

Cornes, Alan, *Moral Me: Making good decisions in an intercultural world*

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Reviewed by Dr. George Simons at diversophy.com

This book is about several things, all of them tantalizing, and the author is a brave soul in offering to explore them with us and attempt to tie them together in a meaningful and useful way.

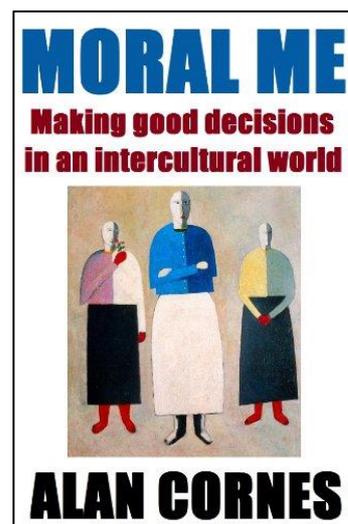
Cornes, like most of us, is admittedly not a professional in such fields as neuroscience. Yet he, like us, is faced with the task of making sense of the increasing volume of research enabled by new tools about our human construction. What is really at stake in our self-understanding? Is a revolution at foot here? We only need to think about how evidence deriving from DNA research has upended criminal justice. What next? What are its implications for the intercultural world?

Opening the human cranium or simply peeking into it via MRI can be a bit like forcing the lid of Pandora's jar and watching the daemons stream out in such quantity that it is hard to put the lid on again. In the case of the cranium, though hope may lie in the residue, we can no longer just blame the stream of escapees on a woman's curiosity as both Bible and Hesiod do! So it is up to us to take these new threads of knowledge carefully and explore their positive possibilities for insight into ourselves. As the history of persecution and genocide so clearly points out, our capacity for stereotyping "substantiated" by scientific research can lead to the kinds of deadly bias, all too easily reinforced by citing current biological and genetic evidence. One should not forget that the accused at Nürnberg protested that they were following eugenic ideas developed in US universities.

Cornes starts his discussion with the phenomenon we call empathy. If empathy resides in the mirroring neurons that automatically connect us to each other's behaviors and states, what does it mean? Some of us may have more of the mirroring kind than others, and some of us may nourish them and take them out to exercise more often (and perhaps have to pick up after them). In either case, we have to ask the questions that this book does: What significance does this neural endowment have for how we behave toward each other? How does this indicator about how we are constructed fit into the puzzle that we interculturalists are trying to assemble that will give us a better picture of what cultural competence looks like?

While this is a field of vast possibilities, the author quickly directs the focus of empathy to how we perceive and behave toward different others and spends a good part of its time looking at *prejudice* and *bias* as they emerge from us. These words are understood, inevitably, with more or less pejorative overtones, particularly in the Anglophone diversity training worlds, despite the author's attempt to see *bias* as a natural phenomenon and *prejudice* as its perpetuation in the light of contrary evidence.

Adding the neurological perspective raises our concern by asking how hardwired bias and prejudice may be, particularly in those who are deemed to be a dominant culture in a given social setting. We are all philosophers on the ground when it comes to organizing what we learn when science pokes



around into who we are and how we are put together. The conclusions we draw conforming to common wisdom and confirmation bias, can be anything but solid. Rather they can be just as shaky as many of the conclusions detailed in scientific research projects where the interpretation of results can easily lead us astray. Nonetheless we must try. So the challenge presented here is about where our neurological endowment leads us and to what degree we use or master it or not in our relations with each other.

From an intercultural perspective, the framework of Cornes' interpretation is Hofstede with a touch of Bennett, while the groundwork on prejudice relies on Gordon Allport. While these provide commonly understood starting points, it concerns me that, particularly when we are talking about the current directions of neuroscience and contemporary cognitive science, that the discussion does not go more deeply into more contemporary forms of analysis, e.g., cultural discourse's role in the social construction of group and personal identity. These insights, along with developing techniques of linguistic analysis, seem to me to be critical for how we shape and use our neurological endowment. On the other hand, the book offers explicit tips on how to manage one's language and behavior in the face of our neurological promptings. This includes how to handle stereotypes of ourselves and our suspicions about how others may implicitly stereotype us, as for example the inner suspicious conversations we may have with ourselves even when we are doing something as simple as filling out a questionnaire that asks about our gender, age, etc.

So it is about the impact created by how we see ourselves as well as how others see us. Particularly when dealing with younger professionals, I repeatedly encounter a denial of cultural identity even when its stamp is obvious in their thinking and behavior. I look for the pain behind such denial. Why? The bite of stereotyping unfortunately can be too sore to deal with. Being stereotyped shackles its victims to a jaundiced past that is not only not attractive but also downright punitive. Somehow when one is unable to dismiss the stereotypes, negation is the chosen escape, a denial of the existence and value of one's own culture, of treasures that we might not realize we have or may not regret losing until later in life. In other words, the baby of identity gets chucked out with the dirty bathwater of stereotypes.

So, denial of identity is a false friend when combatting stereotypes. Firstly, it really doesn't work, and secondly it costs one easy and comfortable access to the riches of diversity in one's background that could become significant strengths if they were not contaminated by being labeled with negative stereotypes in the mind of the one who possesses them. Freedom is possession of one's whole self, whether or not others have besmirched parts of us with biased perceptions. This is not easy. As children we were taught to defend our self-esteem with the maxim, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but names will never hurt me." Unfortunately in many cases the sticks and stones are thrown at us along with the names. The hurt is crippling and sometimes permanent.

While the treatment of bias and prejudice tries to incorporate insight from neurological discoveries, this is Cornes' prelude to the main course. The question now is: where does all this fit into ethics and morality, or rather, more concretely, how can we make better decisions? In order to explore this, the author provides us with a rather meaty menu of ethics and moral philosophy, highlighting the many approaches to it that have been taken throughout history largely in Western culture. For me this was a reawakening of a once-upon-a-time semester in college.

Ethical theory is, however, just the place setting into which the author dishes up various processes and tools intended to assist us in making moral or ethical choices. This includes a favorite tool of mine, the mind map, which has many more uses than decision-making. Fortunately, several software offerings are available nowadays to help us map more quickly and clearly than we used to

with poster boards, markers and post-it notes. All of the tools offered lead the reader to reflect on his or her own decision-making process, how we see ourselves acting justly, fairly and being right with ourselves and others and ultimately being okay with our selves, choosing well and feeling satisfied.

How to sum it up? Given a world of constant research, discovery, reflection and trial and error, the book leaves us with more and more questions via the issues it raises. In the course of human evolution, for example, are those empathetic mirror neurons an evolutionary development taking us to a higher level of adaptation to the environment and social well-being or are they a relict of species-specific survival mechanism destined to become further weakened by cyber hedonism? Is abundance the enemy of social solidarity? We are discovering more about what our nervous system is and does, but what is its history and its direction? Not only can there be too many choices to be made, but are there in fact too many ways to make them? We shudder to look at the daily news reports, at the hatred, desperation, violence, and death-dealing all around us—certainly our empathetic neurons have a hard road to tread!