

Moral Foundations and The Ten Commandments

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Moral Foundations Theory

At a recent meeting of the Jewish Humanism discussion group, we discussed the book “The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion” by social psychologist Jonathon Haidt [page numbers here refer to the 2012 hard cover edition]. The description on Amazon includes the following: “[Haidt] shows how moral judgments arise not from reason but from gut feelings. He shows why liberals, conservatives, and libertarians have such different intuitions about right and wrong, and he shows why each side is actually right about many of its central concerns.”

One impetus for Haidt’s book is an essay he wrote during the 2008 presidential campaign. The essay is titled *What Makes People Vote Republican?* He describes it as follows [p. 164, in the chapter “The Conservative Advantage”]:

I began by summarizing the standard explanations that psychologists had offered for decades: Conservatives are conservative because they were raised by overly strict parents, or because they are inordinately afraid of change, novelty, and complexity, or because they suffer from existential fears and therefore cling to a simple worldview with no shades of gray. These approaches all had one feature in common: they used psychology to explain away conservatism. They made it unnecessary for liberals to take conservative ideas seriously because these ideas are caused by bad childhoods or ugly personality traits. I suggested a very different approach: start by assuming that conservatives are just as sincere as liberals, and then use Moral Foundations Theory to understand the moral matrices of both sides.

The key idea in the essay was that there are two radically different approaches to the challenge of creating a society in which unrelated people can live together peacefully.¹

The book is divided into three parts. Part I of the book, titled “Intuition Comes First, Strategic Reasoning Second”, makes the case that our conscious thoughts are like the riders on an elephant. We think we are in control of the huge

¹ The first approach aims for a society which is “a peaceful, open, and creative place where diverse individuals respect each other’s rights and band together voluntarily ... to help those in need or to change the laws for the common good” [from Haidt’s quote of John Stuart Mill]. The second approach aims for a society where “the basic social unit is not the individual, it is the hierarchically structured family, which serves as a model for other institutions” [from Haidt’s quote of Emile Durkheim].

beast underneath, but really the elephant rules. Haidt urges a more “intuitionist approach to morality and moral education” [p. 92] rooted in how people and societies really work rather than on rationalist constructions.

In Part II of the book, Haidt presents what he calls “Moral Foundations Theory”. He proposes six “moral foundations” which are “in the universal first draft of human nature” [p. 153]. He roots the six moral foundations in something prior to rationalization by explaining how they offered survival value from an evolutionary perspective. Different people will prioritize the importance of the separate foundations differently. He claims quite broadly that liberals and conservatives both care about the first three foundations, which are:

care (vs. harm), liberty (vs. oppression), and fairness (vs. cheating).

He further claims that conservatives care much more than liberals about the last three foundations, which are

loyalty (vs. betrayal), authority (vs. subversion), and sanctity (vs. degradation).

According to Haidt [p. 185]:

Moral Foundations Theory can now explain one of the great puzzles that has preoccupied Democrats in recent years: Why do rural and working-class Americans generally vote Republican when it is the Democratic Party that wants to redistribute money more evenly?

The answer he implies is that Republicans are more attentive to the full range of moral foundation that people care about.

Part III of the book is devoted to explaining how people are groupish and religion can be like a team sport. This emphasizes again how our behavior and thinking are driven by the pre-rational.

In the end, Haidt concludes [on p. 318] that

[O]ur minds were designed for groupish righteousness. We are deeply intuitive creatures whose gut feelings drive our strategic reasoning.

...

So .. Don't bring up morality until you've found a few points of commonality ...

I guess I've already brought up morality. So now let me turn to a piece of our cultural heritage that we all have in common.

The Ten Commandments

I will now read the ten commandments [copied from Jewish Virtual Library web page on the Ten Commandments], stopping briefly after each commandment to list which of the six foundations it touches upon.

Before I read, let me recall the six foundations:

care, liberty, fairness, loyalty, authority, and sanctity.

- 1) I am the Lord thy god, who brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. (*authority, sanctity*)
- 2) Thou shalt have no other gods before Me. (*authority, loyalty, sanctity*)
- 3) Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain. (*authority, loyalty, sanctity*)
- 4) Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy. (*sanctity*)
- 5) Honor thy father and thy mother. (*authority, and helps parents with care*)
- 6) Thou shalt not murder. (*care, fairness*)
- 7) Thou shalt not commit adultery. (*loyalty, sanctity*)
- 8) Thou shalt not steal. (*fairness*)
- 9) Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor. (*fairness*)
- 10) Thou shalt not covet anything that belongs to thy neighbor. (*sanctity ?*)

It appears that the “Moral Foundations” touched on by the ten commandments seem to be skewed toward the *authority, loyalty, and sanctity* foundations that, supposedly, only the right cares deeply about.

Haidt replaces the psychological explanations he claims merely “explain away conservatives” with an alternate set that he claims will help liberals “understand conservatives”. He does this by replacing the claim that conservatives are inordinately afraid of change, novelty, and complexity with the explanation that they are driven by intuition, prone to righteousness, and loyal to the authorities in their tribe. He attempts to deepen our understanding by explaining how these traits provide an evolutionary advantage which allowed society to emerge “organically over time as people found ways of living together, binding themselves to each other, suppressing each others selfishness, and punishing the deviants and free riders who eternally threaten to undermine cooperative groups” [p. 165, quoting Durkheim].

My Reaction

We can never break the unbroken chain connecting us with our ancient ancestors. But that chain is not meant to tie us down to an anchor. There are other ways of being and other values than those Haidt discusses that I think help us lift anchor and evolve.

For example, I think reason and rationality themselves are a value, whether you want to call them a *moral* value or not. The commandment to “not bear false witness” I think touches on something broader than fairness. I think it can be extended to call on us to not bear false witness against reality. Similarly, the commandment to not covet thy neighbor’s property can be interpreted to call on us to develop the ability to transcend material desire.

I think that transcending our baser natures and our hard-wired simplistic views of the world is a fundamental value that is essential if we are to survive and evolve spiritually. I choose to view our heritage, and the ten commandments in particular, as a positive step in this evolution.