



# Response to Dwyer and Hauser: Sounding the retreat?

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We agree with Dwyer and Hauser (DH) [1] that Chomsky's fundamental five questions about the language faculty might shed light on the study of the moral faculty [2,3]. However, we disagree that the concepts that have enabled Chomsky (and other linguists) to answer some of his questions when applied to language are likely to yield answers to his questions when applied to morality. As we point out [3], Chomsky's poverty of the stimulus argument could only demonstrate the existence of a universal moral grammar (UMG) if it was antecedently established that human moral competence has a grammatical structure. The question becomes: what is the evidence for the claim that human moral competence has a grammatical structure? Hauser [4] and Mikhail [2] argued that the evidence is promising. We disagree [3].

DH now claim that our criticism is directed towards a 'straw man'. If so, then Mikhail's [2] endorsement of UMG is a straw man. As Mikhail [2] puts it, 'UMG seeks to describe the nature and origins of moral knowledge by using concepts and models similar to those used in Chomsky's program in linguistics'. This is a strong and interesting claim, linking language and morality. DH want to discard UMG and adopt the weaker 'linguistic analogy' (LA). If this reduces to advertising the application of Chomsky's questions to morality, then this sounds like a precipitous retreat. Chomsky's questions have shed light on several cognitive capacities (e.g. spatial cognition, numerical cognition, mind reading), which have little to do with language. No-one would invoke a 'linguistic analogy' to characterize these research programs. Besides, as the two following examples show, DH's retreat is not completed yet.

First, suppose with DH that there is a grammar of action. If so, then representations of actions are compositional – that is, the properties of the representation

of a complex action depend on the properties of the representations of its constituent acts. If so, then human moral competence uses grammatical representations of actions as an input for delivering moral judgments. However, it does not follow that the moral evaluations of actions are compositional, nor that human moral competence has a grammatical structure.

Second, consider modularity. Chomsky argued that speakers' grammatical judgments (not their pragmatic judgments about the appropriateness of an utterance) do not arise from their naïve explicit metalinguistic beliefs about their language but instead from a deeply unconscious system of grammatical computations. We agree that Fodorian modularity of input systems does not apply here. The issue is whether the processes delivering moral judgments are immune to the top-down influence of one's explicit moral beliefs. We have pointed out that moral dilemmas are cases in which moral judgment is achieved by a process of adjudication between two (or more) conflicting intuitions, and that an agent's explicit moral beliefs might contribute to this process [3]. If so, then moral judgments are interestingly different from grammatical judgments.

So far, we stand by our argument. One paradoxical virtue of both LA and UMG is that they highlight interesting disanalogies between language and morality.

## References

- 1 Dwyer, S. and Hauser, M. Dupoux and Jacob's moral instincts: throwing out the baby, the bathwater and the bathtub. *Trends Cogn. Sci.* doi:10.1016/j.tics.2007.10.006
- 2 Mikhail, J. (2007) Universal moral grammar: theory, evidence and the future. *Trends Cogn. Sci.* 11, 143–152
- 3 Dupoux, E. and Jacob, P. (2007) Universal moral grammar: a critical appraisal. *Trends Cogn. Sci.* 11, 373–378
- 4 Hauser, M. (2006) *Moral Minds: How Nature Designed Our Universal Sense of Right and Wrong*, Ecco Press