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Jonathan Haidt's *The Righteous Mind*



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Synonyms

[Evolution of human sociality](#); [Evolution of morality](#); [Human cooperation](#)

Definition

Jonathan Haidt introduces moral foundations theory in his book and tries to challenge the way we think about the origins of political differences and good and evil.

Introduction

Haidt's *The Righteous Mind* consists of three main chapters. In the first part, he argues that moral judgments are realized through intuitive thinking based on the social intuitionist approach. In the second part, some theoretical approaches based on harm and justice are criticized and it is claimed that morality corresponds to more than harm and justice. In the third part, it is argued that morality is intertwined with (in particular, religious) group

behavior and that moral intuitions underlie our group psychology and political differences.

Haidt (2001) endorses the Humeian point of view on morality and criticizes Kohlberg's rationalist moral understanding based on Kant's moral philosophy. According to Kohlberg's rationalist perspective on morality, when we see a moral violation, we decide rationally whether this is morally right or wrong. However, as Haidt demonstrates in his moral dumbfounding studies, when people are exposed to a set of moral scenarios that do not involve harm but include a moral violation, such as incest, they automatically judge that it is morally wrong, but use their rational processes only to justify the initial moral judgment. For example, Julia and Mark are often used in moral dumbfounding studies:

Julie and Mark are brother and sister. They are traveling together in France on summer vacation from college. One night they are staying alone in a cabin near the beach. They decide that it would be interesting and fun if they tried making love. At the very least, it would be a new experience for each of them. Julie was already taking birth control pills, but Mark uses a condom too, just to be safe. They both enjoy making love, but they decide never to do it again. They keep that night as a special secret, which makes them feel even closer to each other.

What do you think about that? Was it ok for them to make love?

When most people read this scenario, they make an automatic (intuitive) response and state that this behavior is morally wrong. However, when asked why, they try to legitimize their judgment in

a post-hoc manner. Haidt argues that we are not interested in the truth when making moral judgments like scientists. Rather, we justify our behavior as a lawyer. This approach is called the social intuitionist approach.

In the second part of the book, the moral foundations theory (Haidt 2012) is introduced and it is claimed that morality consists of at least five different dimensions. In Kohlberg's theory, the moral principles that are at the "highest levels" are not to harm and to be fair. Kohlberg's perspective has dominated moral psychology. However, inspired by the anthropological work of Shweder et al. (1997), Haidt (2007) mentions that, apart from these two dimensions, there are at least three other moral dimensions, which he calls loyalty, authority, and sanctity. It is argued that these five dimensions are evolutionary adaptations. While harm and justice constitute the individualizing foundations, loyalty, authority, and sanctity constitute the binding foundations.

In the last chapter, Haidt argues that groups, in general, and religious groups, in particular, come together based on a number of shared moral principles, and crucially, that the differences in moral foundations drive intergroup (i.e., political) disagreement. As morality ties groups together, it also blinds them to the fact that members of other groups can also be good people. Instead, people view the world from the perspective of their own group.

In general, Haidt's approach suggests that in order to eliminate the conflict between political groups, liberals should appreciate loyalty, authority, and sanctity more than they are generally inclined to. However, an opposing approach (Sauer 2015) argues that since both sides already value individualizing foundations, conservatives should question their emphasis on binding foundations. Although there are a number of empirical studies on what the core moral foundations of humans are (Alper and Yilmaz 2019; Napier and

Luguri 2013; Wright and Baril 2011; Yilmaz and Saribay 2017), the current evidence is inconclusive and further empirical studies are needed.

Cross-References

- ▶ [Evolution of Cooperation](#)
- ▶ [Evolution of Human Sociality](#)
- ▶ [The Puzzle of Altruism](#)
- ▶ [Theory of Moral Development](#)

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