

Forward, for “Connections Between Ethics and Moral Psychology. Studies Around the Work of Jonathan Haidt”

Jonathan Haidt

Moral psychology is a large part of the operating system of every human group. Perhaps there is a species somewhere in the galaxy that runs all interactions on the basis of one or more normative principles, or even on the principle of long-run self interest, but we are not that species. Therefore, for anyone who wants to understand, evaluate, or improve the state of any group or society, an understanding of moral psychology is helpful. I would even go so far as to say that you can only derive an “ought” from an “is.” That is, you can’t make any normative statements until you have a reasonably accurate descriptive account of what the species in question is, and how it is constituted. My entire career has been an effort to give such a descriptive account. Along the way I’ve had many conversations with philosophers, some of which were like two people yelling to each other across a river, when there was no bridge available to bring them together.

I began my graduate studies at the University of Pennsylvania in September, 1987. Lawrence Kohlberg had committed suicide in January of that year. His ghost, his work, and his towering intellect continued to guide the field for the next decade or more. Moral psychology had been operationalized and brought into the lab as the study of moral reasoning. Not moral reasoning broadly construed; moral reasoning about the things that political progressives value most: harm, rights, and justice.

In my second year of grad school I took a course on cultural psychology, from Alan Fiske. It was like taking a trip around the world when you’d spent all of your previous life in one small town. From then on, I was committed to expanding the moral domain and studying morality as people experienced it, across societies, ages, eras, and eventually political orientations. I read widely, traveled widely, and tried to understand esoteric and radical moralities, including those of religious fundamentalists and political terrorists. I am forever grateful to Fiske, and to his dissertation advisor, Richard Shweder, who became my post-doctoral supervisor at the University of Chicago (1992-1994).

By the time I got my first academic job at the University of Virginia (1995), I was already wrestling with the intellectual challenge that has obsessed me since then: how exactly is it that morality is so variable around the world yet at the same time composed of elements that are



so obviously similar? The answer I eventually came up with — Moral Foundations Theory—is the topic of my 2012 book *The Righteous Mind*. But the first big step toward that answer was the Social Intuitionist Model, which I developed in the late 1990s and first presented in *The Emotional Dog and its Rational Tail*, published 20 years ago. (Actually, the essay was published in September 2001, about a week before the 9/11 terrorist attack, so nobody really noticed it or talked about it until 2002. Therefore, if this edited volume is published in 2022, it can still serve to mark the 20th anniversary of the article).

Re-reading the essay for the first time in around 10 years, I am struck by the degree to which my thinking back in the late 1990s was informed by philosophers. I had studied philosophy as an undergraduate student at Yale from 1981 to 1985, and had written my senior essay (under John Fischer) on the question of free will, offering a psychological account of the kind of determinism that would be compatible with a defensible belief in free will. I framed The Emotional Dog essay as a contest between rationalist approaches in psychology and philosophy versus intuitionist approaches. It was philosophers such as Plato and Kant on one side, and Hume and Gibbard on the other, who gave me two contrasting models of social reality paired with a kind of creature who tries to know reality. I came down on the side of Hume and Gibbard, and I tried to use intuitionism to build a bridge that would allow philosophers and psychologists to come together more easily.

I am so honored that The Emotional Dog has attracted the interest of so many philosophers in the Spanish Speaking world, and I am pleased that so many scholars have found the bridge worth trying out. The set of topics covered in this special issue could never have appeared in an edited volume of philosophical essays in 2001. There now seems to be a consensus that facts about human nature, neuroscience, social psychology and sociology are all proper topics for moral philosophers to investigate. Normative ethics cannot be done floating through the air, rootless, like mathematics or formal logic. Emotions such as anger and empathy matter. If you’re going to make an “ought” statement, you’d better make some “is” statements first, to guide your reader to the aspects of human nature that you’ll be drawing on.

It’s particularly exciting that some of the scholars in this special issue are finding flaws in the bridge’s design, and are suggesting ways to make it stronger. A bridge between disciplines is made of conversations, not stones. It must be a living thing — like those old medieval European bridges where people set up shops and there was laughter and flirting and commerce in addition to bridge crossing.

May the conversation continue.

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