The Precedent and Future of Moral Foundations Theory (MFT)
edited by mks

"[MFT] was created by two psychologists," Jonathan Haidt and Craig Joseph, "who had worked with the anthropologist Richard Shweder on questions of morality and culture. [...] Delighted by the variability of moral practices [they] read about in ethnographies, [they] tried to map out the moral domain in [their] fieldwork in Brazil and India (for Haidt) and in Egypt (for Joseph)."[1] Haidt and Joseph "reviewed four works that offered lists or taxonomies of moral values or social practices across cultures,"[2] including Richard Shweder's "Big Three" of Morality, Alan Fiske's Relational Models Theory, D. E. Brown's *Human Universals,* and S. H. Schwartz's "Universals in the content and structure of values." For an evolutionary perspective, "they also included de Waal's description of the 'building blocks' of morality that are found in other primates,"[3] and later, "Hogan et al.'s evolution-based socioanalytic theory of moral development."[4]

In this process, they "tried to identify the best candidates for being the psychological foundations upon which cultures create their moral systems,"[5] "inspired by the obvious match between the major evolutionary theories and the major moral phenomena reported by anthropologists. [They] engaged in no post-hoc evolutionary theorizing [them]selves,"[6] which can be "reductionist (because they ignore the shared meanings that are the focus of cultural anthropology) and naively functionalist (because they are too quick to assume that every behavior evolved to serve a function.)"[7]

Two Models that Inspired the Moral Foundations

"Shweder was the leading thinker in cultural psychology – a new discipline that combined the anthropologist's love of context and variability with the psychologist's interest in mental processes."[8] He "found three major clusters of moral themes, which they called the ethics of autonomy, community, and divinity."[9]

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1   Haidt, Jonathan, et al., "Above and Below Left-Right..." in *Psychological Inquiry,* 2009, 111
2   Haidt, Jonathan and Selin Kesebir, "Morality," 2009, 41.
3   Haidt, Jonathan and Selin Kesebir, "Morality," 2009, 41.
4   Graham, Jesse et al., "Mapping the Moral Domain," 2011, 368.
5   Haidt, Jonathan, et al., "Above and Below Left-Right..." in *Psychological Inquiry,* 2009, 111
6   Graham, Jesse et al., "Moral Foundations Theory..." 2012, 40.
7   Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind,* 2012, 142.
8   Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind,* 2012, 115.
9   Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind,* 2012, 116.

With the ethic of autonomy, "the self is conceptualized as an individual preference structure, and the point of moral regulation is to increase choice, autonomy, and control."[10] It involves "focusing on goods that protect the autonomous individual, such as rights, freedom of choice, and personal welfare."[11] In *The Righteous Mind,* Haidt writes ""People are […] autonomous individuals with want, needs, and preferences. People should be free to satisfy these … as they see fit, and so societies develop more concepts such as rights, liberty, and justice. […] This is the dominant ethic in individualistic societies."[12]

With the ethic of community, "the self is conceptualized as the holder of an office or role in a larger interdependent and collective enterprise. This code requires duty, respect, [and] obedience to authority,"[13] "focusing on the good that protect families, nations, and other collectivities, such as loyalty, duty, honor, respectfulness, modesty, and self-control."[14] In *The Righteous Mind,* Haidt writes ""People are […] members of larger entities such as families, teams, armies, companies, tribes, and nations. These larger entities are more than the sum of the people who compose them; they are real, they matter, and they must be protected. People have an obligation to play their assigned roles in these entities. Many societies therefore develop moral concepts such as duty, hierarchy, respect, reputation, and patriotism." individualism will "weaken the social fabric and destroy the institutions and collective entities upon which everyone depends."[15]

With the ethic of divinity, "the self is conceptualized as a spiritual entity striving to avoid pollution and attain purity and sanctity. Acts that are disgusting or degrading to one's spiritual nature are condemned."[16] It involves "focusing on goods that protect the spiritual self, such as piety and physical and mental purity."[17] In *The Righteous Mind,* Haidt writes "people are […] temporary vessels within which a divine soul have been implanted. People are not just animals […] the body is a temple, not a playground. Even if it does no harm and violates nobody's rights […] [taboos] degrade him [...] and violates the sacred order of the universe. [This ethic focuses on] sanctity and sin, purity and pollution, elevation and degradation."[18]

10   Jonathan Haidt, Silvia Helena Koller, and Maria G. Dias, "Affect, Culture, and Morality..." 1993, 614.
11   Haidt, Jonathan, "The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail…" 2001, 827.
12   Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind,* 2012, 116.
13   Jonathan Haidt, Silvia Helena Koller, and Maria G. Dias, "Affect, Culture, and Morality..." 1993, 614.
14   Haidt, Jonathan, "The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail…" 2001, 827.
15   Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind,* 2012, 116-117.
16   Jonathan Haidt, Silvia Helena Koller, and Maria G. Dias, "Affect, Culture, and Morality..." 1993, 614.
17   Haidt, Jonathan, "The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail…" 2001, 827.
18   Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind,* 2012, 117.

Alan Fiske models four social relationships, three of which relate to chimpanzee and bonobo behavior:

Communal sharing is "the linkage of kindness, kinship, and empathic concern for close others," behavior deWaal has described among chimps and bonobos.[19] Authority ranking is how "power and rank regulate access to resources but also obligate superiors to protector their subordinates," which deWaal describes as mutual obligations among chimpanzees.[20] Equality matching is "double-edged reciprocal altruism […] remembering and repaying both favors and slights," which has been seen in laboratory settings with chimpanzees.[21] Market pricing describes how "ratio values of goods and services must be computed and aggregated across transactions," which is unique human.[22]

The Construction of the Moral Foundations

In the 2003 *Daedelus* article on "Intuitive Ethics," the first paper published on MFT, Haidt and Joseph had synthesized these ideas and wrote that "human beings come equipped with an *intuitive ethics.* [...] The four patterns for which we believe the evidence is best are those surrounding suffering, hierarchy, reciprocity, and purity."[23] Compared to Shweder's model, they split autonomy into "suffering/compassion" and "reciprocity/fairness"; community into "hierarchy/respect", while divinity lines up with purity/sanctity. In a footnote, they suggest an "ingroup module" that later becomes the Loyalty morality[24]. Fiske's communal sharing relates to ingroup loyalty, equality matching relates to fairness, and authority ranking relates to authority morality.

The sixth foundation, Liberty, came from many sources, including "complaints from libertarians [and] strong arguments for liberty"[25] in response to an open challenge for foundation submissions. After Haidt wrote the 2008 essay "What Makes People Vote Republican,"[26] he received responses from economic conservatives "overflowing with moral content [that Haidt] had a hard time categorizing."[27]

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19 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph, "The Moral Mind," 2008, 384.
20 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph, "The Moral Mind," 2008, 384.
21 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph, "The Moral Mind," 2008, 384.
22 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph, "The Moral Mind," 2008, 384.
23 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph. "Intuitive Ethics..." 2004, 56.
24 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph. "Intuitive Ethics..." 2004, 63.
25 Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind*, 2012, 410.
26 Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind*, 2012, 190.
27 Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind*, 2012, 196.

He "looked into what was known about the egalitarianism of hunter-gatherers,"[28] and adjusted the Fairness foundation: "the desire for equality seems to be more closely related to the psychology of reciprocity and exchange. […] After [Haidt and colleagues] ran some new studies on various kinds of fairness and liberty, [they] added […] Liberty/oppression."[29]

What Qualifies as a Moral Foundation

"MFT is a nativist, cultural-developmentalist, intuitionist, and pluralist approach to the study of morality,"[30] incorporating "best links between anthropological and evolutionary accounts of morality"[31] to produce "a comprehensive explanatory framework."[32] Haidt and others chose "the architectural metaphor of a 'foundation' [because] *foundations are not the finished buildings,* but the foundations constrain the kinds of buildings that can be built most easily.*"[33] From these foundations "humans [begin] to live in 'moral matrices,' - the 'consensual hallucinations' that provide a common normative framework against which people can and do judge the actions of others, even when those actions have no direction implications for the self."[34]

The goal of MFT is to help "researchers as well as the general pubic look beyond the moral values that are dearest to them, and understand those who live in a different moral matrix."[35] It is functionalist description of morality, maximizing fidelity to reality; for this reason, Haidt says he doesn't "know what the best normative ethical theory is for individuals in their private lives;"[36] likewise, he finds "no compelling alternative to utilitarianism."[37]

"MFT was designed to be revisable, and it is being revised."[38] MFT theorists "are constantly arguing among [them]selves over changes to existing foundations and considerations of new candidate foundations."[39] For example, Ravi Iyer "first pointed out that our measures of Fairness concerns centered on equality rather than equity, and that concerns about equality are often motivated by care for

28 Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind*, 2012, 197.
29 Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind*, 2012, 197.
30 Graham, Jesse et al., "Moral Foundations Theory..." 2012, 14.
31 Graham, Jesse, Jonathan Haidt, and Brian Nosek, "Liberals and Conservatives…" 2009, 1030.
32 Suhler, Christopher and Patricia Churchland, "Can Innate, Modular 'Foundations' Explain Morality?" 2011, 2103.
33 Graham, Jesse et al., "Moral Foundations Theory..." 2012, 10.
34 Graham, Jesse et al., "Moral Foundations Theory..." 2012, 36.
35 Graham, Jesse et al., "Moral Foundations Theory..." 2012, 14.
36 Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind*, 2012, 316.
37 Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind*, 2012, 142.
38 Haidt, Jonathan and Craig Joseph, "How Moral Foundations Theory Succeeded..." 2011, p 2118.
39 Graham, Jesse et al., "Moral Foundations Theory..." 2012, 36.

others, whereas equity concerns may be motivationally distinct. [He] also questioned the pragmatic utility of separating Loyalty and Authority."[40] MFT researchers recognize that their "particular list of moral foundations is unlikely to survive the empirical challenges of the next several years with no challenges[, but] think that [their] general approach is likely to stand the test of time, [such as drawing] on both cultural and evolutionary psychology."[41] "[They] think the issue of identifying foundations is rather like the issue of counting planets,"[42] and there are likely more, including efficiency/waste, ownership/theft, and honesty/deception as possible alternatives or additions.

Several variables should be at play to suggest a moral foundation:

There should be evidence of innate preparedness: "if a moral reaction can be elicited quickly and easily, with a variety of [memes about it], that is a point in favor of its foundationhood."[43]

Evolutionary models should demonstrate an adaptive advantage: "the case for innateness grows much stronger when a behavior or ability is found in non-human primates and when it can be shown to emerge in young children before they have been exposed to relevant teaching or reinforcement."[44]

There should be evidence that it is culturally widespread: "we should not treat all cultures as equally information. Hunter-gatherer societies should carry added weight, because they may more closely resemble lifestyles of the 'environment of evolutionary adaptation.'"[45] For this reason, "modern WEIRD societies are arguably the worst places to look for moral foundations because such societies have narrowed the moral domain in order to grant individuals the maximum freedom to pursue their projects."[46]

40 Graham, Jesse et al., "Moral Foundations Theory..." 2012, 36.
41 Graham, Jesse et al., "Moral Foundations Theory..." 2012, 5.
42 Graham, Jesse et al., "Moral Foundations Theory..." 2012, 35.
43 Graham, Jesse et al., "Moral Foundations Theory..." 2012, 37.
44 Graham, Jesse et al., "Moral Foundations Theory..." 2012, 14.
45 Graham, Jesse et al., "Moral Foundations Theory..." 2012, 38.
46 Graham, Jesse et al., "Moral Foundations Theory..." 2012, 38

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