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Moral foundations

What makes a person think it is good to be patriotic? To help understand the need to foster identification with a country and its institutions, it is useful to study the work of Jonathan Haidt on the foundations of morality.¹ Haidt is a psychologist who wants to understand why people make commitments to particular religions and political parties, among other things. Here I outline some of Haidt’s ideas, noting their relevance to understanding why efforts are needed to encourage citizens to identify with their country.

The rider and the elephant

As a preliminary, Haidt presents the view that each of us has two minds.² One mind is intuitive, automatic and high capacity. If you see a rock approaching your head, it is

1 Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Pantheon, 2012). Haidt and his collaborators have written many detailed technical articles.

2 This view is standard among psychologists. See, for example, Jonathan St B. T. Evans, *Thinking Twice: Two Minds in One Brain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011); Timothy D. Wilson, *Strangers to Ourselves: Discovering the Adaptive Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

valuable to duck without pausing to calculate the trajectory of the rock or indeed determine whether it actually is a rock rather than an illusion. In early human evolution, such an automatic system improved the odds of surviving. Responding quickly and automatically to suspicious sounds could enable escape from a predator, and was advantageous even if most such sounds were false alarms.

In the modern world, the intuitive mind still rules much of people's behaviour. A soldier learns to respond quickly to the sound of gunfire and, after returning to civilian life, may hit the ground at the sound of a car backfiring.

The other major component of the mind is slow, methodical and low-capacity: it takes more effort. It is the part of the mind commonly thought of as rational. It weighs up evidence, considers options and draws conclusions, and then may assess them on the basis of new evidence. Scientific research, in its ideal form, relies entirely on this sort of rational evaluation.

Haidt calls the intuitive mind the elephant and the rational mind the rider. In Haidt's metaphor, the rider sits on top of the elephant, perhaps trying to steer it but in most cases actually being at the mercy of the elephant's whims. The elephant is too strong and independent for the rider to control it except in carefully constructed circumstances. What often happens is that the elephant goes in a direction and the rider simply follows: the intuitive mind reaches a conclusion and the rational mind then figures out reasons to justify this conclusion.

Haidt provides some illuminating examples that are, by design, uncomfortable or even repellent for some

people asked to consider them. One is a hypothetical situation of a brother and sister who are travelling together and decide to have sex with each other just to see what it is like. They do it just once, each of them using birth control. They enjoy it but decide not to do it again. The first question: is this right or wrong? The second question: why? Many people immediately react by saying it's wrong. That is their elephant speaking. But they find it challenging to explain why. Some say it is because of the possibility of conceiving a child with genetic defects, ignoring the information about birth control. The rider casts about for a plausible justification of the elephant's choice, but in this case gets stuck.

With other issues, the rider has more options. Consider the issue of drugs such as heroin and cocaine. Many people react intuitively to say they should be illegal. In a debate with a proponent of harm-minimisation, who recommends decriminalisation or legalisation, people might say the dangers are too great, that enforcement needs to be stronger and any of a host of other reasons. But they seldom argue for making alcohol or nicotine illegal. The same applies to those on the other side: they too can come up with many reasons to justify their views. Seldom does someone say, "I don't really know which drugs should be illegal, if any, because I haven't studied the issue in enough detail."

The elephant usually prevails even when the rider is more sophisticated. People with greater intelligence may simply be better at developing clever arguments to justify positions they have taken on intuitive grounds. Intelligence is not a guarantee against bias and prejudice.

An effective counter to misguided views is other people who point out shortcomings. This is most apparent in scientific research. Many scientists, including leading scientists, are strongly committed to their viewpoints, so much so that new evidence will not budge them: they simply come up with ingenious reasons why the contrary evidence is wrong or irrelevant and why their position is still viable. This was shown in a classic study of 40 scientists involved in studying rocks from the moon. Following the first voyages to the moon and return of moon rocks to earth, there was lots of new evidence that could be used to adjudicate between different theories about the origin and nature of the moon. However, key scientists who were advocates of different theories, and who were considered by their peers as especially outstanding in the field, were highly resistant to changing their views. This study showed that commitment plays a crucial role in science and that the idea that scientists seek to falsify their theories is not the way science operates in practice.³

So for scientists, the rider sometimes serves to justify a gut reaction, especially commitment to a viewpoint on which they have built careers and reputations. What makes a difference, eventually, are other scientists. Those without prior commitments or who are more open to

³ Ian I. Mitroff, *The Subjective Side of Science: A Philosophical Inquiry into the Psychology of the Apollo Moon Scientists* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 1974). See also Michael J. Mahoney, *Scientist as Subject: The Psychological Imperative* (Cambridge, MA: Ballinger, 1976).

evidence may adopt different views. More importantly, scientists with contrary views will point out flaws in evidence and logic. The rider-elephant combination may not change direction on its own, but other rider-elephants, going in different directions, sometimes can have an impact.

If this sort of commitment is common in science, with all its systems for peer review and emphasis on rigour, it is even more likely to prevail in politics. After someone develops loyalty to a political party, for example, they may stick with it tenaciously. The elephant has formed a preference and the rider will try to figure out a justification.

The six foundations

Haidt argues that people's moral judgements—their judgements about right and wrong—are influenced by six elements or reference points. He calls them moral foundations. They are care, fairness, liberty, loyalty, authority and sanctity.

People's behaviour and thoughts are potentially influenced by each of these foundations. Haidt says they are deeply embedded in human evolution and social interactions. However, an individual's foundations can change through various processes.

Care means caring for others. The most obvious instance is looking after children, something that most mothers seem to find instinctive. Small groups of humans that did not care for their children would have had a hard time surviving. Furthermore, caring for other adults in the group was also advantageous, because otherwise individu-

als might compete with or even attack each other, undermining the capacity of the group as a whole to survive.

In modern-day societies, the care foundation manifests itself in support for those who are disadvantaged, for example people with disabilities, those who are ill, people in poverty—including people in remote parts of the world. The care foundation evolved from concern about vulnerable members of one's own group, but now can be extended to people anywhere in the world, and even more broadly to animals and the natural environment.

Fairness is another important moral foundation. It can be evoked when someone else receives something they apparently don't deserve. A small child may protest when a brother or sister receives a bigger portion of ice cream. In the workplace, workers at the same level may protest if a co-worker receives special privileges, such as attractive assignments from the boss, or a higher salary for the same work.

The sense of fairness doesn't always give the same results. Some people think it is unfair that those who do no paid work receive unemployment payments—they may be called spongers or welfare parasites—whereas others think it is unfair when children inherit money and property from parents, especially when they did nothing to deserve this windfall. This suggests there are many processes involved in assigning the sense of fairness to particular situations.

Liberty is the sense or demand to be free and independent of oppressive power. It is especially pronounced among libertarians, who oppose many or even most functions of government, instead supporting private

solutions, such as markets or voluntary arrangements such as charity. Even those from other parts of the political spectrum are influenced by the urge for liberty. This is seen especially among people subject to repressive governments, some of whom are resentful, even when the government functions well. Those with a strong liberty orientation would oppose a benevolent dictatorship.

Loyalty involves commitment to a group, a movement or even an abstraction. People can feel loyalty to family, friends, neighbours, clubs, co-workers, employers, sporting teams, commercial brands and countries. In warfare, soldiers may feel tremendous loyalty to their closest mates, even being willing to die for them.

Loyalty to one's country is central to patriotism. This often means supporting one's own government in any contest with others.

Loyalty is often expected of others in the same group. Those who go against expectations may be called traitors. Spies are caught in the crossfire of competing loyalties: they are patriots to those on one side and detested by the other. Few people think of spies as simply doing a job.

In human prehistory, the survival of the group was vital, and loyalty to the group was highly advantageous. This is the evolutionary basis for loyalty being a moral foundation. However, people today are loyal to groups quite unlike earlier times—sporting teams, for example, have no relevance to survival, except in a metaphorical way. Even more divergent from earlier forms of loyalty is patriotism, when the commitment is to a “community” thousands of times larger than one's personal interactions. This suggests that patriotism is not automatic or natural in

any sense, but instead requires active efforts to initiate, cultivate and maintain it.

Authority is a moral foundation built around acceptance of systems of formal power, hierarchy and credibility. Many people believe that authorities should be followed, whether they are government leaders, medical experts, employers, sports coaches or heads of families. Respect for or obedience to authority helps make societies more stable. If no one accepts a boss's directives, then the boss has no power and perhaps a new method of making decisions will take over.

Much of political life involves a struggle over authority. There are struggles over positions of authority, for example military coups, elections and popular uprisings against rulers. Within organisations, there are struggles for positions of influence. Authority figures of various types, from politicians to judges, seek to exert their power, often encountering resistance from other authority figures and from those lower down.

The moral foundation of authority gives an advantage to those currently in positions of power. If someone believes that formal leaders should be respected and obeyed, this makes change more difficult. Yet many authorities need to be resisted. Repressive rulers cause much suffering.

One of the important types of authority is the law, a set of rules administered by various agencies, notably police and courts. The moral foundation of authority means that obeying the law is the default for many people. However, some laws are so unjust or harmful that breaking them might seem justified—to some people,

anyway. Those who heed the authority imperative may reject any sort of law-breaking.

Moral judgements can be selective. Some challenges to authority are considered acceptable, others not. For example, in the US, questioning the views of the president might be okay or not, depending on who the president is. Authority becomes more important in some arenas. In the military, obedience to authority is a foremost value, drummed into recruits, despite lip service to a higher loyalty to other values.

In Nazi Germany, the authority foundation played a crucial role in enabling mass killing and other horrific human rights violations. The famous Milgram experiments showed that this sort of obedience to authority also was widespread in the US. The subjects of the experiment believed they were administering electric shocks to someone else; following instructions from the experimenter, many would continue even to dangerous levels.⁴

Sanctity is a moral foundation built around feelings that some things are sacred and should not be treated casually or with contempt. In the US, many patriots treat the flag as a sacred object that needs to be respected. Raising and retiring the flag is supposed to be done following specified protocols. The way it is folded is specified, and the flag should never touch the ground, which would defile it. When protesters or artists treat the flag in apparently disrespectful ways—for example burning it—this is seen as sacrilegious.

⁴ Stanley Milgram, *Obedience to Authority* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

Moral foundations and tactics

Haidt provides considerable evidence and many arguments in support of his classification of these six moral foundations. Most individuals are affected by all six foundations, but to different degrees. There are some patterns worthy of note. Haidt compares the role of the foundations in three political orientations in the US: libertarians, liberals and conservatives. Libertarians are opposed to most government functions and want society to be run through markets. As already noted, for them the liberty foundation is dominant.

Liberals, in contrast, are primarily influenced by three foundations: care, fairness and liberty. For them, loyalty, authority and sanctity are less influential. This helps explain why liberals are likely to support measures such as unemployment benefits, progressive taxation and foreign aid.

Conservatives, Haidt discovered, are influenced more equally by all six foundations. They are more likely than libertarians or liberals to be concerned about respecting police and the flag, for example.

Although there are systematic differences between people with different political and religious views, what is striking to me is the arbitrariness of people's moral commitments. Haidt says that the six moral foundations are the "first draft of the mind": most people have innate tendencies towards caring for children (and hence caring for others in need), and so forth through all the foundations. But the way these are played out in practice depends on circumstances.

Suppose a person has a strong tendency towards being loyal. But loyalty to what? There are many potential recipients of the feeling of commitment, support and even love: sporting teams, neighbourhoods, family members and companies, as well as governments and countries. Furthermore, there are many choices involved. Does loyalty to country mean not buying foreign goods? Does it mean not caring about government crimes? Or does it mean being especially concerned about government crimes? Does it mean supporting mining companies that are extracting and exporting the country's minerals—even if the companies are foreign owned? Or does it mean supporting calls to use the minerals within the country, or calls by environmentalists to leave the minerals in the ground and maintain a pristine environment? Loyalty has many potential attachments or recipients. To say that loyalty is a moral foundation is only the beginning of understanding how loyalty operates in practice.

My interest here is loyalty to a country or its government or people or ideals. Some people are patriotic, but many are not—indeed, there are plenty of people who are anti-patriotic. However, closely related to patriotism is something more common that can be called country-centredness, which means thinking about the world from the perspective of a particular country, usually the one where one lives or where one was born, and thinking of the world as made up of countries. News stories tell of a disaster affecting a few citizens of your country and ignore thousands dying in remote parts of the world. Stories about the economy or employment focus on local impli-

cations, not implications for elsewhere, whether Albania or Zambia.

How does patriotism and, more generally, country-based thinking develop? How is it maintained? In the following chapters, I examine some of the processes involved, looking at methods, behaviours and assumptions that foster identification with a country, then at alternative forms of action and identification and finally at strategies to move towards alternatives.