

The George Washington University presents the

2009 Thacher Lecture

HOW WE EVOLVED A MORAL ORGAN

Marc Hauser

Harvard College Professor
Professor of Psychology,
Organismic & Evolutionary Biology
and Biological Anthropology

This lecture is sponsored by:
Department of Philosophy
University Seminar in Cognitive and Behavioral Neuroscience
Department of Anthropology
Center for the Advanced Study of Hominid Paleobiology
Department of Psychology



Friday, March 6, 2009 • 4:00 pm
Marvin Center 308
800 21st Street NW • Washington, DC

Abstract: How do you decide what is morally right or wrong? According to one time-honored view, we deliver moral judgments on the basis of a rational, conscious process of accessing principles to justify our actions. According to another view, our judgments result from intuitions mediated by emotions. Though both processes play a role in our moral deliberations, each faces critical problems. My solution appeals to an analogy to language: I argue that humans are endowed with a universal moral grammar that generates intuitive judgments of right and wrong based on an inaccessible, abstract code of action. My supporting argument invokes data from an internet study with over 200,000 subjects, suggesting universal principles and relative immunity to cultural variation, including religion, age, education, and gender. I also present data from patient populations (brain damage, psychopathy), neuroimaging and neural deactivation experiments, showing that integrating beliefs with consequences is crucial to resolving moral dilemmas—but that emotions may be merely a by-product of cold computation that does the work in adjudicating right from wrong.

Biosketch: Marc Hauser's research sits at the interface between evolutionary biology and cognitive neuroscience and aims at understanding the processes and consequences of cognitive evolution. Observations and experiments focus on human and nonhuman animals, incorporating methodological procedures and theoretical insights from behavioral ecology, infant cognitive development, evolutionary theory, cognitive neuroscience, biological anthropology, economics, linguistics, and philosophy.

Hauser received a BS from Bucknell University, a PhD from UCLA, and then did post-docs at U. Michigan, Rockefeller U., and UC-Davis before taking up an Assistant Professorship at Harvard University. Currently, Hauser is a Harvard College Professor, and Professor in the Departments of Psychology, Human Evolutionary Biology, and Organismic & Evolutionary Biology. He is co-director of the Mind, Brain, and Behavior Center and Director of the Cognitive Evolution Lab. He received a NSF Young Investigator Award, a Medal of Science from the College de France, and a Guggenheim Award. Hauser has published over 250 articles as well as three single-authored and three multi-authored books, including his recent *Moral Minds* (Harper Collins).