COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH PROJECT: MORAL TRADITIONS AND MORAL REVOLUTION
HOWARD UNIVERSITY
NOVEMBER 09, 2011

SCIENCE AND ETHICS

Charles Verharen, Professor
Department of Philosophy
Howard University
Washington, DC

cverharen@howard.edu
SCIENCE VS ETHICS

• SCIENCE = “WHAT HAPPENS WHEN….”

• SCIENCE = GENERALIZED DESCRIPTIONS OF EXPERIENCE

• SCIENCE ANSWERS ALL “WHY” QUESTIONS WITH DESCRIPTIONS OF PROCESSES AT A FINER LEVEL
ETHICS AND PHILOSOPHY

- PHILOSOPHY=(A) RULES FOR THE DIRECTION OF LIFE UNDER CONDITIONS OF MAXIMUM UNCERTAINTY
- PHILOSOPHY=(B) RATIONAL MEASURES FOR CORRECTING THOSE RULES
ETHICS = LIVING GUIDELINES

- ETHICS = STUDY OF WHAT IS GOOD
- GOOD = WHAT IS DESIRED? NOT!
- GOOD = WHAT IS DESIRABLE — ON RATIONAL REFLECTION
- RATIONAL = USING APPROPRIATE MEANS TO REACH A GOAL
CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

• SCIENCE TELLS US “HOW THINGS ARE”
• ETHICS TELLS US “HOW THINGS OUGHT TO BE”
• HUME’S DISTINCTION BETWEEN “IS” AND “OUGHT”
STUNNING DISCOVERY!

• THE BRAIN “CREATES” FACTS—THE SENSATIONS WE EXPERIENCE ARE BRAIN ARTIFACTS, VIRTUAL REALITIES: NO COLORS, SOUNDS, SMELLS IN THE “REAL” WORLD

• THE BRAIN “CREATES” VALUES—THEY ARE PRODUCTS OF THE LIMBIC AND FRONTAL LOBE CORTICES
BRUTAL REVOLUTION!

• COLLAPSING ETHICS INTO SCIENCE
• THE “OUGHT” EVOLVES FROM THE “IS”
• WE ARE MORAL NOT BECAUSE WE CHOOSE TO BE MORAL
• WE ARE MORAL BECAUSE OUR GENES COMMAND US TO BE MORAL
WAIT A MOMENT!

• THAT REVOLUTION FORGETS THE TRUE ROLE OF PHILOSOPHY
• IMAGINING HOW WE “COULD BE” REGARDLESS OF HOW WE “ARE.”
• PHILOSOPHY’S GREATEST HITS
• CHRIST’S UNIVERSAL LOVE
• MARX’S UNIVERSAL FREEDOM
CONFLICT RESOLUTION!

• THE POTENTIAL FOR HOW WE COULD BE MUST COME FROM THE ACTUALITY OF HOW WE ARE—IN OUR DEEPEST NATURE

• HOW DEEP IS THAT NATURE—AND WHERE DID IT COME FROM?
CULTURAL WRANGLING!

• OUR “DEEPEST NATURE” IS TO BE:
  • RATIONAL
  • TIGHTLY BONDED TO OUR COMMUNITY
  • FREE
  • PLEASURE-SEEKERS
  • INTROSPECTIVE VIA MEDITATION
HOW TO STOP WRANGLING!

- BEYOND DISPUTE! TO BE GOOD IS FIRST TO BE
- WHY WE ARE HERE: EVOLUTION
- MUTATION AND NATURAL SELECTION
- 1ST ORDER OF BUSINESS: SURVIVAL
- CONDITIONS FOR SURVIVAL BROOK NO ARGUMENT!
SURVIVAL’S GUARANTEE

- FLOURISHING GUARANTEES SURVIVAL
- NATURE OF FLOURISHING HOTLY CONTESTED
- 5 MOST FAMOUS CULTURAL CLAIMS ABOUT FLOURISHING WARRANTED BY THEIR CONNECTIONS TO SURVIVAL
SUPERNATURAL VALUES?

• GOD, IMMORTAL SOUL, HEAVEN
• CONCEPTS EASE FOUR GREAT FEARS GENERATED BY EVOLUTION
  • (1) DEATH
  • (2) IGNORANCE
  • (3) LOSS OF CONTROL
  • (4) LOSS OF COMMUNITY
SUPERNATURAL ETHICS?

• GLOBAL THREATS TO HUMAN SURVIVAL
• WMD (NUCLEAR DEVICES, BIOLOGICAL WEAPONS)
• GLOBAL ETHICS TO COUNTER THREATS
• GLOBAL ETHICS CANNOT BE BASED IN SECTARIAN BELIEF SYSTEMS
DEAL BREAKER!

• IF WE’RE GENETICALLY PROGRAMMED TO BE GOOD, HOW COME WE’RE SO BAD?
• WE HAD TO BE BAD!
• WE’RE GETTING BETTER!
• NO GUARANTEES, HOWEVER!
BAD TO GOOD: FIRST TRACK

• WRANGLHAM: COMPETITION FOR TERRITORY/CAPITAL
• DIAMOND: COMPETITION VERSUS COOPERATION
• PINKER: REASON WILL OUT!
BAD TO GOOD: 2ND TRACK

• FOUR REVOLUTIONS IN ETHICS
• (1) NEED NOT KILL STRANGERS!
• (2) ALL HUMANS FORM SINGLE COMMUNITY (DARWIN)
• (3) BASED ON A SINGLE PRINCIPLE
• (4) OUR OWN ALAIN LOCKE: THAT PRINCIPLE MUST BE DIVERSITY
BAD TO GOOD: 3RD TRACK

• 4 STAGES OF REVOLUTIONS IN ETHICS
  • (1) EGOCENTRISM
  • (2) ETHNOCENTRISM
  • (3) ANTHROPOCENTRISM
  • (4) ACENTRISM
GOOD TO BAD: INDIVIDUALS

- GOOD GENES GONE WRONG: PSYCHOPATHY WITH GENETIC CAUSE
- BAD BLOWS—LITERALLY: BLUNT FORCE HEAD TRAUMA, BRAIN TUMOR
- TRAUMATIC SOCIALIZATION: SOCIOPATHY
HONOR CODES EXPLAINED

• HOBSES: ALL VIOLENCE HAS THREE SOURCES
  • (1) COMPETITION
  • (2) FEAR
  • (3) GLORY OR HONOR
WHY GLORY OR HONOR?

• PINKER: THINK OF “HONOR CULTURES”
• PRONE TO VIOLENCE (CASE STUDIES)
• IN ALL CASES, THE “LEVIATHAN” (RULE OF LAW) IS ABSENT OR DISTANT
• HONOR REALLY MEANS “STREET CRED”
HONOR AS CREDIBILITY

• PINKER’S CLAIM: HONOR GUARANTEES CREDIBILITY

• “I WILL FIGHT YOU TO THE DEATH IF YOU DARE TO THINK I WILL NOT!”

• FIGHTING FOR HONOR MEANS I WILL FIGHT FOR EVERYTHING I CONSIDER TO BE MINE
FAREWELL TO HONOR!

• THE LEVIATHAN—THE RULE OF LAW, EXECUTED WITH FAIRNESS BEHIND THE VEIL—TRUMPS HONOR CODES

• WHERE THE LEVIATHAN IS DISTANT OR ABSENT, HONOR TRUMPS LAW

• SOUTHERN US COMMUNITIES

• NEED FOR CRITICAL RESEARCH ON PINKER’S CLAIMS ABOUT MINORITY COMMUNITIES
ACTION FROM PHILOSOPHY?

- PINKER’S CLAIM ABOUT HONOR CULTURES AND LEVIATHAN: ACTION?
- IF TRUE, ETHICS CALLS FOR DEEP RE-EXAMINATION OF UNITED STATES “CRIMINAL INJUSTICE SYSTEM”
- FMRI’S AND DEATH ROW PRISONERS
- DNA FORENSICS AND CAPITAL PUNISHMENT
FREEWILL VERSUS SCIENCE

• GAZZANIGA: WHO’S IN CHARGE HERE? MY BRAIN OR MYSELF?
• FREE WILL AS AN ILLUSION
• CONSEQUENCES FOR CRIMINAL JUSTICE AND PENAL SYSTEM
• CONSEQUENCES FOR INCARCERATION OF MINORITIES
A FIFTH MORAL REVOLUTION

• CRIMINALITY AS A PUBLIC HEALTH PROBLEM, NOT A MORAL PROBLEM
• RECONCEIVING THE PURPOSE OF PRISON
• HISTORICAL ANALOGY: CHARLES DICKENS ON PHILADELPHIA’S EASTERN “PENITENTIARY”
RESTORATION OF COMMUNITY

• WHAT IS MORE IMPORTANT: BLAMING THE CRIMINAL OR RESTORING THE COMMUNITY?

• B. F. SKINNER’S BEYOND FREEDOM AND DIGNITY AND WALDEN II

• TAOIST PHILOSOPHY: THE EMPTY BOAT
RESTORATION VERSUS VENGEANCE

• WE MUST JUDGE MALEFACTORS
• VENGEANCE CANNOT BE OUR AIM
• RESTORATION OF COMMUNITY HARMONY
• THE FUTURE OF OUR PRISONS
OUR “DISHONOR” CODE

• “VENGEANCE IS MINE, SAYS THE LORD”!

• HONOR CULTURES AND THE ABSENCE OF LAW

• ANCIENT EGYPTIAN ETHICS AND THE ABOLITION OF VENGEANCE
CRIMINALITY AND PUBLIC HEALTH

• CRIMINALITY IS A DISEASE, NOT A CHOICE
• ANALOGY WITH ANCIENT IDEAS OF SPIRIT POSSESSION
• PUBLIC HEALTH MODEL FOR TREATMENT OF DISEASE