

What is Morality?

edited by mks

“The mere existence of morality is a puzzle, one that is deeply intertwined with human’s search for its origins and its uniqueness.”¹ “Soon after humans beings figured out how to write, they began writing about morality, law, and religion, which were often the same thing.”² “Many of the earliest moral texts are largely lists of laws and prohibitions,”³ like the Code of Hammurabi or the Ten commandments. But “as the Axial Age progressed (800 BCE to 200 BCE), many societies East and West began to supplement these lists of rules with a sophisticated psychology of virtue [that] aimed to [instill morality] not just by teaching rules, but by shaping perceptions, emotions, and intuitions. This [was] done in part through providing exemplars of particular virtues, often in the form of narratives [with] protagonists [that] exemplify virtuous conduct and illustrate the terrible consequences of moral failings,”⁴ or in the case of “the wisdom of Confucius and of Buddha, [to provide] lists of aphorisms and metaphors that produce flashes of intuitive understanding.”⁵

“Virtue-based approaches to morality remained dominant in the West up through the Middle Ages,”⁶ but in the 18th through the 19th century, with the Enlightenment, American, French, and Industrial Revolutions, “God retreated from the (perceived) management of daily life [and] Enlightenment philosophers tried to reconstruct ethics [...] from secular first principles,”⁷ pursuing “abstract, even logical, truths to disengage it from religious belief.”⁸ This was in essence a “great narrowing” of morality, reducing “ethical inquiry from the virtue ethicist’s question of ‘whom should I become?’ down to the narrower question of ‘what is the right thing to do?’,”⁹ “what [philosopher] Edmund Pincoffs calls *quandary ethics*.”¹⁰

“Two approaches emerged as the leading contenders [of modern, secular moral philosophy]: deontology and consequentialism.”¹¹ Kant’s formalist deontology sought non-contradictory “logical

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- 1 Haidt, Jonathan and Selin Kesebir, “Morality,” 2009, 20
 - 2 Haidt, Jonathan and Selin Kesebir, “Morality,” 2009, 3
 - 3 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph, “The Moral Mind,” 2008, 368
 - 4 Haidt, Jonathan and Selin Kesebir, “Morality,” 2009, 3
 - 5 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph, “The Moral Mind,” 2008 368
 - 6 Haidt, Jonathan and Selin Kesebir, “Morality,” 2009, 3
 - 7 Haidt, Jonathan and Selin Kesebir, “Morality,” 2009, 4
 - 8 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph, “The Moral Mind,” 2008, 369
 - 9 Haidt, Jonathan and Selin Kesebir, “Morality,” 2009, 4
 - 10 Graham, Jesse et al., “Mapping the Moral Domain,” 2011, 366
 - 11 Haidt, Jonathan and Selin Kesebir, “Morality,” 2009, 4

rationality” in the categorical imperative, while Jeremy Benthan’s consequentialism focused on a “calculative rationality” that maximizes utility.¹² “Despite their many differences they have much in common, including an emphasis on parsimony (ethics can be derived from a single rule), an insistence that moral decisions must be reasoned [...] rather than felt or intuited, and a focus on the abstract and universal, rather than the concrete and particular,”¹³ and that “autonomy and/or welfare of the individual are the starting point for ethical inquiry.”¹⁴ “When moral philosophers conduct experiments [...] they experiment primarily on quandaries such as trolley and lifeboat problems that pit utilitarian and deontological concerns against each other.”¹⁵

“In the 20th century ... many psychologists followed philosophers and other social scientists in embracing rationalism and methodological individualism,”¹⁶ and “by the 1970s, moral psychology had largely become a subfield of developmental psychology that examined how people solved quandaries. The most generative quandaries were ‘should Heinz steal a drug to save his wife’s life?’ and ‘should I have an abortion?’”¹⁷ of moral psychologists Lawrence Kohlberg, founder of this new psychological paradigm, and Carol Gilligan, respectively. In 1983, Elliott Turiel, student of Kohlberg, produced “the most influential definition in moral psychology[:] ‘the moral domain refers to prescriptive judgments of justice, rights, and welfare pertaining to how people ought to relate to each other.’”¹⁸

But “is it possible that Turiel and [others] have defined morality in a parochial way, one that works well for educated, secular Westerners, but that excludes much that other people value?”¹⁹ It seems likely; “the psychological study of morality, like psychology itself, has been dominated by politically liberal researchers,”²⁰ and “students of morality are often biased to their own moral commitments.”²¹ Following the in the steps of the Enlightenment, “rules and practices related to sexual purity, patriotism, and respect for authority are often dismissed as social conventions,”²² while “Kohlberg’s postconventional morality enshrined politically liberal ideals as developmental

12 Graham, Jesse et al., “Mapping the Moral Domain,” 2011, 369

13 Haidt, Jonathan and Selin Kesebir, “Morality,” 2009, 4

14 Graham, Jesse et al., “Mapping the Moral Domain,” 2011, 366

15 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph, “The Moral Mind,” 2008, 370.

16 Haidt, Jonathan and Selin Kesebir, “Morality,” 2009, 43

17 Haidt, Jonathan and Selin Kesebir, “Morality,” 2009, 4

18 Haidt, Jonathan and Selin Kesebir, “Morality,” 2009, 5

19 Haidt, Jonathan and Selin Kesebir, “Morality,” 2009, 5

20 Graham, Jesse et al., “Mapping the Moral Domain,” 2011, 367

21 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph, “The Moral Mind,” 2008, 367

22 Haidt, Jonathan and Jesse Graham, “Planet of the Durkheimians” 2009, 375

endpoints,”²³ in effect “treating a liberal set of values as a developmental progression beyond a conservative set of values”²⁴ and “transformed moral psychology into a boomer-friendly ode to justice”²⁵ that was in essence “scientific justification for a secular liberal moral order.”²⁶

Born near the cusp of the Boomer generation and Generation X, Jonathan Haidt suggests he related to this liberal chauvinism growing up, as in the 1980s he found “being liberal was cool; being liberal was righteous [...] liberalism seemed so obviously ethical.”²⁷ As he saw it, “liberals marches for peace, worker’s rights, civil rights, and secularism. The Republican Party was (as we saw it) the party of war, big business, racism, and evangelical Christianity.”²⁸ In graduate school, he saw these moral theories as “so... dry. [In his experience,] morality was such a passionate affair in [his] family, yet [the moral literature he read] seemed too cerebral. There was hardly a mention of emotion.”²⁹

It wasn’t until graduate school that Haidt began reading anthropological ethnographies that gave him “the confidence to trust his instincts.”³⁰ This came to a head when Haidt found the work of Richard Shweder, who explicit argued “the theories of Kohlberg and Turiel were produced by and for people from individualistic cultures” and not for cultures that were sociocentric in which “selves were interdependent, and no bright line separated moral rules [...] from social convention.”³¹ Along with his ethnographic experiences, Haidt says that Shweder’s “writings were [his] red pill”³² that helped reveal his Matrix-like “experience [of] an illusion, akin to a dream.”³³ Haidt “began to see that many moral matrices coexist within each nation. Each matrix provides a complete, unified, and emotionally compelling worldview, easily justified by observable evidence and nearly impregnable to attack by arguments from outsiders.”³⁴ Haidt realized that “if we could not imagine other moralities, then we could not believe that [others] were as sincere in their moral beliefs as we were in ours,”³⁵ a discovery

23 Graham, Jesse et al., “Mapping the Moral Domain,” 2011, 366

24 Graham, Jesse et al., “Mapping the Moral Domain,” 2011, 381

25 Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind*, 2012, 10

26 Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind*, 2012, 9

27 Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind*, 2012, 126

28 Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind*, 2012, 126

29 Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind*, 2012, 12-13

30 Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind*, 2012, 13

31 Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind*, 2012, 17

32 Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind*, 2012, 125

33 Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind*, 2012, 125

34 Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind*, 2012, 125

35 Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind*, 2012, 126

that “released [him] from partisan anger.”³⁶ Given that “human nature is not just intrinsically moral [but] also intrinsically moralistic, critical, and judgmental,”³⁷ the better we can recognize that opposing “policies [are just] manifestations of deeply conflicting but equally heartfelt visions of the good society,”³⁸ the better chance we have to find a way to all live together.

In the next five essays of this study we will look at specific threads of morality’s evolution in terms of Jonathan Haidt and collaborators’ involvement in the development of morality, starting within the “affect revolution” of the 1980s and 1990s, “the increase in research on emotion that followed the ‘cognitive revolution’ of the 1960s and 1970s.”³⁹ and “the rebirth of sociobiology as evolutionary psychology.”⁴⁰

In brief, “morality has become one the major interdisciplinary topics of research in the academy. Three of the fields most active in this integration are social psychology, social-cognitive neuroscience, and evolutionary science.” The goal now is to “expand the range of phenomena studied in moral psychology so that it matches the full range of moral concerns, including those found in non-Western cultures, in religious practices, and among political conservatives.”⁴¹ It is therefore aiming to be a descriptive, not a prescriptive or normative model. Unlike pre-modern moralities, universality is still seen as a “hallmark of moral judgment”⁴² but evidence suggests it is better to pursue a “universalism without uniformity”⁴³ and excessive parsimony. In terms of theoretical complexity, such “social-psychological work must be integrated ‘up’ a level of analysis and made consilient with ‘outside-the-head’ elements studied by anthropologists and sociologists ... also be integrated ‘down’ a level of analysis and made consilient with brain-based explanations of those mechanisms, and with evolutionary accounts of how those mechanisms evolved.”⁴⁴

36 Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind*, 2012, 127

37 Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind*, 2012, xix

38 Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind*, 2012, 127

39 Haidt, Jonathan. “The New Synthesis in Moral Psychology,” 2007, p 998

40 Haidt, Jonathan and Selin Kesebir, “Morality,” 8

41 Graham, Jesse et al., “Mapping the Moral Domain,” 2011, p 366

42 Jonathan Haidt, Silvia Helena Koller, and Maria G. Dias, “Affect, Culture, and Morality...” 1993, 614

43 Jonathan Haidt, Silvia Helena Koller, and Maria G. Dias, “Affect, Culture, and Morality...” 1993, 625

44 Haidt, Jonathan and Selin Kesebir, “Morality,” 2009, 7

From his and others' continuing work on morality, two general definitions can be put forward that don't "specif[y] the *content* of moral issues (e.g. 'justice, rights, and welfare'), [but] specif[y] the *function* of moral systems":⁴⁵

1. "Morality is innate (as a small set of modules) and socially constructed (as a set of interlocking virtues). It is cognitive (intuitions are pattern-recognition systems) and it is emotional (intuitions often launch moral emotions)"⁴⁶

2. "Moral systems are interlocking sets of values, virtues, norms, practices, identities, institutions, technologies, and evolved psychological mechanisms that work together to suppress or regulate self-interest and make cooperative societies possible."⁴⁷

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45 Haidt, Jonathan and Selin Kesebir, "Morality," 2009, 6-7

46 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph. "Intuitive Ethics..." 2004, 64

47 Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind*, 2012, 314