THAMMASAT REVIEW
PRINT ISSN: 0859-5747 ONLINE ISSN: 2630-0303
Volume 21 No 2 (July-December) 2018 [Page 172-178]

Book review: "Moral Tribes: Emotion, Reason, and the Gap Between Us and Them"

Pasit Wongngamdee *

Faculty of Political Science, Ubonratchathani University, Thailand

Received 18 May 2018; Received in revised form 1 November 2018
Accepted 2 November 2018; Available online 20 December 2018

Abstract

Combining psychological experiments with philosophical debates, Joshua Greene, the author of *Moral Tribes*, proposes metamorality to overcome modern day's conflicts escalating from the gap between *us* and *them*. Greene argues that humans are naturally tribalistic, as evidenced by our two modes of brain: the automatic mode and the manual mode. The automatic mode controls common sense while the manual mode controls deliberation. However, by nature humans use the automatic mode far more often, influencing people to draw the line between tribes, automatically making *us* and *them*. To overcome this problem arising from the automatic mode, Greene proposes that people need metamorality which is grounded on manual mode thinking. His proposal is utilitarianism. Greene argues that moral schools such as Kantian and Rawlsian are grounded on the automatic mode, and they are not useful for solving tribalism. In Greene's view, unlike Kantian and Rawlsian, utilitarianism is grounded on the manual mode, as utilitarianism involves cost-benefit analysis and deliberation. Utilitarianism does not adhere to certain rules but focuses on what ultimately works best. Greene believes that such philosophical thinking may create rooms where tribes can discuss and reach common agreement. Nevertheless, Greene's proposal is still questionable, as utilitarianism is widely criticised that it might justify violence, and excessively hypothetical. Most of all, Greene's support for utilitarianism can also be considered as tribalistic and biased. Altogether, *Moral Tribes* may be thought-provoking and fun to read, but its proposal is not yet satisfactory.

Keywords

Morality, Moral philosophy, Metamorality, Conflicts, Tribalism

* **Corresponding author**: pasit.wong@gmail.com **DOI**: 10.14456/tureview.2018.16

Introduction

Many scholars, including Joshua Greene, the author of *Moral Tribes*, believe that humans are naturally tribalistic. We are biased for people who share similarities with us, while also biased against people who are different from us. Scholars also agree that tribes or identity are fluid. They can be influenced by various characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, religion, political ideology, class, home town, sports teams, and any other imagined community. Moreover, people may consider themselves to be a part of many tribes simultaneously, and they might use, deny, or emphasise a particular tribal identity over another, depending on the circumstances. Therefore, in the modern world, where people from various fluid tribes have to live together, people are likely to fight those who are fluidly perceived as *other*. The gap between *us* and *them* can take place anywhere and at any time. Consequently, the modern world could be, or has already been, chaotic.

Seeing conflicts between different tribes, Greene is concerned and ambitious enough to write *Moral Tribes* to track down the nature of the human mind, so that he can answer why tribalism is our nature, and how tribalism should be dealt with. Although the book is physically divided into five parts, it is more useful to divide it into two parts.

As a psychologist, in the first part (Chapters 1-3) Greene extensively employs a large number of neuroscience experiments to prove that humans are prone to tribalism. As a philosopher, in the latter part (Chapters 4-12) Greene proposes and defends his solution, centring on philosophical debates over which moral concepts should be used as a common ground to bridge the gap between *us* and *them*.

Regarding the first part, Greene explains that the conflict between tribes as we see today does not happen because people are immoral, but rather because people from different tribes have different moral perspectives. Greene calls conflicts escalating from these differences in moral perspective as "The tragedy of common sense morality."

Tribalism not only makes humans favour people closer to us and biased against those who are different, but it also affects how we interpret what is right and wrong. Greene calls this 'biased-fairness.' He summarises, "We genuinely want to be fair, but in most disputes there is a range of options that might be seen as fair, and we tend to favour the ones that suit us best" (p. 83-84). People interpret reality to support their own position. This is why people stick to their own 'local morality,' seeing it as the ultimate moral truth, and according to Greene, this is how the tragedy of common sense morality arises.

Because humans tend to be tribalistic, we view our own local morality as absolute. Therefore, when people from different tribes meet, we are unable to compromise. Greene believes that at this point, local morality cannot help to reach an agreement. He thinks that humans need something more to be used as a common ground to bridge the gap between *us* and *them*. Greene's answer is *metamorality*–morality that every tribe shares and is likely to

be employed as common currency to exchange their attitudes and beliefs. Greene strongly believes that 'utilitarianism' is the proper metamorality, and presents and defends this argument in the latter part of the book.

Greene starts the latter part by exploring the human brain. He argues that the human brain can be understood to have two modes–an automatic and a manual setting. The automatic setting is like a shortcut for human thinking.It associates with emotion, feeling, and stereotypes–or in short "common sense." It helps us to use our brain more efficiently, but it is not good at dealing with complex reality. The manual setting is associated with calculation, reasoning, and problem-solving. The manual mode is not efficient, but it is useful for deliberation.

Greene says that despite its usefulness in daily life, the automatic setting is the source of the tragedy of common sense morality, as it is associated with emotion and common sense, and common sense is not always trustworthy. Greene tries to convince the reader that the automatic mode is sometimes inconsistent and irrational, especially when it comes to making moral judgements. He uses variations of a moral dilemma in order to highlight this irrationality. In the basic run-away trolley case, people are forced to choose if they will push a 'switch' to kill an innocent life in order to save five people.(2) Under this condition, 87 percent of people do not hesitate to sacrifice the innocent person. However, when people are forced to choose if they will physically push an innocent person off a 'footbridge' to save five people, only 31 percent agree. Moreover, Greene presents a further experiment, a 'remote' case, where people can choose to push a remote button to open a trapdoor and drop a person to block the trolley's path. In this case, the number of people willing to kill an innocent person rises to 63 percent. Greene questions why people react to the cases so differently, though in theory the 'switch', 'footbridge', and 'remote' cases are not different, as they both involve killing one person to save five others.

Why do people's decisions on these moral dilemmas vary so significantly? Greene hypothesises that this is because characteristics in some run-away trolley cases trigger our automatic setting, such as physical touch in the 'footbridge' case, while in some other cases there are no characteristics which will activate the automatic mode. When the automatic setting is triggered, our common sense tells us that we should not kill an innocent to save five. By contrast, when the automatic is not triggered, the manual mode will be in charge and calculates that the best decision is to sacrifice one person to save five.

In Greene's view, the inconsistency of the automatic mode does not make sense. He says:

> Suppose that a friend calls you from a footbridge, seeking moral advice: "should I kill one to save the five?" you wouldn't say, "Well, that depends… will you be pushing this person or can you drop 'em with a switch?" (p. 217)

The moral judgement based on the automatic setting–common sense–is less rational, according to Greene. He believes that the hesitation in killing an innocent to save five is "nothing more than a cognitive accident, a by-product" (p. 240). Hesitation does not occur because sacrificing one person is morally wrong, but because of this psychological accident. Greene is of the opinion that moral judgement should be based on the manual mode, grounded in deliberation and calculation.

Greene not only attacks automatic mode decision making, but also the philosophical schools which are against sacrificing a minority to save the lives of the majority, for instance in Kantian, Rawlsian and other philosophical schools grounded on the protection of rights. Although Greene does not state it clearly, he implies that those philosophical schools are primarily based on this cognitive accident. For example, Greene particularly attacks Kant on the basis that his philosophy is based on the automatic mode. Kant sets his philosophical goal first, based upon his own common sense, and later rationalises his idea. That is why Kant ends up with the argument that " masturbation is wrong because it involves using yourself as a means" (p. 301). According to Greene, Kant's common sense, in the first place, establishes that " masturbation is wrong;" thereby Kant later employs manual mode to rationalise that "because it involves using yourself as a means."

Therefore, Greene's logic is that automatic mode is not trustworthy, and neither are the philosophical schools which are rooted in that mode of thinking. Instead, we should base our moral judgement on manual mode–calculation and cost-benefit analysis. In Greene's view, the philosophical school which is grounded on manual mode is utilitarianism: the consequentialist school focusing on choosing the choice which produces the greatest good or 'whatever ultimately works best.'

However, viewing 'rights protection' philosophical schools as a by–product of a cognitive accident does not mean that Greene conceives rights as a morally wrong concept. He believes that the concept of rights is useful, but not for its own sake, rather because it has been proven through history that rights protection helps to produce the greatest good. In other words, rights protection and other related schools are just the result of utilitarian thinking. Greene insists that generally we should protect rights since it produces greatest good, but in case protecting rights does not produce the greatest good anymore, we should not care about rights and do 'whatever works best' instead. Otherwise, we will be just a slave to irrational common sense.

Greene thinks that utilitarianism should be the metamorality, and can be used as a common currency to fill the gaps between tribes. He believes that although tribes have different perspectives–common sense–on right and wrong, all tribes uphold such perspectives because they think it works best. For instance, collectivists are so because they view collectivism as able to produce the greatest good, whilst individualists believe the

opposite. Hence, although tribes disagree on what works best, all tribes share their want for 'whatever works best.' It is a good starting point, Greene says.

At this point, the next question that Greene needs to answer is how we reach agreement on what works best. He argues that humans are biased-fairness, it is quite common that tribes will conflict on deciding what works best. Nevertheless, Greene insists that this is why we need the manual mode and utilitarianism. When we face controversies over what works best, Greene elaborates, we need to do cost-benefit analysis, putting aside our automatic mode–initial common sense–and collecting information to calculate what works best by using our manual mode. Yet, Greene is fully aware that this is easier said than done. To solve this problem, Greene outlines some tricks which may help us to get out of our biased thinking. For illustration, Green says that people often overestimate their knowledge, while underestimating their bias. However, when they are asked to thoroughly explain certain things, and fail to reach their estimation, they will be less biased. In short, Greene proposes that in the debate to search for what works best, instead of rationalising why we uphold our local morality (or why we oppose other's local morality), we should ask ourselves how our local morality produces benefits for everyone (or how other's local morality reduces benefits for everyone). If we fail to explain 'how,' we will be less biased.

To sum up, the thesis of *Moral Tribes* is that because of our tribalistic nature, humans are facing a tragedy of common sense morality and encounter conflict between *us* and *them*. This is, more or less, because of certain functions of our brain called the automatic mode which influence how people exercise common sense. To overcome this tribalism and bridge the gap between tribes, Greene proposes that we should base our moral judgements more on the function of our brain called the manual mode which enable us to think like a utilitarian.

Moral Tribes is very interesting as it combines psychological knowledge with philosophical debate. A lot of experiments mentioned in this book are truly thought provoking, especially when Greene uses the run-away trolley experiments to argue that certain moral schools are merely a by-product of a cognitive accident.

Nevertheless, Greene' s proposal to use utilitarianism as metamorality is still questionable. Utilitarianism has been widely criticised as a dangerous moral philosophy. Utilitarianism is a consequentialist idea, which focuses merely on consequence while overlooking the means, meaning that producing good by unjust means is acceptable in a utilitarian view. Many critics are afraid that utilitarianism might bring about slavery of minorities, or sacrificing innocents for the sake of society. Furthermore, utilitarianism can be easily interpreted to justify violence. Throughout human history there have been times where people were mobilised to exercise violence, or to wage war, for the sake of the greater good, or for the sake of society–many times in the name of 'nation' or 'religion.'

Greene does try his best to defend utilitarianism, but his defending arguments are not very convincing. He insists that it is a misunderstanding that utilitarianism encourages slavery of minorities or a legal system which sacrifices innocents for social benefits. Greene spends more than 10 pages in Chapter 10 to assert that those cases will do more harm than good. However, his assertion is highly hypothetical. Nobody, including Greene, can precisely measure loss and gain from slavery and sacrificing innocents.

Furthermore, even though Greene argues that utilitarianism does not intentionally support violence, war, and fascism–which may be true–utilitarianism does produce a 'greater good' discourse, and it appears throughout history that this discourse has been widely used to justify violence. Utilitarianism is no different from religion: they both intend to make the world a better place, but they are both manipulated to justify violence.

Promoting utilitarianism as metamorality or a common currency may not be a good idea, especially in the world where people are tribalistic in the first place. As Greene mentions in the book, all tribes like 'whatever works best,' but the big problem is that tribes cannot agree on 'what works best.' Applying utilitarianism as metamorality in a world full of tribalism and biased-fairness might lead to catastrophe, since tribes will fight for what they think works best. In such a tribalistic world, using only the manual mode without the automatic mode may free people from commons sense, including guilt. Without guilt, tribalism will exclude *them* from *our* utilitarian calculation. Consequently, people will do the best things for *us* though it means to kill *them* who are not counted in our calculation.

Although Greene does give us some tricks to overcome tribalism and biased-fairness, these appear too ideal to be practiced. Greene recommends that when coming to decide what works best, we should collect information and evidence; and not just decide without information. However, can people really be unbiased in their decision making? As Greene himself discusses biased fairness, despite people are presented with the same set of evidence and information, we end up with different conclusions based on our bias. As a result, people cannot reach agreement anyway. Greene suggests that at this point we should ask ourselves 'how' *our* local morality produces greater good, and how *other's* local morality impedes the greater good. This trick might help to recheck our common sense, shifting our brain from automatic mode to manual mode. Yet, this trick is still easier said than done, because it is very difficult to distinguish unbiased reasoning from rationalisation. Greene critically attacks Kant throughout the book that he set his moral goal on automatic setting, and later rationalises his common sense by using manual mode. If this criticism of Kant is true, normal people will face this problem as well. How can we know that we use our manual mode for unbiased reasoning, or we just use our manual mode to justify our biased common sense? Greene did not answer this question.

Most of all, we should not trust Greene's hypothesis, as his cognitive approach can also be tribalistic. The whole thesis of *Moral Tribes* is entirely based on the assumption that Greene's cognitive approach is neutral. He insists throughout the book that there are only two choices, common sense and deliberation. Greene strongly favours deliberation. However, how can we know that his conclusion is not biased? How can we be sure that *Moral Tribes* is not just a big systematic, yet biased, rationalisation of Greene?

Altogether, *Moral Tribes* is indeed a fascinating book worthy of being read, especially in terms of the thought-provoking elements. If you want to challenge the dominant moral philosophies like Kantian and Rawlsian, *Moral Tribes* is a good choice. If you want to explore how psychological effects influence our moral thinking, *Moral Tribes* is also a good choice. However, if you want to find an answer to bridge the gap between *us* and *them*, *Moral Tribes* may not give you a satisfactory answer.