

Original Article

‘MORAL SENSE’

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Abstract

The concept of ‘moral sense’ plays an important role in books on philosophy, psychology and popular science written by authors who write in English and who take the English language for granted. For example, in his recent book *The God Delusion* Richard Dawkins (2006) states that “we have a moral sense which is built into our brains, like our sexual instinct or our fear of heights” (p. 214). Yet there is no expression like *moral sense* in other languages, not even European ones like Spanish or German, let alone non-European ones, like Chinese. Nor was there any *moral sense* in English before the phrase was invented by so-called “British moralists” – Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and Hume. This paper traces the origins of the modern Anglo/English concept of ‘moral sense’ in the influence of Locke’s empiricist philosophy on the eighteenth-century ‘British moralists’, and through them, on the language of British natural scientists, and especially Darwin’s.

Thus, the paper argues that when contemporary scientists of the English language like Dawkins, Hauser, and others write about the ‘moral sense’ and present it as a panhuman characteristic evolved through biological evolution, they are looking at “human nature” and “human morality” through the prism of the English language. Seeing the phrase *moral sense*, and the discourse based on it, in a cross-linguistic and historical perspective can help us to stretch our imagination as to different possible conceptions of “morality” and to go beyond the culture-bound vision of what Dawkins (2006) calls “moral sense” and Hauser (2006), a “universal sense of right and wrong”.

Keywords: Moral Sense Test, evolution, cross-cultural differences, cross-linguistic evidence, universal human concepts, Anglo/English bias, Locke-Hume-Darwin-Dawkins, British empiricism, ‘conscience’ vs. ‘moral sense’, Anglo cultural heritage

‘Moral sense’ -- a human universal?

The concept of ‘moral sense’ plays an important role in books on philosophy, psychology and popular science written by authors who write in English and who take the English language for granted. For example, in his popular and controversial recent book *The God Delusion*, the evolutionary biologist and public intellectual Richard Dawkins asks (in a heading title): “Does our moral sense have a Darwinian origin?” (p. 214) and

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he replies: “our moral sense, like our sexual desire, is indeed rooted deep in our Darwinian past”; he also affirms that “we have a moral sense which is built into our brains, like our sexual instinct or our fear of heights”.

Dawkins uses the phrase *moral sense* interchangeably with the phrase *a sense of right and wrong*, and he also appears to equate *moral sense* with ‘morality’ and ‘moral universals’. In a judicious critical review of Dawkins, another biologist, H. Allen Orr, concurs: “I suspect that biological evolution has endowed us with a rough moral sense” (2007, p.24)¹.

In another acclaimed recent book for the general reader, the American psychologist Paul Bloom (2004), writes about “the growth of the ‘moral circle’, the universe of beings encompassed by our developed moral sense” and he promises to “present a theory of the emergence of a uniquely human morality, and discuss how certain forces can enhance, nourish and solidify our evolved moral sense” (p. XIII).

The key role of the phrase *moral sense* in the language of popular science is also reflected in the web-based “Moral Sense Test” (MST) designed by the Harvard psychologist and evolutionary biologist Marc Hauser, the author of a recent book entitled *Moral Minds – How Nature Designed our Universal Sense of Right and Wrong* (2006). I will discuss the supposedly universal ‘sense of right and wrong’ shortly, for the moment, however, my focus is on the phrase *moral sense*.

As Hauser explained in a recent radio interview (Mitchell, 2006), “we built about three years ago a website called The Moral Sense Test (. . .) which now (. . .) has somewhere like 300,000 subjects from around the world. And on that website people log in and tell us where they’re from, their religious background or educational background, age and so forth”. Apparently, Hauser and his colleagues believe that the phrase *moral sense* is intelligible to “people around the world”; and also, that by encouraging “people around the world” to log in and do the test they can collect culture-independent data on “moral universals”. The interviewer Natasha Mitchell (2006) sums up Hauser’s position and his invitation to “people around the world” as follows: “Moral fundamentals that Marc Hauser’s research is revealing are common across all human cultures and you can test your own response to some everyday moral dilemmas on his team’s Moral Sense Test on the web and add to his data. Pop the words “moral sense test” and “Harvard” into Google and you’ll find it.”

Evidently, the “Moral Sense Test” is meant to be culture-blind in the sense of being culture-neutral; but in fact it is strikingly culture-blind in another sense: its very title appears to equate universal human concerns about ‘morality’ (in the sense of ‘doing bad

¹ The graphic conventions used in this paper may strike some readers as complicated and confusing. Why not write, they might ask, simply about moral sense rather than, variably, *moral sense*, ‘moral sense’ and “moral sense”? For the purposes of this paper, however, it is essential to distinguish between the English phrase *moral sense*, the modern English concept ‘moral sense’, and the quotation “moral sense”, when speaking, for example, of “what Dawkins (2006) calls “moral sense””, that is, to distinguish graphically between words and phrases (italics), concepts (single quotes), and quotations (double quotes). In accordance with a common convention, I am also using double quotes as a distancing device, for example, when I put “human nature” or “human morality” in double quotes. The whole point of the paper is to problematize the use of English expressions (such as, for example, *moral sense*) and English concepts (such as, for example, ‘moral sense’). For this, elaborate graphic distinctions are sometimes essential.

things' and 'doing good things') with the Anglo concept of 'moral sense'. What the designers of the test do not seem to realize is that in fact the concept of 'moral sense' is a cultural artefact, part of the Anglo cultural heritage, that it is linked with modern English and that it has no exact semantic equivalents in other languages, or even in Shakespeare's English.

When one does look at the MST website, one can find putative versions of "the same test" in Spanish and Chinese, but even a quick glance at the Spanish version shows that this "identity" is an illusion and that not even the title "Moral Sense Test" can be adequately translated into Spanish. The Spanish phrase *encuesta de juicio moral* introduced at the outset means in fact something like 'an inquiry into moral judgement'. But since *juicio*, like *judgement*, implies an element of reflection, it is incompatible with the non-reflective implications of the phrase *moral sense*. It is not surprising, therefore, that the word *juicio* is quickly dropped in favour of a loan from English and that the explanatory note "About the Moral Sense Test" is rendered in Spanish as "Sobre el Moral Sense Test"².

Furthermore, the key English words *right* and *wrong* used in the explanation of the test are rendered in the Spanish version as *correcta* and *incorrecta*, 'correct' and 'incorrect' (action), because Spanish has no words matching these English words, with their uniquely English meanings; but of course the words *right* and *wrong* do not mean the same as *correct* and *incorrect*; and in fact, they stand for uniquely English concepts (for detailed discussion, see Wierzbicka, 2006, chapter 3).

In the Chinese version of the "Moral Sense Test", *moral sense* has been rendered as *shì fēi guān*, where *shì* means something like 'yes, correct, right', *fēi* 'no, incorrect, wrong', and *guān*, 'point of view, concept' (cf. e.g. Liang 1973). While such glosses can be only approximate, there can be no doubt that *shì fēi guān* doesn't match the English *moral sense* any more than the Spanish *juicio moral* does.

Empirical linguistic investigations strongly suggest that the concepts of 'good' and 'bad' are indeed universal, and also, that in all languages and cultures people distinguish between 'doing something bad' and 'doing something good' (for detailed discussion, see Wierzbicka, 2001, pp. 161-169). The ideas that 'people can do bad things' and 'people can do good things' can indeed be regarded as "moral universals"; but the same is not true of the notion of 'moral sense', which is in fact highly culture-specific, just as 'right' and 'wrong' are.

² French has the expression *sens moral*, which might seem to be an exact semantic equivalent of the English *moral sense*, but this is an illusion. In fact, *sens moral* (unlike *moral sense*) is closely related to rational discernment and frequently occurs in collocations like *le sens moral*, *social et politique* and *le sens moral et civique*, (see, e.g. the French Cobuild). The English *moral sense* does not occur in similar collocations. For example, one doesn't speak of *moral and political sense* because *moral sense* and *a political sense* are not conceptually on a par in English as *le sens moral* and *le sens politique* are in French. (Cf. the entry on *sens* in Rey et al. 1995 and on *moral sense* in Cassin et al. 2004).

It is also interesting to note that while Piaget (1932) studied, famously, "Le jugement moral chez l'enfant" ('The moral judgement in children'), Anglophone developmental psychologists often study, instead, children's 'moral sense'. For example, Sharon Lamb (1991), in an article entitled "First moral sense: aspects of and contributors to a beginning morality in the second year of life", equates the emergence of 'morality' with the emergence of a child's 'moral sense'.

Lamb reports, more helpfully, that according to her research, 18-month-olds show remarkable concern for knowing about doing, and not doing, 'good' (1991, p. 187); but she puts an Anglo spin on her results when she writes, with reference to previous research, "I also discovered the moral sense of the 1- to 2-year old" (p. 186).

The introduction to the “Moral Sense Test” (MST) states: “Our aim is to use data from the MST, as well as other experiments, to characterize the nature of our moral psychology, how it evolved, and how it develops in our species”. The word “our” in the phrase “our moral psychology” is meant to stand for “human”, but if human moral psychology is seen through the prism of the modern Anglo concept of ‘moral sense’ its portrayal is bound to be distorted, to some extent, by an Anglo bias.

Although the expression *moral sense* is less colloquial and less frequent in English than its putative semantic equivalent *a sense of right and wrong* (see the section on 18th Century *moral sense*), it is by no means rare. In fact, a Google search yields close to a million occurrences of *moral sense*, as compared to less than half a million of *sense of right and wrong*. Nor is *moral sense* restricted to the language of philosophers, psychologists and popularizers of science, as in the following examples from Cobuild, from the British National Corpus (BNC) and from a novel illustrate:

My **moral sense** has been dulled by too many years here. (BNC)

Without the guidance of the nuns, Tilda seemed to have lost the last vestige of **moral sense**. (BNC)

It was not just that he was unversed in Washington mores, he was also a deeply religious man with a highly developed **moral sense**. (Cobuild)

The **moral sense** seems to be lacking in their makeup. (Cobuild)

‘I will be writing,’ pronounced Monty, ‘of my beliefs concerning the state of the university system in this country. I will be writing employing my knowledge *as well as my moral sense* – ’ (Zadie Smith, 2005)

In many popular philosophical and psychological discussions of “moral sense”, the word *sense* is often used more or less interchangeably with the word *judgement*, or with expressions like *our intuitive judgement*. Hauser, in his radio interview with Natasha Mitchell (2006), speaks also about a “universal moral grammar”, which he describes as “a tool-kit for building possible moral systems”; and about a “moral calculus” which is “a completely unconscious intuitive process”. However, as the examples from Cobuild and the British National Corpus illustrate, *moral sense* cannot mean exactly the same as *moral judgement*: a judgement cannot be part of someone’s “makeup”, cannot be unconscious, and does not imply any link, or analogy, with the senses, with bodily perception, or with bodily sensations.

There can be little doubt that speakers of English interpret the expression *moral sense* against the background of expressions like *a sense of time*, *a sense of direction*, *a sense of obligation*, *a sense of responsibility* and, above all, *a sense of right and wrong*. Like all these other *sense* expressions, *moral sense*, too, stands for a complex concept which combines, in a particular way, references to thinking, feeling, and knowing, and which implies an analogy with the senses and sensations. More precisely, the concept of ‘sense’ in the expression *moral sense* refers to the human capacity to think something, to feel something at the same time, and to know something on the basis of these thoughts and these feelings – as one can know something on the basis of bodily sensations and perceptions. At the same time, it is significant that *moral sense*, in contrast to *a sense of*

right and wrong, a sense of time and so on, is usually used in present-day English without the article *a* (unless it is accompanied by an adjective, e.g. *a rough moral sense*, cf. the quote from Orr adduced earlier) – a grammatical difference which reflects a special conceptual status of ‘moral sense’ as a shared human characteristic (in contrast, for example, to ‘a sense of time’).

So what exactly does the expression *moral sense* (as it is used in present-day English) mean?

To be able explore such questions, we need a suitable methodology. As I have tried to show in my *English: Meaning and culture* (2006), and as colleagues and I have tried to show in many other publications (cf. e.g. Cliff Goddard and Anna Wierzbicka eds 2002, Anna Wierzbicka 1996, Cliff Goddard 1998, 2006; see also NSM Homepage: www.une.edu.au/lcl/nsm/index.php), such a methodology is provided by “NSM semantics”, based on a small set of simple, intelligible, and universally available words, that is, words with semantic equivalents in all languages. This small set of “universal words” (that is, universal word-meanings) provides a “natural semantic metalanguage” for exploring languages, cultures, and ways of thinking, which is why the theory on which this approach is based is known under the acronym “NSM”: “NSM” stands for “the natural semantic metalanguage”.

The “NSM” technique for exploring human psychology without an Anglo bias

NSM is a semi-artificial language developed by Anna Wierzbicka, Cliff Goddard and their colleagues, over more than three decades, for the investigation and description of meaning. NSM is a technique for the representation of meaning based on, and interpretable through natural language – *any* natural language.

The central idea of this theory, supported by extensive empirical investigations by a number of researchers, is that despite their enormous diversity, all natural languages share a common core: a small vocabulary of 65 or so “conceptual primes” and a “universal grammar” (the combinatory properties of the primes). The set of universal conceptual primes identifiable as distinct word-meanings in all languages, includes elements such as SOMEONE, SOMETHING, PEOPLE, GOOD, BAD, KNOW, THINK, WANT, FEEL, and so on. The full set of these primes is given in the table below. (Cf. Wierzbicka 1996; Goddard, 1998; Goddard and Wierzbicka eds., 1994, 2002. For versions in languages other than English, including Spanish and Chinese, see Goddard and Wierzbicka eds., 2002; see also Peeters ed., 2006; Goddard ed., in press.)

The inventory of semantic primes given in Table 1 below uses English exponents, but equivalent lists have been drawn up for many languages. Because semantic primes and their grammar are shared across languages, it is possible to construct equivalent NSMs in any language: a Chinese NSM, a Malay NSM, a Spanish NSM, a Japanese NSM, and so on (see especially the chapters in Goddard and Wierzbicka eds., 2002; Peeters ed., 2006; Goddard ed., in press). The use of NSM as a system of meaning description depends on being able to break down complex language-specific meanings into extended explanatory paraphrases, known as explications.

Table 1: Universal human concepts – English version

substantives:	I, YOU, SOMEONE, SOMETHING/THING, PEOPLE, BODY
relational substantives:	KIND, PART
determiners:	THIS, THE SAME, OTHER/ELSE
quantifiers:	ONE, TWO, SOME, ALL, MUCH/MANY
evaluators:	GOOD, BAD
descriptors:	BIG, SMALL
mental predicates:	KNOW, THINK, WANT, FEEL, SEE, HEAR
speech:	SAY, WORDS, TRUE
actions, events, movement, contact:	DO, HAPPEN, MOVE, TOUCH
location, existence, possession, specification:	BE (SOMEWHERE), BE/EXIST, HAVE, BE (SOMEONE/SOMETHING)
life and death:	LIVE, DIE
time:	WHEN/TIME, NOW, BEFORE, AFTER, A LONG TIME, A SHORT TIME, FOR SOME TIME, MOMENT
space:	WHERE/PLACE, HERE, ABOVE, BELOW, FAR, NEAR, SIDE, INSIDE
logical concepts:	NOT, MAYBE, CAN, BECAUSE, IF
intensifier, augmentor:	VERY, MORE
similarity:	LIKE/WAY

Notes: • Primes exist as the meanings of lexical units (not at the level of lexemes)
 • Exponents of primes may be words, bound morphemes, or phrasemes • They can be formally complex • They can have different morphosyntactic properties, including word-class, in different languages • They can have combinatorial variants (allolexes) • Each prime has well-specified syntactic (combinatorial) properties.

The NSM approach to semantic and cultural analysis has been employed in hundreds of studies across many languages and cultures. A large bibliography is available at the NSM Homepage: www.une.edu.au/lcl/nsm/index.php.

Unlike complex English-specific terms like “motivation”, “sensation”, “self-awareness”, “domination”, “empathy”, “reconciliation”, “confrontation”, “aggression”, “sense” and so on, the mini-language of universal conceptual primes can be used for discussing cognition, emotion and communication of both humans and animals without cultural or linguistic biases, without theoretical preconceptions, and in a unified framework.

In his survey of new developments in “Evolutionary Psychology” (*Annual Review of Anthropology*, 1999), Douglas Jones says of the NSM work that “despite differences in aims and methods, it shows a striking convergence with other work in

psychology and anthropology”³. The work on which this paper is based seeks to explore, and build on, this convergence, and to continue the dialogue between NSM semantics, anthropology, psychology, and evolutionary biology. (For favourable attention from adjacent disciplines, see also, inter alia, D’Andrade, 2001; Geertz, 2002; Shweder, 2004; Eco, 1999.)

Building on the analyses of other *sense*-expressions developed in a larger work on ‘sense’ (Wierzbicka, Forthcoming), I would propose the following NSM explication of the expression *moral sense* (as it is used in contemporary English):

moral sense (20th/21st century)

people can think about some things like this:

“it is like this: I know that if I do this, I will do something good”

“I know that if I do this, I will do something bad”

when people think like this about these things they can know that it is like this,
like people in a place can know something about this place because they are in this place

they can know it because when they think like this they can feel something
like someone can feel something in some parts of their body
when something is happening in these parts of their body
because something is happening in the place where this someone is

The element “I know” in the first block of components situates *moral sense* closer to perception than to judgement: my *moral sense* “tells me” (“causes me to know”) that if I do this, I will do something good (bad); it is not a matter of reflection but, as it were, of “inner perception”.

It could be argued that the two basic thoughts associated with *moral sense* should be formulated in terms of “someone” rather than “I”: “if someone does this, this someone will do something bad/good”. However, in contemporary popular science and other writings of the subject, the notion of ‘moral sense’ is strongly linked with motivation, action and choice, and also with questions such as “what is the origin of goodness?” and “what is the origin of altruism?” (cf. e.g. Dugatkin, 2006). These questions relate more to one’s own prospective acts (“if I do this I will do something good/bad”) than to one’s assessment of people’s behaviour in general (“if someone does this, they will do something good/bad”). Of course the expression *moral sense* can be used in relation to such assessments as well, but arguably, this is done by extension from the more basic first-person model (“I know that if I do this, I will do something bad/good”), which better connects with the view of ‘moral sense’ as a guide for action.

A brief history of ‘moral sense’

Given how important the concept of ‘moral sense’ is in the Anglo/English thought-world, and how many influential writers have tried to trace the origins of this ‘sense’ in

³ For earlier publications in an “NSM” framework bearing directly on evolutionary biology, see Wierzbicka 1999 and 2004.

“our Darwinian past”, it is interesting to trace the origins of the ‘moral sense’ concept in Anglo/English intellectual history. In fact, the milestones of this history are not difficult to identify, since they can be linked fairly straightforwardly with the names of Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, Hume, and Darwin, and since from Darwin, the path led straight to contemporary writers like Hauser, Dawkins, Bloom and Orr. Tracing the use of the phrase *moral sense* in the writings of these authors, we can establish both a clear continuity and a semantic shift.

It is commonly held that the expression *moral sense* was first used in English in the writings of the early-eighteenth-century moral philosopher Lord Shaftesbury, alongside *a sense of right and wrong*⁴ (cf. Mautner 1996, 277-78). Shaftesbury was deeply convinced of the universality and, in some sense, innateness, of basic moral distinctions. In his correspondence, he rejected with scorn Hobbes’ view of human nature (which, without external control, would supposedly lead to “a war (...) of every man against every man” Hobbes 2002 [1651]: 95), but he was far more worried about Locke’s influence and what he saw as the danger inherent in Locke’s view that, as Shaftesbury put it, “virtue . . . has not other measure, law, or rule, than fashion and custom”:

It was Mr. Locke that struck the home blow: for Mr. Hobbes’s character and base slavish principles in government took off the poison of his philosophy. ‘Twas Mr. Locke that struck at all fundamentals, threw all order and virtue out of the world, and made the very ideas of these (which are the same as those of God) *unnatural*, and without foundation in our minds. (Shaftesbury, 1900, p. 404)

According to Shaftesbury, the key question is not whether moral ideas are (in some sense) innate but whether “the constitution of man be such that, being adult and grown up, at such or such a time, sooner or later (no matter when), the idea and sense of [moral] order, administration, and a God, will not infallibly, inevitably, necessarily spring up in him” (ibid.). Shaftesbury attributed Locke’s rejection of moral universals to his excessive credulity:

Then comes the credulous Mr. Locke, with his Indian, barbarian stories of wild nations, that have no such idea (as travellers! learned authors! and men of truth! and great philosophers! have informed him), not considering that is but a negative upon a hearsay, and so circumstantiated that the faith of the Indian (. . .) may be as well questioned as the veracity or judgment of the relater, who cannot be supposed to know sufficiently the mysteries and secrets of those barbarians; whose language they but imperfectly know; to whom we good Christians have by our little mercy given sufficient reason to conceal many secrets from us. (Shaftesbury, 1900: 403-404)

But although the idea of ‘a moral sense’ or ‘a sense of right and wrong’ was indeed advanced by Shaftesbury, and although he did on occasion use the phrase *moral sense*,

⁴ Before Shaftesbury, a group called “the Cambridge Platonists” used sometimes the term *a sense of good*, or *a sense of good and evil* (cf. e.g. Partridge, 1992, p. 30). However, they appear to have been using the word *sense* in an earlier sense, unrelated to *senses* and closer to judgement and discernment: “for them, ‘the sense of good’ was a matter of ‘right reason’ (Partridge, 1992 p. 31-32). (On the polysemy of the Latin *sensus* and of its descendants in various European languages, see Cassin et al., 2004).

this phrase took root in the English language through two seminal works of the moral philosopher Francis Hutcheson, each comprising two semi-autonomous treatises: *An inquiry into the original of our ideas of beauty and virtue* (1725) and *An essay on the nature and conduct of the passions and affections* (1728). Both these works were extremely influential in eighteenth-century England and America, and had particularly great impact in Scotland, where they influenced many well-known Scottish philosophers including Hume.

Leidhold (2004, xiii), in his introduction to Hutcheson's *Inquiry*, notes Hutcheson's acknowledged debt to Shaftesbury's *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711) and states: "Shaftesbury had taught that *social affections* were the foundations of morals and that a *moral sense* was the origin of our moral ideas". But the phrase *moral sense* appears in Shaftesbury's *Characteristics* only twice whereas in Hutcheson's work it occurs very frequently and becomes a veritable key term. As noted by Raphael (1947, 2), "the expression 'moral sense' was first used by Shaftesbury, but in a loose and vague way; it became the name of a specific theory in the work of Hutcheson, who drew upon Locke's empiricist theory of knowledge in framing it."

It is true that Shaftesbury's use of the term *moral sense* was somewhat vague and that he didn't make a clear distinction between the new term *moral sense* and the older term *conscience*. For example, he wrote: "to want [i.e. lack] conscience, or natural sense of the odiousness of crime and injustice, is to be most of all miserable in life" (*An Inquiry Concerning Virtue or Merit*, 1999, p. 209). The word *conscience*, which Locke defined as "our own Opinion or Judgment of the Moral Rectitude or Pravity of our own Actions" (*Essay* I. iii. 8, Niditch ed., p. 70), carried with it implications of reflection and was felt to have Christian connotations. As the 19th century preacher Frederick William Robertson, quoted in the OED (1853), put it, "We come into this world with a moral sense; or to speak more Christianly, with a conscience". (As an electronic search indicates, there are as many as 969 uses of the word *conscience* in Bunyan's *Works*). Hutcheson's *moral sense*, on the other hand, was free of Christian connotations and was linked with 'the five senses', not with moral reflection, and, as Partridge (1992, p. 90) puts it, it was "both prospective and retrospective".

Drawing on Locke's theory of knowledge, according to which all knowledge is ultimately derived from the senses, Hutcheson advanced the view that in addition to "external senses" like sight and taste, there are also "internal senses" such as "the sense of beauty" and "a moral sense". In his *Inquiry* Hutcheson set out to prove:

that some actions have to men an *immediate Goodness*; or, that by a *superior Sense*, which I call a *moral one*, we *approve* the Actions of others (. . .); a like Perception we have in reflecting on such Actions of our own, without any View of *natural advantage* from them. (Hutcheson, 1725/2004, p. 88)

There can be no doubt that for Hutcheson, "moral sense" so defined was analogous to "the five senses": "All our Ideas, or the materials of our reasoning or judging, are received by some immediate Powers of Perception internal or external, which we may call *Senses*." (1728/2002, p. 215). Furthermore, as Partridge (1992, p. 97) comments, "the most important point for Hutcheson is that the nature of the moral faculty involves sensation, and not reason".

Hutcheson's notion of a 'moral sense' put forward in his *Inquiry* was sharply criticized by many of his contemporaries. In his *Essay* published three years later, the

phrase *moral sense* was put provocatively in the title and attracted even more attention. In this work, in which the phrase *moral sense* recurs dozens of times, the author writes: “all Men *feel* something in their own Hearts recommending Virtue, which yet it is difficult to explain. This Difficulty probably arises from our previous Notions of a small Number of *Senses*, so that we are unwilling to have recourse in our Theories to any more.” (Hutcheson, 1728/2002, p. 7)

One of the most keen participants in this debate was Adam Smith, the famous author of *The Wealth of Nations*, who in his *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759) argued against the innateness and universality of ‘moral sense’ in Hutcheson’s sense of the term on linguistic grounds:

It is strange that this sentiment, which Providence undoubtedly intended to be the governing principle of human nature, should hitherto have been so little taken notice of, as to not have got a name in any language. The word moral sense is of very late formation, and cannot yet be considered as making part of the English tongue. (Smith, 1759/1980, p. 326)

Smith does not reject the idea of moral universals, but he notes the contingent nature of Hutcheson’s concept of ‘a moral sense’. As Partridge (1992, p. 250) puts it, “this in itself (. . .) undermines, as Smith notes, the credibility of the philosophical claim that there is such a distinct faculty”.

Eighteenth-century Britain saw a raging debate between proponents and opponents of the ‘moral sense’, and also, a debate about the appropriate use and interpretation of this phrase. As Hume noted in his *Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, “There has been a controversy started of late, much better worth examination, concerning the general foundation of MORALS; whether they be derived from REASON, or from SENTIMENT, whether we attain the knowledge of them by a chain of argument and induction, or by an immediate feeling and finer internal sense; or whether, like all sound judgment of truth and falsehood, they should be the same to every rational intelligent being” (Hume, 1751/1969: 59).

Hume himself was very much on Hutcheson’s side, and he argued strongly for what he called “a sense of morals”. For example, in the *Treatise of Human Nature* (Hume, 1734/1978, p. 455), in a section entitled “*Moral Distinctions not deriv’d from Reason*” (Section I, Part I, Book III), he wrote: “Moral distinctions (. . .) are not the offspring of reason. Reason is wholly inactive, and can never be the source of so active a principle as conscience, or a sense of morals”. In another section, he also wrote: “It requires but very little knowledge of human affairs to perceive, that a sense of morals is a principle inherent in the soul, and one of the most powerful that enters into the composition” (1734/1978, p. 619).

But although Hume used, here and elsewhere, the phrase *a sense of morals*, he also adopted Hutcheson’s phrase *a moral sense*, and in particular, Section I, Part I of Book III of the *Treatise* (1734/1978) bears the memorable heading “Moral distinctions deriv’d from a moral sense”. The section starts as follows:

Section II. *Moral distinctions deriv’d from a moral sense.*

Thus the course of the argument leads us to conclude that since vice and virtue are not discoverable merely by reason, or the comparison of ideas, it must be by means of some impression or sentiment they occasion, that we are able to mark the difference betwixt them (. . .) Morality, therefore, is more properly felt

than judg'd of; though this feeling or sentiment is commonly so soft and gentle that we are apt to confound it with an idea . . . (Hume, 1734/1978, p. 470)

The key words in this passage are *discoverable*, *feeling*, *reason* and *idea*. Jointly, they suggest that for Hume, *a moral sense* was a matter of knowing how to distinguish between 'vice' and 'virtue' on the basis of what one felt (rather than merely on the basis of what one thought).

Both Hutcheson and Hume talk about *a moral sense*, rather than *moral sense* (although they also use other determiners, such as *our*, *this* and *the*); and they both appear to regard *a moral sense* as one of the senses ('internal senses'), almost on a par with 'external senses' like sight, smell, and touch. As the Scottish philosopher Thomas Reid, who was an opponent of Hutcheson and Hume, put it in his *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (1785), "Many important powers of mind have, especially of late, been called internal senses from a supposed resemblance to the external; such as, the sense of beauty, the sense of harmony, the moral sense" (1785/2002, p. 71).

Thus, building on the explication of *the senses* in Wierzbicka (forthcoming), we can propose the following explication of that 18th century (Hutcheson/Hume) meaning of the phrase *a moral sense*:

a moral sense (18th century)

people are like this:

they can know that when they want to do some things they want to do something good
they can know that when they want to do some other things they want to do something
bad

they can know this because when they think about it they can feel something
like they can feel something in some parts of their bodies
when something is happening in these parts of their bodies
because something is happening at that time in the place where they are
when they think that someone else did some things
they can know the same because when they think about it they can feel the same

The explications of *senses* (as in *the five senses*) starts with the component "people's bodies are like this" and the explication of the 18th century concept of *moral sense* starts with an analogous component: "people are like this". The explication of *senses* posits a direct link between what is happening at a particular time in the place where someone is and what can happen in some parts of this someone's body; and also, a direct line between what happens in some parts of this someone's body and some resulting knowledge. Both these links have their counterparts in the explication of the 18th century concept of *moral sense* proposed here. Furthermore, the temporal anchoring of the 'moral sense' in the first line ("when they want"), parallel to the anchoring of sensory perception in the here and now, connects with Hutcheson's and Hume's view that the 'moral sense' (unlike a mere judgement) can move people to action. (Cf. Mautner, 1996, p.278).

Reid, who was one of the most noteworthy players in the eighteenth-century debate about ‘moral sense’, in his *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* (1788) argued against Hume’s (and Hutcheson’s) use of this phrase as follows:

When Mr Hume derives moral distinctions from **a moral sense**, I agree with him in words, but we differ about the meaning of the *sense*. Every power to which the name of a sense has been given, is a power of judging of the objects of that sense, and has been accounted such in all ages; **the moral sense** therefore is the power of judging in morals. But Mr Hume will have **the moral sense** to be only a power of feeling, without judging: this I take to be an abuse of a word. (Reid, 1788, quoted in Raphael, 1947, p. 153)

But influential as Reid was in other matters (and in particular, in his promotion of the notion of ‘common sense’, which he helped to become a vital part of the Anglo/English thought-world), on the question of ‘moral sense’ he lost⁵. Although the present-day meaning of the phrase *moral sense* differs in some respects from the meaning given to it by Hutcheson and Hume, it is much closer to their meaning than to that advocated by Reid. For example, when Dawkins, Hauser, Bloom and Orr talk about “moral sense” they do not mean “a power of judging”, as Reid would have it, but rather, an ability to react to certain human actions “instinctively”, “intuitively”, and yes, by “feeling”.

It is interesting to note in this context that Darwin, who was undoubtedly an important link in the conceptual chain leading from Hutcheson and Hume to present-day writers such as Dawkins and Hauser, seems to have sometimes spoken interchangeably of *the moral sense*, *a sense of right and wrong*, and *some feeling of right and wrong*. He also wrote:

... it can hardly be disputed that the social feelings are instinctive or innate in the lower animals; and why should they not be so in man? Mr Bain (see, for instance, ‘The Emotions and the Will’, 1865, p. 481) and others believe that the moral sense is acquired by each individual during his lifetime. On the general theory of evolution this is at least extremely improbable. (Darwin, 1871, p. 84)

Darwin also quoted, with apparent approval, “our great philosopher, Herbert Spencer”, who “has recently explained his views on moral sense”:

I believe that the experiences of utility organised and consolidated through all past generations of the human race, have been producing corresponding modifications, which, by continued transmission and accumulation, have become in us certain faculties of moral intuition – certain emotions responding to right and wrong conduct, which have no apparent basis in the individual experiences of utility. (Darwin, 1871, p. 115)

⁵ Reid (1788/2005) wrote: “The name of the *moral sense*, though more frequently given to conscience since Lord Shaftesbury and Dr Hutcheson wrote, is not new. The *sensus recti et honesti* is a phrase not unfrequent among the ancients” (quoted in Raphael 1947: 1787). But the Latin word *sensus* did not mean the same as the post-Lockean English word *sense* (Cf. Cassin et al., 2004).

18th century *moral sense* and 20th/21st century *moral sense*: a comparison

Whatever may have changed in the meaning of *moral sense* between, say, Hutcheson and Darwin, and then Darwin and Dawkins, arguably the link between knowing and feeling has survived: present-day *moral sense*, too, links moral distinctions not with reasoning (as in the Spanish *juicio* or English *judgement*) but with an intuitive, feeling-based response.

It might be asked: why should we think that anything changed in the meaning of *moral sense* at all between Hutcheson and Dawkins?

There is indeed no conclusive evidence on this point, there is, however, a good deal of circumstantial evidence. To begin with, Hutcheson's *moral sense* was usually accompanied by an indefinite article (*a moral sense*), and it was explicitly presented as one of the senses, more precisely, one of the "internal senses", alongside *a sense of beauty* and some others; and these "internal senses" were quite explicitly presented as parallel to the "external senses". Thus, in the 18th-century usage (or at least in Hutcheson's usage), there was a transparent and direct semantic link between the phrase *a moral sense* and the word *senses* (as in *the five senses*).

By contrast, in present-day usage the link between *moral sense* and *the five senses* is less direct and less obvious. For example, when Dawkins says the "we have a moral sense which is built into our brains" he does not compare this "sense" with other "senses" but with "our sexual instinct" and "our fear of heights".

Furthermore, the whole semantic context in which the expression *moral sense* exists in contemporary English is quite different from what it used to be. With time, *moral sense* came to be felt to be closely related in meaning to *a sense of right and wrong* – not in the sense in which Shaftesbury used that phrase (roughly, an innate and universal 'natural sense' closely related to 'conscience'), but in a new meaning (to be discussed in the next section). This new meaning of *a sense of right and wrong* implies consciousness: thinking in terms of "I". Schematically, the conceptual shift in question, which relates to the first chunk in the two explications of *moral sense*, can be represented as follows:

18th century

people can know that when they want to do some things they want to do something
good/bad

20th/21st century

people can think about some things like this:
"it is like this: I know that if I do this, I will do something good"
"I know that if I do this, I will do something bad"

Arguably, this conceptual shift in the meaning of *moral sense* is closely related to a broader cultural shift, which has also occurred in the semantic history of *experience* (see Wierzbicka, forthcoming, Part III). As argued by Shweder et al. (1990, p. 142), "there is an unequal distribution (. . .) of self-consciousness" across populations, and "self-consciousness about thinking is probably a useful cross-cultural (. . .) variable". The term "cross-cultural" can also be applied to different epochs. To say that the thought-world reflected in modern (20th/21st century) English is different from that reflected in pre-

Enlightenment English is hardly a radically new claim. But the methods of linguistic semantics, and in particular, of NSM semantics can help us to trace such differences more precisely and more systematically than it was possible before. (Cf. e.g. Bromhead, in press).

The emergence of the first-person perspective in the 20th/21st century meaning of *moral sense* brought this meaning closer, in some respects, to that of *a sense of right and wrong*, and to the perspective reflected in the plethora of other more or less recent *sense*-expressions such as, for example, *a sense of commitment*, *a sense of responsibility*, *a sense of identity*, and so on.

At the same time, this alignment between *moral sense* and those other present-day *sense*-expressions is no doubt only partial, if only because *moral sense* is still seen today, as it was in the eighteenth century, as a shared human characteristic. Thus, there is no assumption today that everybody has ‘a sense of responsibility’, ‘a sense of humor’ or ‘a sense of direction’, but those who use the phrase *moral sense* assume that (apart from pathologies) all people have ‘moral sense’. Accordingly, the explication of *moral sense* (20th/21st century), like that of the earlier (18th-century) meaning, has been phrased here in terms of ‘people’ rather than ‘someone’.

The present-day meaning of *moral sense* is linked with consciousness and the possibility of choice: “if I do this, I will do something good, if I do this, I will do something bad”. There is no evidence for the presence of such a link in the eighteenth-century usage, in which *moral sense* was strongly associated with other ‘senses’, both “internal”, like ‘a sense of beauty’, and “external” (“the five senses”). The ‘five senses’ do not imply consciousness, and are attributed to lower animals, but not even Frans de Waal, the most prominent champion of ‘a sense of right and wrong’ in non-human primates (2006), attributes a ‘moral sense’ to frogs or spiders.⁶

The two explications of *moral sense* proposed here, one for the 18th-century usage and one for the present-day meaning, reflect considerations such as these. While it is not possible to present these considerations here in full detail, one point needs to be at least briefly addressed: the relationship between *moral sense* and *a sense of right and wrong* in present-day English. I will turn to it in the next section.

‘A sense of right and wrong’ in present-day English

Philosophers and scientists who write about ‘moral sense’ often appear to use the phrase *moral sense* interchangeably with *a sense of right and wrong*, apparently for elegant variation. In ordinary language, however, the two phrases do not mean the same. Roughly speaking, the phrase *a sense of right and wrong* implies something less stable and less permanent than *moral sense*, or to put it differently, something more variable, more changeable, more situation-bound, and more individual than *moral sense*. Consider, for example, the following descriptions of people, from the British National Corpus (BNC):

A strong-minded colleen with **a sense of right and wrong** [? moral sense].

⁶ In the blurb on the cover of de Waal’s book, Robert Sapolsky, the author of *A Primate’s Memoir*, attributes to nonhuman primates not only ‘the rudiments of morality’ but even ‘a sense of fairness’.

He was someone with respect for himself and for his community. He was someone with **a sense of right and wrong** [? moral sense].

One could describe someone as a person with *a sense of responsibility*, *a sense of duty* or *a sense of humor* but not as *someone with moral sense*, because *moral sense* implies a common human characteristic. Furthermore, *a sense of right and wrong* is often presented as something acquired through learning, whereas *moral sense* implies something innate (or, in the current parlance, hard-wired):

This undermines the authority of parents, the ones most responsible for passing on to their offspring **a sense of right and wrong** [? moral sense].

People can speak of passing on to one’s offspring, through example and moral teaching, *a sense of right and wrong* but they don’t normally speak of passing on *moral sense* in this way.

Similarly, one can speak of trying to *instill* in children in one’s care *a sense of right and wrong*, as in the following example, but hardly of trying to *instill moral sense* in them:

As a PE teacher, I spent a lot of time at extra-curricular activities, such as football matches against other schools. But I am becoming frustrated by trying to instill **a sense of right and wrong** [? moral sense] into our players, not only towards each other but also towards the referee.

But perhaps the clearest evidence for the difference in meaning between *moral sense* and *a sense of right and wrong* comes from collocations with adjectives. Generally speaking, *moral sense* usually occurs without any adjectives, unqualified, whereas *a sense of right and wrong* can be readily described as *strong* and, above all, as *clear*. The key differences in frequency (in a Google search) can be represented in the following diagram:

TABLE 2: Moral sense vs. sense of right and wrong (Google searches)

1.	<i>strong moral sense</i>	2% of <i>moral sense</i>
2.	<i>clear moral sense</i>	0.1% of <i>moral sense</i>
3.	<i>strong sense of right and wrong</i>	8% of <i>sense of right and wrong</i>
4.	<i>clear sense of right and wrong</i>	3% of <i>sense of right and wrong</i>

As this table shows, *clear sense of right and wrong* is almost 30 times more frequent (in proportion to its counterpart without the adjective) than *clear moral sense*. This is a spectacular difference, which clearly shows that *a sense of right and wrong* is perceived as more conscious, and more related to “clear thinking”, than *moral sense*. No doubt this is related to the semantic implications of the words *right* and *wrong*, which imply, roughly speaking, rational thinking (cf. Wierzbicka, 2006, chapter 3) – implications which are absent from the meaning of *moral sense*. The fact that *moral sense* normally occurs without any adjectival qualification altogether suggests its “absolute” character, as something shared by all (normal) human beings.

A person who has ‘a clear sense of right and wrong’ often assesses people’s actions as either ‘right’ or ‘wrong’. By contrast, a person who has ‘moral sense’ is just like everyone else: *all* people can distinguish between doing something good and doing something bad (especially, in relation to their own actions).

As mentioned earlier, and as discussed in detail elsewhere (Wierzbicka, 2006), the concepts ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ are, unlike ‘good’ and ‘bad’, complex and culture-specific, and I am not going to try to analyze them again here. Leaving these two as they are, we can explicate the expression *a sense of right and wrong* as follows (the asterisk indicates here words which are semantically complex):

she has a sense of right and wrong

she often thinks like this about some things at some times:

“it is like this: if someone does this, it is *right, if someone does this, it is *wrong”

when she thinks about something like this, she can know that it is like this,
like people in a place can know something about this place because they are in this place

she can know it because when she thinks like this about something, she can feel
something
like someone can feel something in some parts of their body
when something is happening in these parts of their body
because something is happening in the place where this someone is

As mentioned earlier, the meaning of *a sense of right and wrong* explicated here is almost certainly different, in some respects, from Shaftesbury’s early-eighteenth-century usage, since for Shaftesbury, *a sense of right and wrong* was, like *a moral sense*, ‘one of the senses’, but we cannot pursue this comparison here further.

Conclusion

The phrase *moral sense* plays an important role in contemporary philosophy, science, and popular science and it is an important tool in the conceptual kit with which the English language provides its speakers, writers and thinkers. Anglophone scientists, including evolutionary biologists, often take this phrase for granted and assume that it corresponds neatly to something “built into our brains” (Dawkins, 2006). Yet this phrase has no exact equivalents in other European languages, let alone non-European ones.

As this paper shows, the phrase *moral sense* is part of the Anglo cultural heritage, going back to eighteenth-century British moral philosophers like Shaftesbury, Hutcheson, and Hume, and even further, to Locke’s influential tenet that all knowledge derives, ultimately, from the senses.

While the meaning of the phrase *moral sense* has changed in the course of the last three centuries there is also a continuity here. Scientists and popular science writers who write today, in English, about ‘moral sense’ do not seem to be aware that they are part of a particular linguistic and conceptual tradition, and that by equating “human morality” with “moral sense” they are interpreting it through the prism of that tradition.

When Hume wrote that “moral distinctions are not the offspring of reason” and that “moral distinctions [are] derived from a moral sense”, he was making a *claim* about the

source of moral distinctions and he was not taking the concept of ‘a moral sense’ for granted. By contrast, those who write today (in English) about “moral sense” tend to take the concept of ‘moral sense’ for granted and use this phrase as if it were self-explanatory, unproblematic, and independent of history and culture.

Many present-day speakers of English continue to use the word *conscience*, alongside *moral sense* and *a sense of right and wrong*, and even Darwin often said, perhaps to connect with a wider European tradition: *moral sense or conscience* (see e.g., 1871, p. 70). Yet connotations of *conscience* and *sense* are quite different: the former evokes ideas of soul, God, spirit and conscious discernment, and the latter, of the body, brain, and the senses. It is not surprising, therefore, that Anglophone popular science writers like Dawkins go for *moral sense* rather than *conscience*. ‘Conscience’ is not a universal concept either⁷, and it, too, was shaped by a particular cultural tradition; but so was the more scientific-sounding ‘moral sense’⁸.

No doubt for contemporary English writers, including science writers, the phrase *moral sense* can be a piece of convenient shorthand for talking about a whole cloud of unanalyzed ideas, including the distinction that people everywhere make, or can make, between ‘doing something good’ and ‘doing something bad’. But if the use of this shorthand is not accompanied by an awareness that it carries with it a historically shaped cultural perspective, an Anglo bias creeps in – and once again, the writers are not only using the English language but are unwittingly “being used” by it themselves.

In his recent tribute to Clifford Geertz, Richard Shweder (In press) writes: “His goal, in an age of ‘globalization’, was to help us imagine difference: different conceptions of the self, of morality, of emotions (. . .), as made manifest by groups of people, ways of life”. To “groups of people” and “ways of life” one could add, of course: “languages”. Languages manifest, and promote, different conceptions of the self, of emotions, and of morality (among other things), and the modern English phrase *moral sense* – the cornerstone of a whole discourse of “moral sense” – is a good case in point. Seeing this phrase, and this discourse, in a cross-cultural and cross-historical perspective, can help us to stretch our imagination as to different possible conceptions of “morality” and to go beyond the culture-bound vision of what Hauser (2006) calls a “universal sense of right and wrong”.

A coda on the author’s position on the universality of moral concepts

An anonymous reviewer of this paper asks about “the explicit position of the author about the universality (or not) of the phenomena discussed. Specifically, is moral sense explicitly considered (or not) by the author as a universal process common to all cultures?”

⁷ For example, in Chinese, the closest semantic and cultural counterpart of *conscience* is *liáng xīn*, roughly, ‘good heart’, where *liáng* stands for ‘good’ (in a sense normally used only in relation to people), and *xīn*, something like ‘heart/mind’) (Cf. e.g. Liang, ed., 1973; Cowie and Edison, eds., 1995).

⁸ In present-day English, *conscience* is often understood as an imaginary voice judging one’s own actions, and this understanding appears to go several centuries back. For example, Swift, quoted in Dr Johnson’s Dictionary (1755/1812), wrote: “*Conscience* signifies that knowledge which a man hath of his own thoughts and actions; and because, if a man judgeth fairly of his actions by comparing them with the law of God, his mind will approve or condemn him, this knowledge or *conscience* may be both an accuser and a judge”. This definition links *conscience* with *judgment*, *knowledge*, and *God*, and it is “retrospective” rather than “prospective”: it presents ‘conscience’ as an accuser and judge of past actions rather than a guide for action.

(...) For example, different cultures would disagree on what (content) is considered “right or wrong” but would not disagree that a) there are some things that are right and b) there are some things that are wrong?”

I welcome this question because it gives me an opportunity to make my own position on the “phenomena discussed” clear and explicit.

The first point is that different cultures COULD NOT agree, even in principle, that some things are right and some things are wrong, because apart from Anglo culture, other cultures do not have the concepts of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’.

The second point is that while cultures cannot agree that some things are ‘right’ and some ‘wrong’ they CAN in principle agree that some things are ‘good’ and some ‘bad’ – because empirical evidence suggests that all languages have words for ‘good’ and ‘bad’. More than that, empirical evidence suggests that all languages have phrases such as “to do something bad” and “to do something good”. Thus, the conceptual distinction between ‘doing something good’ and ‘doing something bad’ is universal.

Since I have been challenged to state my own personal view on the “phenomena discussed” I am happy to acknowledge that it is quite close to St. Paul’s view that there is a moral law “written on people’s hearts”, as discussed and elaborated in John Paul II’s encyclical *Veritatis Spondor*. But both Paul and the encyclical use language which is metaphorical and culture-specific. To make my own “position” clear and explicit I would need to formulate it in simple and universal human concepts. This can be done as follows (see Wierzbicka, 2001):

- (a) all people can know some things
- (b) they can know that some things are good
- (c) they can know that some things are bad
- (d) they can know that someone can do bad things
- (e) they can know that someone can do good things
- (f) they can know that it is bad if someone wants to do bad things to other people
- (g) they can know that it is good if someone wants to do good things for other people

- (h) they can know these things not because other people say these things

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