BOOK REVIEW

THE RIGHTEOUS MIND: WHY GOOD PEOPLE ARE DIVIDED BY POLITICS AND RELIGION

Jonathan Haidt; Published by: Pantheon, 2012
Reviewed by: Clifton F. Guthrie, Husson University

Jonathan Haidt, Professor of Social Psychology at the University of Virginia, is one of our most celebrated theorists in moral psychology, solidifying his position with this his third major book. In The Righteous Mind, he summarizes the evidence for a social intuitionist view of our moral impulses, rehearses how his theories have developed in the course of his research, and comments on how moral psychology can help untangle the political and religious debates that divide civil society. It is an ambitious and therefore sometimes unwieldy book. Its familiar tone and charming anecdotes about family life and exotic travel seems to aim to speak to the wider audience he is cultivating as a public intellectual. Yet is dense enough with endnotes and references (a combined 82 pages) that it also seems aimed to serve as a scholarly defense of his position.

Others have tried to summarize the findings of moral psychology and their implications for civic and political life (Marc Hauser’s Moral Minds, and George Lakoff’s Moral Politics), but Haidt has produced a more robustly tested, cross-culturally confirmed, and nuanced theory. Like these others, he is motivated by the hope that a fully fleshed out account of how human beings moralize will “drain some of the heat, anger, and divisiveness” (xii) from our culture wars by helping us understand the complimentary values of conservative, liberal, and libertarian moral intuitions and arguments. That being said, his main audience is those who are like himself Western, intellectual, non-religious, individualists who to his mind are particularly blind to the origins and value of conservative morality.

After a brief introduction outlining his purpose and plan, Haidt divides his book into three main parts, named so deliberately that the reader is unlikely to miss the book’s argument: “Intuitions Come First, Strategic Reasoning Second;” “There’s More to Morality than Harm and Fairness;” and “Morality Binds and Blinds.” A very brief conclusion
serves primarily as a summary of his main argument, again keeping the reader who is new to this material securely oriented.

In Part I, Haidt rehearses the mounting evidence for a social intuitionist view of moral thinking. This should be familiar territory to anyone who has read Malcolm Gladwell’s *Blink*, Daniel Kahneman’s *Thinking Fast, Thinking Slow*, or Dan Ariely’s *Predictably Irrational*. Haidt’s preferred metaphor of the relationship between unconscious intuitions and reason is the elephant and the rider. The elephant is the bundle of biases, heuristics, and emotions that make up the bulk of our day-to-day moral lives. The rider (reason) can to some extent train the elephant, but that rider is easily fooled into thinking that it is more in charge than it is. Most ethical thinking by the rider, he argues, is in fact, clever *post hoc* rationalization of a position already determined by our biases. Or, to use another of Haidt’s metaphors, reason acts like a press secretary justifying a position arrived at by intuition and emotion. Therefore, social intuitionism shows that Glaucon was right and Socrates wrong in the discussion of Plato’s famous “Ring of Gyges” story in the *Republic*. We are all more-or-less self-interested creeps who would get away with murder if we could. Therefore, the best hope for a moral society is transparency and mutual vigilance. The chief target here is any kind of rationalism, and he takes large swings at Kant, Mill, and Kohlberg. At times it is gratuitous: “Anyone who values truth should stop worshipping reason” (p. 89) or hyperbolic: “Nobody is ever going to invent an ethics class that makes people behave ethically after they step out of the classroom” (p. 90). It is at moments like these that the book seems simply popular.

By contrast, Part II, “There’s More to Morality than Harm and Fairness,” was likely most anticipated by those who have followed Haidt’s work. Here he describes a significant adjustment to the “Moral Foundations Theory” (MFT) he has been developing for the past decade. The term “Foundations” is misleading. What he means by them is something more like sensitivities, and indeed, he helpfully uses the metaphor of taste buds. Originally, MFT posited five foundations (Harm, Fairness, Loyalty, Authority, and Purity). As more data and comments came in from research subjects, two major adjustments were made: altering the fairness foundation toward detection of cheaters and adding a sixth foundation about freedom and oppression to reflect libertarian sensitivities. The six foundations are now (along with their oppositional qualities): Care/harm, Liberty/oppression, Fairness/cheating, Loyalty/betrayal, Authority/subversion, Sanctity/ degradation. Haidt argues that
these are functional modules of cognition, evolved as ways to suppress selfishness and tyranny, and promote group identity and pro-social action. He acknowledges that any evolutionary account of MFT depends upon the possibility of group selection and writes well in defense of that controversial view.

These six moral foundations or sensitivities function much like basic human emotions or the “Big-5” personality traits: they are universal to our species but expressed to different degrees in each individual. However, MFT argues not just that sensitivities differ between individuals, but that groups and whole cultures skew one way or another. Groups that cultural psychologists Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan have termed, “WEIRD” (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic), tend to be most sensitive to harm and draw their moral sensitivities primarily from the Care/harm foundation; libertarians draw mostly from the Liberty/oppression foundation; and social conservatives from all six. Conservative values of loyalty, authority, and sanctity, which all emphasize elements of collectivism, give conservative groups and cultures an “advantage” when it comes to identity cohesion and cultural longevity.

This is the main point of Part III: “Morality Binds and Blinds,” which recounts the evolutionary background and function of our groupish or hive behaviors. Haidt repeatedly comments that, morally speaking, we are 90% chimp (selfish) and 10% bee (groupish) but the final part of this book presses for the distinct and widespread advantages that our tendency to form social groups conveys. Given that the book is primarily addressed to “WEIRD” readers, it isn’t surprising that the 10% gets so much positive attention in this final part of the book. Yet the obvious disadvantages and dangers of hive mentality seem underdeveloped in this book. Whatever advantages conservative clannishness provides for insiders, these groupish tendencies can be very hard on outsiders. Here is where traditional ethics must try to steer the elephant: at the places where competing human hives disagree and yet must live side by side.

Those who teach ethics can no longer ignore moral psychology, at least if they are interested in doing more than graduating more philosophical ethicists. If their course goals include ideas like critical thinking, student self-reflection, or even improving pro-social behavior—training the elephant, in Haidt’s lingo—they must begin with a thorough account of how humans actually behave in morally important situations. Because of the book’s length, it may be hard to adopt it
entirely in an introductory course. The third chapter, “Elephants Rule,” would serve to convince students of the importance of moral psychology while supplemental lectures could explain Haidt’s general theory. This is the approach I plan to use. However, if I ever got my wish and were able to teach an entire course on moral psychology rather than simply spend two weeks on it, I would put this whole book on the required reading list. Haidt has shorter treatments, but for now, this is the most up to date and accessible source for his approach to the subject.

Haidt’s book is a compelling portrait of our moral elephants. But is it a complete portrait? Well, for all the scholarly apparatus, Haidt is strangely silent about the work of some of the other leading thinkers in the field, many of whom work together under the auspices of the Moral Psychology Research Group (moralpsychology.net), although their most recent overview of the field, the *Moral Psychology Handbook* (2010) refers to Haidt over fifty times. This asymmetry sometimes leaves the impression that Haidt’s work is insufficiently engaged with alternative models and scholarly challenges and skepticisms. Students of the field will need to seek these other perspectives to make sure they are getting the whole elephant.