context. It is possible to justify violating a moral rule based on the occurrence of adverse (bad) consequences should it be followed. For example, when the Nazi storm troopers came to the shop where Anne Frank and her family were hiding in Amsterdam, the owner, if following the moral rule “do not deceive,” would have been forced to disclose that the Frank family was hiding in the attic, thus ensuring their death. Alternatively, impartial and rational individuals would want to justify a violation of the moral rule “do not deceive” due to the negative consequence that obeying it would have. Gert summarizes the moral rules as “do not cause harm to others.”

Chambers is of the view that the ethical is determined by the moral community of which one is a member and that universal moral rules, even if not absolute and only hypothetical, are not necessarily valid. I believe it is possible, even necessary, to morally challenge practices sanctioned among some cultural and religious “communities of interest” on the grounds that they violate the universal moral rule of “not depriving others of freedom and opportunity,” thus causing harm to the human potential. Examples include the systematic subjugation of women and practices such as clitoridectomy. Given Chambers’s position, he would be unable to reject such practices as immoral as they are sanctioned by the communities in which they are practiced. I find it difficult to accept his view that human ethical norms can vary significantly from one so-called moral community to another. It is important to emphasize that our world is such today that we live in a global moral community. Sam Harris emphasizes this in his recently released book, The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values.18 Note that the title of the book (and its content) also challenges the so-called “naturalistic fallacy,” discussed previously.

I must also challenge Dave Chambers, as I have privately, on his view that my perspective on Robert Axelrod’s work with the prisoner’s dilemma game is incorrect. Chambers’s intellectual mentor in this critique is the British economist Ken Binmore, who says in his book Natural Justice that “scholars swallowed the line that this trivial game [the prisoner’s dilemma] embodies the essence of the problem of human cooperation.”12 Binmore’s (and Chambers’s) critique of Axelrod’s work aside, many scholars do accept that Axelrod’s use of the prisoner’s dilemma demonstrates that the strategies of human beings in durable relationships, in which cooperation through reciprocity is the norm, become stable relationships and actually expand in a society. Some game theorists contend that it is wrong to claim that the prisoner’s dilemma embodies the essence of cooperation. Chambers argues that I (and the “scholars” whom Binmore doesn’t identify) read into Axelrod’s work a positive perspective for human cooperation that is not there. However, one has only to read the concluding chapter entitled “The Robustness of Cooperation” of Axelrod’s classic, The Evolution of Cooperation, to realize that the understanding Axelrod advances for the results of his work with the prisoner’s dilemma are positive for developing and sustaining the social contract—that is, a reciprocal cooperation among individuals for the human good.19 Axelrod’s expressed view in multiple illustrations assumes a concept of cooperation that results in “good” outcomes for society. Peter Singer in his book How Are We to Live: Ethics in an Age of Self-Interest also cites Axelrod’s work in identifying that cooperation through reciprocity results in an “expanding circle” of the human good.9

As I cited in my original article, the classic summary of ethical behavior among human cultures and religions has been some aspect of what has come
to be known as the “golden rule.” In its negative form: “do not do to others what you would not want done to you,” and in its positive form: “do unto others as you would want others to do unto you.” Our everyday, common sensical experience suggests that those who regularly are seen and understood to cooperate with others by following the moral rules are more successful in life than those who do not. I acknowledge that all do cheat on occasion or, in game theory parlance, “defect.” Chambers’s fascination with game theory is in an attempt to figure out mathematically, and from a second-person position, when and how often it is to someone’s self-interested advantage to defect. In this regard, he cites the classical work on bargaining by the Nobel laureate John Nash. (Dave: I do not think you can presume we are not related: I am having a genealogist check on it!) Game theorists’ underlying assumptions are that equilibrium can be identified as to when to cooperate and when to defect.

The issues that exist between Dave Chambers and me on these matters can be better understood by reading the authorities to whom we individually appeal. I would encourage the reading of the thoughtful book by Ken Binmore entitled Natural Justice. Binmore’s work on game theory as a basis for developing natural justice in the social contract is enlightening, and it is the source of much of Chambers’s perspective and argument. I would also encourage the reading of the following books that form much of the basis for my thinking and the distinctions I draw with Chambers: Darwinian Natural Right: The Biological Ethics of Human Nature by Larry Arnhart, The Evolution of Cooperation by Robert Axelrod, Good-Natured by Frans deWaal, Darwin’s Dangerous Idea and the Meanings of Life by Daniel Dennett, and How Are We to Live: Ethics in an Age of Self-Interest by Peter Singer.

I concur with Chambers when he says that my distinction between the cognitive and emotional aspects of empathy is at “best a hope and [with] certainly no evidence that emotional empathy in and of itself will do better [than other selection criteria for admission to dental school].” My intent was to suggest that there is a theoretical basis for “hoping” that assessing emotional empathy might provide an additional measure for selecting individuals to study dentistry who possess a strong orientation to helping behavior. There is a sound theoretical basis for my proposal. The challenge for dental educators is to undertake research to determine whether emotional empathy is positively correlated with being a “good” dentist. Chambers argues that there is no reason to “develop” a test to measure emotional empathy to screen for dental school admission, as such a test would not be helpful. (Incidentally, there are already several tests available so one does not need to be developed.) I retort by asking, “why not?” if it could be determined that one’s emotional empathy quotient was such as to suggest that one was not constitutionally equipped to daily engage in helping behaviors. What I find problematic about Chambers’s position is to reject the idea as “unsound” absent any empirical research. Such foreclosure is not in the spirit of science.

I encourage Chambers to develop and publish in the Journal of Dental Education a complete explication of his ethical views as they relate to our common task of educating “good” dentists. I am smiling as I suggest that I might have to write a letter challenging him as he has me!

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