Reason and moral intuition: Haidt

DUMBFOUNDING. Suppose that you learn of two adult siblings engaging in consensual sex. Although you're told that no harmful consequences can possibly ensue, your reaction is (presumably) a strong aversion with normative statements such as, 'This is wrong!' Importantly, you're unable to cite intelligible reasons for your reaction. At the same time, you are not prepared to give it up. Similar reactions are observed in other cases like chicken masturbation etc.

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SOCIAL INTUITIONISM. Haidt uses this example of incest to provide some preliminary evidence for *social intuitionism*:

SI   Moral judgement is, largely, a response akin to perception. It is also, intrinsically, a process in which you try to sway other people's opinions and to convert them to your point of view. Therefore: morality, largely, is a rhetorical instrument based on a non-rational cognitive mechanism.

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The contrast between the rationalist and the SI models is illustrated in two figures. Examine Figure 2 and observe two features. The reasoning cited in support of a verbalised moral judgement is post hoc—that is, first the judgement is formed and pronounced, then the reasoning is given in its support. At least normally, we are not to believe that the rational argument *generates* the judgement and the behavioural response toward the given morally significant situation. This causal flow is of course reversed in the rationalist model. Secondly, the rhetorical element is completely missing in the rationalist model in Figure 1. As the rationalist sees it, the moral judge is like a scientist discovering moral truths. On the SI model, the moral judge is like a lawyer aiming to influence the audience. Influence how? The main purpose is to recruit others to your view—that is, to form moralistic alliances with the aid of a verbalised judgement in a rational wrapping.

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Remark 1. Another way to put the alliance-building function of moral judgements (when publicly expressed which is their 'natural setting') is to understand them as signals to the audience about your moral stance with the view of joining extant alliances.

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Remark 2. Compare the SI take on morality with Mandeville's views.

RATIONALISM AND INTERACTIONISM. The dispute with rationalism is clear enough. On one hand, there is the Kantian tradition in which moral principles must follow from the properties of rationality itself. On the other hand, there is Kohlberg, on whose view (as we saw) moral development and the emergence of moral reasoning track the development of cognitive abilities.

816

A extension of Kohlberg's rationalism is the 'social interactionism' defended by Turiel. The emphasis is on a sharp distinction between conventional and non-conventional violations (echoing Kohlberg). Non-conventional violations are violations of the rules that are universal and unchangeable. They are criticised on the basis of their harmful consequences. Importantly, Turiel stressed the role of peer-to-peer interactions that contribute to the maturity of moral judgement.

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Haidt endorses the social aspect of Turiel's view, but insists that the causal role of reasoning should be challenged. The evidence that Turiel assembled shows a *correlation* between judgement and reasons (such as reference to harms). But this is no proof that these reasons cause the judgement, rather than being caused by it.

INTUITION AND REASONING. A fundamental distinction of the SI model is the one between intuitions and reasoning. Reasoning is a conscious, effortful, and controllable activity. It is to be contrasted with intuitions that are quick and cheap, and whose process is not accessible to consciousness. As Haidt notes, a moral intuition so understood is similar to the traditional 18th century understanding of aesthetic judgement.

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ELEMENTS OF THE SI MODEL. So far we have covered the Links 1–4 of the model described in 818–819. These elements, and in particular Links 1–2, represent the sharp contrast between SI and classical rationalism, as well as Turiel's interactionism. But let us mention now that the SI model is flexible enough to accommodate some of the rationalist insights. Thus, in situations where there is no stable or strong intuition, as may be the case in novel, unfamiliar situations, people may resort to a rational examination (Link 5). However, this is not really a concession to the rationalist (see Example 3)

Example 3 (Cloning). Is cloning morally permissible? If you ask me out of the blue, I may not have an intuition one way or another. I might not have any emotional attitude to it. So I will defend my position by appealing to some general principles. Yet the kind of principles I adopt at the outset are likely to be shaped by intuitions. If I am emotionally inclined to favour equality, then one verdict will follow. If instead I favour perfection, then another. The social intuitionist should insist (I think) that there is no ground zero of moral discussion where I begin from scratch using only my reasoning abilities. On the contrary, my acceptance of 'self-evident' rational principles masks my prior emotional attitudes.

Another hidden problem for the rationalist: it matters *who* defends which view in the debate. Supposing I have no view on the matter, if on a public occasion my friend suggests permitting cloning, I may produce arguments in favour not so much *because* I believe they are right, but because I want to support my friend's position. The opposite happens if the speaker is my enemy.

Remark 4. An even more telling example would be a political event that demands some moral evaluation, like the war in Ukraine.

There may be occasions when I examine a moral issue in private (Link 6). Then it is possible to either fall back on your dominant intuition or to use reasoning. The latter is likely, e.g., with moral philosophers who are supposed to follow wherever their reason leads them to. But again, though Haidt sounds ecumenical, we may doubt such possibilities. For example, the philosopher cannot examine just every kind of argument in favour or against *P*. He'll have to be selective. But his selection will be much affected by his intuitions, emotional attitudes, elements of the social context.

LAWYERS AND SCIENTISTS. Psychologists and cognitive scientists have proposed a dual-process model of cognition. The affective process is quick and easy. The reasoning system is effortful and slow (see Table 1). The social intuitionist insists that moral judgement is primarily a product of the affective process. Once again, we see it as part of a public debate, rather than a private reflection. In the debate it matters *who* said what, rather than who said *what*. In a conversation among friends, for example, there will be a pressure to come to some agreement. But in a conversation among enemies or rivals, the pressure will be in the opposite direction. Neither of these pressures have anything to do with discovering moral truths or constructing logically more adequate arguments.

There are other similar pressures. Consider, e.g., the coherence pressure to form beliefs consistent with your extant ones. Or consider terror management which forces you to stick to your cultural norms more tightly. Your moral judgement then tracks this psychologically induced commitment.

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