How Good is the Linguistic Analogy?

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It is implausible to think that any interesting human capacity is not a product of the interaction of some innate endowment and environmental factors. The devil lies in articulating precisely what the content of the innate endowment is. Linguists have made good use of poverty of stimulus arguments to discover the content of the principles that constitute the language faculty, where these principles are to be thought of as constraints. They specify what is possible in any given human language, and parameterized, they specify what is possible in particular human languages. Now, it is very tempting to theorize about moral competence in a similar fashion. In earlier work I have tried to make such an approach — often described as pursuing the ‘linguistic analogy’ — initially appealing. However, one needs to be more precise about the alleged analogies and disanalogies between moral and linguistic competence. In this talk I shall discuss (at least) the following: (1) that moral judgments (esp. judgments about permissibility) are not analogous to acceptability judgments; (2) that moral disagreement must be distinguished from moral diversity; and (3) the implications of (1) and (2) for epistemological questions regarding moral relativism and psychological questions about what it is like to be a moral agent. My hope is that this discussion will illustrate how not to use linguistic analogy, and more importantly will re-emphasize (what I at least have always found compelling about the Chomskian project)—viz., that human competences are essentially normative, and that their systematic study will reveal facts about the nature and structure of the human mind.