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The Righteous Mind

Why Good People Are Divided by
Politics and Religion

JONATHAN HAIDT



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seem acceptable⁴⁵ and altruism seem embarrassing,⁴⁶ without giving us any reasons or arguments.

Because of these two changes I called my theory the “social intuitionist model of moral judgment,” and I published it in 2001 in an article titled “The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail.”⁴⁷ In hindsight I wish I’d called the dog “intuitive” because psychologists who are still entrenched in the emotion-versus-cognition dichotomy often assume from the title that I’m saying that morality is always driven by emotion. Then they prove that cognition matters, and think they have found evidence against intuitionism.⁴⁸ But intuitions (including emotional responses) are a kind of cognition. They’re just not a kind of reasoning.

HOW TO WIN AN ARGUMENT

The social intuitionist model offers an explanation of why moral and political arguments are so frustrating: *because moral reasons are the tail wagged by the intuitive dog*. A dog’s tail wags to communicate. You can’t make a dog happy by forcibly wagging its tail. And you can’t change people’s minds by utterly refuting their arguments. Hume diagnosed the problem long ago:

And as reasoning is not the source, whence either disputant derives his tenets; it is in vain to expect, that any logic, which speaks not to the affections, will ever engage him to embrace sounder principles.⁴⁹

If you want to change people’s minds, you’ve got to talk to their elephants. You’ve got to use links 3 and 4 of the social intuitionist model to elicit new intuitions, not new rationales.

Dale Carnegie was one of the greatest elephant-whisperers of all time. In his classic book *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, Carnegie repeatedly urged readers to avoid direct confrontations. Instead he advised people to “begin in a friendly way,” to “smile,” to “be a good listener,” and to “never say ‘you’re wrong.’” The persuader’s goal should be to convey respect, warmth, and an openness to dialogue before stating one’s own case. Carnegie was urging readers to

use link 3, the social persuasion link, to prepare the ground before attempting to use link 4, the reasoned persuasion link.

From my description of Carnegie so far, you might think his techniques are superficial and manipulative, appropriate only for salespeople. But Carnegie was in fact a brilliant moral psychologist who grasped one of the deepest truths about conflict. He used a quotation from Henry Ford to express it: “If there is any one secret of success it lies in the ability to get the other person’s point of view and see things from their angle as well as your own.”⁵⁰

It’s such an obvious point, yet few of us apply it in moral and political arguments because our righteous minds so readily shift into combat mode. The rider and the elephant work together smoothly to fend off attacks and lob rhetorical grenades of our own. The performance may impress our friends and show allies that we are committed members of the team, but no matter how good our logic, it’s not going to change the minds of our opponents if they are in combat mode too. If you really want to change someone’s mind on a moral or political matter, you’ll need to see things from that person’s angle as well as your own. And if you do truly see it the other person’s way—deeply and intuitively—you might even find your own mind opening in response. Empathy is an antidote to righteousness, although it’s very difficult to empathize across a moral divide.

IN SUM

People reason and people have moral intuitions (including moral emotions), but what is the relationship among these processes? Plato believed that reason could and should be the master; Jefferson believed that the two processes were equal partners (head and heart) ruling a divided empire; Hume believed that reason was (and was only fit to be) the servant of the passions. In this chapter I tried to show that Hume was right:

- The mind is divided into parts, like a rider (controlled processes) on an elephant (automatic processes). The rider evolved to serve the elephant.

- You can see the rider serving the elephant when people are morally dumbfounded. They have strong gut feelings about what is right and wrong, and they struggle to construct post hoc justifications for those feelings. Even when the servant (reasoning) comes back empty-handed, the master (intuition) doesn't change his judgment.
- The social intuitionist model starts with Hume's model and makes it more social. Moral reasoning is part of our lifelong struggle to win friends and influence people. That's why I say that "intuitions come first, strategic reasoning second." You'll misunderstand moral reasoning if you think about it as something people do by themselves in order to figure out the truth.
- Therefore, if you want to change someone's mind about a moral or political issue, *talk to the elephant first*. If you ask people to believe something that violates their intuitions, they will devote their efforts to finding an escape hatch—a reason to doubt your argument or conclusion. They will almost always succeed.

I have tried to use intuitionism while writing this book. My goal is to change the way a diverse group of readers—liberal and conservative, secular and religious—think about morality, politics, religion, and each other. I knew that I had to take things slowly and address myself more to elephants than to riders. I couldn't just lay out the theory in chapter 1 and then ask readers to reserve judgment until I had presented all of the supporting evidence. Rather, I decided to weave together the history of moral psychology and my own personal story to create a sense of movement from rationalism to intuitionism. I threw in historical anecdotes, quotations from the ancients, and praise of a few visionaries. I set up metaphors (such as the rider and the elephant) that will recur throughout the book. I did these things in order to "tune up" your intuitions about moral psychology. If I have

failed and you have a visceral dislike of intuitionism or of me, then no amount of evidence I could present will convince you that intuitionism is correct. But if you now feel an intuitive sense that intuitionism *might* be true, then let's keep going. In the next two chapters I'll address myself more to riders than to elephants.