

Lesson Seven

Superstructure

We fail to examine our assumptions not just because they are hard to see, but also because they are safe and comfortable. They allow us to live with the flattering illusion that "I am the center of the universe, and what matters are my immediate needs and desires."

BIG QUESTIONS ABOUT MORALITY

The ideal marriage among the Sumbanese of Indonesia is for a woman to marry her father's sister's son, and for a man to marry his mother's brother's daughter. Like the marriages among the Tamil, these cousin marriages are arranged by elders and thought to be far too important to be left up to individual choice. These marriages create alliances between clans which are further reinforced through ceremonies involving an elaborate exchange of valuables such as horses, pigs, ivory, and gold. For the Sumbanese, this is simply the right thing to do.

One day, the anthropologist Web Keane was discussing these matters with an elder Sumbanese woman when she turned the tables and asked him about American marriage practices. Keane told her that individuals choose their own partners, that we rarely or never marry cousins but otherwise there are no rules, and that we do not host an elaborate exchange of goods like the Sumbanese. "She was visibly appalled," Keane notes. With a sense of shock she exclaimed, "So Americans just mate like animals!"

On the surface, this story is a reminder of the vast differences between us. Our cultures seem to encapsulate very different morals, ethics, and values. Marriage practices are just one expression of what at root seem to be vastly different ideas and ideals. The American marriage system rests on ideals of individualism, freedom, liberty, and choice. If we really stop to imagine a young girl marrying her cousin at the behest of her elders, we can't help but feel as appalled as the Sumbanese woman above. The Sumbanese system seems to be denying her most fundamental right to live a free life, fall in love, and pursue happiness under her own terms. But beneath the surface we might also perceive a few important similarities. First, both systems are supported by moral and ethical values. Americans may disagree on the specifics of the ethical system, but we recognize it as an ethical system and understand the value of such constraints. We might even agree with the sentiment that, as Keane summarizes it, "being ethical makes you human."

The problem of different morals and ethics raises some challenging questions. As noted earlier, *great questions can take us further than we ever thought possible*. But questions can be disconcerting too, especially those that might lead us to question our moral and ethical foundations. Are there universal principles of right and wrong? Where does our morality come from? Does it have natural or divine origins? Are we born with a sense of morality or do we learn it? The implications of how we answer these questions will impact everything about how we live and find meaning and purpose in life. The stakes are high.

Morality provides many benefits to human societies. They keep people in line and allow us to live in relative peace and harmony. They can provide a sense of direction, meaning, and purpose. And they often put us in accord with the natural world around us as well, providing rules and directions for how to treat the world and the other creatures with whom we live.

But morality can also drive us apart. Many of the most intense conflicts and wars stem from real or perceived moral differences.

Even within a single culture there can be virulent conflict over moral principles. As I write these words there are several protests planned in America today in the ongoing battles that have been dubbed the "culture wars." The culture wars pit ardent conservatives against progressive liberals on issues of abortion, women's rights, LGBTQ rights, free speech, political correctness, racial inequalities, global warming, and immigration, among many others. Over the past few years, the culture wars have become even more explosive, with protests and counter-protests often erupting into violence.

In the midst of these conflicts there is a growing sense that we simply cannot talk or have a civil discussion anymore. We live in different media worlds inside the filter bubbles created by social media. One person's facts are another's "alt-facts." Is there any hope to find common ground?

In this lesson, we will be exploring the roots and many flourishing branches of morality, but ultimately our goal will be to use the anthropological perspective to try to see our own seeing, see big, and see small, so that we can "see it all" – see and understand our own moral foundations as well as those of others in hopes that we can have productive conversations with people who see the world differently. To do this, we will have to open ourselves up to the anthropological method to experience more (other moral ideas and systems), experience difference (by truly understanding the roots and foundations of those systems), and experience differently (by allowing ourselves to imagine our way into a new way of thinking, if only temporarily, to truly understand a different point of view).

IS THERE A UNIVERSAL MORALITY?

Imagine the following dilemma: A woman is dying and there is only one drug that can save her life. The druggist paid \$200 for the materials and charges \$2,000 for the drug. The woman's husband, Heinz, asked everyone he knows for money but could only collect \$1,000. He offered this to the druggist but the druggist refused.

Desperate, Heinz broke into the lab and stole the drug for his wife. Should he have done this?

This is the famous Heinz dilemma, created by Lawrence Kohlberg to analyze how people think through a moral dilemma. Kohlberg was not interested in whether or not people thought Heinz acted morally. He wanted to know how they justified their answer. From their responses he was able to construct a six-stage theory of moral development proposing that over the course of a lifetime, people move from a "pre-conventional" self-centered morality based on obedience or self-interest to a more "conventional" group-oriented morality in which they value conformity to rules and the importance of law and order. Some people move past this "conventional" morality to a "post-conventional" humanistic morality based on human rights and universal human ethics.

Kohlberg proposed that these are universal stages of moral judgment that anyone in any culture may go through, but still allowed for a wide range of cultural variation in the group-oriented conventional stages based on local rules, customs, and laws. His post-conventional stages represent a universal morality but only a very few people can see their way past their own cultural conventions to see and act on them. In his studies, just 2% of people responded in a way that reflected a model of morality based on universal human ethics, and in practice he reserved the highest stage of moral development to moral luminaries like Gandhi and Mother Theresa.

However, some saw Kohlberg's "universal" morality as biased toward a very specific model of morality that was culturally and politically biased in favor of liberal American values. By placing this "humanistic morality" as beyond and more developed than morality based on conformity or law and order he was placing his own cultural values at the pinnacle of human moral achievement. Kohlberg's stage-theory model provided justification for a liberal secular worldview that championed questioning authority and egalitarianism as more advanced and developed than religiously-based moral worldviews that valued authority and tradition.

Then Kohlberg's former student Elliot Turiel discovered that children as young as five often responded as "conventional" in some contexts but "post-conventional" in others. When children were asked whether or not it was okay to wear regular clothes to a school that requires school uniforms, kids said no, except in cases in which the teacher allowed it. The kids recognized that these rules were based on social conventions. But if you asked them if it was okay if a girl pushed a boy off a swing, the kids said no, and held to that answer even in cases in which the teacher allowed it or there were explicitly no rules against it. In this case, the kids were not basing their moral reasoning on social conventions. Turiel suggested that these were moral rules, not conventional rules, and moral rules were based on a universal moral truth: *harm is wrong*.

This moral truth discovered by Turiel as he analyzed the discourse of children reflects the wisdom of "The Golden Rule," which is found in religious traditions all over the world. The words of Jesus ("Do unto others what you would have them do unto you.") are echoed in the Analects of Confucius ("Do not do to others what you do not want them to do to you."), the Udana-Varga of Buddhism ("Hurt not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.") and the Hadiths of Islam ("None of you truly believes until he wishes for his brother what he wishes for himself."), as well as many others. But evidence of a universal human morality might go beyond what is written in our texts. It might be written in our DNA.

THE NATURE OF HUMAN NATURE

Two dominant theories of human nature have been debated for centuries. One suggests that we are inherently good, peaceful, cooperative, empathic and nurturing. The other argues that we are inherently evil, violent, competitive, and selfish. In the 17th Century, Thomas Hobbes argued that our societies are composed of selfish individuals and that without a strong social contract enforced by government we would be engaged in a "war of all against all," that we

would be unable to cooperate to build technologies, institutions, and knowledge, and that ultimately our lives would be "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." Against this conception stood Jean-Jacques Rousseau with his image of the Noble Savage living in accord with nature in peaceful and egalitarian communities beyond the corruption of power and society.

Many early popular anthropological accounts of indigenous people aligned with Rousseau's vision. Countering popular stereotypes of violent "savages," work such as that of Margaret Mead and Elizabeth Marshall Thomas portrayed indigenous people like the !Kung San as "The Harmless People" – hunter-gatherers living peaceful lives despite the absence of formal laws and governments.

However, over the past few decades anthropologists have acquired more detailed statistics on these groups, and the rates of violent death among hunter-gatherers appears much higher than what we find in large state-based societies, even when massive atrocities like the World Wars are taken into account. Violent death rates among males of the Jivaro and Yanomamo have been reported to be over 45%. Adding more data to the side that humans are inherently violent, anthropologist Carol Ember estimated that 64 percent of hunter-gatherer societies are either in a war or will be in one within the next two years. Under the weight of this evidence, linguist Steven Pinker declared that the "doctrine of the Noble Savage" had been "mercilessly debunked."

But proponents of a better human nature note that just because we are naturally aggressive does not mean that we do not also have other important traits. Looking to our closest primate ancestors we find ample evidence of violent territorial behavior, but primatologist Franz de Waal sees a softer side as well. After a violent skirmish among chimpanzees he watched as the two fighters retreated to the tree tops. Soon one of them held out a hand in the direction of the other. They slowly moved closer to one another and reconciled with a hug. He had originally been tasked with studying aggression and conflict among chimps, but it was clear to him that chimpanzees

valued their relationships and found ways to repair them when they were damaged.

In further field observations and lab tests, de Waal pieced together a vast array of evidence suggesting that primates exhibit two pillars upon which a more complex human morality can be built: empathy and reciprocity.

In one simple field test, he showed a looping video of a chimp yawning to see if chimps experience yawn contagion. Other studies among humans had shown that yawn contagion correlates with empathy. When chimps see a video of a chimp they know yawning, they "yawn like crazy" he says. This mimicry is a basic building block of empathy, an ability to imagine our way into another's emotions and perspective.

This perspective-taking is of utmost necessity when cooperating on complex tasks and we find it not only in primates but other mammals as well. Chimpanzees and elephants are able to cooperate on the task of pulling in a food tray to obtain food. And chimpanzees will cooperate with another chimp even when there is nothing in it for them, showing that these actions go beyond mere selfishness.

In another study they let a chimpanzee purchase food with tokens. If the chimp paid with a red token, only they got food. If they paid with a green token, both the chimp and another chimp next door received food. If chimps were purely selfish, we would expect random selection of tokens, so that over time 50% would be red and 50% would be green. However, chimps tend to make prosocial choices by selecting the green token that fed the other chimp as well.

These pro-social tendencies extend into more elaborate notions of fairness as well. In a study of capuchin monkeys one monkey was paid in cucumber and the other in grapes. By the second round of payments the first monkey was furious and demanded fairness, throwing the cucumber back at the researcher and demanding the grape. Among chimpanzees the same test elicited even more complex behavior. The chimp receiving the grapes refused grapes until the other chimp also received grapes.

For decades, de Waal found himself struggling against a strong consensus among scientists that deep down, humans are violent, cruel, aggressive, and selfish. They proposed that only a thin veneer of human-made morality kept the world from falling apart. But his work was leading him somewhere else. Each experiment revealed that our evolutionary history had placed deep within us the capacity for empathy, cooperation, reconciliation, and a sense of fairness. "Our brains have been designed to blur the line between self and other," de Waal noted on our capacity for empathy. "It is an ancient neural circuitry that marks every mammal, from mouse to elephant."

De Waal seemed to be confirming Turiel's findings. Turiel had found a basic universal morality in five-year-old children that showed that we place an innate value on fairness and see harm to others as inherently wrong. De Waal now found this same basic morality among monkeys and apes, suggesting that the foundations of our morality run very deep in our biology and evolutionary history.

THE PROBLEM OF CULTURAL VARIATION

Despite these apparent universals in the domains of harm and fairness, anthropologists did not need to look far to see a vast array of different moral standards reflected in the beliefs, practices, taboos, and rituals around the world. Aside from the most titillating accounts of human sacrifice, head-hunting, and ritualized cannibalism were many others that defied categorization into a simple scheme that placed principles of harm and fairness as the two pillars of morality.

In the 1980s, anthropologist Richard Shweder started working with Turiel to examine the cross-cultural evidence for a universal morality. Together, they determined that there was simply not enough evidence yet. They recognized that the five-year-olds may have simply picked up the principles of fairness and harm through socialization. They needed a more thorough study of moral development in other cultures to determine if these moral principles were made by nature or culture.

Shweder knew a great way to get started. He had done extensive fieldwork in the Hindu temple town of Bhubaneswar in India. As he describes it, it is

"...a place where marriages are arranged, not matters of 'love' or free choice, where, at least among Brahman families, widows may not remarry or wear colored clothing or ornaments or jewelry; where Untouchables are not allowed in the temple; where menstruating women may not sleep in the same bed as their husbands or enter the kitchen or touch their children; where ancestral spirits are fed on a daily basis; where husband and wives do not eat together and the communal family meals we find so important rarely occur; where women avoid their husbands' elder brothers and men avoid their wives' elder sisters, where, with the exception of holy men, corpses are cremated, never buried, and where the cow, the first 'mother,' is never carved up into sirloin, porterhouse or tenderloin cut."

Note that it isn't just the practices that strike the Western reader as strange, there are whole categories of persons and activities that run against our ideals of fairness and equality. The notion that there could be a whole class of people known as "Untouchables" runs counter to Western Enlightenment ideals of equality. To see what this could tell us about the possibility of universal morality, Shweder set up a study to compare the moral reasoning of Hindu Brahmans from Bhubaneswar with the people of Hyde Park, Illinois.

Shweder came up with 39 scenarios that he thought would be judged very differently between the two groups. For example, among the 39 scenarios the Brahman children thought the most serious moral transgression was one in which the eldest son gets a haircut and eats chicken the day after his father's death. The second worst was eating beef, which was ranked worse than eating dog, which was only slightly worse than a widow eating fish. Other serious breaches as judged by the Brahman children included women who did not change their clothes after defecating and before cooking, a widow

asking a man she loves to marry her, and a woman cooking rice and then eating it with her family. None of these, with the exception of eating dog, were seen as breaches by the children of Hyde Park.

Some of the disagreements between Brahmans and Americans reflected deeper and broader differences in basic moral vision. For example, Brahmans were deeply concerned about people modeling the behavior prescribed for them by their social role and position, while Americans prioritized equality and non-violence. Brahmans approved of beating a disobedient wife or caning a misbehaving child, while Americans found nothing wrong with the Brahman-disapproved behaviors of a woman eating with her husband's elder brother or washing his plates.

So does this mean there is *not* a universal morality based on the foundations of harm and fairness? Turiel was not convinced. He pointed out that there was still strong agreement among Brahmans and Americans when it came to matters of harm and fairness. Both groups agreed that breaking promises, cutting in line, kicking a harmless animal, and stealing were wrong. As for the differences, Turiel argued that they could still fit within his model of universal morality because the cultural differences were just social conventions.

But Shweder's research indicated that the locals did not see it this way. They saw their "social conventions" as moral imperatives. They were as real and obvious as Turiel's foundations of harm and fairness. Behind these differences, Shweder argued that there was a profound difference not only in how Brahmans viewed morality, but also in how they think about the self, the mind, and the world.

Shweder proposed that the Brahmans were using three different moral systems as they evaluated different scenarios. The first he called the "ethic of autonomy." This is the most familiar system to people in the West and the dominant ethic in individualistic cultures. The central idea is that people are autonomous individuals who should be able to pursue happiness so long as it does not impinge upon the happiness of others. Turiel's "universal morality" is based in this ethic. Shweder's point is that this apparently "universal" morality,

while shared universally, is not the dominant moral system in other cultures.

The second moral system is the "ethic of community." This one may take priority over the ethic of autonomy in more socio-centric cultures that emphasize the solidarity and well-being of the society, group, or nation over and above the individual. To maintain social order, this ethic emphasizes social roles, duties, customs, and traditions. Hierarchies are important, as are the values of respect and honor that may be required to uphold them. The emphasis on the ethic of community is what leads Brahmans to disagree with Americans on beating a disobedient wife or caning a misbehaving child.

The third moral system is the "ethic of divinity." This system sees people as part and parcel of a world that requires constant and conscientious reverence to taboos, rules, and behaviors in line with a sacred worldview. Behaviors are judged not just in terms of whether or not they violate individual rights, but for how they might upset or fall in line with sacred rules, taboos, and prescriptions. This system explains the vast majority of differences between Brahmans and Americans, such as the food and behavior taboos.

Turiel and Shweder argued about how to interpret these cultural differences. Turiel continued to advocate for the idea that the behaviors Shweder categorized in these alternative ethical systems could be understood within a single, more simplified system based on rational assessments of individual harm and fairness if we just account for how Brahmans think. For example, he pointed out that the Brahman idea of reincarnation meant that they might be reasoning that breaking a taboo is wrong because it could lead to harm in a future life. If Brahmans were indeed doing this kind of calculation, the underlying moral decision would still be based on individualistic notions of harm and fairness.

WEIRD MORALITY

Jonathan Haidt had an idea about how to settle this debate. He invented scenarios that he called "harmless taboo stories" and shared them with research subjects of different backgrounds and education levels in Brazil and Pennsylvania to get their reactions. One story is about a man who purchases a chicken and has sex with the carcass before eating it. Another is about a woman tearing apart an American flag and using it to clean her house. Another is about a family eating a dog. Another is about a brother and sister having sex. In each case he is careful to arrange the facts in the story so that it is clear that there is no harm done to anyone, yet he also knows that it will trigger people's sense of disgust and thereby create a moral dilemma as to whether or not it is right or wrong. If Turiel is right that all morality is ultimately based on harm and fairness, people should be able to see that their disgust is simply based on cultural conventions and ultimately reason that the people in the stories have done nothing wrong.

Out of 12 groups, all but one saw these "harmless" acts as moral violations. The rest were using different moral models based on community and divinity, supporting Shweder's claims. The only one group that held true to Turiel's model of moral reasoning was upper-class Americans at the University of Pennsylvania.

Cultural psychologists Joe Henrich, Steve Heine, and Ara Norenzayan would later call this group of people "the weirdest people in the world," using the acronym WEIRD to define them as Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich and Democratic. Haidt's study showed that the WEIRDer you are, the more likely you are to stick to Turiel's model of moral reasoning based solely on the ethic of autonomy when making a moral decision. But it turns out that if you want to make inferences about human nature, WEIRD people may be the least typical and representative sample of humans on the planet.

As Haidt summarizes it, the key difference between WEIRD people and most other cultures is that WEIRD people "see a world full of separate objects, rather than relationships." This includes the individual, who is seen not in terms of their relationships but instead as an entity separate and unto itself. As anthropologist Clifford Geertz has noted,

The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and against its social and natural background, is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures.

Richard Shweder proposed that this "egocentric" or individualistic view of the world and the moral reasoning that went along with it were historically and culturally rare, fostered during the Western Enlightenment and rising to prominence in the 20th Century. Most cultures are more "sociocentric," emphasizing the need for social order, solidarity, rules and roles above individual needs and desires.

Haidt wanted to immerse himself in a more sociocentric culture to better understand their morality, so he teamed up with Shweder and went to Bhunabeswar. Emulating the open-minded anthropologists that inspired his trip, Haidt immersed himself in local life, and very soon felt the feelings of dissonance and shock that can come when someone crosses over into a very different cultural world. He immediately felt the conflicts between his moral world and the one he had just entered. His egalitarian ethos made him uncomfortable with having servants. He had to be told to be stricter with them and stop thanking them. "I was immersed in a sex-segregated, hierarchically stratified, devoutly religious society," he

writes, "and I was committed to understanding it on its own terms, not mine."

Tourists often move about among other tourists. A tourist in India might briefly interact with the local culture, but will often find themselves on that same day telling a story about the interaction, and falling back into common Western assumptions to explain and describe what they saw. Full cultural immersion over several weeks or months allowed Haidt to start to see the world more as the locals saw it.

He credits his ability to break past his WEIRD biases and assumptions on a simple fact: he liked the people he was living with in India. They were helpful, kind, and patient, and they became his friends. So even though he would normally reject their hierarchical rules as oppressive and sometimes sexist, he found himself leaning in a little further to understand them, rather than immediately discounting them.

As he did, he saw a completely different set of assumptions and values supporting the system. Rather than equality and individual rights as sacred values, it was the honoring of elders, rules, and gods that mattered most. Rather than striving to express one's unique identity, they strove to fulfill their respective roles. He had understood Shweder's argument intellectually, but now he began to *feel* it. "I could see beauty in a moral code that emphasizes duty, respect for one's elders, service to the group, and negation of the self's desires." He was not blind to the downsides of their system – the potential abuse of women, Untouchables, and others who were low in the hierarchy – but it also made him aware of the downsides of his own moral system. "From the vantage point of the ethic of community, the ethic of autonomy now seemed overly individualistic and self-focused."

THE FOUNDATIONS OF MORALITY

Haidt noticed something peculiar as his research subjects responded to his harmless taboo stories. All of them, even the WEIRD ones, had immediate responses of disgust. Only after these initial responses did they start struggling to come up with moral reasonings to support their feelings. It was as if they were making quick and intuitive moral judgments and then searching for reasons after the fact. At the time, most research had assumed that morality was based in moral reasoning. It was assumed that people consciously considered their moral values and then made decisions based on these conscious deliberations. Haidt suspected that morality was more intuitive, and that the seat of morality rested in the emotions, not in the intellect.

In one study, he had his research team stand on street corners with fart spray. They would spray a little bit and then pose moral dilemmas to passers-by using his harmless taboo stories. It turns out that when people are immersed in a cloud of fart, they make harsher moral judgments. Haidt proposed that the fart spray was triggering the emotion of disgust. The intellect then tried to explain this emotion using moral reasoning. Contrary to popular belief, Haidt was showing that reasoning does *not* lead to moral judgment. It is the other way around. We use reasoning to explain our judgments, not to make them. He modeled it like this:

Intuition → Judgment → Reasoning

Haidt found additional support for his "intuitionist model of morality" in the studies of primates by Frans de Waal. After all, if conscious moral reasoning was necessary for morality, how could monkeys demand fairness or empathize with someone who has been harmed? Other studies showed that moral philosophers, people who spend their whole lives studying and sharpening their capacities for moral reasoning, are no more moral than anyone else. Just as one

does not need to know and name the specific rules of grammar that make a language work in order to speak a language, people (and other apes) do not need moral reasoning to act morally.

If these moral intuitions lie deeper in the brain and our moral reasoning is at least partially shared by our primate cousins, it would follow that our moral capacities are innate and part of our evolutionary heritage. But instead of proposing a universal morality, Haidt and his colleagues proposed that humans may have universal moral "taste receptors." Using the metaphor of the tongue and its taste receptors, Haidt pointed out that humans all share five tastes (salty, sweet, bitter, sour, and umami) and yet build a wide-range of different cuisines to satisfy them. Similarly, moral "taste receptors" could serve as the backdrop upon which thousands of different moral systems could develop. Breaking through the nature-nurture debate, Haidt found a model that accommodated the exciting findings of primatologists that suggested a universal human morality while still making room for the vast range of cultural variation found by anthropologists.

Haidt and his colleagues proposed six foundations of morality that developed through the process of evolution as our ancestors faced the challenges of living and reproducing.

1. **Care/harm.** Emotions: Empathy, Sympathy, Compassion. Developed to protect and care for vulnerable children, we feel compassion for those who are suffering or in distress.
2. **Fairness/cheating.** Emotions: Anger, Gratitude, Guilt. Developed to reap the benefits of reciprocity, we feel anger when somebody cheats, gratitude when they cooperate, and guilty when we deceive others.
3. **Loyalty/betrayal.** Emotions: Pride, Rage, Ecstasy. Developed to form coalitions that could compete with other coalitions, we feel a sense of group pride and loyalty with our in-group and a sense of rage when someone acts as a traitor. Group rituals also give us a

sense of ecstasy and make us feel part of something bigger than ourselves.

4. **Authority/subversion.** Emotions: Obedience, Respect. Developed to forge beneficial relationships within hierarchies, we feel a sense of respect or fear toward people above us in a hierarchy, fostering a sense of obedience and deference.
5. **Sanctity/degradation.** Emotions: Disgust and Aversion. Developed to avoid poisons, parasites, and other contaminants, we feel a sense of disgust toward the unclean, especially bodily waste and blood.
6. **Liberty/oppression.** Emotion: Righteous anger/reactance. Developed to maintain trust and cooperation in small groups, we feel a sense of righteous anger and unite with others in our group to resist any sign of oppression.

Think of these as our moral "taste receptors." Just as people have different personal tastes that develop within larger cultural systems, so it is also true for morality. We all grow up within a certain moral culture that shapes our moral tastes, but we also have personal differences in tastes.

UNDERSTANDING OTHER MORALITIES

One of the greatest gifts of ethnographic fieldwork, immersion in a foreign culture, and careful study of the human condition is that it allows you to see your own culture in a new way. Haidt was raised in a liberal household in a liberal city and went to school at a liberal college. By his own account, he was immersed in a liberal bubble. The Left was his native culture. "I was a twenty-nine-year-old liberal atheist with very definite views about right and wrong," he writes. But after his visit to India and his ongoing studies of morality, he started to see Republicans and other conservatives with a more open mind.

He had always been a liberal, because he saw it as the group that advocates for equality and fairness for all individuals regardless of their background. *How could anyone be against equality?* he wondered. He assumed that conservatives must just be selfish, prejudiced, and/or racist. Why else would conservatives want to lower taxes and strip away funding to help the poor?

But when he came back from India and started researching the foundations of morality, he found that he was starting to understand why people on the religious right would fight for more traditional values and social structures. He had gone to the other side of the world to get a glimpse of people with a radically different morality to his own. Now he realized that such people were all around him. And with the culture wars heating up as Democrats and Republicans yelled right past each other into gridlock, Haidt wanted more than ever to understand the roots of these alternative moralities to see if he could help both sides understand one another a little better.

He set up a questionnaire to assess how people varied in their moral "tastes," and thanks to some good press about his project in the *New York Times*, over 100,000 people participated. The results showed substantial differences in what factors and values liberals and conservatives consider when making moral decisions.

In short, liberals focus primarily on just three foundations (Care, Fairness, and Liberty) while conservatives equally consider all six. Moreover, liberals see the other three (Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity) as potentially immoral, because they constrain their pursuit of their most sacred value: caring for victims of oppression. If we want equality for all, we have to dissolve groupishness (Loyalty), undermine hierarchy (Authority), and never press one group's sacred values upon others (Sanctity).

However, until Haidt did his study, he (like other liberals) did not even recognize these other three moral foundations, and this led him to misunderstand and misjudge conservatives. Conservative stances against immigrants, programs to help the poor, gay marriage, feminism, and the rights of oppressed groups lead many liberals to

assume that conservatives are simply heartless and selfish. However, these mis-judgments arise because liberals judge conservative morality on the basis of just three of the six foundations, which makes it seem like the conservatives do not care about other races and ethnicities, poor people, immigrants, women, and gay people.

To test this idea, Haidt asked his liberal study participants whether conservatives would agree or disagree with the statement "One of the worst things a person can do is hurt a defenseless animal." Liberals thought conservatives would disagree, demonstrating that liberals think conservatives are heartless and selfish. They fail to see that conservatives are pursuing a broader range of positive moral values, and that there may be some merit to what they bring to our political discussions.

Ultimately, Haidt sees that at the root of these opposing moral visions are two very different views of society and human nature, and they are the same two views that we have been arguing about for centuries that were presented in the opening of this chapter. Stephen Pinker calls them the Utopian Vision and the Tragic Vision. The Left takes the utopian view. We are good in our core, but the biases and assumptions of our cultures and societies corrupt us. We are limited from achieving a better world by socially constructed rules, roles, laws, and institutions that are oppressive to some groups and identities among us. We can create a more just, free, and equal society by recognizing how these things are constructed, thereby setting ourselves free from bias, bigotry, and oppression.

The Right takes a more tragic view of society and human nature. They see humans as constrained and limited in their moral capacities and abilities. We are naturally prone to violence, tribalism, and selfishness. If we eliminated hierarchies, we would just re-create them in new forms because of our will to power and desire for self-preservation. The only thing that keeps the world from falling apart into violent chaos is the system of rules, traditions, moral values, and social institutions. We should be careful in our attempts to mess with

these precious (and for many, divine) moral institutions that hold our fragile society together.

As Haidt started to see, understand, and empathize with the conservative perspective, he found himself "stepping out of the Matrix" and taking "the red pill." He did not "turn red" and become a conservative, but he could now genuinely appreciate their perspective and actually listen to their views with true understanding. This opened him up to many new and exciting ideas for solving major social problems that he had never considered before.

From his work we can find five good reasons to challenge ourselves to open up and try to understand and even appreciate the arguments coming from the other side of the political aisle.

1. Both sides offer wisdom.

On the Left, the wisdom centers on caring for the victims of oppression and constraining the powerful. The Left seeks to offer equal opportunity for all, which has obvious merit based on universal principles of harm and fairness. But there is also an important utilitarian aspect to the argument. There is tremendous wasted human potential right now in disadvantaged places (impoverished inner cities, rural towns, migrant worker camps, refugee camps). Providing adequate support and opportunity in these places could add tremendous value to society by unleashing the potential of more people.

The Right offers the wisdom of markets. Societies have grown beyond the capacity for any one person or small group to understand and manage. Markets allow millions and sometimes billions of people to participate in the essential, minute decisions of production, pricing, and distribution of goods. What emerges is a super-organism that is greater than the sum of its parts.

The Right also offers the wisdom of moral order and stability. Societies function best when there is a sense of solidarity and trust

among members, and this can be nurtured through shared values, virtues, norms and a shared sense of identity.

2. They each reveal the blind spots in the other.

Liberals have a blind spot that makes it difficult for them to see the importance of shared moral principles, values, and virtues that uphold our traditional practices and institutions. Pushing for change too fast can be dangerously disruptive and divisive. On the other hand, conservatives fail to see how these traditional practices and institutions might oppress certain groups or identities and may need to reform or change along with other cultural changes.

3. Our political differences are natural and unavoidable.

Our moral judgments are based in our intuitive emotional responses that are beyond conscious control. Since our emotional responses vary along with our personalities, we cannot expect everyone to agree, and it should not seem unusual to find that a two party political system would so consistently break somewhere close to 50/50 in every election.

Furthermore, studies of identical twins separated at birth and raised in different households suggest that our genetics can explain one-third to one-half of the variability of our political attitudes. Genes shape our personalities, which in turn shape which way we will lean politically. This genetic effect is actually stronger than the effect of how and where we are raised.

4. Our political differences are an essential adaptation.

Humans have not survived and thrived alone. We have survived as a species with many different personality types, and *because* we are a species with many different personality types. Some personalities are open to new experiences and people. Others are more careful and

fearful. We have survived through many millennia thanks to the balance of these traits. We should be grateful to those who are different from us, for they offer important checks and balances against our own limited vision and understanding.

5. There are many dangers to Us vs. Them thinking.

Our tendency to create in-groups lead us into political "bubbles" where we only encounter the safe and familiar ideas of our political "tribe." When we encounter an idea that is associated with the other tribe, our immediate reaction is one of disgust. We then use our moral reasoning to explain our reaction, finding reasons to reject the idea even if it is a good one that could serve our highest ideals. Likewise, we will have warm feelings toward any idea put forth as one that supports our political leanings. We will then search for reasons to accept the idea. In the age of Google, it is all too easy to find research and reasons to support any idea, thereby strengthening our biases and assumptions.

As Haidt so eloquently and concisely states, "morality binds and blinds." Our moral inclinations bind us together and then blind us to the other.



LEARN MORE

- ❖ The Righteous Mind, by Jonathan Haidt
- ❖ Thinking Through Cultures: Expeditions in Cultural Psychology, by Ricahrd Shweder
- ❖ Ethical Life: Its Natural and Social Histories by Webb Keane