

How Many Moralities Are There?

Edited by mks

Is morality monist or plural? Evidence suggests the latter; as discussed in previous essays, there is a multitude of evolutionary adaptations (neurological, behavioral...), and cultural mores (myths, rituals...) that are involved in a diversity of moral concerns. Only a modern, Western, excessively parsimonious and normative moral framework could justify the narrowing of morality to few or one principle. A descriptive approach suggests a moral plurality, but not an infinitude. Contrary to concerns of collective moralities justifying the suppression of individuals, the focus on monism opens the door to a unilateral certain that can produce totalitarian extremism. Through an appreciation of the tension of exclusive but equally valid moral concerns, humans can humble themselves to the always-contextual problem of doing and being good.

“How many ‘irreducible basic elements are needed to represent, understand, and explain the breadth of the moral domain?’”¹ Since the Enlightenment, moral philosophers have pursued moral monism, “the attempt to ground all of morality on a single principle,”² such as Kant’s categorical imperative or Bentham’s utilitarianism. “Kohlberg founded the modern field of moral psychology with his declaration that the answer was one.”³ In his words in 1971: “Virtue is ultimately one, not many, and it is always the same ideal form regardless of climate or culture [...] the name of this ideal form is justice.”⁴ In 1982, Carol Gilligan argued that the morality of girls and women did not follow Kohlberg’s one true path,⁵ and that care for the young was a distinct morality. Though these concerns aren’t limited to women, her argument was accepted. In turn, leading moral psychologists “Kohlberg, Gilligan, and Turiel were all united in their belief that morality is about how *individuals* out to relate to, protect, and respect other individuals.”⁶ Sam Harris “makes his [own] monist critique in the context of the larger normative argument that science should determine human values and pronounce which moral views are correct based on which ones lead to the greatest happiness. [...] But even if one agrees with Harris’s normative views, would the reduction of all morality to harm help us understand how morality actually works? Or would it be [...] another attempt to clean up the litter the world actually contains?”⁷

1 Graham, Jesse et al., “Moral Foundations Theory...” 2012, 4.

2 Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind*, 2012, 132

3 Graham, Jesse et al., “Moral Foundations Theory...” 2012, 6.

4 Graham, Jesse et al., “Moral Foundations Theory...” 2012, 4.

5 Graham, Jesse et al., “Moral Foundations Theory...” 2012, 6.

6 Graham, Jesse et al., “Moral Foundations Theory...” 2012, 6.

7 Graham, Jesse et al., “Moral Foundations Theory...” 2012, 34.

“Scientists value parsimony as well as explanatory adequacy. There is, however, an inherent tension between these two values.”⁸ William James says, compared to the “something clean and intellectual in the way of inner structure” typically pursued by philosophers and scientists, pluralism is a “turbid, muddled, gothic sort of affair, without a sweeping outline and with little pictorial nobility.”⁹ But for all its noble clarity, the “project of searching for a single, unified principle or psychological mechanism that, by itself, accounts for all of morality [is] a project that has thus far proved something of a quagmire.”¹⁰ “Evolutionary biology suggests that there is no principled reason for parsimony to be a design criterion for the mind.”¹¹ As previous essays contend, “morality is derived from or constrained by multiple innate mental systems, each shaped by a different evolutionary process,”¹² from which “a finite but potentially large number of moral ideals [exist] within the repertoire of human beings.”¹³ As anthropologist Richard Shweder notes, “we are multiple from the start.”¹⁴ “As a simple matter of anthropological fact, the moral domain varies across cultures.”¹⁵

This is not to say morality is relativistic; as Isaiah Berlin states, there are a “plurality of ideals [...] not an infinity of [them;]”¹⁶ and that “multiple values are objective, part of the essence of humanity rather than arbitrary creations of men’s subjective fancies.”¹⁷ Haidt and his collaborators are likewise not “saying that ‘anything goes,’ or that all societies or all [moral] cuisines are equally good. But [they] believe that moral monism [...] leads to societies that are unsatisfying to most people and at high risk of becoming inhumane because they ignore so many other moral principles.”¹⁸ In this way, “moral pluralism is true *descriptively*;¹⁹ it doesn’t reduce social concerns to conventions if they are judged normatively problematic, as collective concerns for the group over individuals are often view by moderns. To the contrary, “an appreciation of the full repertoire opens the door to mutual understanding.”²⁰

8 Graham, Jesse et al., “Moral Foundations Theory...” 2012, 4.

9 Graham, Jesse et al., “Moral Foundations Theory...” 2012, 4.

10 Suhler, Christopher and Patricia Churchland, “Can Innate, Modular ‘Foundations’ Explain Morality?” 2011, p 2104.

11 Graham, Jesse et al., “Moral Foundations Theory...” 2012, 12.

12 Graham, Jesse et al., “Moral Foundations Theory...” 2012, 5.

13 Graham, Jesse et al., “Moral Foundations Theory...” 2012, 5.

14 Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind*, 2012, 128.

15 Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind*, 2012, 129.

16 Graham, Jesse et al., “Moral Foundations Theory...” 2012, 4.

17 Graham, Jesse et al., “Moral Foundations Theory...” 2012, 43.

18 Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind*, 2012, 132

19 Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind*, 2012, 129.

20 Graham, Jesse et al., “Moral Foundations Theory...” 2012, 5.

Ironically, philosopher Isaiah Berlin contends that “monism is at the root of every extremism,”²¹ as “the elevation or ‘sacralization’ of a moral principle or symbol is a major cause of evil.”²² By recognizing a reduced number of moral concerns above and beyond the rest, as “tradeoffs or compromises involving what is sacralized are resisted or refused,” a totalitarian orthodoxy arises, and like a hammer, it makes all else look like a nail. In this way, moral monism can lead to righteous justifications for freeing others from their backwards, collectivist restraints through an imposition of modernity and liberalism.

This is not to say there is no universalism to the human condition, but “even though people in all cultures have more or less the same bodies, they have different embodiments, and therefore they end up with different minds.”²³ “People vary in the extent to which they endorse, value, and use [different moralities], providing an opportunity to better understand moral diversity.”²⁴

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21 Graham, Jesse, and Jonathan Haidt. “Sacred values and evil adversaries...” 2012, 1.

22 Graham, Jesse, and Jonathan Haidt. “Sacred values and evil adversaries...” 2012, 1.

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

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