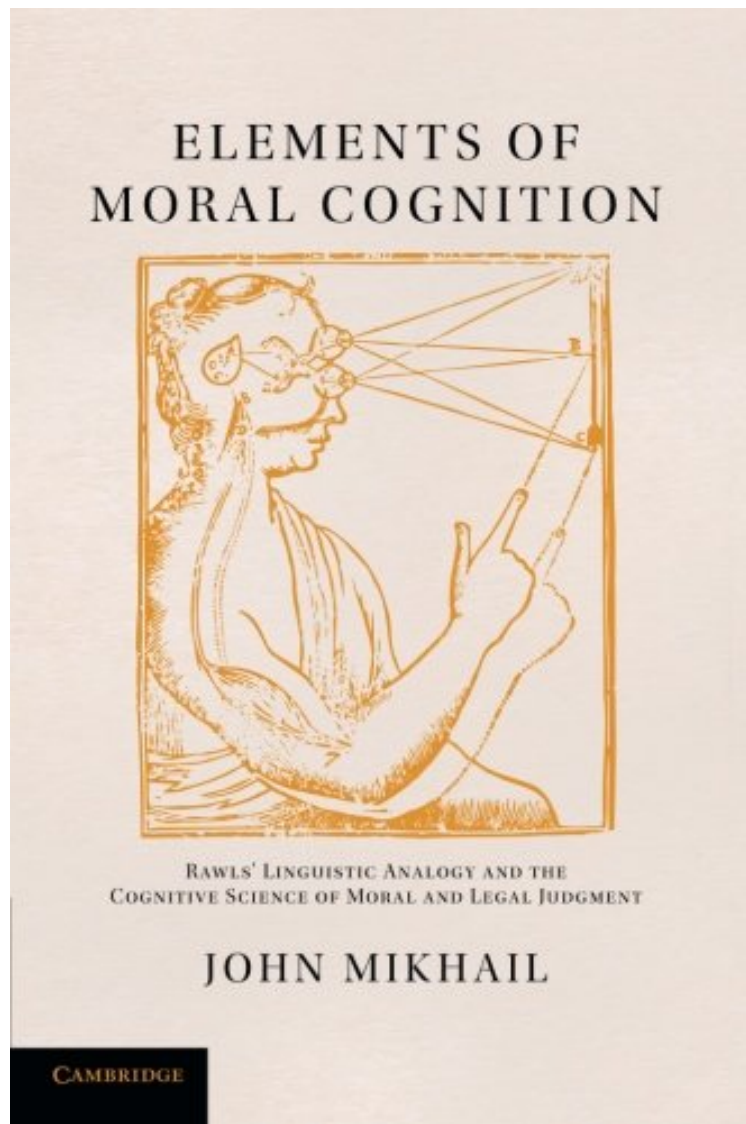


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## Elements of Moral Cognition: Rawls' Linguistic Analogy and the Cognitive Science of Moral and Legal Judgment

*John Mikhail*

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**John Mikhail : Elements of Moral Cognition: Rawls' Linguistic Analogy and the Cognitive Science of Moral and Legal Judgment** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Elements of Moral Cognition: Rawls' Linguistic Analogy and the Cognitive Science of Moral and Legal Judgment:

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Compare Options PreptorialFirst, since the left canonizes and the right demonizes John Rawls, I was quite surprised that Mikhail gave him a subtitle in this book. The truth is, very few of Rawls actual theories are employed here; rather, Mikhail uses Rawls as a "set up" for opening the door to a universal grammar type "neural encoding" of morality. He quotes an important concept by Rawls, for example, when Rawls decries the "semantic differences" of philosophical aspects of morality such as term and hair splitting about epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of mind, etc. (p. 213) instead of moral theory and research. BUT Mikhail's ideas are original and more related to Chomsky than Rawls, the aforementioned being mostly to support stepping outside of the semantic differences of philosophy to look more closely at, for example, culture and genetics. I bring this up because I don't want you to be turned off by the mention of Rawls if you dismiss him, love him or hate him-- this is pure Mikhail, not Rawls or Chomsky. Rawls is not as good or bad as promoted, and in fact A Theory of Justice is an important read. But Mikhail also refers to a number of his other books to lightly touch on jurisprudence and economics as well. Mikhail's ideas are novel and difficult. This is a slow, nuanced, highly techno-speak oriented text, and you need either a good grounding in moral theory terms, or Wikipedia close at hand. Chomsky attempts (and still does) to remove grammar from "common use" to a more testable premise base, with the attendant jargon so characteristic of that translation. Mikhail uses the same syllogism and inductive process to (generalize) common moral terminology to a possibly hard wired universal ethics, in the spirit of Chomsky's universal grammar. For example, the index is wonderful with tiny "sub-snippets" of additional keywords and phrases within each entry, but there is no entry for utility functions. You have to look at cost-benefit if you're pursuing enlightened self interest via reward and punishment, in addition to the universal hard wiring proposed! There also is no entry for Free Will (or will, free) vs. determinism/ cause-effect, and the discussion avoids current interesting issues like how choice works if we're actually living in a sim, as many of the multiverse theories in quantum physics are considering, most particularly Tegmark's amazing new book: Our Mathematical Universe: My Quest for the Ultimate Nature of Reality. If you're an attorney or judge, or teach law, this book is a must read much more so than for economists. The reason is that there are numerous, detailed connections between moral theory, Mikhail's innovative new ideas, and jurisprudence, whether common law or case precedent. In the spirit of Chomsky, Mikhail even creates a "periodic table" of moral elements! If you can work through the technical language, the concepts are refreshing and novel, and will add a completely new dimension to ethics discussions, as would more serious consideration of those choices if this reality IS a sim ala Tegmark et al. Highly recommended for those not too timid about either technical language or philosophical logic. The semantic hair splitting of "usual" philosophy also is either avoided or pointed out as such, and that introspective caution is truly refreshing for any philosopher. IF YOU ARE UNSURE that you'll be able to wade through the technical language, the hardcover version has 's wonderful "look inside" feature, so you can gauge the level of grammar before you purchase to be sure it's right for you, please be sure to check it out!

2 of 3 people found the following review helpful. Wonderful but Technical Overview of Possible Universals By Let's Compare Options PreptorialFirst, since the left canonizes and the right demonizes John Rawls, I was quite surprised that Mikhail gave him a subtitle in this book. The truth is, very few of Rawls actual theories are employed here; rather, Mikhail uses Rawls as a "set up" for opening the door to a universal grammar type "neural encoding" of morality. He quotes an important concept by Rawls, for example, when Rawls decries the "semantic differences" of philosophical aspects of morality such as term and hair splitting about epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of mind, etc. (p. 213) instead of moral theory and research. BUT Mikhail's ideas are original and more related to Chomsky than Rawls, the aforementioned being mostly to support stepping outside of the semantic differences of philosophy to look more closely at, for example, culture and genetics. I bring this up because I don't want you to be turned off by the mention of Rawls if you dismiss him, love him or hate him-- this is pure Mikhail, not Rawls or Chomsky. Rawls is not as good or bad as promoted, and in fact A Theory of Justice is an important read. But Mikhail also refers to a number of his other books to lightly touch on jurisprudence and economics as well. Mikhail's ideas are novel and difficult. This is a slow, nuanced, highly techno-speak oriented text, and you need either a good grounding in moral theory terms, or Wikipedia close at hand. Chomsky attempts (and still does) to remove grammar from "common use" to a more testable premise base, with the attendant jargon so characteristic of that translation. Mikhail uses the same syllogism and inductive process to (generalize) common moral terminology to a possibly hard wired universal ethics, in the spirit of Chomsky's universal grammar. For example, the index is wonderful with tiny "sub-snippets" of additional keywords and phrases within each entry, but there is no entry for utility functions. You have to look at cost-benefit if you're pursuing enlightened self interest via reward and punishment, in addition to the universal hard wiring proposed! There also is no entry for Free Will (or will, free) vs. determinism/ cause-effect, and the discussion avoids current interesting issues like how choice works if we're actually living in a sim, as many of the multiverse theories in quantum physics are considering, most particularly Tegmark's amazing new book: Our Mathematical Universe: My Quest for the Ultimate Nature of Reality. If you're an attorney or judge, or teach law, this book is a must read much more so than for economists. The reason is that there are numerous, detailed connections between moral theory, Mikhail's innovative new ideas, and jurisprudence, whether common law or case precedent. In the spirit of Chomsky, Mikhail even creates a "periodic table" of moral elements! If you can work through the technical language, the concepts are refreshing and novel, and will add a completely new dimension to ethics discussions, as would more serious consideration of those

choices if this reality IS a sim ala Tegmark et al. Highly recommended for those not too timid about either technical language or philosophical logic. The semantic hair splitting of "usual" philosophy also is either avoided or pointed out as such, and that introspective caution is truly refreshing for any philosopher. 7 of 9 people found the following review helpful. This book is something entirely new on Ethics By Joao Ricardo Barroca Mendes This book is something new on Ethics and this is one of the reasons why I gave it 5 stars. This is not a total beginner's book. You need some background on Cognitive Sciences and both Normative Ethics and Meta-Ethics. Often Mikhail is highly technical and he can use an entire chapter to cover a relatively unimportant issue. I think Mikhail is too generous to Rawls and attribute to him most of his own greater insights. So, ironically, you don't need much previous knowledge on Rawls' Theory of justice. Some basic understanding on Chomsky's ideas will help, but Mikhail will provide you with most you will need. Mikhail proposal can be oversimplified by the following points: 1) There are some genetic encodings on our moral cognitions that should be common to all normal people regardless its cultural background. 2) The basic process created by this genetic encoding can be described on a similar way that of a Formal Grammar or any other cognitive process. 3) You can do Empirical research to uncover those invariant moral processes. This should be done by vanilla scientific method: you do some hypotheses and test those hypotheses against empirical data. 4) You have prima facie reason to believe that those processes have Normative force. But prepare yourself to a MUCH deeper and nuanced analysis of those issues. And Mikhail will provide you with both reliable empirical data from the famous Trolley problems and a convincing cognitive model that match those data. And surprise: the heart of his model (the principle of double effect) has been around at least since Aquinas. Even so, Mikhail version is a master piece of precision. I think Mikhail is basically the single guy pointing on the right direction while so many are talking no sense. Personally, I only have two critics on him (both unfair, if you take in account his relatively modest program): a) The idea that our cognitive process can be modeled with some equivalent of a Turing machine is, on my view, wrong. It is true that this is the mainstream view. And even if it is wrong it still provides us with the best cognitive models available. But my own view is that the mind is a non-computable, pattern processor function. This objection is really only important to me, but the urge to adopt a mainstream model make Mikhail unnecessary attached with the Grammar analogy. He restricts himself with ONE kind of cognitive model. This model fits his first set of data, but he must grow past it if he wants his research program to takeoff. b) His model does not make provision to structural aspects of ethics. I think not everything is genetically encoded and some ethical issues just can't be solved by firmware programmed to deal with hunter-collectors societies. Other that test if a cultural aspect is compatible with our basic wiring, his research program will not provide us with a model to judge the normativity of rules on complex social issues. But I have a intuition that he would answer to this with a: first things first. We first deal with the simpler issues, then we complicate them. If you want to think Ethics on a different way, this book is for you. But if you hold hard to ideas like Cultural Relativist or Utilitarianism, you will find plenty of reasons to hate the guy that will show how outdated are those ideas.

Is the science of moral cognition usefully modeled on aspects of Universal Grammar? Are human beings born with an innate "moral grammar" that causes them to analyze human action in terms of its moral structure, with just as little awareness as they analyze human speech in terms of its grammatical structure? Questions like these have been at the forefront of moral psychology ever since John Mikhail revived them in his influential work on the linguistic analogy and its implications for jurisprudence and moral theory. In this seminal book, Mikhail offers a careful and sustained analysis of the moral grammar hypothesis, showing how some of John Rawls' original ideas about the linguistic analogy, together with famous thought experiments like the trolley problem, can be used to improve our understanding of moral and legal judgment. The book will be of interest to philosophers, cognitive scientists, legal scholars, and other researchers in the interdisciplinary field of moral psychology.

"Judicious, carefully executed, and deeply informed, this valuable study builds upon the early work of John Rawls, including his now-classic Theory of Justice, identifying its core principles, persuasively defending them against critics, deepening them conceptually and developing rich empirical foundations. It thereby provides the outlines of a naturalistic theory of moral judgment and moral cognition, which may well be a common human possession. One conclusion with broad consequences is that moral cognition crucially relies on the generation of complex mental representations of actions and their components. Mikhail's enterprise resurrects fundamental themes of traditional moral philosophy and Enlightenment rationalism, while showing how they can be cast as empirical science with far-reaching implications for political, social, and legal theory. It is a most impressive contribution." --Noam Chomsky "John Mikhail's Elements of Moral Cognition: Rawls Linguistic Analogy And The Cognitive Science of Moral Judgment carefully and convincingly explains John Rawls' remarks in his Theory of Justice about a possible analogy between linguistics and moral theory, showing that most commentators have mischaracterized these remarks and have therefore misunderstood important aspects of Rawls' early writings. (This is the best account I have read of Rawls.) In addition Mikhail takes the linguistic analogy more seriously than other researchers and develops the beginnings of a kind of moral grammar that is somewhat analogous to the grammar of a language. The grammar he

envisions has rules characterizing more or less complex actions, rules that derive partly from Alvin Goldman's Theory of Action and uses concepts taken from common law. He also speculates on the implications of the possibility that a moral grammar of this sort might account for aspects of ordinary moral judgments, comparing morality with language. I believe that Mikhail's current work in this area as reported in his book is the most important contemporary development in moral theory." --Gilbert Harman, Stuart Professor of Philosophy, Princeton University"Finally, a book that compares our current knowledge of human morality against the idea of an inborn rule-based system, not unlike universal grammar. With great erudition, John Mikhail carefully discusses all of the steps needed to understand this linguistic parallel, adding a new perspective to the ongoing debate about an evolved moral sense." --Frans de Waal, author of "The Age of Empathy" (Harmony, 2009)About the AuthorJohn Mikhail is Associate Professor at the Georgetown University Law Center.