Book Review

HYPOCRISY REVEALED (AND THOUGHTS ON THE ROLE OF MODULARITY IN EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY)

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Make no mistake: Robert Kurzban is one of the most important scholars in modern evolutionary psychology (EP) circles. His work on social cognition and moral decision-making (e.g., Kurzban, DeScioli, & O’Brien, 2007) is as well-thought-out and implemented as any modern research in the social sciences. Further, he is an extremely eloquent scholar with an engaging presentational style. For these reasons, his first book has been met with great excitement and interest by folks in our field. And I’d have to say that while I don’t agree with all of his points, I think the overall product of Why Everyone (Else) is a Hypocrite: Evolution and the Modular Mind is really outstanding. Written in a highly engaging style, this book does an exceptional job of summarizing work on the psychology of morality and, to some extent, it serves as an interesting introduction to the field of EP.

To my mind, this book has two primary goals – and these goals are encapsulated in the title and subtitle of the book respectively. Primarily, this book sheds light on the nature of moral psychology – with a specific eye toward elucidating hypocrisy. This is great for several reasons – largely because people are, without exception, fascinated by hypocrisy. People seem to love to catch others in moments of hypocrisy. And in a highly political world (as ours is), calling people out on hypocrisy is something of a silver bullet – often used by people in all sorts of contexts to advance their own agenda. Second, per the book’s subtitle, this book sets out to provide an evolutionarily informed argument for why a modular conception of the mind is the best way to understand human psychology.

On the Nature of Hypocrisy

We know that pointing out hypocrisy is a crucial element of social life partly based on the literature (see Haidt, 2007). But, if you think about your social world, you’ll see that we also see evidence for the moral outrage facet of hypocrisy in our everyday lives. My personal knowledge on this topic comes from the fact that I’m an academic. And co-coach of a little league team (the New Paltz Little Twins!). And member of the Board for the Friends of the Plattekill Public Library. And I often speak my mind regarding our local (New Paltz) school district. I just can’t help it – I’m constantly surrounded by politics! Politics is everywhere. And as I’ve commented in some of my...
own work (see Geher, 2011; Geher & Gambacorta, 2010), pointing out hypocrisy is, without a doubt, one of the core elements of any and all political situations.

With this backdrop, I have to say that Kurzban’s analysis of human hypocrisy is spot-on. And I love the fact that he essentially points out that hypocrisy is not a feature of some people and not others, as we often think. Democrats often paint Republicans as hypocrites. And vice versa. Scientists often paint religious fundamentalists as hypocrites. And vice versa. Northerners paint Southerners as hypocrites. And vice versa. And on and on. The beauty of Kurzban’s analysis is that he points out that hypocrisy is a natural consequence of having a normal human mind.

In his words, Kurzban (2010, p. 20) describes the phenomenon of hypocrisy as follows: “One type of inconsistency is moral hypocrisy, which I’ll take to be something like expressing moral condemnation and then doing exactly that thing.”

When people catch others in this kind of situation (think Eliot Spitzer), they often act with public outrage. Can you believe that he, of all people, a representative of all the people of New York, no less, who has, himself, come down hard against the prostitution industry ... ???? How could he!!? Of all people!!? What a hypocrite! Sure, what Spitzer did was pathetic – and people had a right to be outraged at his actions. That said, his incident captures Kurzban’s conception of hypocrisy well.

Kurzban’s point is not to excuse the behavior of people like Spitzer. Rather, taking an evolution-based perspective, his point is to answer precisely the kind of question that millions asked about Spitzer: How could he?! He could because he is human – and hypocrisy goes with the territory. This is not a justification. This is an explanation.

How do humans come to be so prone to hypocrisy? In short, Kurzban draws on many psychological processes that, in concert, often lead to outcomes that we would call hypocritical. People are driven to have sex – but people are concurrently motivated to make sure that others in their community hold sexual urges in check, for instance. Both of these realities of human psychology – basic urges related to procreation and moral beliefs that serve to exert social control within a community – are somewhat at odds. Not just for Eliot Spitzer – but, importantly, for everyone. All people have all kinds of urges and feelings that encourage selfish behaviors – and all people have some understanding of morality (largely shaped by their particular culture) that has codes against certain expressions of selfish behaviors. And our fragmented psychology reflects this complex reality.

Further, Kurzban argues that many specific elements of the human mind play a role here in allowing for hypocritical behaviors. Such mental elements include the tendency to over-inflate one’s own value along many dimensions, the tendency to engage in self-deception, and the tendency to hold incongruous views of the self at the conscious and non-conscious levels. All these different mental elements likely characterize the human mind for some reason – they evolved because they have some ultimate benefits in helping individuals survive and/or reproduce. However, they also, when working synchronously, lead to some not-so-adaptive outcomes such as blatant hypocrisy.

Kurzban does a great job of painting hypocrisy as a feature of a normal human mind rather than as a feature of some subset of the population whom we think of as evil politicians, scoundrels, and the like.

On the Overemphasis of Modularity
In April of 2012 (at Plymouth State University in New Hampshire), members of the NorthEastern Evolutionary Psychology Society (NEEPS) were treated to a keynote address by Kurzban on topics related to his book. I watched with my wife and children – and it was great. Truly one of the most engaging academic presentations that I’ve attended.

That said, there was one intellectual concern I had based on the material that Kurzban presented. And in my reading of his book, my concern remains. This concern pertains to Kurzban’s emphasis on modularity as an axiomatic aspect of the human mind. There are many scholars who comprise the field of EP – and there are several versions of EP that these different folks espouse. In my own work (e.g., Geher, 2006), I make a point to conceptualize EP in broad terms – focusing on any and all scholarship in the behavioral sciences that takes an evolutionary approach to human behavior – understanding human behavior as an outcome of such evolutionary forces as natural and sexual selection. From this perspective, both general and specific psychological processes may be understood and examined from an evolutionary perspective.

Modularity is the idea that the mind is comprised of many different specialized processes with specific functions that evolved across human history. And, as controversy exists in all corners of academia, of course, controversy over modularity exists. This point was raised by both myself and, separately, by Scott Barry Kaufman during the question-and-answer period of Kurzban’s talk at NEEPS. In his own work, Kaufman has focused on the evolutionary origins of broad, general psychological processes such as conscious and non-conscious problem-solving that comprise broad categories of human intelligence (see Kaufman, 2011). The debate pertains to whether human mental processes are best conceptualized as representing discrete evolutionarily shaped modules (a la Kurzban) or as part of broad, flexible general mechanisms (a la Kaufman). Essentially, in different ways, Kaufman and I both questioned the importance and validity of the modularistic perspective during this session at NEEPS.

Clearly, Kurzban had heard this before – and I don’t want to get caught up in a discussion of the validity of modularity here. My main point here is to broach the issue of whether modularity is necessary for the argument regarding hypocrisy that Kurzban so elegantly makes. As I see it, Kurzban points out a number of psychological processes, such as basic physiological motives, moral outrage, and self-deception, as ultimately, in concert, leading to potential hypocrisy in all of us. I think that’s a great idea and I’m strongly convinced of his argument. However, I don’t see why it is necessary to appeal to modularity in making this point. For instance, Kurzban (2010, p. 98) writes, “...modularity makes certain phenomena that are otherwise very puzzling easy to understand.”

I’m not convinced of this particular idea. Further, more relevant to the task at hand, I’m not convinced that Kurzban’s analysis of hypocrisy needs to rest on the pillars of modularity. This may be a bit semantic of a point – but I can’t see why calling self-deception and these other psychological phenomena something more general, such as psychological processes – and conceiving of them as such – would make any difference to Kurzban’s analysis of hypocrisy.

Kurzban’s modularistic perspective on hypocrisy rests on the idea that there are discrete modules for such processes as having selfish sexual urges and being morally outraged by the sexual indiscretions of others. To my mind, this same basic idea works just as well by talking about broader processes such as selfish physiological motivations and the tendency to experience moral outrage. Modularity comes with a host of
assumptions including discrete brain pathways – assumptions that, to my understanding, have hardly been sufficiently documented to this point. It just seems to me that Kurzban’s same analysis of hypocrisy works just as well with the concepts framed in more general terms. I don’t see the empirical benefits of appealing explicitly to modularity in this case.

As I see it, trying to convince the reader of modularity is something of an unnecessary and even distracting point. Kurzban writes as if the argument requires modularity to be valid – and he underscores this point so much as to include this point in the book’s subtitle (Evolution and the Modular Mind). I think that the book, which works very well, would work even better if the issue of modularity were made less of a focus.

**Bottom Line**

Criticisms of an overemphasis of modularity aside, I end by getting to my core take on this book. This book is exceptional – it’s extremely well-written and provocative. It leaves the reader with new insights into the human condition – which is exactly what the best books in psychology do. By underscoring how basic hypocrisy is to human psychology, the ideas in this book have the capacity to help people better understand hypocrisy and moral outrage in themselves and others – and in a political world such as ours, this should be a good thing. You should read this book – and so should your students – and so should your family.

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**References**


