



BRAINTRUST.
WHAT NEUROSCIENCE TELLS US ABOUT MORALITY
Patricia S. Churchland

[Princeton University Press, Princeton 2011]

review by Daniele Mario Cassaghi

One of the most frustrating points about Moral Philosophy is the immortal question: “How long does the natural side of the human being influence moral behaviour?”. Dealing with this issue actually means defining sharp boundaries on the human faculty of Ethics. Far from philosophers who follow Kantian theories and who reject the influence of science inside the moral sphere, because of the presumed impossibility to derive “ought” from “is”, Patricia Churchland clearly explains that we need to understand the *platform of moral behaviour* inside our brain before understanding morality itself.

She argues that human ethics are based on a *four dimensional scheme* interlocked inside our brain’s processes: (1) *caring (especially about family and friends)*, (2) *recognition of others’ psychological states*, (3) *problem solving in a social context*, (4) *learning social practices*. The key word which underpins this mechanism is “Oxytocin”, an ancient peptide developed in mammals, which is responsible for both the anxiety and the fear felt by offspring separated from their parents and for the joy after reunion. The second important role of that hormone is increasing capacity for learning from the others in the group, linked to pain and pleasure derived from approval or disapproval. Thus the idea is that *attachment* to other people, owing to those two sensations, is our *moral platform*. Patricia Churchland claims that the most basic values, being-alive and well-being, derive from a *circuit of self-maintenance and avoidance of pain*, which is also extended to other individuals, and it becomes the basis of the *other caring* sociality in mammals and humans. This means that humans are intrinsically social and worried about their own interests, but also about those of relatives and friends. This, the neuroscientist says, allows humans to solve some kinds of problems from a social prospective, *shaped by concern for reputation and fear of punishment and exclusion*, they are therefore able to decrease the amount of conflicts. Under this point of view moral and social behaviour might be linked to the same brain areas that respond when somebody sees these kinds of actions: moral acts could be selected from the social solutions of those problems. Cooperation and the first account of human “theory of mind”, as argued by the author, are also based on Oxytocin.

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With a strict logic, Patricia Churchland gives her warning against the temptations induced by the easy innatism regarding ethical values. She is clearly aware of the importance of the context of moral-skill learning, and she suggests that a smooth reduction to “one gene-one behavior” is far from acceptable. It is certainly a point of thought for those who usually accuse her of being the pioneer of the trivial reductionism of human faculties on the biological sphere without deeper analyses.

After a long and exhaustive chapter devoted to the purest neurobiological aspects regarding the “human imitation” and “the theory of mind”, *Braintrust* provides the writer’s point of view about the general thought concerning ethical issues. The excessive faith in Kantian pure reason along with Mill’s utilitarianism, and Moore’s argument of Natural Fallacy are only three of the targets of Churchland’s claims against the vision of moral behaviour as linked to *exceptionless rules*. Her approach to morality, based on the different *cased-based reasoning*, (everybody values his own actions depending on both circumstances and own background) is as simple as it is striking, especially if it is embedded on the pain and pleasure circuit. Strict bonds between religion and morality during the centuries are not ignored by the philosopher, who, with her usual skeptical approach, analyses various positions regarding the derivation of ethical values from God. Her simple and elegant style does not fail to point out the amount of problems generated by the conception of morality based on divine extraction.

The reader looking for a nihilist essay, which should completely eliminate morality, because it is “matter of religion”, “unproven”, or simply “not natural”, will be disappointed. The main thesis is exactly the opposite: humans are intrinsically moral. They are so, because Ethics is primarily rooted in our sociality, which is rooted in our biology, in our brain structure. *Braintrust* shows a revolutionary approach to morality, far from abstractions or supernatural features and is strictly linked to the new neuroscience discoveries: it is the attempt to demonstrate how the human being is really moral.

References

Churchland, Patricia S. (2011). *Braintrust. What Neuroscience Tells Us about Morality*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. Traduzione italiana di Silvano Zipoli Caiani in: *Neurobiologia della morale*, Milano, Raffaello Cortina Editore, 2012.