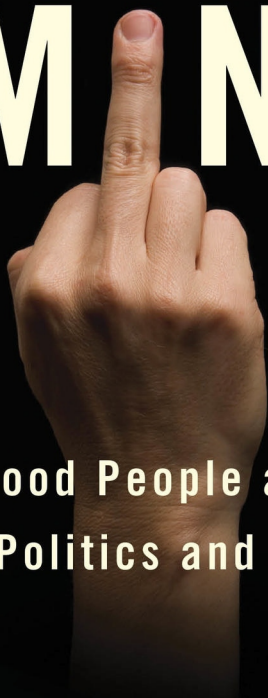


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THE
RIGHTEOUS
MIND



Why Good People are Divided
by Politics and Religion

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SIX

Taste Buds of the Righteous Mind

A few years ago I tried a restaurant called The True Taste. The interior was entirely white. Each table was set only with spoons—five small spoons at each place setting. I sat down at a table and looked at the menu. It was divided into sections labeled “Sugars,” “Honeys,” “Tree Saps,” and “Artificials.” I called the waiter over and asked him to explain. Did they not serve food?

The waiter, it turned out, was also the owner and sole employee of the restaurant. He told me that the restaurant was the first of its kind in the world: it was a tasting bar for sweeteners. I could sample sweeteners from thirty-two countries. He explained that he was a biologist who specialized in the sense of taste. He described to me the five kinds of taste receptor found in each taste bud on the tongue—sweet, sour, salty, bitter, and savory (also called umami). He said that in his research he had discovered that activation of the sweet receptor produced the strongest surge of dopamine in the brain, which indicated to him that humans are hard-wired to seek sweetness above the other four tastes. He therefore reasoned that it was most efficient, in terms of units of pleasure per calorie, to consume sweeteners, and he conceived the idea of opening a restaurant aimed entirely at stimulating this one taste receptor. I asked him how business was going. “Ter-

rible,” he said, “but at least I’m doing better than the chemist down the street who opened a salt-tasting bar.”

OK, this didn’t really happen to me, but it’s a metaphor for how I feel sometimes when I read books about moral philosophy and psychology. Morality is so rich and complex, so multifaceted and internally contradictory. Pluralists such as Shweder rise to the challenge, offering theories that can explain moral diversity within and across cultures. Yet many authors reduce morality to a single principle, usually some variant of welfare maximization (basically, help people, don’t hurt them).¹ Or sometimes it’s justice or related notions of fairness, rights, or respect for individuals and their autonomy.² There’s The Utilitarian Grill, serving only sweeteners (welfare), and The Deontological Diner, serving only salts (rights). Those are your options.

Neither Shweder nor I am saying that “anything goes,” or that all societies or all cuisines are equally good. But we believe that moral monism—the attempt to ground all of morality on a single principle—leads to societies that are unsatisfying to most people and at high risk of becoming inhumane because they ignore so many other moral principles.³

We humans all have the same five taste receptors, but we don’t all like the same foods. To understand where these differences come from, we can start with an evolutionary story about sugary fruits and fatty animals, which were good food for our common ancestors. But we’ll also have to examine the history of each culture, and we’ll have to look at the childhood eating habits of each individual. Just knowing that everyone has sweetness receptors can’t tell you why one person prefers Thai food to Mexican, or why hardly anyone stirs sugar into beer. It takes a lot of additional work to connect the universal taste receptors to the specific things that a particular person eats and drinks.

It’s the same for moral judgments. To understand why people are so divided by moral issues, we can start with an exploration of our common evolutionary heritage, but we’ll also have to examine

the history of each culture and the childhood socialization of each individual within that culture. Just knowing that we all care about harm can't tell you why one person prefers hunting to badminton or why hardly anyone devotes their waking hours primarily to serving the poor. It will take a lot of additional work for us to connect the universal moral taste receptors to the specific moral judgments that a particular person makes.

The Chinese sage Mencius made the analogy between morality and food 2,300 years ago when he wrote that "moral principles please our minds as beef and mutton and pork please our mouths."⁴ In this chapter and the next two, I'll develop the analogy that *the righteous mind is like a tongue with six taste receptors*. In this analogy, morality is like cuisine: it's a cultural construction, influenced by accidents of environment and history, but it's not so flexible that anything goes. You can't have a cuisine based on tree bark, nor can you have one based primarily on bitter tastes. Cuisines vary, but they all must please tongues equipped with the same five taste receptors.⁵ Moral matrices vary, but they all must please righteous minds equipped with the same six social receptors.

THE BIRTH OF MORAL SCIENCE

Nowadays, secular people often see the Enlightenment as a battle between two mortal enemies: on one side was science, with its principal weapon, reason, and on the other was religion, with its ancient shield of superstition. Reason defeated superstition, light replaced darkness. But when David Hume was alive, he was fighting a three-way battle. Enlightenment thinkers were united in rejecting divine revelation as the source of moral knowledge, but they were divided as to whether morality *transcended* human nature—that is, it emerged from the very nature of rationality and could therefore be deduced by reasoning, as Plato believed—or whether morality was a *part* of human nature, like language or taste, which had to be studied by observation.⁶ Given Hume's concerns about the limits of reasoning, he believed that philosophers who tried to reason their

way to moral truth without looking at human nature were no better than theologians who thought they could find moral truth revealed in sacred texts. Both were transcendentalists.⁷

Hume's work on morality was the quintessential Enlightenment project: an exploration of an area previously owned by religion, using the methods and attitudes of the new natural sciences. His first great work, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, had this subtitle: *Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects*. Hume believed that "moral science" had to begin with careful inquiry into what humans are really like. And when he examined human nature—in history, in political affairs, and among his fellow philosophers—he saw that "sentiment" (intuition) is the driving force of our moral lives, whereas reasoning is biased and impotent, fit primarily to be a servant of the passions.⁸ He also saw a diversity of virtues, and he rejected attempts by some of his contemporaries to reduce all of morality to a single virtue such as kindness, or to do away with virtues and replace them with a few moral laws.

Because he thought that morality was based in a variety of sentiments, which give us pleasure when we encounter virtue and displeasure when we encounter vice, Hume often relied upon sensory analogies, and particularly the 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. Moral Perceptions therefore, ought not to be class'd with the Operations of the Understanding, but with the Tastes or Sentiments.⁹

Moral judgment is a kind of perception, and moral science should begin with a careful study of the moral taste receptors. You can't possibly deduce the list of five taste receptors by pure reasoning, nor should you search for it in scripture. There's nothing transcendental about them. You've got to examine tongues.

Hume got it right. When he died in 1776, he and other sentimentalists¹⁰ had laid a superb foundation for “moral science,” one that has, in my view, been largely vindicated by modern research.¹¹ You would think, then, that in the decades after his death, the moral sciences progressed rapidly. But you would be wrong. In the decades after Hume’s death the rationalists claimed victory over religion and took the moral sciences off on a two-hundred-year tangent.

ATTACK OF THE SYSTEMIZERS

Autism has bedeviled psychiatric classifiers for decades because it is not a single, discrete disease. It’s usually described as a “spectrum” disorder because people can be more or less autistic, and it’s not clear where to draw the line between those who have a serious mental illness and those who are just not very good at reading other people. At the extreme end of the spectrum, autistic people are “mind-blind.”¹² They are missing the social-cognitive software that the rest of us use to guess the intentions and desires of other people.

According to one of the leading autism researchers, Simon Baron-Cohen, there are in fact two spectra, two dimensions on which we can place each person: empathizing and systemizing. Empathizing is “the drive to identify another person’s emotions and thoughts, and to respond to these with an appropriate emotion.”¹³ If you prefer fiction to nonfiction, or if you often enjoy conversations about people you don’t know, you are probably above average on empathizing. Systemizing is “the drive to analyse the variables in a system, to derive the underlying rules that govern the behaviour of the system.”¹⁴ If you are good at reading maps and instruction manuals, or if you enjoy figuring out how machines work, you are probably above average on systemizing.

If we cross these two traits, we get a two-dimensional space (see figure 6.1), and each person can be placed at a particular spot in that space. Baron-Cohen has shown that autism is what you get when genes and prenatal factors combine to produce a brain that is exceptionally low on empathizing and exceptionally high on systemizing.

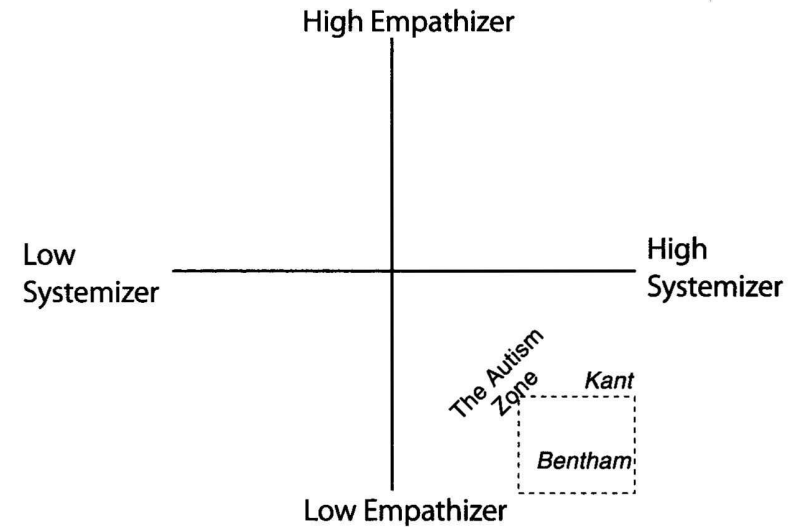


FIGURE 6.1. *Two dimensions of cognitive style.* People with autism are very high on systemizing and very low on empathizing. So were some important moral philosophers. (Adapted from Baron-Cohen 2009.)

Autism, including Asperger’s syndrome (a subtype of high-functioning autism), is better thought of as a region of personality-space—the lower right corner of the lower right quadrant—than as a discrete disease.¹⁵ The two leading ethical theories in Western philosophy were founded by men who were as high as could be on systemizing, and were rather low on empathizing.

BENTHAM AND THE UTILITARIAN GRILL

Jeremy Bentham was born in England in 1748. He went to Oxford at the age of twelve, trained as a lawyer, and devoted his career to reforming the mess of contradictory and often pointless rules and punishments that had accreted over many centuries to constitute English law. His most important work was titled *Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*. In it he proposed that a single principle should govern all reforms, all laws, and even all human actions: the *principle of utility*, which he defined as “the principle which approves

or disapproves of every action whatsoever, according to the tendency which it appears to have to augment or diminish the happiness of the party whose interest is in question."¹⁶ Each law should aim to maximize the utility of the community, which is defined as the simple arithmetic sum of the expected utilities of each member. Bentham then systematized the parameters needed to calculate utility, including the intensity, duration, and certainty of "hedons" (pleasures) and "dolors" (pains). He offered an algorithm, the "felicific calculus," for summing the hedons and dolors to reach a moral verdict on any action, for any person, in any country.

Bentham's philosophy showed an extraordinary degree of systemizing, and as Baron-Cohen says, systemizing is a strength. Problems arise, however, when systemizing occurs in the absence of empathizing. In an article titled "Asperger's Syndrome and the Eccentricity and Genius of Jeremy Bentham," Philip Lucas and Anne Sheeran collect accounts of Bentham's personal life and compare them to the diagnostic criteria for Asperger's syndrome.¹⁷ They find a close match on the main diagnostic criteria, including those involving low empathy and poor social relationships. Bentham had few friends as a child, and he left a string of angry ex-friends as an adult. He never married, referred to himself as a hermit, and seemed to care little about other people. One contemporary said of him: "He regards the people about him no more than the flies of a summer."¹⁸

A related criterion is an impaired imaginative capacity, particularly with respect to the inner lives of other people. In his philosophy as in his personal behavior, Bentham offended many of his contemporaries by his inability to perceive variety and subtlety in human motives. John Stuart Mill—a decidedly non-autistic utilitarian—came to despise Bentham. He wrote that Bentham's personality disqualified him as a philosopher because of the "incompleteness" of his mind:

In many of the most natural and strongest feelings of human nature he had no sympathy; from many of its graver experiences he was altogether cut off; and the faculty by which one mind understands a mind dif-

ferent from itself, and throws itself into the feelings of that other mind, was denied him by his deficiency of Imagination.¹⁹

Lucas and Sheeran conclude that had Bentham been alive today, "it is likely he would have received the diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome."²⁰

KANT AND THE DEONTOLOGICAL DINER

Immanuel Kant was born in Prussia in 1724. He was well acquainted with Hume's work and was favorably disposed toward sentimentalist theories early in his career, particularly when he wrote about aesthetics and the sublime. But although he granted that sentiments such as sympathy are crucial for a description of why people *in fact* behave morally, he was disturbed by the subjectivity that such an account implied for ethics. If one person has different moral sentiments from another, does she have different moral obligations? And what if people in one culture have different sentiments from people in another?

Kant, like Plato, wanted to discover the timeless, changeless form of the Good. He believed that morality had to be the same for all rational creatures, regardless of their cultural or individual proclivities. To discover this timeless form, it simply would not do to use observational methods—to look around the world and see what virtues people happened to pursue. Rather, he said that moral law could only be established by the process of a priori (prior to experience) philosophizing. It had to consist of principles that are inherent in and revealed through the operation of reason.²¹ And Kant found such a principle: noncontradiction. Rather than offering a concrete rule with some specific content, such as "help the poor" or "honor your parents," Kant provided an abstract rule from which (he claimed) all other valid moral rules could be derived. He called it the categorical (or unconditional) imperative: "Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law."²²

Bentham told us to use arithmetic to figure out the right course of action, but Kant told us to use logic. Both men accomplished miracles of systemization, boiling all of morality down to a single sentence, a single formula. Did Kant also have Asperger's syndrome?

Like Bentham, Kant was a loner who never married and whose inner life seems cold. He was famous for his love of routine (he set out for his afternoon walk at precisely three-thirty every day, regardless of the weather), and some experts have speculated that he too had Asperger's syndrome.²³ After reading accounts of Kant's personal life, however, I think the case is not as clear as it is for Bentham. Kant was widely liked, and he did seem to enjoy company, although some of his socializing had a calculated feel to it (he valued laughter and companionship because they were good for his health).²⁴ The safest thing to do is to take advantage of Baron-Cohen's two dimensions and say that Kant was one of the most extraordinary systemizers in human history while being rather low on empathizing, without joining Bentham at the bottom right corner of figure 6.1.

GETTING BACK ON TRACK

I do not want to suggest that utilitarianism and Kantian deontology are incorrect as moral theories just because they were founded by men who may have had Asperger's syndrome. That would be an *ad hominem* argument, a logical error, and a mean thing to say. Besides, both utilitarianism and Kantian deontology have been enormously generative in philosophy and public policy.

But in psychology our goal is descriptive. 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, and observation is usually keener when informed by empathy.²⁵ However, philosophy began retreating from observation and empathy in the nineteenth century, placing ever more emphasis on reasoning and systematic thought. As Western societies became more educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic, the minds of its intellectuals changed. They became more analytic and less holistic.²⁶

Utilitarianism and deontology became far more appealing to ethicists than Hume's messy, pluralist, sentimentalist approach.

This trend explains why I found moral psychology so dull when I first studied it in graduate school. Kohlberg had embraced Kant's rationalism. He created a theory in which moral development had one and only one end point: a full understanding of justice. This whole approach felt wrong to me. It was oversystemized and underempathized. It was The True Taste restaurant, serving up a one-receptor morality.²⁷

BROADENING THE PALATE

So what else is there beyond harm and fairness? Shweder's three ethics offered a useful starting point, but like most cultural anthropologists Shweder was wary of evolutionary explanations of human behavior. The prevailing view among anthropologists had long been that evolution got our species to the point of becoming bipedal, tool-using, large-brained creatures, but once we developed the capacity for culture, biological evolution stopped, or at least became irrelevant. Culture is so powerful that it can cause humans to behave in ways that override whatever ancient instincts we share with other primates.

I was convinced that the prevailing view in anthropology was wrong, and that it would never be possible to understand morality without evolution. But Shweder had taught me to be careful about evolutionary explanations, which are sometimes 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). Could I formulate an evolutionary account of moral intuition that was not reductionist, and that was cautious in its claims about the "purpose" or "function" of evolved psychological mechanisms? I couldn't just point to features of morality that seemed universal—such as compassion and reciprocity—and assert that they were innate merely because they were found everywhere. I had to have a careful evolutionary story for each one,

and I had to be able to say how these innate intuitions interacted with cultural evolution to produce the variety of moral matrices that now cover the Earth.

I began by analyzing lists of virtues from around the world. Virtues are social constructions. The virtues taught to children in a warrior culture are different from those taught in a farming culture or a modern industrialized culture. There's always some overlap among lists, but even then there are different shades of meaning. Buddha, Christ, and Muhammad all talked about compassion, but in rather different ways.²⁸ Nonetheless, when you see that some version of kindness, fairness, and loyalty is valued in most cultures, you start wondering if there might be some low-level pan-human social receptors (analogous to taste receptors) that make it particularly easy for people to notice some kinds of social events rather than others.

To put it in terms of the taste analogy: Most cultures have one or more sweet beverages that are widely consumed—usually derived from a local fruit, or, in industrialized nations, just from sugar and a few flavorings. It would be silly to posit the existence of separate receptors for mango juice, apple juice, Coca-Cola, and Fanta. There's one main receptor at work here—the sweetness receptor—and each culture has invented various ways to trigger it.²⁹ If an anthropologist tells us that an Eskimo tribe has no such beverage, it would not mean that they lack the sweetness receptor; it would just show that Eskimo cuisine makes little use of it, for the obvious reason that Eskimos, until recently, had little access to fruit. And when primatologists tell us that chimpanzees and bonobos love fruit and will work hard in a laboratory task to obtain a sip of Coca-Cola, the case for an innate sweet receptor becomes even stronger.

My goal was to find links between virtues and well-established evolutionary theories. I didn't want to make the classic mistake of amateur evolutionary theorists, which is to pick a trait and then ask: "Can I think of a story about how this trait might once have been adaptive?" The answer to that question is almost always yes because reasoning can take you wherever you want to go. Anyone with access to an armchair can sit down and generate what Rudyard Kipling called "just-so stories"—fantastical accounts of how the camel got

a hump and the elephant got a trunk. My goal, in contrast, was to identify the most obvious links between two fields I deeply respected: anthropology and evolutionary psychology.

MORAL FOUNDATIONS THEORY

I teamed up with a friend from my years at the University of Chicago, Craig Joseph, who had also worked with Shweder. Craig's research examined virtue concepts among Muslims in Egypt and the United States.

We borrowed the idea of "modularity" from the cognitive anthropologists Dan Sperber and Lawrence Hirschfeld.³⁰ Modules are like little switches in the brains of all animals. 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. For example, many animals react with fear the very first time they see a snake because their brains include neural circuits that function as snake detectors.³¹ As Sperber and Hirschfeld put it:

An evolved cognitive module—for instance a snake detector, a face-recognition device . . . is an adaptation to a range of phenomena that presented problems or opportunities in the ancestral environment of the species. Its function is to process a given type of stimuli or inputs—for instance snakes [or] human faces.

This was a perfect description of what universal moral "taste receptors" would look like. They would be adaptations to long-standing threats and opportunities in social life. They would draw people's attention to certain kinds of events (such as cruelty or disrespect), and trigger instant intuitive reactions, perhaps even specific emotions (such as sympathy or anger).

This approach was just what we needed to account for cultural learning and variation. Sperber and Hirschfeld distinguished between

the *original* triggers of a module and its *current* triggers.³² The original triggers are the set of objects for which the module was designed³³ (that is, the set of all snakes is the original trigger for a snake-detector module). The current triggers are all the things in the world that happen to trigger it (including real snakes, as well as toy snakes, curved sticks, and thick ropes, any of which might give you a scare if you see them in the grass). Modules make mistakes, and many animals have evolved tricks to exploit the mistakes of other animals. For example, the hover fly has evolved yellow and black stripes, making it look like a wasp, which triggers the wasp-avoidance module in some birds that would otherwise enjoy eating hover flies.

Cultural variation in morality can be explained in part by noting that cultures can shrink or expand the current triggers of any module. For example, in the past fifty years people in many Western societies have come to feel compassion in response to many more kinds of animal suffering, and they've come to feel disgust in response to many fewer kinds of sexual activity. The current triggers can change in a single generation, even though it would take many generations for genetic evolution to alter the design of the module and its original triggers.

Furthermore, within any given culture, many moral controversies turn out to involve competing ways to link a behavior to a moral module. Should parents and teachers be allowed to spank children for disobedience? On the left side of the political spectrum, spanking typically triggers judgments of cruelty and oppression. On the right, it is sometimes linked to judgments about proper enforcement of rules, particularly rules about respect for parents and teachers. 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 matrices on the same small set of foundations.

Craig and I tried to identify the best candidates for being the universal cognitive modules upon which cultures construct moral matrices. We therefore called our approach Moral Foundations Theory.³⁴ We created it by identifying the adaptive challenges of social life that evolutionary psychologists frequently wrote about and then connecting those challenges to virtues that are found in some form in many cultures.³⁵

	Care/ harm	Fairness/ cheating	Loyalty/ betrayal	Authority/ subversion	Sanctity/ degradation
Adaptive challenge	Protect and care for children	Reap benefits of two-way partnerships	Form cohesive coalitions	Forge beneficial relationships within hierarchies	Avoid contaminants
Original triggers	Suffering, distress, or neediness expressed by one's child	Cheating, cooperation, deception	Threat or challenge to group	Signs of dominance and submission	Waste products, diseased people
Current triggers	Baby seals, cute cartoon characters	Marital fidelity, broken vending machines	Sports teams, nations	Bosses, respected professionals	Taboo ideas (communism, racism)
Characteristic emotions	Compassion	Anger, gratitude, guilt	Group pride, rage at traitors	Respect, fear	Disgust
Relevant virtues	Caring, kindness	Fairness, justice, trustworthiness	Loyalty, patriotism, self-sacrifice	Obedience, deference	Temperance, chastity, piety, cleanliness

FIGURE 6.2. *The five foundations of morality (first draft).*

Five adaptive challenges stood out most clearly: caring for vulnerable children, forming partnerships with non-kin to reap the benefits of reciprocity, forming coalitions to compete with other coalitions, negotiating status hierarchies, and keeping oneself and one's kin free from parasites and pathogens, which spread quickly when people live in close proximity to each other. (I'll present the sixth foundation—Liberty/oppression—in chapter 8.)

In figure 6.2 I have drawn a column for each of the five foundations we initially proposed.³⁶ The first row gives the adaptive challenges. If our ancestors faced these challenges for hundreds of thousands of years, then natural selection would favor those whose cognitive modules helped them to get things right—rapidly and intuitively—compared to those who had to rely upon their general intelligence (the rider) to solve recurrent problems. The second row gives the original triggers—that is, the sorts of social patterns that such a module should detect. (Note that the foundations are really *sets* of modules that work together to meet the adaptive challenge.)³⁷ The third row lists examples of the current triggers—the sorts of things that do in fact trigger the relevant modules (sometimes by mistake) for people in a modern Western society. The fourth row lists

some emotions that are part of the output of each foundation, at least when the foundation is activated very strongly. The fifth row lists some of the virtue words that we use to talk about people who trigger a particular moral “taste” in our minds.

I’ll talk about each foundation in more detail in the next chapter. For now, I just want to demonstrate the theory using the Care/harm foundation. Imagine that your four-year-old son is taken to the hospital to have his appendix removed. You are allowed to watch the procedure from behind a glass window. Your son is given a general anesthetic and you see him lying, unconscious, on the operating table. Next, you see the surgeon’s knife puncture his abdomen. Would you feel a wave of relief, knowing that he is finally getting an operation that will save his life? Or would you feel pain so strongly that you’d have to look away? If your “dolors” (pains) outweigh your “hedons” (pleasures), then your reaction is irrational, from a utilitarian point of view, but it makes perfect sense as the output of a module. We respond emotionally to signs of violence or suffering, particularly when a child is involved, particularly our own child. We respond even when we know consciously that it’s not really violence and he’s not really suffering. It’s like the Muller-Lyer illusion: we can’t help but see one line as longer, even when we know consciously that they are the same length.

As you watch the surgery, you notice two nurses assisting in the operation—one older, one younger. Both are fully attentive to the procedure, but the older nurse occasionally strokes your son’s head, as though trying to comfort him. The younger nurse is all business. Suppose, for the sake of argument, that there was conclusive proof that patients under deep anesthetic don’t hear or feel anything. If that were the case, then what should be your reaction to the two nurses? If you are a utilitarian, you should have no preference. The older nurse’s actions did nothing to reduce suffering or improve the surgical outcome. If you are a Kantian, you’d also give the older nurse no extra credit. She seems to have acted absentmindedly, or (even worse, for Kant) she acted on her feelings. She did not act out of commitment to a universalizable principle. But if you are a Humean, then it is perfectly proper for you to like and praise the older nurse. She has so

fully acquired the virtue of caring that she does it automatically and effortlessly, even when it has no effect. She is a virtuoso of caring, which is a fine and beautiful thing in a nurse. It tastes good.

IN SUM

The second principle of moral psychology is: *There’s more to morality than harm and fairness.* In this chapter I began to say exactly what more there is:

- Morality is like taste in many ways—an analogy made long ago by Hume and Mencius.
- Deontology and utilitarianism are “one-receptor” moralities that are likely to appeal most strongly to people who are high on systemizing and low on empathizing.
- Hume’s pluralist, sentimentalist, and naturalist approach to ethics is more promising than utilitarianism or deontology for modern moral psychology. As a first step in resuming Hume’s project, we should try to identify the taste receptors of the righteous mind.
- Modularity can help us think about innate receptors, and how they produce a variety of initial perceptions that get developed in culturally variable ways.
- Five good candidates for being taste receptors of the righteous mind are care, fairness, loyalty, authority, and sanctity.

In psychology, theories are cheap. Anyone can invent one. Progress happens when theories are tested, supported, and corrected by empirical evidence, especially when a theory proves to be useful—for example, if it helps people to understand why half of the people in their country seem to live in a different moral universe. That’s what happened next.

SEVEN

The Moral Foundations of Politics

Behind every act of altruism, heroism, and human decency you'll find either selfishness or stupidity. That, at least, is the view long held by many social scientists who accepted the idea that *Homo sapiens* is really *Homo economicus*.¹ "Economic man" is a simple creature who makes all of life's choices like a shopper in a supermarket with plenty of time to compare jars of applesauce. If that's your view of human nature, then it's easy to create mathematical models of behavior because there's really just one principle at work: self-interest. People do whatever gets them the most benefit for the lowest cost.

To see how wrong this view is, answer the ten questions in figure 7.1. *Homo economicus* would put a price on sticking a needle into his own arm, and a lower price—perhaps zero—on the other nine actions, none of which hurts him directly or costs him anything.

More important than the numbers you wrote are the comparisons between columns. *Homo economicus* would find the actions in column B no more aversive than those in column A. If you found any of the actions in column B worse than their counterparts in column A, then congratulations, you are a human being, not an economist's fantasy. You have concerns beyond narrow self-interest. You have a working set of moral foundations.

How much would someone have to pay you to perform each of these actions? Assume that you'd be paid secretly and that there would be no social, legal, or other harmful consequences to you afterward. Answer by writing a number from 0 to 4 after each action, where:

0 = \$0, I'd do it for free

1 = \$100

2 = \$10,000

3 = \$1,000,000

4 = I would not do this for any amount of money

Column A	Column B
1a. Stick a sterile hypodermic needle into your arm. ____	1b. Stick a sterile hypodermic needle into the arm of a child you don't know. ____
2a. Accept a plasma-screen television that a friend of yours wants to give you. You know that the friend got the TV a year ago when the company that made it sent it to your friend, by mistake and at no charge. ____	2b. Accept a plasma-screen television that a friend of yours wants to give you. You know that your friend bought the TV a year ago from a thief who had stolen it from a wealthy family. ____
3a. Say something critical about your nation (which you believe to be true) while calling in, anonymously, to a talk-radio show in your nation. ____	3b. Say something critical about your nation (which you believe to be true) while calling in, anonymously, to a talk-radio show in a foreign nation. ____
4a. Slap a male friend in the face (with his permission) as part of a comedy skit. ____	4b. Slap your father in the face (with his permission) as part of a comedy skit. ____
5a. Attend a short avant-garde play in which the actors act like fools for thirty minutes, including failing to solve simple problems and falling down repeatedly onstage. ____	5b. Attend a short avant-garde play in which the actors act like animals for 30 minutes, including crawling around naked and grunting like chimpanzees. ____
Total for Column A: ____	Total for Column B: ____

FIGURE 7.1. What's your price?

I wrote these five pairs of actions so that the B column would give you an intuitive flash from each foundation, like putting a grain of salt or sugar on your tongue. The five rows illustrate violations of Care (hurting a child), Fairness (profiting from someone else's undeserved loss), Loyalty (criticizing your nation to outsiders), Authority (disrespecting your father), and Sanctity (acting in a degrading or disgusting way).

In the rest of this chapter I'll describe these foundations and how they became part of human nature. I'll show that these foundations are used differently, and to different degrees, to support moral matrices on the political left and right.

A NOTE ON INNATENESS

It used to be risky for a scientist to assert that anything about human behavior was innate. To back up such claims, you had to show that the trait was hardwired, unchangeable by experience, and found in all cultures. With that definition, not much is innate, aside from a few infant reflexes such as that cute thing they do when you put one finger into their little hands. If you proposed that anything more complex than that was innate—particularly a sex difference—you'd be told that there was a tribe somewhere on Earth that didn't show the trait, so therefore it's not innate.

We've advanced a lot since the 1970s in our understanding of the brain, and now we know that 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."²

To replace wiring diagrams, Marcus suggests a better analogy: The brain is like a book, the first draft of which is written by the genes during fetal development. No chapters are complete at birth, and some are just rough outlines waiting to be filled in during childhood. But not a single chapter—be it on sexuality, language, food preferences, or morality—consists of blank pages on which a society

can inscribe any conceivable set of words. Marcus's analogy leads to the best definition of innateness I have ever seen:

Nature provides a first draft, which experience then revises. . . . "Built-in" does not mean unmalleable; it means "*organized in advance of experience*."³

The list of five moral foundations was my first attempt to specify how the righteous mind was "organized in advance of experience." But Moral Foundations Theory also tries to explain how that first draft gets revised during childhood to produce the diversity of moralities that we find across cultures—and across the political spectrum.

1. THE CARE/HARM FOUNDATION

Reptiles get a bad rap for being cold—not just cold-blooded but coldhearted. Some reptile mothers do hang around after their babies hatch, to provide some protection, but in many species they don't. So when the first mammals began suckling their young, they raised the cost of motherhood. No longer would females turn out dozens of babies and bet that a few would survive on their own.

Mammals make fewer bets and invest a lot more in each one, so mammals face the challenge of caring for and nurturing their children for a long time. Primate moms place even fewer bets and invest still more in each one. And human babies, whose brains are so enormous that a child must be pushed out through the birth canal a year before he or she can walk, are bets so huge that a woman can't even put her chips on the table by herself. She needs help in the last months of pregnancy, help to deliver the baby, and help to feed and care for the child for years after the birth. Given this big wager, there is an enormous adaptive challenge: to care for the vulnerable and expensive child, keep it safe, keep it alive, keep it from harm.

It is just not conceivable that the chapter on mothering in the book of human nature is entirely blank, leaving it for mothers to learn everything by cultural instruction or trial and error. Mothers who

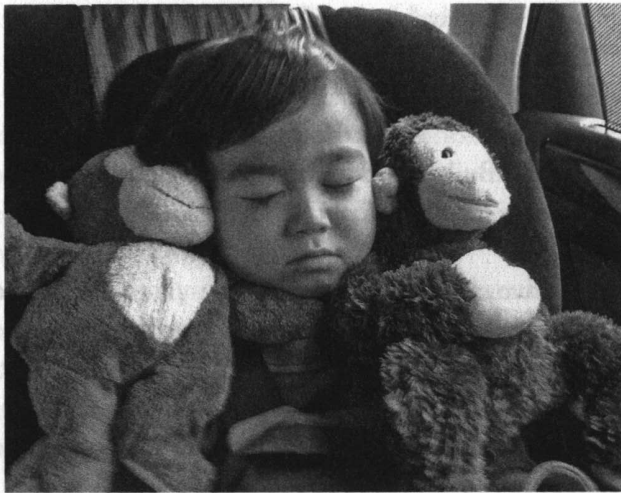


FIGURE 7.2. *Baby Gogo, Max, and Gogo.*

were innately sensitive to signs of suffering, distress, or neediness improved their odds, relative to their less sensitive sisters.

And it's not only mothers who need innate knowledge. Given the number of people who pool their resources to bet on each child, evolution favored women and (to a lesser extent) men who had an automatic reaction to signs of need or suffering, such as crying, from children in their midst (who, in ancient times, were likely to be kin).⁴ The suffering of your own children is the original trigger of one of the key modules of the Care foundation. (I'll often refer to foundations using only the first of their two names—Care rather than Care/harm.) This module works with other related modules⁵ to meet the adaptive challenge of protecting and caring for children.

This is not a just-so story. It is my retelling of the beginning of attachment theory, a well-supported theory that 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.⁶

The set of current triggers for any module is often much larger than the set of original triggers. The photo in figure 7.2 illustrates this expansion in four ways. First, you might find it cute. If you do, it's because your mind is automatically responsive to certain proportions

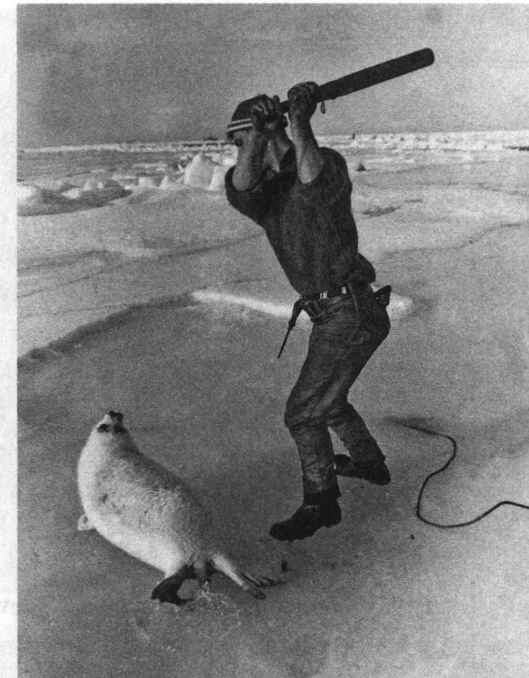


FIGURE 7.3. *A current trigger for the Care/harm foundation.*

and patterns that distinguish human children from adults. Cuteness primes us to care, nurture, protect, and interact.⁷ It gets the elephant leaning. Second, although this is not your child, you might still have an instant emotional response because the Care foundation can be triggered by any child. Third, you might find my son's companions (Gogo and Baby Gogo) cute, even though they are not real children, because they were designed by a toy company to trigger your Care foundation. Fourth, Max loves Gogo; he screams when I accidentally sit on Gogo, and he often says, "I am Gogo's mommy," because his attachment system and Care foundation are developing normally.

If your buttons can get pushed by a photo of a child sleeping with two stuffed monkeys, just imagine how you'd feel if you saw a child or a cute animal facing the threat of violence, as in figure 7.3.

It makes no evolutionary sense for you to care about what happens to my son Max, or a hungry child in a faraway country, or a baby seal. But Darwin doesn't have to explain why you shed any *particular*

tear. He just has to explain why you have tear ducts in the first place, and why those ducts can sometimes be activated by suffering that is not your own.⁸ Darwin must explain the original triggers of each module. The current triggers can change rapidly. We care about violence toward many more classes of victims today than our grandparents did in their time.⁹

Political parties and interest groups strive to make their concerns become current triggers of your moral modules. To get your vote, your money, or your time, they must activate at least one of your moral foundations.¹⁰ For example, figure 7.4 shows two cars I photographed in Charlottesville. What can you guess about the drivers' politics?

Bumper stickers are often tribal badges; they advertise the teams we support, including sports teams, universities, and rock bands. The driver of the "Save Darfur" car is announcing that he or she is on the liberal team. You know that intuitively, but I can give a more formal reason: The moral matrix of liberals, in America and elsewhere, rests more heavily on the Care foundation than do the matrices of conservatives, and this driver has selected three bumper stickers urging people to protect innocent victims.¹¹ The driver has no relationship to these victims. The driver is trying to get you to connect your thinking about Darfur and meat-eating to the intuitions generated by your Care foundation.

It was harder to find bumper stickers related to compassion for conservatives, but the "wounded warrior" car is an example. This driver is also trying to get you to care, but conservative caring is somewhat different—it is aimed not at animals or at people in other countries but at those who've sacrificed for the group.¹² It is not universalist; it is more local, and blended with loyalty.

2. THE FAIRNESS/CHEATING FOUNDATION

Suppose a coworker offers to take on your workload for five days so that you can add a second week to your Caribbean vacation. How would you feel? *Homo economicus* would feel unalloyed pleasure, as though he had just been given a free bag of groceries. But the rest

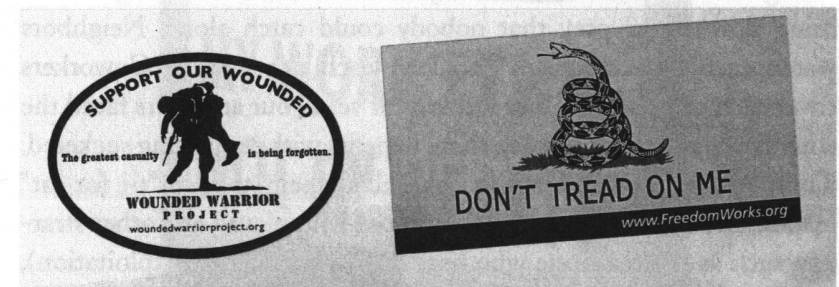
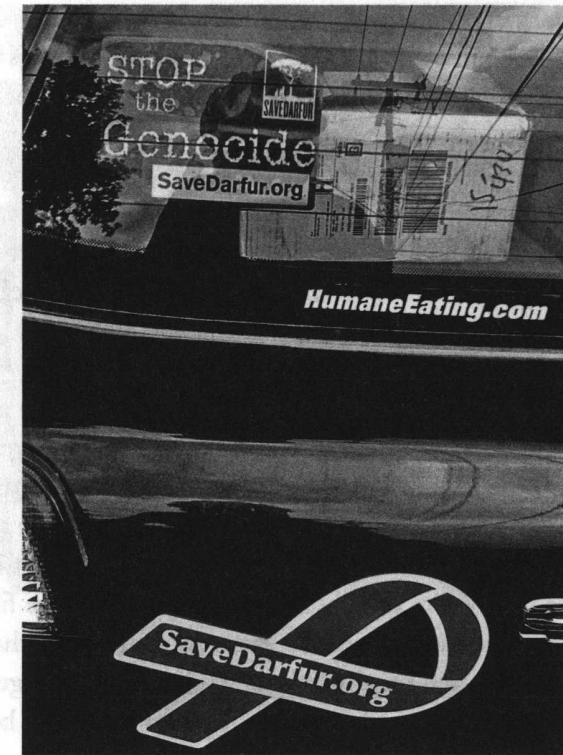


FIGURE 7.4. Liberal and conservative caring.

of us know that the bag isn't free. It's a big favor, and you can't repay your coworker by bringing back a bottle of rum. If you accept her offer, you're likely to do so while gushing forth expressions of gratitude, praise for her kindness, and a promise to do the same for her whenever she goes on vacation.

Evolutionary theorists often speak of genes as being “selfish,” meaning that they can only influence an animal to do things that will spread copies of that gene. But one of the most important insights into the origins of morality is that “selfish” genes can give rise to generous creatures, as long as those creatures are selective in their generosity. Altruism toward kin is not a puzzle at all. Altruism toward non-kin, on the other hand, has presented one of the longest-running puzzles in the history of evolutionary thinking.¹³ A big step toward its solution came in 1971 when Robert Trivers published his theory of reciprocal altruism.¹⁴

Trivers noted that evolution could create altruists in a species where individuals could remember their prior interactions with other individuals and then limit their current niceness to those who were likely to repay the favor. We humans are obviously just such a species. Trivers proposed that we evolved a set of moral emotions that make us play “tit for tat.” We’re usually nice to people when we first meet them. But after that we’re selective: we cooperate with those who have been nice to us, and we shun those who took advantage of us.

Human life is a series of opportunities for mutually beneficial cooperation. If we play our cards right, we can work with others to enlarge the pie that we ultimately share. Hunters work together to bring down large prey that nobody could catch alone. Neighbors watch each other’s houses and loan each other tools. Coworkers cover each other’s shifts. For millions of years, our ancestors faced the adaptive challenge of reaping these benefits without getting suckered. Those whose moral emotions compelled them to play “tit for tat” reaped more of these benefits than those who played any other strategy, such as “help anyone who needs it” (which invites exploitation), or “take but don’t give” (which can work just once with each person; pretty soon nobody’s willing to share pie with you).¹⁵ The original triggers of the Fairness modules are acts of cooperation or selfishness that people show toward 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.¹⁶

The current triggers of the Fairness modules include a great

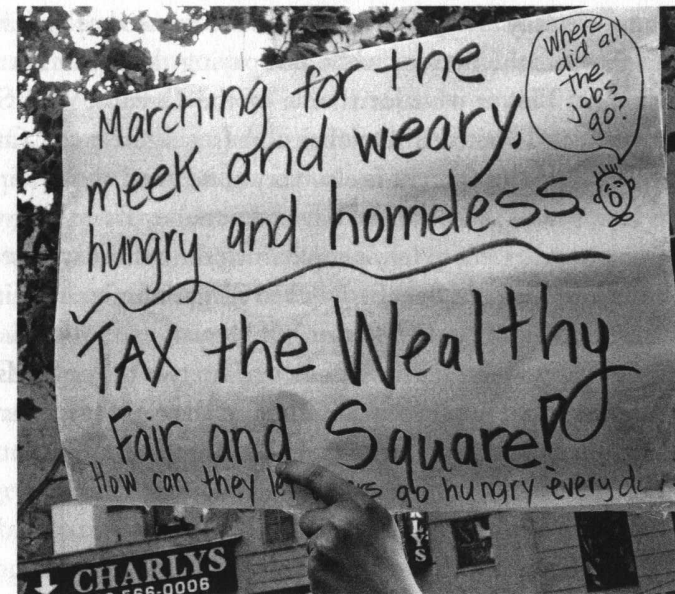


FIGURE 7.5. *Fairness left and right.* Top: Sign at Occupy Wall Street, Zuccotti Park, New York City. Bottom: Sign at Tea Party rally, Washington, DC (photo by Emily Ekins). Everyone believes that taxes should be “fair.”

many things that have gotten linked, culturally and politically, to the dynamics of reciprocity and cheating. On the left, concerns about equality and social justice are based in part on the Fairness

foundation—wealthy and powerful groups are accused of gaining by exploiting those at the bottom while not paying their “fair share” of the tax burden. This is a major theme of the Occupy Wall Street movement, which I visited in October 2011 (see figure 7.5).¹⁷ On the right, the Tea Party movement is also very concerned about fairness. They see Democrats as “socialists” who take money from hardworking Americans and give it to lazy people (including those who receive welfare or unemployment benefits) and to illegal immigrants (in the form of free health care and education).¹⁸

Everyone cares about fairness, but there are two major kinds. On the left, fairness often implies equality, but on the right it means proportionality—people should be rewarded in proportion to what they contribute, even if that guarantees unequal outcomes.

3. THE LOYALTY/BETRAYAL FOUNDATION

In the summer of 1954, Muzafar Sherif convinced twenty-two sets of working-class parents to let him take their twelve-year-old boys off their hands for three weeks. He brought the boys to a summer camp he had rented in Robbers Cave State Park, Oklahoma. There he conducted one of the most famous studies in social psychology, and one of the richest for understanding the foundations of morality. Sherif brought the boys to the camp in two groups of eleven, on two consecutive days, and housed them in different parts of the park. For the first five days, each group thought it was alone. Even still, they set about marking territory and creating tribal identities.

One group called themselves the “Rattlers,” and the other group took the name “Eagles.” The Rattlers discovered a good swimming hole upstream from the main camp and, after an initial swim, they made a few improvements to the site, such as laying a rock path down to the water. They then claimed the site as their own, as their special hideout, which they visited each day. The Rattlers were disturbed one day to discover paper cups at the site (which in fact they themselves had left behind); they were angry that “outsiders” had used their swimming hole.

A leader emerged in each group by consensus. When the boys were deciding what to do, they all suggested ideas. But when it came time to choose one of those ideas, the leader usually made the choice. Norms, songs, rituals, and distinctive identities began to form in each group (Rattlers are tough and never cry; Eagles never curse). Even though they were there to have fun, and even though they believed they were alone in the woods, each group ended up doing the sorts of things that would have been quite useful if they were about to face a rival group that claimed the same territory. Which they were.

On day 6 of the study, Sherif let the Rattlers get close enough to the baseball field to hear that other boys—the Eagles—were using it, even though the Rattlers had claimed it as their field. The Rattlers begged the camp counselors to let them challenge the Eagles to a baseball game. As he had planned to do from the start, Sherif then arranged a weeklong tournament of sports competitions and camping skills. From that point forward, Sherif says, “performance in all activities which might now become competitive (tent pitching, baseball, etc.) was entered into with more zest and also with more efficiency.”¹⁹ Tribal behavior increased dramatically. Both sides created flags and hung them in contested territory. They destroyed each other’s flags, raided and vandalized each other’s bunks, called each other nasty names, made weapons (socks filled with rocks), and would often have come to blows had the counselors not intervened.

We all recognize this portrait of boyhood. The male mind appears to be innately tribal—that is, structured in advance of experience so that boys and men *enjoy* doing the sorts of things that lead to group cohesion and success in conflicts between groups (including warfare).²⁰ The virtue of loyalty matters a great deal to both sexes, though the objects of loyalty tend to be teams and coalitions for boys, in contrast to two-person relationships for girls.²¹

Despite some claims by anthropologists in the 1970s, human beings are not the only species that engages in war or kills its own kind. It now appears that chimpanzees guard their territory, raid the territory of rivals, and, if they can pull it off, kill the males of the neighboring group and take their territory and their females.²² And it now appears that warfare has been a constant feature of human life

since long before agriculture and private property.²³ For millions of years, therefore, our ancestors faced the adaptive challenge of forming and maintaining coalitions that could fend off challenges and attacks from rival groups. We are the descendants of successful tribalists, not their more individualistic cousins.

Many psychological systems contribute to effective tribalism and success in inter-group competition. The Loyalty/betrayal foundation is just a part of our innate preparation for meeting the adaptive challenge of forming cohesive coalitions. The original trigger for the Loyalty foundation is anything that tells you who is a team player and who is a traitor, particularly when your team is fighting with other teams. But because we love tribalism so much, we seek out ways to form groups and teams that can compete just for the fun of competing. Much of the psychology of sports is about expanding the current triggers of the Loyalty foundation so that people can have the pleasures of binding themselves together to pursue harmless trophies. (A trophy is evidence of victory. The urge to take trophies—including body parts from slain foes—is widespread in warfare, occurring even during modern times.)²⁴

I can't be certain that the owner of the car in figure 7.6 is a man, but I'm fairly confident that the owner is a Republican based on his or her choice to decorate the car using only the Loyalty foundation. The *V* with crossed swords is the symbol of the UVA sports teams (the Cavaliers) and the owner chose to pay an extra \$20 every year to have a customized license plate honoring the American flag ("Old Glory") and American unity ("United We Stand").

The love of loyal teammates is matched by a corresponding hatred of traitors, who are usually considered to be far worse than enemies. The Koran, for example, is full of warnings about the duplicity of out-group members, particularly Jews, yet the Koran does not command Muslims to kill Jews. Far worse than a Jew is an apostate—a Muslim who has betrayed or simply abandoned the faith. The Koran commands Muslims to kill apostates, and Allah himself promises that he "shall certainly roast them at a Fire; as often as their skins are wholly burned, We shall give them in exchange other skins, that they may taste the chastisement. Surely God is All-mighty,



FIGURE 7.6. A car decorated with emblems of loyalty, and a sign modified to reject one kind of loyalty.

All-wise."²⁵ Similarly, in *The Inferno*, Dante reserves the innermost circle of hell—and the most excruciating suffering—for the crime of treachery. Far worse than lust, gluttony, violence, or even heresy is the betrayal of one's family, team, or nation.

Given such strong links to love and hate, is it any wonder that the Loyalty foundation plays an important role in politics? The left tends toward universalism and away from nationalism,²⁶ so it often has trouble connecting to voters who rely on the Loyalty foundation. Indeed, because of its strong reliance upon the Care foundation, American liberals are often hostile to American foreign policy. For example, during the last year of George W. Bush's presidency, somebody vandalized a stop sign near my home (figure 7.6). I can't be certain that the vandal rejects teams and groups of all sorts, but I can be confident that he or she is far to the left of the owner of "OGLORY." The two photographs show opposing statements about the need for Americans to be team players at a time when America was fighting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Liberal activists often make it easy for conservatives to connect liberalism to the Loyalty foundation—and not in a good way. The title of Ann Coulter's 2003 book says it all: *Treason: Liberal Treachery from the Cold War to the War on Terrorism*.²⁷

4. THE AUTHORITY/SUBVERSION FOUNDATION

Soon after I returned from India I was talking with a taxi driver who told me that he had just become a father. I asked him if he planned on staying in the United States or returning to his native Jordan. I'll never forget his response: "We will return to Jordan because I never want to hear my son say 'fuck you' to me." Now, most American children will never say such an awful thing to their parents, but some will, and many more will say it indirectly. Cultures vary enormously in the degree to which they demand that respect be shown to parents, teachers, and others in positions of authority.

The urge to respect hierarchical relationships is so deep that many languages encode it directly. In French, as in other romance languages, speakers are forced to choose whether they'll address someone using the respectful form (*vous*) or the familiar form (*tu*). Even English, which doesn't embed status into verb conjugations, embeds it elsewhere. Until recently, Americans addressed strangers and superiors using title plus last name (Mrs. Smith, Dr. Jones), whereas intimates and subordinates were called by first name. If you've ever felt a flash of distaste when a salesperson called you by first name without being invited to do so, or if you felt a pang of awkwardness when an older person you have long revered asked you to call him by first name, then you have experienced the activation of some of the modules that comprise the Authority/subversion foundation.

The obvious way to begin thinking about the evolution of the Authority foundation is to consider the pecking orders and dominance hierarchies of chickens, dogs, chimpanzees, and so many other species that live in groups. The displays made by low-ranking individuals are often similar across species because their function is always the same—to appear submissive, which means small and nonthreatening. The failure to detect signs of dominance and then to respond accordingly often results in a beating.

So far this doesn't sound like a promising origin story for a "moral" foundation; it sounds like the origin of oppression of the weak by the powerful. But authority should not be confused with

power.²⁸ Even among chimpanzees, where dominance hierarchies are indeed about raw power and the ability to inflict violence, the alpha male performs some socially beneficial functions, such as taking on the "control role."²⁹ He resolves some disputes and suppresses much of the violent conflict that erupts when there is no clear alpha male. As the primatologist Frans de Waal puts it: "Without agreement on rank and a certain respect for authority there can be no great sensitivity to social rules, as anyone who has tried to teach simple house rules to a cat will agree."³⁰

This control role is quite visible in human tribes and early civilizations. Many of the earliest legal texts begin by grounding the king's rule in divine choice, and then they dedicate the king's authority to providing order and justice. The very first sentence of the Code of Hammurabi (eighteenth century BCE) includes this clause: "Then Anu and Bel [two gods] called by name me, Hammurabi, the exalted prince, who feared God, to bring about the rule of righteousness in the land, to destroy the wicked and the evil-doers; so that the strong should not harm the weak."³¹

Human authority, then, is not just raw power backed by the threat of force. Human authorities take on responsibility for maintaining order and justice. Of course, authorities often exploit their subordinates for their own benefit while believing they are perfectly just. But if we want to understand how human civilizations burst forth and covered the Earth in just a few thousand years, we'll have to look closely at the role of authority in creating moral order.

When I began graduate school I subscribed to the common liberal belief that hierarchy = power = exploitation = evil. But when I began to work with Alan Fiske, I discovered that I was wrong. Fiske's theory of the four basic kinds of social relationships includes one called "Authority Ranking." Drawing on his own fieldwork in Africa, Fiske showed that people who relate to each other in this way have mutual expectations that are more like those of a parent and child than those of a dictator and fearful underlings:

In Authority Ranking, people have asymmetric positions in a linear hierarchy in which subordinates defer, respect,

and (perhaps) obey, while superiors take precedence and take pastoral responsibility for subordinates. Examples are military hierarchies . . . ancestor worship ([including] offerings of filial piety and expectations of protection and enforcement of norms), [and] monotheistic religious moralities . . . Authority Ranking relationships are based on perceptions of legitimate asymmetries, not coercive power; they are not inherently exploitative.³²

The Authority foundation, as I describe it, is borrowed directly from Fiske. It is more complex than the other foundations because its modules must look in two directions—up toward superiors and down toward subordinates. These modules work together to help individuals meet the adaptive challenge of forging beneficial relationships within hierarchies. We are the descendants of the individuals who were best able to play the game—to rise in status while cultivating the protection of superiors and the allegiance of subordinates.³³

The original triggers of some of these modules include patterns of appearance and behavior that indicate higher versus lower rank. Like chimpanzees, people track and remember who is above whom.³⁴ When people within a hierarchical order act in ways that negate or subvert that order, we feel it instantly, even if we ourselves have not been directly harmed. If authority is in part about protecting order and fending off chaos, then everyone has a stake in supporting the existing order and in holding people accountable for fulfilling the obligations of their station.³⁵

The current triggers of the Authority/subversion foundation, therefore, include anything that is construed as an act of obedience, disobedience, respect, disrespect, submission, or rebellion, with regard to authorities perceived to be legitimate. Current triggers also include acts that are seen to subvert the traditions, institutions, or values that are perceived to provide stability. As with the Loyalty foundation, it is much easier for the political right to build on this foundation than it is for the left, which often defines itself in part by its opposition to hierarchy, inequality, and power. It should not be difficult for you to guess the politics of the magazine advertised in figure 7.7. Conversely,

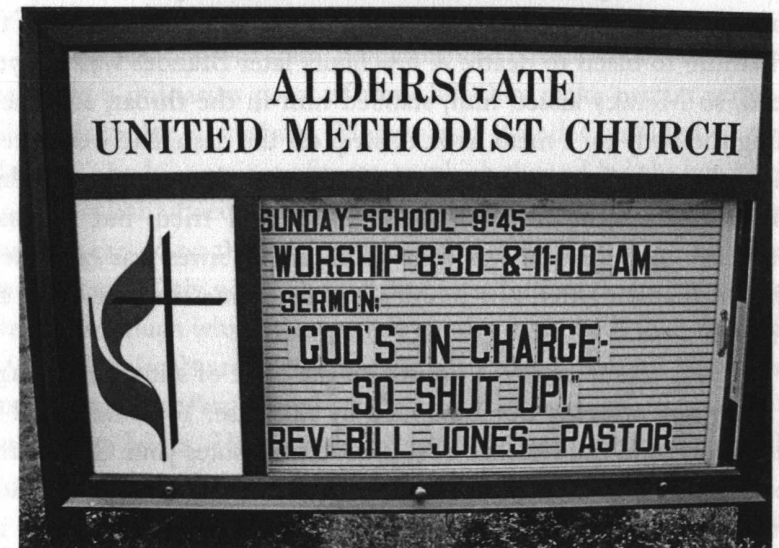
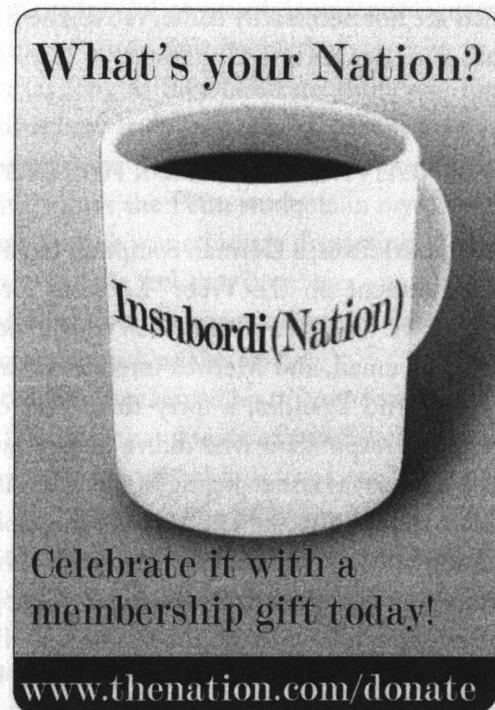


FIGURE 7.7. Two rather different valuations of the Authority/subversion foundation. Advertisement for the liberal magazine *The Nation* (top); church in Charlottesville, Virginia (bottom; photo by Sarah Estes Graham).

while Methodists are not necessarily conservative, the sign in front of their church tells you they ain't no Unitarians.

5. THE SANCTITY/DEGRADATION FOUNDATION

In early 2001, Armin Meiwes, a German computer technician, posted an unusual advertisement on the Web: "Looking for a well-built 21-to-30-year-old to be slaughtered and then consumed." Hundreds of men responded by email, and Meiwes interviewed a few of them at his farmhouse. Bernd Brandes, a forty-three-year-old computer engineer, was the first respondent who didn't change his mind when he realized that Meiwes was not engaging in mere fantasy. (Warning: Squeamish readers should skip the entire next paragraph.)

On the evening of March 9, the two men made a video to prove that Brandes fully consented to what was about to happen. Brandes then took some sleeping pills and alcohol, but he was still alert when Meiwes cut off Brandes's penis, after being unable to bite it off (as Brandes had requested). Meiwes then sautéed the penis in a frying pan with wine and garlic. Brandes took a bite of it, then went off to a bathtub to bleed to death. A few hours later Brandes was not yet dead, so Meiwes kissed him, stabbed him in the throat, and then hung the body on a meat hook to strip off the flesh. Meiwes stored the flesh in his freezer and ate it gradually over the next ten months. Meiwes was ultimately caught, arrested, and tried, but because Brandes's participation was fully voluntary, Meiwes was convicted only of manslaughter, not murder, the first time the case went to trial.³⁶

If your moral matrix is limited to the ethic of autonomy, you're at high risk of being dumbfounded by this case. You surely find it disturbing, and the violence of it probably activates your Care/harm foundation. But any attempt to condemn Meiwes or Brandes runs smack into John Stuart Mill's harm principle, which I introduced in chapter 5: "The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others." The next line of the original quote is: "His

own good, either physical or moral, is not sufficient warrant." From within the ethic of autonomy, people have a right to live their lives as they please (as long as they harm nobody), and they have a right to end their lives how and when they please (as long as they leave no dependents unsupported). Brandes chose an extraordinarily revolting means of death, but as the Penn students in my dissertation research often said, just because something is disgusting, that doesn't make it wrong. Yet most people feel that there *was* something terribly wrong here, and that it should be against the law for adults to engage in consensual activities such as this. Why?

Imagine that Meiwes served his prison sentence and then returned to his home. (Assume that a team of psychiatrists established that he posed no threat to anyone who did not explicitly ask to be eaten.) Imagine that his home was one block away from your home. Would you find his return unsettling? If Meiwes was then forced by social pressure to move out of your town, might you feel some relief? And what about the house where this atrocity happened? How much would someone have to pay you to live in it for a week? Might you feel that the stain would be expunged only if the house was burned to the ground?

These feelings—of stain, pollution, and purification—are irrational from a utilitarian point of view, but they make perfect sense in Shweder's ethic of divinity. Meiwes and Brandes colluded to treat Brandes's body as a piece of meat, to which they added the extra horror of a splash of sexuality. They behaved monstrously—as low as any humans can go on the vertical dimension of divinity that I discussed in chapter 5. Only worms and demons eat human flesh. But why do we care so much what other people choose to do with their bodies?

Most animals are born knowing what to eat. A koala bear's sensory systems are "structured in advance of experience" to guide it to eucalyptus leaves. Humans, however, must learn what to eat. Like rats and cockroaches, we're omnivores.

Being an omnivore has the enormous advantage of flexibility: You can wander into a new continent and be quite confident that you'll find something to eat. But it also has the disadvantage that new foods can be toxic, infected with microbes, or riddled with parasitic

worms. The “omnivore’s dilemma” (a term coined by Paul Rozin)³⁷ is that omnivores must seek out and explore new potential foods while remaining wary of them until they are proven safe.

Omnivores therefore go through life with two competing motives: neophilia (an attraction to new things) and neophobia (a fear of new things). People vary in terms of which motive is stronger, and this variation will come back to help us in later chapters: Liberals score higher on measures of neophilia (also known as “openness to experience”), not just for new foods but also for new people, music, and ideas. Conservatives are higher on neophobia; they prefer to stick with what’s tried and true, and they care a lot more about guarding borders, boundaries, and traditions.³⁸

The emotion of disgust evolved initially to optimize responses to the omnivore’s dilemma.³⁹ 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. But it’s not just food that posed a threat: when early hominids came down from the trees and began living in larger groups on the ground, they greatly increased their risk of infection from each other, and from each other’s waste products. The psychologist Mark Schaller has shown that disgust is part of what he calls the “behavioral immune system”—a set of cognitive modules that are triggered by signs of infection or disease in other people and that make you want to get away from those people.⁴⁰ It’s a lot more effective to prevent infection by washing your food, casting out lepers, or simply avoiding dirty people than it is to let the microbes into your body and then hope that your biological immune system can kill every last one of them.

The original adaptive challenge that drove the evolution of the Sanctity foundation, therefore, was the need to avoid pathogens, parasites, and other threats that spread by physical touch or proximity. The original triggers of the key modules that compose this foundation include smells, sights, or other sensory patterns that predict the presence of dangerous pathogens in objects or people. (Examples include human corpses, excrement, scavengers such as vultures, and people with visible lesions or sores.)

The current triggers of the Sanctity foundation, however, are

extraordinarily variable and expandable across cultures and eras. A common and direct expansion is to out-group members. Cultures differ in their attitudes toward immigrants, and there is some evidence that liberal and welcoming attitudes are more common in times and places where disease risks are lower.⁴¹ Plagues, epidemics, and new diseases are usually brought in by foreigners—as are many new ideas, goods, and technologies—so societies face an analogue of the omnivore’s dilemma, balancing xenophobia and xenophilia.

As with the Authority foundation, Sanctity seems to be off to a poor start as a foundation of morality. Isn’t it just a primitive response to pathogens? And doesn’t this response lead to prejudice and discrimination? Now that we have antibiotics, we should reject this foundation entirely, right?

Not so fast. The Sanctity foundation makes it easy for us to regard some things as “untouchable,” both in a bad way (because something is so dirty or polluted we want to stay away) and in a good way (because something is so hallowed, so sacred, that we want to protect it from desecration). If we had no sense of disgust, I believe we would also have no sense of the sacred. And if you think, as I do, that one of the greatest unsolved mysteries is how people ever came together to form large cooperative societies, then you might take a special interest in the psychology of sacredness. Why do people so readily treat objects (flags, crosses), places (Mecca, a battlefield related to the birth of your nation), people (saints, heroes), and principles (liberty, fraternity, equality) as though they were of infinite value? Whatever its origins, the psychology of sacredness helps bind individuals into moral communities.⁴² When someone in a moral community desecrates one of the sacred pillars supporting the community, the reaction is sure to be swift, emotional, collective, and punitive.

To return, finally, to Meiwes and Brandes: They caused no harm to anyone in a direct, material, or utilitarian way.⁴³ But they desecrated several of the bedrock moral principles of Western society, such as our shared beliefs that human life is supremely valuable, and that the human body is more than just a walking slab of meat. They trampled on these principles not out of necessity, and not in service to a higher goal, but out of carnal desire. If Mill’s harm principle prevents us from outlawing their actions, then Mill’s harm principle seems inadequate as

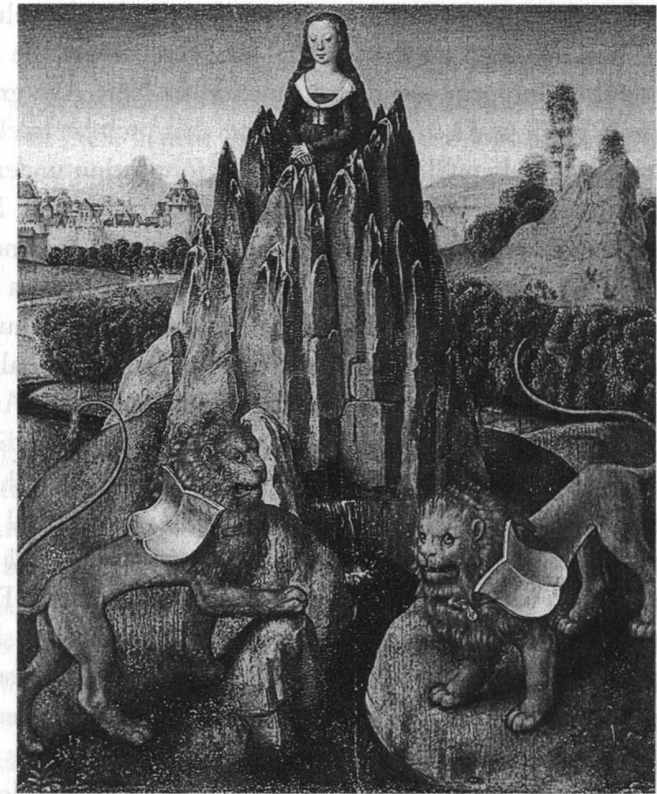
the basis for a moral community. Whether or not God exists, people feel that some things, actions, and people are noble, pure, and elevated; others are base, polluted, and degraded.

Does the Meiwes case tell us anything about politics? It's too revolting a case to use in research; I'm confident that liberals and conservatives would all condemn Meiwes (although I'm not so sure about libertarians).⁴⁴ But if we turn down the disgust a few notches, we see a vast difference between left and right over the use of concepts such as sanctity and purity. American conservatives are more likely to talk about "the sanctity of life" and "the sanctity of marriage." Conservatives—particularly religious conservatives—are more likely to view the body as a temple, housing a soul within, rather than as a machine to be optimized, or as a playground to be used for fun.

The two images in figure 7.8 show exactly the contrast that Shweder had described in his ethic of divinity. The image on top is from a fifteenth-century painting, *The Allegory of Chastity*.⁴⁵ It shows the Virgin Mary raised and protected by an amethyst rock formation. From beneath her flows a stream (symbolizing her purity) guarded by two lions. The painting portrays chastity as a virtue, a treasure to be guarded.

This idea is not just ancient history; it inspired a virginity pledge movement in the United States as recently as the 1990s. The group Silver Ring Thing asks its members to vow to remain celibate and pure until marriage. Those who make the vow are given a silver ring, to wear like a wedding ring, inscribed with the name of Bible verses such as "1 Thessalonians 4:3–4." Those verses state: "For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication; that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor."⁴⁶

On the left, however, the virtue of chastity is usually dismissed as outdated and sexist. Jeremy Bentham urged us to maximize our "hedons" (pleasures) and minimize our "dolors" (pains). If your morality focuses on individuals and their conscious experiences, then why on earth should anyone *not* use their body as a playground? Devout Christians are often lampooned by secular liberals as uptight, pleasure-fearing prudes.



**Your Body May Be A Temple,
But Mine's An Amusement Park**

FIGURE 7.8. Two different views of the Sanctity/degradation foundation. *The Allegory of Chastity*, by Hans Memling (1475), and a bumper sticker on a car in Charlottesville, Virginia. Another sticker on the car (supporting Democratic Senator Jim Webb) confirmed that the owner leaned left.

The Sanctity foundation is used most heavily by the religious right, but it is also used on the spiritual left. You can see the foundation's original impurity-avoidance function in New Age grocery stores, where you'll find a variety of products that promise to cleanse you of "toxins." And you'll find the Sanctity foundation underlying some of the moral passions of the environmental movement. Many environmentalists revile industrialism, capitalism, and automobiles not just for the physical pollution they create but also for a more symbolic kind of pollution—a degradation of nature, and of humanity's original nature, before it was corrupted by industrial capitalism.⁴⁷

The Sanctity foundation is crucial for understanding the American culture wars, particularly over biomedical issues. If you dismiss the Sanctity foundation entirely, then it's hard to understand the fuss over most of today's biomedical controversies. The only ethical question about abortion becomes: At what point can a fetus feel pain? Doctor-assisted suicide becomes an obviously good thing: People who are suffering should be allowed to end their lives, and should be given medical help to do it painlessly. Same for stem cell research: Why not take tissue from all those embryos living in suspended animation in fertility clinics? They can't feel pain, but their tissues could help researchers develop cures that would spare sentient people from pain.

The philosopher Leon Kass is among the foremost spokesmen for Shweder's ethic of divinity, and for the Sanctity foundation on which it is based. Writing in 1997, the year after Dolly the sheep became the first cloned mammal, Kass lamented the way that technology often erases moral boundaries and brings people ever closer to the dangerous belief that they can do anything they want to do. In an essay titled "The Wisdom of Repugnance," Kass argued that our feelings of disgust can sometimes provide us with a valuable warning that we are going too far, even when we are morally dumbfounded and can't justify those feelings by pointing to victims:

Repugnance, here as elsewhere, revolts against the excesses of human willfulness, warning us not to transgress what is unspeakably profound. Indeed, in this age

in which everything is held to be permissible so long as it is freely done, in which our given human nature no longer commands respect, in which our bodies are regarded as mere instruments of our autonomous rational wills, repugnance may be the only voice left that speaks up to defend the central core of our humanity. Shallow are the souls that have forgotten how to shudder.⁴⁸

IN SUM

I began this chapter by trying to trigger your intuitions about the five moral foundations that I introduced in chapter 6. I then defined innateness as "organized in advance of experience," like the first draft of a book that gets revised as individuals grow up within diverse cultures. This definition allowed me to propose that the moral foundations are innate. Particular rules and virtues vary across cultures, so you'll get fooled if you look for universality in the finished books. You won't find a single paragraph that exists in identical form in every human culture. But if you look for links between evolutionary theory and anthropological observations, you can take some educated guesses about what was in the universal first draft of human nature. I tried to make (and justify) five such guesses:

- The Care/harm foundation evolved in response to the adaptive challenge of caring for vulnerable children. It makes us sensitive to signs of suffering and need; it makes us despise cruelty and want to care for those who are suffering.
- The Fairness/cheating foundation evolved in response to the adaptive challenge of reaping the rewards of cooperation without getting exploited. It makes us sensitive to indications that another person is likely to be a good (or bad) partner for collaboration and reciprocal altruism. It makes us want to shun or punish cheaters.

- The Loyalty/betrayal foundation evolved in response to the adaptive challenge of forming and maintaining coalitions. It makes us sensitive to signs that another person is (or is not) a team player. It makes us trust and reward such people, and it makes us want to hurt, ostracize, or even kill those who betray us or our group.
- The Authority/subversion foundation evolved in response to the adaptive challenge of forging relationships that will benefit us within social hierarchies. It makes us sensitive to signs of rank or status, and to signs that other people are (or are not) behaving properly, given their position.
- The Sanctity/degradation foundation evolved initially in response to the adaptive challenge of the omnivore's dilemma, and then to the broader challenge of living in a world of pathogens and parasites. It includes the behavioral immune system, which can make us wary of a diverse array of symbolic objects and threats. It makes it possible for people to invest objects with irrational and extreme values—both positive and negative—which are important for binding groups together.

I showed how the two ends of the political spectrum rely upon each foundation in different ways, or to different degrees. It appears that the left relies primarily on the Care and Fairness foundations, whereas the right uses all five. If this is true, then is the morality of the left like the food served in The True Taste restaurant? Does left-wing morality activate just one or two taste receptors, whereas right-wing morality engages a broader palate, including loyalty, authority, and sanctity? And if so, does that give conservative politicians a broader variety of ways to connect with voters?