

## Book Review of

*The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* by Jonathan Haidt

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From my position, and possibly from other philosophers, Haidt's book offered three important insights from three reference/citations that he provided, rather than from his moral foundation theory. I will have little to say about the moral foundation theory directly, except to note briefly that I believe that Haidt underrates the modernist shift to make Care-Harm and Fairness-Cheating paramount. The other evolutionary 'foundations' of 'Loyalty-Betrayal', 'Authority-Subversion', and 'Sanctity-Degradation' were more important in ancient societies, and the dichotomies are certain being challenged beyond traditional outlooks. Furthermore, Haidt has not sufficiently addressed 'Power-Powerlessness' in morality, even as he examined 'Liberty-Oppression'.

Like any theory, the moral foundation theory suffers from the limits of its outlook. The first two insights, which Haidt's offers, are strangely juxtaposition to his scientific intuitionist argument; and maybe, that was deliberate. Firstly, Haidt in the title page oddly quotes Baruch Spinoza, from the *Tractatus Politicus* (1676):

*I have shriven not to laugh at human action, not to weep at them, not to hate them, but to understand them*

I think that Haidt is having a laugh at Spinoza because the rationalist has removed the intuitive emotion in order to understand, where Haidt thinks he cannot understand the human condition. Haidt has a valid point but then his anti-philosophical tone, displayed throughout the book, blinds him to understanding Spinoza's point. A charitable interpretation of the rational mystic Spinoza would be that he only seeks to keep his emotions at bay to allow a kinder response of understanding. Spinoza does not want to make a mockery of his fellow humans, and he does not want to be held in grief, such as not to be able to bring hope, and he certainly goes not hate human

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emotions. In his anti-philosophical tone, Haidt fails to see that human understanding is rational, not *necessarily* intuitive. Spinoza is making a rational moral choice. The deterministic question of evolutionary psychology does not allow that insight. It is a different type of question; a valid question, but not the only question to understand morality.

I say that Haidt is short-sighted ('blinds') because he makes clear that his argument is moral monism, although with some attempt to address the philosophical challenges.<sup>1</sup> The idea of monism is the one overarching schema, to which everything else fits, and for Haidt that is evolutionary naturalism. He asks:

*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?<sup>2</sup>*

Early in the book Haidt reveals, in his life history, changing from studying philosophy to psychology, and his writing cannot hide his disgust at the rationalist end of the discipline.<sup>3</sup> Haidt requires Hume and the early moral sentimentalists as the philosophical underpinning of his psychology, but he fails to demonstrate an understanding of the 'reasons' for the rationalist turn in the debate on ethics. More strangely, he misses all reference to the modern philosophical intuitionists, led by G.E. Moore. And as I will explain later, it is quite possible to have Humean high-view about moral sentiment, and still be skeptical of the naturalist's monism, if not the social science reduction that Haidt claims to avoid.

With a monist paradigm the legitimate question was set-up to fail, since the philosophical tradition of key critical questions does not settle into his framework or theory. And they will not, because they rationally-framed questions, not intuition. However, it is not that Haidt is unaware of

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<sup>1</sup> Page 113.

<sup>2</sup> Page 121.

<sup>3</sup> One notes Haidt's anger at the poor treatment that E.O. Wilson and sociobiology received from leftwing rationalists, before the rebirth of Haidt's field of evolutionary psychology. Haidt's is probably right in his indignation at the procedural unfairness; however, I believe it has distorted his perception of rationalist arguments.

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the philosophical categories in the ethics debate. It is only that his monist framework has placed the descriptive question of the evolutionary psychology in such a paramount position, that he misunderstands the importance of the philosophical reasoning for his own 'science'.<sup>4</sup> Haidt writes:

*...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 generative in philosophy and public policy*

*But in psychology our goal is descriptive. We want to discover how that moral mind actually works, not how it ought to work, and that can't be done by reasoning, maths, or logic. It can be done only by observation, and observation is usually keener when informed by empathy.<sup>5</sup>*

Whether observation is keener when informed by empathy is not the issue. The problem is the empiricist's high view of observation where what reasoning, maths, or logic is actually employed for interpretation is ignored. Again, Haidt misses the point about the importance of principle ('ought') in ethics because he is damned if the rationalist has a role in the endeavour. Here Haidt introduces the idea of the 'rationalist delusion', somewhat in the same vein as Dawkin's 'God delusion'.<sup>6</sup> I see that is more of a rhetorical device than a critical thinking principle, and it also the same vein that the materialistic reducers claim illusory thinking of its opponents in the facile versions of the brain-mind debates. It's all-or-nothing, and a better compatibilist claim is ignored.

At this point, it is important to bring in the second insight from the book, when Haidt introduces the quote from the meditative Jianzhi Sengcan:

*The Perfect Way is only difficult for those who pick and choose; Do not like, do not dislike; all will then be clear. Make a hairbreadth difference, and Heaven and Earth are set apart; If you want the truth to stand clear before you, never be for or against. The struggle between 'for' and 'against' is the mind's worst disease...*

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<sup>4</sup> Page 113.

<sup>5</sup> Page 120.

<sup>6</sup> Pages 28-29.

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I think that this where Haidt believe he is not taking the reductionist direction. He is not against reason but it is the question of primacy for morality, and he makes the choice for Hume's view on the moral sentiments, the emotions, being paramount. However, Haidt is still being 'for' intuition in a reductive view of the role of moral reasoning. Emotion is the massively strong elephant and reason is a weak 'back-seat' driver, forced to make decision post-facto. It appears what is happening is that Haidt well underplays the ability of language and convention to shift intuition in its evolutionary course. However, he is forced early in the book to come clean, and in what is something of a confession that undermines his strong intuitionist thesis:

*...But when Hume said that reason is the 'slave' of the passions I think he went too far.*

*A slave is never suppose to question his master, but most of us can think of time when we question and revised our first intuitive judgement.<sup>7</sup>*

In Haidt's diagram of the social institutionalist model, he does have a weak dotted line of 'private reflection' looping back to influence the intuition. Oddly, Haidt underplays this capacity because it is WEIRD – a Western, Educated Industrial, Rich, Democrat outlook, and culturally it plays a marginally role in the global demography. However, is Haidt right in assuming that the capacity for revising intuition in moral reasoning is WEIRD? Or, in spite of Haidt's acclaimed anthropological pluralism, he underrates the application of non-western cultural conventions and habits in moral reasoning.

What has gone wrong? I believe Haidt missed the point in the third insight that he himself introduces as reference to Howard Margolis' work, *Patterns, Thinking, Cognition*.<sup>8</sup> Margolis untangles the two important questions that are required, by defining judgement in the two different ways of "seeing-that" and "reasoning-why". The former refers to intuition and the later refers to language (reason). For philosophers, it is the analytical (artificial?) division between perceptive

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<sup>7</sup> Page 67.

<sup>8</sup> Pages 41-44.

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knowledge and propositional knowledge. There are no arguments why either question should be ('ought' to be) paramount. Emotive intuition, not only in different cultural settings but also on the individual level, may be no stronger than the 'pre-conscious' reasoning occurring. Reason is not merely the articulated belief. It is also structural and logical firing of the brain which is experience, what we internally identify as 'mind' or 'self'. You can argue that this self-perception is an 'illusion', but the challenge is what would the word 'illusion' mean here, in such a closed system where nothing internally escapes its *reflective* attention, even post facto?<sup>9</sup>

Hence, we can conclude habit, culture and intuition need not be the tyrant. We can reevaluate value as set forth by Nietzsche. The modernist ethicist who was greatly influenced by both Hume and Nietzsche was Bernard Williams. Williams had a methodological intuitionism; however, it embraced reason and logic as an equal part in the ethical judgement, through his 'internal reason thesis'.<sup>10</sup> What he is arguing is that in ethics, and not science, all reasons are internal, and that there are no external reasons. This view aligns with his argument of the Absolute Conception: "If knowledge is what it claims to be, then it is knowledge of a reality which exists independently of that knowledge."<sup>11</sup> In Williams' argument, this is what broadly-defined 'science' seeks to accomplish, as in Haidt's endeavour. However, William argues that this is not the realm of ethics, which cannot achieve the consilience anticipated by E.O. Wilson. In this way Williams does not create the 'for' or 'against' intuition or moral reasoning. Moral understanding is both on par, as the cognition of the brain determines, and yet for the mind to make its choice.

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<sup>9</sup> I have to explain the epistemological point here, as many would not get the inference. Any reference to there being an 'illusion', something escaped the attention of consciousness, upon its being revealed as a factor, has thus been captured in reflection. In terms of language, it is to say that what we understand as 'illusion' must require that it can be 'unveiled'. The magic trick of the mind cannot be unveiled as it is all internal.

<sup>10</sup> Chappell, Sophie Grace and Smyth, Nicholas, "Bernard Williams", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Fall 2018 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), forthcoming URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/williams-bernard/>>.

<sup>11</sup> John Tilson. Bernard Williams and The Absolute Conception. [https://www.academia.edu/1465456/IS\\_KNOWLEDGE\\_WHAT\\_IT\\_CLAIMS\\_TO\\_BE\\_BERNARD\\_WILLIAMS\\_AND\\_THE\\_ABSOLUTE\\_CONCEPTION](https://www.academia.edu/1465456/IS_KNOWLEDGE_WHAT_IT_CLAIMS_TO_BE_BERNARD_WILLIAMS_AND_THE_ABSOLUTE_CONCEPTION)