

Where Does Morality Come From?

edited by mks

Is morality learned or innate? Both, of course; moral psychology of the 20th century was dominated by an emphasis on learning right and wrong from a more-or-less blank slate, but contemporaneous evidence shows moral intuitions are endogenous and ‘organized in advance of experience’ before they are consciously refined. Haidt adopts the concept of ‘modularity’ to explain the ‘pre-wiring’ of moralities that are shaped differently across cultures, similar to various cuisines developed for universal taste receptors. This process of moral development parallels the classical concept of virtue: the cultivation of intuitions and behavior through habituation and exemplary moral narrative towards greater sophistication and admirable character.

Conjecturing from his own revolutionary work on the cognitive development in children, psychologist Jean Piaget “thought that children constructed much of their morality [like their abstract reasoning skills, by] themselves, rather than learning it from their parents or from society.”¹ He believed “children are active participants in their own development;”² through empathetic perspective-taking, they come to refine their moral beliefs. “If adults would just step back and grant them more autonomy, children would reach moral maturity more quickly.”³

Following Piaget’s precedence, moral psychologist “Lawrence Kohlberg worked out the sequence of progressively more adequate understandings of morality in his famous six stages.”⁴ As he saw it, a child went from conforming to authoritative decrees to consulting their own conscience, “the child continually constructed and reconstructed a progressively more adequate understanding”⁵ towards “the gradual formulation of abstract, universal moral principles,”⁶ that centered on rights, harm, and justice. To the extent that there were differences across cultures, Kohlberg saw them “as developmental differences: children in some cultures did not have as many opportunities for role-taking in egalitarian interactions, but if they did have those opportunities, they’d reach the same endpoint.”⁷

Paul Churchland developed a connectionist approach to morality, in which “human beings are born into and live in a sociomoral world that is extremely dense and complex [and must] learn to

1 Haidt, Jonathan and Jesse Graham, “Planet of the Durkheimians,” 2009, 379.

2 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph, “The Moral Mind,” 2008, 367-392.

3 Haidt, Jonathan and Jesse Graham, “Planet of the Durkheimians,” 2009, 379.

4 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph, “The Moral Mind,” 2008, 374.

5 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph, “The Moral Mind,” 2008, 374.

6 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph, “The Moral Mind,” 2008, 375.

7 Graham, Jesse et al., “Moral Foundations Theory...” 2012, 32.

navigate this environment successfully by developing adequate representations of it and pairing those representations with appropriate behavioral responses [...] through the gradual tuning up of expertise [towards] a hierarchy of moral prototypes.”⁸ Instead of generating abstract, universal principles, Churchland’s theory “treats moral competence as a set of skills cultivated gradually, by practice, and helped along by adult emphasis on moral stories, fables, and role models.”⁹

Despite their differences, these two theories of moral development – constructivism and connectionism – are “essentially ‘blank slate’ theories in that they posit only innate general learning processes, not innate moral content.”¹⁰ For both theories, “there is no moral faculty or moral anything else build into the human mind, although there may be some innate learning mechanisms that enable the acquisition of later knowledge. To the extent that there are similarities across cultures, they arise because all cultures face similar problems for which they have often developed similar solutions.”¹¹

Contra empirical processes of moral attainment in blank slate moral theories, nativist morality suggests “knowledge about [morality] has been built into the human mind by evolution. To the extent that there are differences across cultures, they arise because of local variation in the implementation of universal moral knowledge.”¹² In this view, moral development “is not about children figuring out natural law for themselves, as Kohlberg thought;”¹³ it “is primarily a matter of the maturation and cultural shaping of endogenous intuitions. People can acquire explicit propositional knowledge about right and wrong in adulthood, but it is primarily through participation in custom complexes involving sensory, motor, and other forms of implicit knowledge shared with one’s peers during the sensitive period of late childhood and adolescence that one comes to feel, physically and emotionally, the self-evident truth of moral propositions.”¹⁴ Less objectionably, Churchland’s connectionism is “eloquent on how the editing process occurs, but it is silent on the contents of the first draft,”¹⁵ and therefore is incomplete.

8 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph, “The Moral Mind,” 2008, 375.

9 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph, “The Moral Mind,” 2008, 375.

10 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph, “The Moral Mind,” 2008, 374.

11 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph. “Intuitive Ethics...” 2004, 55.

12 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph. “Intuitive Ethics...” 2004, 55.

13 Haidt, Jonathan and Jesse Graham, “Planet of the Durkheimians,” 2009, 383.

14 Haidt, Jonathan, “The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail...” 2001, 828.

15 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph, “The Moral Mind,” 2008, 375.

While this disagreement is mostly settled in the sciences, it exemplifies the continuing anxieties around an innate, ‘nativist’ understanding of human nature, which leads many “to believe that human nature is a blank slate on which any utopian vision can be sketched,”¹⁶ and following the “normative objection that calling [anything focusing on groups over individuals] ‘moral’ could legitimize anything from jingoism to blind obedience to prejudice and racism.”¹⁷ after all, “if Hitler was a nativist, then all nativists were Nazis.”¹⁸ “Although the word ‘moral’ can introduce ambiguities because it has both descriptive and normative uses, [theories should reflect] morality as it is observed around the world, not about the moral systems that ought to prevail.”¹⁹ “We want to discover how the moral mind *actually* works, not how it *ought* to work, and that can’t be done by reasoning, math, or logic. It can be done only by observation.”²⁰

What Evidence is There for Innate Morality?

“By six months of age, infants are watching how people behave toward *other people*, and they are developing a preference for those who are nice rather than those who are mean.”²¹ “Children as young as three are adept at sharing rewards equally, but only when they both cooperated to produce the benefit[, and] infants notice markers of ingroup membership and prefer members of their ingroup.”²² Other research shows “children seem relatively insensitive to issues of fairness until around the age of 4, at which points of concern about fairness burst forth and are overgeneralized to social situations in which they were ever encouraged and in which they are often inappropriate. This pattern of sudden similarly timed emergence with overgeneralization suggests the maturation of an endogenous ability rather than the learning of a set of cultural norms.”²³ Similarly, “cooties games tend to emerge around the age of 7 or 9 which is the age at which disgust sensitivity becomes pronounced. In other words, these games seem to reflect the *externalization* of children’s developing social-emotional abilities, not the *internalization* of prevailing cultural norms.”²⁴ This sudden emergence of moral intuitions is reflected in studies on kids who move to foreign cultures, which show “there [is] a sensitive period for

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

17 Graham, Jesse et al., “Moral Foundations Theory...” 2012, 35.

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

19 Graham, Jesse et al., “Moral Foundations Theory...” 2012, 35.

20 Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind*, 2012, 141.

21 Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind*, 2012, 65.

22 Graham, Jesse et al., “Moral Foundations Theory...” 2012, 39.

23 Haidt, Jonathan, “The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail...” 2001, 826-827.

24 Graham, Jesse et al., “Moral Foundations Theory...” 2012, 40.

culture learning between the ages of 9 and 15;” before then was “shallower, non-emotional learning,” after was “puzzlement and culture shock.” While these teenagers could state norms explicitly, “these norms did not become internalized.”²⁵

Counter to the building up constructivist and connectionist morality, maintenance-loss models show that it is “a design feature of mammalian brains that much of neural develop is ‘experience expectant.’ That is, there are developmentally timed periods of high neural plasticity, as though the brain ‘expected’ certain types of experience to be present at a certain time to guide its final wiring. [...] “Most synapse selection and elimination in the human cerebral cortex occurs in the first few years but that in the prefrontal cortex the period of plasticity is greatly delayed, [...] the brain area most frequently implicated in moral judgment and behavior.”²⁶ Through this process of pruning, we see how “traits can be innate without being either hardwired or universal. As the neuroscientist Gary Marcus explains, ‘nature bestows upon the newborn a considerably complex brain, but one that is best seen as *prewired* – flexible and subject to change – rather than *hardwired*, fixed, and immutable.’”²⁷

It’s worth noting that innateness should not be confused with claims of genetic or neurological exactitude, nor should it (yet) have to make such claims; “despite the fact that just about everything is heritable, there do not appear to be genes ‘for’ traits. The human genome project failed to find genes or even sets of dozens of genes that account for more than a few percent of the variance in any target disease or trait. Even for physical eight, which has a heritability of 0.9 and can be measured with nearly perfect accuracy, nobody can find a gene or set of genes that explain why some people are taller than others.”²⁸

Innateness risks other confusions, as well: “on the one hand, too strong a notion of innateness is likely not to be applicable to cognitive behavioral traits of any complexity, morality included, because so much learning is involved. On the other, too weak a notion may apply to far too *many* cognitive and behavioral traits to be useful for explanation, prediction, and categorization.”²⁹ To address this problem, Jonathan Haidt and Craig Joseph borrowed the idea that the mind is made of modules, “little bits of

25 Haidt, Jonathan, “The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail...” 2001, 828.

26 Haidt, Jonathan, “The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail...” 2001, 827.

27 Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind*. Vintage Books (New York), 2012, 152.

28 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph, “How Moral Foundations Theory Succeeded...” 2011, p 2119

29 Suhler, Christopher and Patricia Churchland, “Can Innate, Modular ‘Foundations’ Explain Morality?” 2011, p 2105.

input-output programming, ways of enabling fast and automatic responses to specific environmental”³⁰ “problems or opportunities that [have] presented themselves for many generations.”³¹ “They are switched on by patterns that were important for survival in a particular ecological niche, and when they detect that pattern, they send out a signal that (eventually) changes the animal’s behavior in a way that is (usually) adaptive,”³² such as with face detection.

“Evolution, as well as brain development, tends to be very conservative, typically extending, reappropriating, or modifying extant neurobiological mechanisms rather than engineering wholly new, dedicated mechanisms for each new challenge that the environment throws an organism’s way.”³³ Likewise, anthropologist Dan Sperber theorizes a “moderately massive modularity,”³⁴ in which “modules are highly variable[,] often nested within each other[, and most] are not innate; they are generated during development by a smaller set of “learning modules” which are innate templates or “learning instincts.”³⁵ In this way, “Sperber envisions a core set of innate modules generating a great diversity of other modules. He uses the evocative term ‘teeming modularity,’”³⁶ a conceptualization Haidt is sympathetic towards.

“A small set of moral learning modules could explain the high degree of preparedness that moral reactions show: some moral rules are so easily learned that it is not clear that anyone needs to teach them (e.g. the tit for tat rule: ‘don’t hit first but if someone hits you, hit back’). Other moral rules are so hard to learn that it is not clear they can be inculcated by any means yet discovered (e.g. ‘if someone hits you, turn the other cheek with love in your heart.’)”³⁷ Nature and nurture are both at play; as Marcus says, “built-in’ does not mean unmalleable; it means organized in advance of experience.”³⁸ “This is why [Haidt and his collaborators] chose the architectural metaphor of a ‘foundation.’ ... *the foundations are not the finished buildings*, but the foundations constrain the kinds of buildings that can be built most easily.”³⁹

30 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph. “Intuitive Ethics...” 2004, 60.

31 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph. “Intuitive Ethics...” 2004, 59.

32 Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind*, 2012, 144.

33 Suhler, Christopher and Patricia Churchland, “Can Innate, Modular ‘Foundations’ Explain Morality?” 2011, p 2111

34 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph, “The Moral Mind,” 2008, 378.

35 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph, “The Moral Mind,” 2008, 379.

36 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph, “The Moral Mind,” 2008, 379.

37 Haidt, Jonathan and Jesse Graham, “Planet of the Durkheimians,” 2009, 383.

38 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph, “The Moral Mind,” 2008, 374.

39 Graham, Jesse et al., “Moral Foundations Theory...” 2012, 10.

Modules are theorized to produce two types of triggered reactions: there is the ‘proper domain’ of ‘initial triggers,’ a “set of specific scenarios or stimuli that the module was evolved to handle.”⁴⁰ For example, primates seem to have a module for detecting snakes, shadowy slinking lines on the ground. This proper domain of modules tends to grow into an ‘actual domain’ of ‘current triggers,’ “the set of all things in the world that now happen to trigger the module,”⁴¹ such as ropes setting off the snake detection module, or an animal using camouflage to not set off movement and prey modules. “Current triggers can change in a single generation[, so] even if we all share the same small set of cognitive modules, we can hook actions up to modules in so many ways that we can build conflicting moral [systems] on the same small set of foundations.”⁴²

How Do Different Cultures Build Their Moralities?

“A culture that emphasized all of the moral intuitions that the human mind is prepared to experience would risk paralysis as every action triggered multiple conflicting intuitions. Cultures seem instead to specialize in a subset of human moral potential.”⁴³ An apt metaphor for this process of intuitive universals becoming particulars is taste; as Mencius, the Chinese sage, said 2300 years ago, “moral principles please our minds as beef and mutton and pork please our mouths.”⁴⁴ Hume also used a taste analogy: “Morality is nothing in the abstract Nature of Things, but is entirely relative to the Sentiment or mental Taste of each particular Being; in the same Manner as the Distinctions of sweet and bitter, hot and cold, arise from the particular feeling of each Sense or Organ.”⁴⁵

Extending the metaphor further, “morality is like a cuisine: it’s a cultural construction, influenced by accidents of environment and history, but it’s not so flexible that anything goes. [...] Cuisines vary, but they all must please tongues equipped with the same five taste receptors.”⁴⁶ “Most cultures have one or more sweet beverages that are widely consumed [but] it would be silly to posit the existence of separate receptors for [each different beverage]. There’s one main receptor at work here –

40 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph. “Intuitive Ethics...” 2004, 60.

41 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph. “Intuitive Ethics...” 2004, 60.

42 Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind*. Vintage Books (New York), 2012, 145.

43 Haidt, Jonathan, “The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail...” 2001, 827.

44 Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind*, 2012, 133.

45 Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind*, 2012, 135.

46 Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind*, 2012, 133.

the sweetness receptor – and each culture has invented various ways to trigger it.”⁴⁷ As with cuisines that feature more sweetness than bitterness, “intuitions with culturally supported ethics become sharper and more chronically accessible.”⁴⁸ In turn, “cultures create moralities that are unique yet constrained in their variations.”⁴⁹

From these initial, intuitive moral tastes, Haidt and Jesse Graham “believe virtue theories are the most psychologically sound approach to morality,”⁵⁰ which “sees morality as embodied in the very structure of the self, not merely as one of the activities of the self.”⁵¹ “Aristotle supposed that in developing the virtues we acquire a second nature, a refinement of our basic nature,”⁵² developing “proper automatic reactions to ethically relevant events”⁵³ and “characteristics of a person that are morally praiseworthy.”⁵⁴ Such “mature moral functioning does not consist only, or even primarily, of simple affective or intuitive reactions to social stimuli,”⁵⁵ but are “cultivated through practice”⁵⁶ and “habit[,] rather than propositional knowledge and reasoning”⁵⁷ or “explicit rationales or principles.”⁵⁸ There is far less truth in what one says than what one does. Virtues are otherwise “acquired inductively, through exposure to [...] many examples of the virtue in practice,”⁵⁹ such as in narratives and myths.

“Depriving children of frequent moral feedback, including displays of the parent’s moral emotions, or exposing them to many conflicting messages, may deprive the intuitive system of the experiences it needs to properly tune up. If virtues are social skills, then moral education should be a comprehensive and sustained training regimen with regular feedback.”⁶⁰ “Even if some virtues tend to go together across cultures, the virtue complexes that each culture generates are likely to be unique,”⁶¹ but since their underlying intuitions are nonetheless universally shared, we can persuade others across moral divides if we respect the diversity of moral cuisines in our world.

47 Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind*, 2012, 143.

48 Haidt, Jonathan, “The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail...” 2001, 827.

49 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph, “The Moral Mind,” 2008, 381.

50 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph. “Intuitive Ethics...” 2004, 62.

51 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph. “Intuitive Ethics...” 2004, 61.

52 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph. “Intuitive Ethics...” 2004, 61.

53 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph. “Intuitive Ethics...” 2004, 61.

54 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph, “The Moral Mind,” 2008, 386.

55 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph, “The Moral Mind,” 2008, 385.

56 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph, “The Moral Mind,” 2008, 368.

57 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph, “The Moral Mind,” 2008, 368.

58 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph, “The Moral Mind,” 2008, 368.

59 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph, “The Moral Mind,” 2008, 386.

60 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph. “Intuitive Ethics...” 2004, 65.

61 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph. “Intuitive Ethics...” 2004, 61.

In summary, the “human mind is organized in advance of experience so that it is prepared to learn values, norms, and behaviors related to a diverse set of recurrent adaptive social problems.”⁶² “The universal (and incomplete) first draft of the moral mind gets filled in and revised so that the child can successfully navigate the moral ‘matrix’ he or she actually experiences.”⁶³ “The characteristic developmental trajectory in the moral domain is a movement from crude, global judgments, articulated using a small number of innate moral intuitions, to highly sophisticated and differentiated perceptions, beliefs, emotions responses, and judgments.”⁶⁴ ‘Blank slate’-favoring moral development models of “constructivism and connectionism [...] are partially correct as descriptions of the editing process, and [...] can be improved by positing at least some content that is organized in advance of experience.”⁶⁵

62 Graham, Jesse et al., “Moral Foundations Theory...” 2012, 9.

63 Graham, Jesse et al., “Moral Foundations Theory...” 2012, 10.

64 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph, “The Moral Mind,” 2008, 388.

65 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph, “The Moral Mind,” 2008, 374.

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