

The Six Moral Foundations

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The Moral Foundations Theory (MFT) proposes a moral landscape that extends from evolutionary instincts to philosophical virtues, with pulling from biological and cultural anthropology to established psychological and sociological theory. Contrary to moral psychology precedence, MFT centers fast, affective intuitions over slow, rational judgments; a multiplicity of moral matrices over one or two; and an ad-hoc approach over holding to an underlying principle. It also suggests a balance between morality of the collective and the individual, and influence from ‘pre-wired’ moral tastes to conditioned moral preferences.

This essay draws from various official texts on MFT to provide a comprehensive description of each of the six moral foundations, looking at their hypothesized evolutionary origins; related bio-, psycho-, and sociological theories; and the original and extended domains and experiences of life that trigger the moral matrices.

Care and Harm

The morality of Care concerns feelings of compassion, sympathy, and kindness that emerge in response to signs of distress, pain, or injury. It motivates us to relieve such suffering by providing comfort, help, safety, and protection to the vulnerable, dependent, weak, and infantile. It also leads us to condemn the violence, cruelty, abuse, and exploitation by perpetrators of Harm.

The Evolutionary Story

As animals evolved from reptiles to mammals, so did reproductive strategies that require a greater investment of time and energy in the young. Humans have brought this to an extreme; our babies are born with soft skulls, months before they can walk or begin feeding themselves, to mothers who themselves depend on the support of others to help rear their child. This need to care for vulnerable offspring, to keep them safe and alive, is central to the evolutionary success of a species, so “leaving it up to new mothers to learn from their culture, or from trial and error,”¹ seems unlikely. Mothers who were more sensitive and responsive to their offspring’s needs and signs of distress were

more likely to see their genes pass on to the next generation than their less empathetic sisters, and “over time a communication system developed in which children’s stylized distress signals triggered maternal aid.”²

Scientific Correlations

Care corresponds to theories on the evolution of empathy³ and kin altruism⁴, research on empathy/compassion⁵, and attachment theory⁶, which “describes the system by which mothers and children regulate each other’s behavior so that the child gets a good mix of protection and opportunities for independent exploration.”⁷ It also relates to the broadened human sensitivity to oxytocin, helping generate warm and altruistic feelings towards those with some shared relation and/or affinity.⁸ Studies show that before infants can speak, they reach for and appear to prefer puppets that help over harm other puppets,⁹ suggesting this morality begins developing from an early age.

Past and Present Examples

The original domain for this moral foundation includes signs of suffering and neediness of one’s children, and likely those of close kin and vulnerable or injured family. The current domain can take many forms, extending how we “disapprove of individual[s] that cause pain and suffering [and] approve of those who prevent or alleviate harm.”¹⁰ It may evoke feelings of empathy and concern for innocent victims with whom we share no close relation, such as starving children and adults in a faraway land, even fictional ones. It can include other animals like baby seals or our pets, stuffed animals or cute cartoons, all exhibiting child-like characteristics. It can include concern for the unborn or those who sacrificed for the good of the group, like wounded and killed soldiers.

This moral foundation is associated with mothers, nurses, and pacifists; non-violent leaders like Gandhi or M.L. King Jr. In extreme self-righteousness, Care morality may be used to justify the killing of abortion doctors, or the militancy of groups like the Weather Underground.

Fairness and Cheating

The Morality of Fairness concerns feelings of gratitude and appreciation for those who repay debts and favors, proving their trustworthiness as honest and cooperative partners in reciprocal relationships. It leads to feelings of guilt when we fail to honor and balance our exchanges, and anger when others fail. It motivates us to be vigilant against Cheating, stealing, bias, and deception; and pursue justice, revenge, and seek compensation that returns balance to unfair exchanges.

The Evolutionary Story

“All social animals face recurrent opportunities to engage in non-zero-sum exchanges and relationships,”¹¹ such as in the joint ventures of hunting and foraging. Care morality accounts for kindness among kin, but reaping the benefits of cooperation with distant and non-kin required further development. Those who managed to balance ‘helping anyone and risking exploitation’ and ‘selfishly taking and risking punishment’ survived to pass on their genes, leading to the emergence of reciprocal altruism. In this ‘tit for tat’ model of exchange, individuals remember their prior interactions, repay debts, limit exchanges to those who repay, feel bad when they cheat, and avoid or punish cheaters. In this way, “‘selfish’ genes can give rise to generous creatures, as long as those creatures are selective in their generosity.”¹²

The Scientific Evidence

The Fairness moral foundation pulls from the theory of reciprocal altruism¹³ and anthropological descriptions of gift-giving practices as means of forging relationships.¹⁴¹⁵ There is limited¹⁶ and disputed¹⁷ lab evidence of precursors of fairness among other primates. Indirect reciprocity fits the importance of reputation management as your good and bad behavior can be the subject of gossip, impacting other’s cooperation.¹⁸ “Children as young as three are adept at sharing rewards equally, but only when they both cooperated to produce the benefit.”¹⁹²⁰ In an experiment on sharing among anonymous participants,²¹ selfishness was incentivized until players were able and willing to pay to punish cheaters, “in part, because it felt good to do so. [...] We want to see cheaters and slackers ‘get what’s coming to them.’ We want the law of karma to run its course.”²²

Past and Present Examples

The original domain for this moral foundation includes acts of “cooperation or selfishness that people show towards us. We feel pleasure, liking, and friendship when people show signs that they can be trusted to reciprocate. We feel anger, contempt, and even sometimes disgust when people try to cheat us or take advantage of us.”²³ The current domain can take many forms, including the laws and social institutions related to rights and pursuing justice. It can also extend to interactions with inanimate objects, like when a game or vending machine breaks, stealing our time, effort, and money. It can include concerns for social justice and addressing the wrongs of manipulative and exploitative elites and corporations, or concerns about free riders and the subsidizing of lazy welfare recipients and illegal immigrants. “Everyone gets angry when people take more than they deserve.”²⁴ Punishment should fit the crime; one should reap what they sow; “people should be rewarded in proportion to what they contribute, even if that guarantees unequal outcomes.”²⁵

This moral foundation is associated with the court system, labor unions, Occupy Wall Street, and the Tea Party Movement. At extremes, it can lead to feuds, vengeance killings, and other reciprocal, deadly attacks.

Loyalty and Betrayal

The morality of Loyalty concerns feelings of group pride and belongingness that emerge when people feel a bond of trust or loyalty towards their in-group and team, and approval towards those who contribute to the group’s cohesion and advancement. It motivates us towards acts of loyalty, unity, and self-sacrifice to do one’s part in competition with outsiders. It also leads us to be vigilant and punitive against the Betrayal and/or treason of traitors, profiteers, and slackers.

The Evolutionary Story

The world has limited resources, so animals are always in competition for survival. Fairness may produce cooperation within non-kin groups, but scarcity requires zero-sum competition among out-groups. For example, “chimpanzees guard their territory, raid the territory of rivals, and, if they can pull it off, kill the males of the neighborhood group and take their territory and their females.”²⁶ Since evolving from our common ancestor, human development of language, weapons, initiation rites, rituals, and tribal markers drastically increased our ability to aggregate into cohesive tribes. Groups with the

strongest coalitions for fending off attacks from rivals – committed to the camaraderie of warfare, celebrating victories, and honoring the sacrifice of brave warriors – would out-compete and replace other groups, promoting genes and intuitive reactions that maintained cooperation and loyalty while rooting out treachery.

The Scientific Evidence

Loyalty morality pulls from ethnographic observations of chimpanzee inter-group competition²⁷ and the theories of coalitional behavior²⁸ and inter-coalitional conflict.²⁹ De Waal notes “celebrations break out [among chimps] when long-simmering power struggles are resolved [reflecting their desire for] harmony within the cooperative groups upon which they depend both for material sustenance and for intergroup defense.”³⁰ The black sheep effect demonstrates the negative affective response to ingroup betrayals.³¹ Multi-level selection theory reflects how group selection can emerge.³² “Infants notice markers of ingroup membership and prefer members of their ingroup [...] and even prefer those who help similar others and harm dissimilar others.”³³ Studies show people form groups based on even trivial similarities.³⁴ Oxytocin produces feelings of bonding and empathy with one’s in-group, leading to parochial altruism.³⁵

Past and Present Examples

The original domain for this moral foundation includes threats or challenges to the group in which one belongs. It makes us “sensitive to signs that another person is (or is not) a team player,”³⁶ particularly when engaged in competition and warfare with other groups. The current domain “now includes all the [...] gatherings that contribute to modern identities”³⁷: race, ethnicity, nation, homeland, family, guild, home team, club... we now experience a plethora of nested and overlapping groups of shared interests and solidarity. Our love for the emotional heights of competition and the striving for victory has been sublimated by sports and their fandoms, lowering the stakes and risks while playing to our desire for achievement over others. This moral foundation also extends to brand loyalty, defending or ignoring the flaws and mistakes of family and friends, honoring law enforcement and the military for their sacrifice, and patriotism.

At extremes, this moral foundation is associated with xenophobic bigotry and grudges that can lead to genocidal violence for betrayals.

Authority and Subversion

The morality of Authority concerns feelings of deference, dominance, fear, and respect when obeying authority and/or maintaining and negotiating our social rank among superiors and inferiors, and contempt for those who who are disobedient, arrogant, or uppity. Subversion can't be tolerated; order is delicate; chaos must be actively resisted. The life-supporting stability of institutional structures motivate us to work within them and keep to the mutual obligations of hierarchical relationships, fulfilling our duties to earn respect.

The Evolutionary Story

Pecking orders and dominance hierarchies are common in nature: chickens, dogs, lobsters. Displays made by low-ranking individuals are often similar across species; [the goal is to] to appear submissive [...] small and nonthreatening.”³⁸ With the evolution of more interdependence among animals, hierarchies grew beyond mere resource control to negotiating power. “Psychological preparation for hierarchy evolved to help animals living in social groups make the most of their relative abilities to dominate others. Given the unequal distribution of strength, skill, and luck, those individuals who had the right emotional reactions to play along successfully and work their way up through the ranks did better than those who refused to play subordinate roles or who failed to handle the perks of power gracefully.”³⁹

The Scientific Evidence

Authority matches writing on the evolution of hierarchy in primates:⁴⁰ Chimpanzees and bonobos live in dominance hierarchies and have adapted to navigating them “effectively and forg[ing] beneficial relationships upwards and downwards, [gaining] an advantage over those who fail to perceive or react appropriately in these complex social interactions.”⁴¹ Dominant male apes often benefit from control of reproductive access, but they also serve the group by “resolv[ing] disputes and suppress[ing] much of the violent conflict that erupts when there is no clear alpha male. [...] Without agreement on rank and a certain respect for authority there can be no great sensitivity to social rules.”⁴² Just as loyalty keeps groups cohesive for inter-group competition, effective authority keeps groups cohesive by stabilizing intra-group competition. The morality of authority also follows research on how humans maintain rank and deference⁴³ and how authority became dependent on subordinates’ consent.⁴⁴ Humans now depend more on ‘freely conferred deference’⁴⁵ than the threat of force.

Past and Present Examples

The original domain for this moral foundation includes appearance and behavior that indicates rank; people track and remember who is above whom, and when this order is negated or subverted, we notice instantly. It primes us with intuitive reactions for “negotiating rank in social hierarchies[,] recognize signs of status[,] and show proper respect and deference upward, while”⁴⁶ taking responsibility, offering protection, and showing restraint towards subordinates to earn their allegiance. Everyone must fulfill their role; inferiors dutifully follow, superiors lead and maintain order. The current moral domain of authority maintains these mutual obligations. We encode hierarchical language into our speech: prefixes, titles, and last names show professional and respectful deference, while first names express an inappropriate intimacy. Traditional and long-standing institutions like religion are widely honored for their wisdom that survived the tests of time, as are elders for their lifelong contributions to family, community, and society.

Authority morality oppose subversive art and youthful rebellion as a potential threats to the legitimacy of social order. Divorce, abortion, and queer identities likewise threaten the traditional family structures on which society was built. At extremes, this moral foundation is associated with tyrannical and oppressive attitudes and actions that ossify society in resistance any social change.

Liberty and Oppression

The morality of Liberty concerns feelings of resentment and righteous anger that emerge in response to bullying, domineering, and Oppressive behavior. It motivates us to band together with others in resistance to shun, banish, or even kill would-be tyrants, thereby maintaining the egalitarianism of our communities and/or the autonomy of individuals. This foundation “operates in tension with the Authority foundation,”⁴⁷ priming us to push back on its excesses.

The Evolutionary Story

The “extraordinary similarities in the ways that humans and chimpanzees display dominance and submission”⁴⁸ suggests this was likely our early state, “yet even among chimpanzees, it sometimes happens that subordinates gang up to take down alphas.”⁴⁹ Hierarchies provide stabilizing order in social groups, but alphas must mind their limits and “have enough political skill to cultivate a few allies

and stave off rebellion.”⁵⁰ At “some point in the last million years our ancestors underwent a ‘political transition’ that allowed [us] to live as egalitarians by banding together to reign in, punish, or kill any would-be alpha males who tried to dominate the group.”⁵¹ The balance of power likely shifted with the invention of weapons like spears; with these new tools, physical strength no longer determined the outcome of power struggles. This produced a “fragile state of political egalitarianism achieved by cooperation among creatures who are innately predisposed to hierarchical arrangements.”⁵²

The Scientific Evidence

Evidentiary support for Liberty-focused morality comes from ethnographic writing on nomadic hunter-gathers and archaeological evidence, both suggesting a persistence of egalitarianism in human history.⁵³ Bands of foragers need no hierarchy or chief to maintain order, as “the norms of the group actively encourage sharing resources. [...] Our ancestors lived for hundreds of thousands of years in egalitarian bands of mobile hunter-gatherers,”⁵⁴ and have all likely gone through a similar process of self-domestication, tempering the violence more readily enacted by chimpanzees and other social animals by removing bullies from the gene pool. Hierarchy returned when humans took up agriculture and domesticated animals, became sedentary, and created private property, putting an end to group-wide equality. Other ethnographic accounts suggest humans have sometimes abandoned the hierarchies and order of sedentary life to return to nomadic egalitarianism, even giving up writing in the process.⁵⁵

Past and Present Examples

The original trigger of this foundation is in response to would-be dominators, who evoke the emotion of *reactance*, “the feeling you get when an authority tells you you can’t do something and you feel yourself wanting to do it even more strongly.”⁵⁶ This motivates us “to unite as equals with other oppressed individuals to resist, restrain, and in extreme cases kill the oppressor. Individuals who failed to detect signs [of tyranny] and respond to them [...] faced the prospect of reduced access to food, mates, and all the other things that make individuals (and their genes) successful in the Darwinian sense.”⁵⁷ The current domain of Liberty often centers individualism and independence; it can relate to the rebelliousness of teenagers finding their sense of identity, or social justice advocacy for underdogs, victims, and the proletariat. It also relate to resistance and outrage against high taxes, oppressive regulations, and other sovereignty-reducing restraints of the nanny state. This morality reflects the

ambitions of revolutionaries and freedom fighters. The American Revolution motto “Don’t Tread on Me,” now beloved by Libertarians, exemplifies this moral foundation.

While rare in modern nation-states, the call for the death of tyrants can still mobilize many into collective action. French revolutionaries “had to call for *fraternité* and *égalité* if they were going to entice commoners to join them in their regicidal quest for *liberté*.”⁵⁸ The ideals of Liberty are “uncannily similar to Marx’s dream of the ‘dictatorship of the proletariat.’”⁵⁹ At these extremes, these revolutionary overturning of the structures of society can lead to chaos and anarchy that produces a power vacuum for even worse oppressors can arise, like Robespierre and Stalin.

Sanctity and Degradation

The morality of Sanctity concerns feelings of reverence and humility towards that which is set above as sacred, profound, and holy, or else pure, innocent, and natural. Abstention from indulging in carnal desires and impulses is necessary to avoid pollution, corruption, and Degradation, which evoke feelings of disgust, repugnance, and revulsion. While such transgressions and taboos may be arbitrary, they motivate us away from depravity and disease and towards temperance and cleanliness, thereby maintaining our physical and spiritual integrity as civilized, elevated beings.

The Evolutionary Story

“Hominid history includes several turns that exposed our ancestors to greater risks from pathogens and parasites.”⁶⁰ We left the trees behind and began living on the ground in larger and denser groups, increasing our “risk of infection from each other, and from each others’ waste products.”⁶¹ By “shifting to a more omnivorous diet, including more meat, some of which was scavenged,”⁶² we gained nutritional flexibility that we had to balance against the risk of new foods containing toxins, microbes, or parasites. “Individuals who had a properly calibrated sense of disgust were able to consume more calories than their overly disgusting cousins while consuming fewer dangerous microbes than their insufficiently disgusting cousins.”⁶³ It was “adaptive to attend to the contact history of the people and potential foods in one’s immediate environment, sometimes shunning or avoiding them.”⁶⁴

“Once humans beings developed the emotion of disgust and its cognitive component of contagion sensitivity, they began to apply the emotion to other people and groups for social and symbolic reasons.”⁶⁵ Maintaining health was redefined as remaining pure and devoted to the sacred, as

humans came to mark off their group's cultural boundaries as clean spaces⁶⁶ and suppressed humanity's selfish and impulsive animal nature by viewing it as lower and depraved. Religious objects and spaces were set apart as worthy of ultimate protection from the profane and mundane, investing them with a shared irrational and extreme value, hiding "their arbitrariness in a cloak of seeming necessity,"⁶⁷ inclining individuals to participate in the construction of social unity. Authority prevents the destruction of earthly order, but Sanctity prevents spiritual contamination and annihilation of the sacred order. Authority generates a vertical social space of leaders over followers, while Sanctity defines the high, good, and pure over the low, bad, and dirty. Likewise, "moral disgust is felt when people judge others to have moved downward on that vertical dimension."⁶⁸

The Scientific Evidence

This story of Sanctity's evolutionary origins correspond to many⁶⁹ theories⁷⁰ positing disgust as the foundation of the sacred. Disgust is considered the basis of our 'behavioral immune system,'⁷¹ and "the 'civilizing process,'⁷² by which societies develop rules and practices of self-restraint – a 'second nature' - that distinguish them from primitive societies and animals."⁷³ Religious laws often mix nutritional and symbolic hygiene, such as Leviticus prohibiting the consumption of bottom-feeders and the mixing fabrics. "Cooties games tend to emerge around the age of 7 or 8⁷⁴, which is the age at which disgust sensitivity becomes pronounced."⁷⁵ Studies show "immorality makes us feel physically dirty, and cleansing ourselves can sometimes make us more concerned about guarding our moral purity."⁷⁷⁷⁸

Past and Current Examples

The original domain of Sanctity are the "smells, sights, or other sensory patterns that predict the presence of dangerous pathogens"⁷⁹ such as excrement, scavengers, or visible lesions and sores. It leads to "attending to each other's physical states, and altering interactions and contacts accordingly,"⁸⁰ producing "purity and pollution rules that so often regulate biological processes such as menstruation, birth, and defecation,"⁸¹ often now thought of as merely being civilized and minding your manners. Its current domain may still believe 'cleanliness is next to godliness:' human bodies are "temporary vessels within which a divine soul have been implanted,"⁸² we are not just animals. Therefore, "the body as a temple, housing a soul within, rather than a machine to be optimized, or as a playground to be used as fun."⁸³ States of purity and innocence like sexual virginity and childhood wonder are often treasured, as they cannot be unsullied. Sanctity is also evoked by organic and wholesome foods, New

Age treatments that promise to cleanse you of toxins, or the environmental movement's opposition to the "degradation of nature, of humanity's original nature, before it was corrupted by industrial capitalism."⁸⁴

This foundation may be viewed as pleasure-fearing prudishness that is oppressive in its devotion to abstention and celibacy. It is also "associated with homophobia and other disgust-based restrictions on the rights of women and some minority or immigrant groups."⁸⁵⁸⁶ The term 'ethnic cleansing' is telling.

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