

# *The Righteous Mind*

Why Good People Are Divided by  
Politics and Religion

JONATHAN HAIDT



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ONE

## Where Does Morality Come From?

I'm going to tell you a brief story. Pause after you read it and decide whether the people in the story did anything morally wrong.

A family's dog was killed by a car in front of their house. They had heard that dog meat was delicious, so they cut up the dog's body and cooked it and ate it for dinner. Nobody saw them do this.

If you are like most of the well-educated people in my studies, you felt an initial flash of disgust, but you hesitated before saying the family had done anything *morally* wrong. After all, the dog was dead already, so they didn't hurt it, right? And it was their dog, so they had a right to do what they wanted with the carcass, no? If I pushed you to make a judgment, odds are you'd give me a nuanced answer, something like "Well, I think it's disgusting, and I think they should have just buried the dog, but I wouldn't say it was *morally* wrong."

OK, here's a more challenging story:

A man goes to the supermarket once a week and buys a chicken. But before cooking the chicken, he

has sexual intercourse with it. Then he cooks it and eats it.

Once again, no harm, nobody else knows, and, like the dog-eating family, it involves a kind of recycling that is—as some of my research subjects pointed out—an efficient use of natural resources. But now the disgust is so much stronger, and the action just seems so . . . degrading. Does that make it wrong? If you're an educated and politically liberal Westerner, you'll probably give another nuanced answer, one that acknowledges the man's right to do what he wants, as long as he doesn't hurt anyone.

But if you are *not* a liberal or libertarian Westerner, you probably think it's wrong—morally wrong—for someone to have sex with a chicken carcass and then eat it. For you, as for most people on the planet, morality is broad. Some actions are wrong even though they don't hurt anyone. Understanding the simple fact that morality differs around the world, and even within societies, is the first step toward understanding your righteous mind. The next step is to understand where these many moralities came from in the first place.

#### THE ORIGIN OF MORALITY (TAKE 1)

I studied philosophy in college, hoping to figure out the meaning of life. After watching too many Woody Allen movies, I had the mistaken impression that philosophy would be of some help.<sup>1</sup> But I had taken some psychology courses too, and I loved them, so I chose to continue. In 1987 I was admitted to the graduate program in psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. I had a vague plan to conduct experiments on the psychology of humor. I thought it might be fun to do research that let me hang out in comedy clubs.

A week after arriving in Philadelphia, I sat down to talk with Jonathan Baron, a professor who studies how people think and make decisions. With my (minimal) background in philosophy, we had a good discussion about ethics. Baron asked me point-blank: "Is *moral* thinking any different from other kinds of thinking?" I said

that thinking about moral issues (such as whether abortion is wrong) seemed different from thinking about other kinds of questions (such as where to go to dinner tonight), because of the much greater need to provide reasons justifying your moral judgments to other people. Baron responded enthusiastically, and we talked about some ways one might compare moral thinking to other kinds of thinking in the lab. The next day, on the basis of little more than a feeling of encouragement, I asked him to be my advisor and I set off to study moral psychology.

In 1987, moral psychology was a part of developmental psychology. Researchers focused on questions such as how children develop in their thinking about rules, especially rules of fairness. The big question behind this research was: How do children come to know right from wrong? Where does morality come from?

There are two obvious answers to this question: nature or nurture. If you pick nature, then you're a *nativist*. You believe that moral knowledge is native in our minds. It comes preloaded, perhaps in our God-inscribed hearts (as the Bible says), or in our evolved moral emotions (as Darwin argued).<sup>2</sup>

But if you believe that moral knowledge comes from nurture, then you are an *empiricist*.<sup>3</sup> You believe that children are more or less blank slates at birth (as John Locke said).<sup>4</sup> If morality varies around the world and across the centuries, then how could it be innate? Whatever morals we have as adults must have been learned during childhood from our own experience, which includes adults telling us what's right and wrong. (*Empirical* means "from observation or experience.")

But this is a false choice, and in 1987 moral psychology was mostly focused on a third answer: *rationalism*, which says that kids figure out morality for themselves. Jean Piaget, the greatest developmental psychologist of all time, began his career as a zoologist studying mollusks and insects in his native Switzerland. He was fascinated by the stages that animals went through as they transformed themselves from, say, caterpillars to butterflies. Later, when his attention turned to children, he brought with him this interest in stages of development. Piaget wanted to know how the extraordinary sophistication of adult

thinking (a cognitive butterfly) emerges from the limited abilities of young children (lowly caterpillars).

Piaget focused on the kinds of errors kids make. For example, he'd put water into two identical drinking glasses and ask kids to tell him if the glasses held the same amount of water. (Yes.) Then he'd pour the contents of one of the glasses into a tall skinny glass and ask the child to compare the new glass to the one that had not been touched. Kids younger than six or seven usually say that the tall skinny glass now holds more water, because the level is higher. They don't understand that the total volume of water is conserved when it moves from glass to glass. He also found that it's pointless for adults to explain the conservation of volume to kids. The kids won't get it until they reach an age (and cognitive stage) when their minds are ready for it. And when they are ready, they'll figure it out for themselves just by playing with cups of water.

In other words, the understanding of the conservation of volume wasn't innate, and it wasn't learned from adults. Kids *figure it out for themselves*, but only when their minds are ready *and* they are given the right kinds of experiences.

Piaget applied this cognitive-developmental approach to the study of children's moral thinking as well.<sup>5</sup> He got down on his hands and knees to play marbles with children, and sometimes he deliberately broke rules and played dumb. The children then responded to his mistakes, and in so doing, they revealed their growing ability to respect rules, change rules, take turns, and resolve disputes. This growing knowledge came in orderly stages, as children's cognitive abilities matured.

Piaget argued that children's understanding of morality is like their understanding of those water glasses: we can't say that it is innate, and we can't say that kids learn it directly from adults.<sup>6</sup> It is, rather, *self-constructed* as kids play with other kids. Taking turns in a game is like pouring water back and forth between glasses. No matter how often you do it with three-year-olds, they're just not ready to get the concept of fairness,<sup>7</sup> any more than they can understand the conservation of volume. But once they've reached the age of five or six, then playing games, having arguments, and working things out

together will help them learn about fairness far more effectively than any sermon from adults.

This is the essence of psychological rationalism: We grow into our rationality as caterpillars grow into butterflies. If the caterpillar eats enough leaves, it will (eventually) grow wings. And if the child gets enough experiences of turn taking, sharing, and playground justice, it will (eventually) become a moral creature, able to use its rational capacities to solve ever harder problems. Rationality is our nature, and good moral reasoning is the end point of development.

Rationalism has a long and complex history in philosophy. In this book I'll use the word *rationalist* to describe anyone who believes that reasoning is the most important and reliable way to obtain moral knowledge.<sup>8</sup>

Piaget's insights were extended by Lawrence Kohlberg, who revolutionized the study of morality in the 1960s with two key innovations.<sup>9</sup> First, he developed a way to quantify Piaget's observation that children's moral reasoning changed over time. He created a set of moral dilemmas that he presented to children of various ages, and he recorded and coded their responses. For example, should a man named Heinz break into a drugstore to steal a drug that would save his dying wife? Should a girl named Louise reveal to her mother that her younger sister had lied to the mother? It didn't much matter whether the child said yes or no; what mattered were the *reasons* children gave when they tried to explain their answers.

Kohlberg found a six-stage progression in children's reasoning about the *social* world, and this progression matched up well with the stages Piaget had found in children's reasoning about the *physical* world. Young children judged right and wrong by very superficial features, such as whether a person was punished for an action. (If an adult punished the act, then the act must have been wrong.) Kohlberg called the first two stages the "pre-conventional" level of moral judgment, and they correspond to the Piagetian stage at which kids judge the physical world by superficial features (if a glass is taller, then it has more water in it).

But during elementary school, most children move on to the two "conventional" stages, becoming adept at understanding and even

manipulating rules and social conventions. This is the age of petty legalism that most of us who grew up with siblings remember well ("I'm not hitting you. I'm using your hand to hit you. Stop hitting yourself!"). Kids at this stage generally care a lot about conformity, and they have great respect for authority—in word, if not always in deed. They rarely question the legitimacy of authority, even as they learn to maneuver within and around the constraints that adults impose on them.

After puberty, right when Piaget said that children become capable of abstract thought, Kohlberg found that some children begin to think for themselves about the nature of authority, the meaning of justice, and the reasons behind rules and laws. In the two "post-conventional" stages, adolescents still value honesty and respect rules and laws, but now they sometimes justify dishonesty or law-breaking in pursuit of still higher goods, particularly justice. Kohlberg painted an inspiring rationalist image of children as "moral philosophers" trying to work out coherent ethical systems for themselves.<sup>10</sup> In the post-conventional stages, they finally get good at it. Kohlberg's dilemmas were a tool for measuring these dramatic advances in moral reasoning.

#### THE LIBERAL CONSENSUS

Mark Twain once said that "to a man with a hammer, everything looks like a nail." Once Kohlberg developed his moral dilemmas and his scoring techniques, the psychological community had a new hammer, and a thousand graduate students used it to pound out dissertations on moral reasoning. But there's a deeper reason so many young psychologists began to study morality from a rationalist perspective, and this was Kohlberg's second great innovation: he used his research to build a scientific justification for a secular liberal moral order.

Kohlberg's most influential finding was that the most morally advanced kids (according to his scoring technique) were those who had frequent opportunities for role taking—for putting themselves into another person's shoes and looking at a problem from that per-

son's perspective. Egalitarian relationships (such as with peers) invite role taking, but hierarchical relationships (such as with teachers and parents) do not. It's really hard for a child to see things from the teacher's point of view, because the child has never been a teacher. Piaget and Kohlberg both thought that parents and other authorities were *obstacles* to moral development. If you want your kids to learn about the physical world, let them play with cups and water; don't lecture them about the conservation of volume. And if you want your kids to learn about the social world, let them play with other kids and resolve disputes; don't lecture them about the Ten Commandments. And, for heaven's sake, don't force them to obey God or their teachers or you. That will only freeze them at the conventional level.

Kohlberg's timing was perfect. Just as the first wave of baby boomers was entering graduate school, he transformed moral psychology into a boomer-friendly ode to justice, and he gave them a tool to measure children's progress toward the liberal ideal. For the next twenty-five years, from the 1970s through the 1990s, moral psychologists mostly just interviewed young people about moral dilemmas and analyzed their justifications.<sup>11</sup> Most of this work was not politically motivated—it was careful and honest scientific research. But by using a framework that predefined morality as justice while denigrating authority, hierarchy, and tradition, it was inevitable that the research would support worldviews that were secular, questioning, and egalitarian.

#### AN EASIER TEST

If you force kids to explain complex notions, such as how to balance competing concerns about rights and justice, you're guaranteed to find age trends because kids get so much more articulate with each passing year. But if you are searching for the first appearance of a moral concept, then you'd better find a technique that doesn't require much verbal skill. Kohlberg's former student Elliot Turiel developed such a technique. His innovation was to tell children short stories about other kids who break rules and then give them a series of sim-

ple yes-or-no probe questions. For example, you tell a story about a child who goes to school wearing regular clothes, even though his school requires students to wear a uniform. You start by getting an overall judgment: "Is that OK, what the boy did?" Most kids say no. You ask if there's a rule about what to wear. ("Yes.") Then you probe to find out what kind of rule it is: "What if the teacher said it was OK for the boy to wear his regular clothes, then would it be OK?" and "What if this happened in another school, where they don't have any rules about uniforms, then would it be OK?"

Turiel discovered that children as young as five usually say that the boy was wrong to break the rule, but that it would be OK if the teacher gave permission or if it happened in another school where there was no such rule. Children recognize that rules about clothing, food, and many other aspects of life are *social conventions*, which are arbitrary and changeable to some extent.<sup>12</sup>

But if you ask kids about actions that hurt other people, such as a girl who pushes a boy off a swing because she wants to use it, you get a very different set of responses. Nearly all kids say that the girl was wrong and that she'd be wrong even if the teacher said it was OK, and even if this happened in another school where there were no rules about pushing kids off swings. Children recognize that rules that prevent harm are *moral rules*, which Turiel defined as rules related to "justice, rights, and welfare pertaining to how people ought to relate to each other."<sup>13</sup>

In other words, young children don't treat all rules the same, as Piaget and Kohlberg had supposed. Kids can't talk like moral philosophers, but they are busy sorting social information in a sophisticated way. They seem to grasp early on that rules that prevent harm are special, important, unalterable, and universal. And this realization, Turiel said, was the foundation of all moral development. Children construct their moral understanding on the bedrock of the absolute moral truth that *harm is wrong*. Specific rules may vary across cultures, but in all of the cultures Turiel examined, children still made a distinction between moral rules and conventional rules.<sup>14</sup>

Turiel's account of moral development differed in many ways from Kohlberg's, but the political implications were similar: morality

is about *treating individuals well*. It's about harm and fairness (not loyalty, respect, duty, piety, patriotism, or tradition). Hierarchy and authority are generally bad things (so it's best to let kids figure things out for themselves). Schools and families should therefore embody progressive principles of equality and autonomy (not authoritarian principles that enable elders to train and constrain children).

#### MEANWHILE, IN THE REST OF THE WORLD . . .

Kohlberg and Turiel had pretty much defined the field of moral psychology by the time I sat in Jon Baron's office and decided to study morality.<sup>15</sup> The field I entered was vibrant and growing, yet something about it felt wrong to me. It wasn't the politics—I was very liberal back then, twenty-four years old and full of indignation at Ronald Reagan and conservative groups such as the righteously named Moral Majority. No, the problem was that the things I was reading were so . . . dry. I had grown up with two sisters, close in age to me. We fought every day, using every dirty rhetorical trick we could think of. Morality was such a passionate affair in my family, yet the articles I was reading were all about reasoning and cognitive structures and domains of knowledge. It just seemed too cerebral. There was hardly any mention of emotion.

As a first-year graduate student, I didn't have the confidence to trust my instincts, so I forced myself to continue reading. But then, in my second year, I took a course on cultural psychology and was captivated. The course was taught by a brilliant anthropologist, Alan Fiske, who had spent many years in West Africa studying the psychological foundations of social relationships.<sup>16</sup> Fiske asked us all to read several ethnographies (book-length reports of an anthropologist's fieldwork), each of which focused on a different topic, such as kinship, sexuality, or music. But no matter the topic, morality turned out to be a central theme.

I read a book on witchcraft among the Azande of Sudan.<sup>17</sup> It turns out that witchcraft beliefs arise in surprisingly similar forms in many parts of the world, which suggests either that there really are witches

or (more likely) that there's something about human minds that often generates this cultural institution. The Azande believed that witches were just as likely to be men as women, and the fear of being called a witch made the Azande careful not to make their neighbors angry or envious. That was my first hint that groups create supernatural beings not to explain the universe but to order their societies.<sup>18</sup>

I read a book about the Ilongot, a tribe in the Philippines whose young men gained honor by cutting off people's heads.<sup>19</sup> Some of these beheadings were revenge killings, which offered Western readers a motive they could understand. But many of these murders were committed against strangers who were not involved in any kind of feud with the killer. The author explained these most puzzling killings as ways that small groups of men channeled resentments and frictions within the group into a group-strengthening "hunting party," capped off by a long night of communal celebratory singing. This was my first hint that morality often involves tension *within* the group linked to competition *between* different groups.

These ethnographies were fascinating, often beautifully written, and intuitively graspable despite the strangeness of their content. Reading each book was like spending a week in a new country: confusing at first, but gradually you tune up, finding yourself better able to guess what's going to happen next. And as with all foreign travel, you learn as much about where you're from as where you're visiting. I began to see the United States and Western Europe as extraordinary historical exceptions—new societies that had found a way to strip down and thin out the thick, all-encompassing moral orders that the anthropologists wrote about.

Nowhere was this thinning more apparent than in our lack of rules about what the anthropologists call "purity" and "pollution." Contrast us with the Hua of New Guinea, who have developed elaborate networks of food taboos that govern what men and women may eat. In order for their boys to become men, they have to avoid foods that in any way resemble vaginas, including anything that is red, wet, slimy, comes from a hole, or has hair. It sounds at first like arbitrary superstition mixed with the predictable sexism of a patriarchal society. Turiel would call these rules social conventions, because the Hua

don't believe that men in other tribes have to follow these rules. But the Hua certainly seemed to think of their food rules as moral rules. They talked about them constantly, judged each other by their food habits, and governed their lives, duties, and relationships by what the anthropologist Anna Meigs called "a religion of the body."<sup>20</sup>

But it's not just hunter-gatherers in rain forests who believe that bodily practices can be moral practices. When I read the Hebrew Bible, I was shocked to discover how much of the book—one of the sources of Western morality—was taken up with rules about food, menstruation, sex, skin, and the handling of corpses. Some of these rules were clear attempts to avoid disease, such as the long sections of Leviticus on leprosy. But many of the rules seemed to follow a more emotional logic about avoiding disgust. For example, the Bible prohibits Jews from eating or even touching "the swarming things that swarm upon the earth" (and just think how much more disgusting a swarm of mice is than a single mouse).<sup>21</sup> Other rules seemed to follow a conceptual logic involving keeping categories pure or not mixing things together (such as clothing made from two different fibers).<sup>22</sup>

So what's going on here? If Turiel was right that morality is really about harm, then why do most non-Western cultures moralize so many practices that seem to have nothing to do with harm? Why do many Christians and Jews believe that "cleanliness is next to godliness"?<sup>23</sup> And why do so many Westerners, even secular ones, continue to see choices about food and sex as being heavily loaded with moral significance? Liberals sometimes say that religious conservatives are sexual prudes for whom anything other than missionary-position intercourse within marriage is a sin. But conservatives can just as well make fun of liberal struggles to choose a balanced breakfast—balanced among moral concerns about free-range eggs, fair-trade coffee, naturalness, and a variety of toxins, some of which (such as genetically modified corn and soybeans) pose a greater threat spiritually than biologically. Even if Turiel was right that children lock onto harmfulness as a method for identifying immoral actions, I couldn't see how kids in the West—let alone among the Azande, the Ilongot, and the Hua—could have come to all this purity and pollution stuff on their own. There must be more to moral development than kids

constructing rules as they take the perspectives of other people and feel their pain. There must be something beyond rationalism.

### THE GREAT DEBATE

When anthropologists wrote about morality, it was as though they spoke a different language from the psychologists I had been reading. The Rosetta stone that helped me translate between the two fields was a paper that had just been published by Fiske's former advisor, Richard Shweder, at the University of Chicago.<sup>24</sup> Shweder is a psychological anthropologist who had lived and worked in Orissa, a state on the east coast of India. He had found large differences in how Oriyans (residents of Orissa) and Americans thought about personality and individuality, and these differences led to corresponding differences in how they thought about morality. Shweder quoted the anthropologist Clifford Geertz on how unusual Westerners are in thinking about people as discrete individuals:

The Western conception of the person as a bounded, unique, more or less integrated motivational and cognitive universe, a dynamic center of awareness, emotion, judgment, and action organized into a distinctive whole and set contrastively both against other such wholes and against its social and natural background, is, however incorrigible it may seem to us, a rather peculiar idea within the context of the world's cultures.<sup>25</sup>

Shweder offered a simple idea to explain why the self differs so much across cultures: all societies must resolve a small set of questions about how to order society, the most important being how to balance the needs of individuals and groups. There seem to be just two primary ways of answering this question. Most societies have chosen the *sociocentric* answer, placing the needs of groups and institutions first, and subordinating the needs of individuals. In contrast, the *individualistic* answer places individuals at the center and makes society a

servant of the individual.<sup>26</sup> The sociocentric answer dominated most of the ancient world, but the individualistic answer became a powerful rival during the Enlightenment. The individualistic answer largely vanquished the sociocentric approach in the twentieth century as individual rights expanded rapidly, consumer culture spread, and the Western world reacted with horror to the evils perpetrated by the ultrasociocentric fascist and communist empires. (European nations with strong social safety nets are not sociocentric on this definition. They just do a very good job of protecting *individuals* from the vicissitudes of life.)

Shweder thought that the theories of Kohlberg and Turiel were produced by and for people from individualistic cultures. He doubted that those theories would apply in Orissa, where morality was sociocentric, selves were interdependent, and no bright line separated moral rules (preventing harm) from social conventions (regulating behaviors not linked directly to harm). To test his ideas, he and two collaborators came up with thirty-nine very short stories in which someone does something that would violate a rule either in the United States or in Orissa. The researchers then interviewed 180 children (ranging in age from five to thirteen) and 60 adults who lived in Hyde Park (the neighborhood surrounding the University of Chicago) about these stories. They also interviewed a matched sample of Brahmin children and adults in the town of Bhubaneswar (an ancient pilgrimage site in Orissa),<sup>27</sup> and 120 people from low ("untouchable") castes. Altogether it was an enormous undertaking—six hundred long interviews in two very different cities.

The interview used Turiel's method, more or less, but the scenarios covered many more behaviors than Turiel had ever asked about. As you can see in the top third of figure 1.1, people in some of the stories obviously hurt other people or treated them unfairly, and subjects (the people being interviewed) in both countries condemned these actions by saying that they were wrong, unalterably wrong, and universally wrong. But the Indians would not condemn other cases that seemed (to Americans) just as clearly to involve harm and unfairness (see middle third).

Most of the thirty-nine stories portrayed no harm or unfairness,



Actions that Indians and Americans agreed were wrong:

- While walking, a man saw a dog sleeping on the road. He walked up to it and kicked it.
- A father said to his son, "If you do well on the exam, I will buy you a pen." The son did well on the exam, but the father did not give him anything.

Actions that Americans said were wrong but  
Indians said were acceptable:

- A young married woman went alone to see a movie without informing her husband. When she returned home her husband said, "If you do it again, I will beat you black and blue." She did it again; he beat her black and blue. (Judge the husband.)
- A man had a married son and a married daughter. After his death his son claimed most of the property. His daughter got little. (Judge the son.)

Actions that Indians said were wrong but  
Americans said were acceptable:

- In a family, a twenty-five-year-old son addresses his father by his first name.
- A woman cooked rice and wanted to eat with her husband and his elder brother. Then she ate with them. (Judge the woman.)
- A widow in your community eats fish two or three times a week.
- After defecation a woman did not change her clothes before cooking.

FIGURE 1.1. Some of the thirty-nine stories used in Shweder, Mahapatra, and Miller 1987.

at least none that could have been obvious to a five-year-old child, and nearly all Americans said that these actions were permissible (see the bottom third of figure 1.1). If Indians said that these actions were wrong, then Turiel would predict that they were condemning the actions merely as violations of social conventions. Yet most of the Indian subjects—even the five-year-old children—said that these actions were wrong, universally wrong, and unalterably wrong. Indian practices related to food, sex, clothing, and gender relations were almost always judged to be moral issues, not social conventions, and there were few differences between the adults and children within each city. In other words, Shweder found almost no trace of social conventional thinking in the sociocentric culture of Orissa, where, as he put it, "the social order is a moral order." Morality was much broader and thicker in Orissa; almost any practice could be loaded up with moral force. And if that was true, then Turiel's theory became less plausible. Children were not figuring out morality for themselves, based on the bedrock certainty that harm is bad.

Even in Chicago, Shweder found relatively little evidence of social-conventional thinking. There were plenty of stories that contained no obvious harm or injustice, such as a widow eating fish, and Americans predictably said that those cases were fine. But more important, they didn't see these behaviors as social conventions that could be changed by popular consent. They believed that widows should be able to eat whatever they darn well please, and if there's some other country where people try to limit widows' freedoms, well, they're wrong to do so. Even in the United States the social order is a moral order, but it's an individualistic order built up around the protection of individuals and their freedom. The distinction between morals and mere conventions is not a tool that children everywhere use to self-construct their moral knowledge. Rather, the distinction turns out to be a cultural artifact, a necessary by-product of the individualistic answer to the question of how individuals and groups relate. When you put individuals first, before society, then any rule or social practice that limits personal freedom can be questioned. If it doesn't protect somebody from harm, then it can't be morally justified. It's just a social convention.

SOCIAL  
ORDER =  
MORAL  
ORDER

SOCIAL  
CONVENTION  
VS  
MORAL RULES

Shweder's study was a major attack on the whole rationalist approach, and Turiel didn't take it lying down. He wrote a long rebuttal essay pointing out that many of Shweder's thirty-nine stories were trick questions: they had very different meanings in India and America.<sup>28</sup> For example, Hindus in Orissa believe that fish is a "hot" food that will stimulate a person's sexual appetite. If a widow eats hot foods, she is more likely to have sex with someone, which would offend the spirit of her dead husband and prevent her from reincarnating at a higher level. Turiel argued that once you take into account Indian "informational assumptions" about the way the world works, you see that most of Shweder's thirty-nine stories really *were* moral violations, harming victims in ways that Americans could not see. So Shweder's study didn't contradict Turiel's claims; it might even support them, if we could find out for sure whether Shweder's Indian subjects saw harm in the stories.

#### DISGUST AND DISRESPECT

When I read the Shweder and Turiel essays, I had two strong reactions. The first was an intellectual agreement with Turiel's defense. Shweder had used "trick" questions not to be devious but to demonstrate that rules about food, clothing, ways of addressing people, and other seemingly conventional matters could all get woven into a thick moral web. Nonetheless, I agreed with Turiel that Shweder's study was missing an important experimental control: he didn't ask his subjects about harm. If Shweder wanted to show that morality extended beyond harm in Orissa, he had to show that people were willing to morally condemn actions that *they themselves* stated were harmless.

My second reaction was a gut feeling that Shweder was ultimately right. His explanation of sociocentric morality fit so perfectly with the ethnographies I had read in Fiske's class. His emphasis on the moral emotions was so satisfying after reading all that cerebral cognitive-developmental work. I thought that if somebody ran the right study—one that controlled for perceptions of harm—Shweder's

claims about cultural differences would survive the test. I spent the next semester figuring out how to become that somebody.

I started writing very short stories about people who do offensive things, but do them in such a way that nobody is harmed. I called these stories "harmless taboo violations," and you read two of them at the start of this chapter (about dog-eating and chicken- . . . eating). I made up dozens of these stories but quickly found that the ones that worked best fell into two categories: disgust and disrespect. If you want to give people a quick flash of revulsion but deprive them of any victim they can use to justify moral condemnation, ask them about people who do disgusting or disrespectful things, but make sure the actions are done in private so that nobody else is offended. For example, one of my disrespect stories was: "A woman is cleaning out her closet, and she finds her old American flag. She doesn't want the flag anymore, so she cuts it up into pieces and uses the rags to clean her bathroom."

My idea was to give adults and children stories that pitted gut feelings about important cultural norms against reasoning about harmlessness, and then see which force was stronger. Turiel's rationalism predicted that reasoning about harm is the basis of moral judgment, so even though people might say it's wrong to eat your dog, they would have to treat the act as a violation of a social convention. (*We* don't eat our dogs, but hey, if people in another country want to eat their ex-pets rather than bury them, who are we to criticize?) Shweder's theory, on the other hand, said that Turiel's predictions should hold among members of individualistic secular societies but not elsewhere. I now had a study designed. I just had to find the elsewhere. 7

I spoke Spanish fairly well, so when I learned that a major conference of Latin American psychologists was to be held in Buenos Aires in July 1989, I bought a plane ticket. I had no contacts and no idea how to start an international research collaboration, so I just went to every talk that had anything to do with morality. I was chagrined to discover that psychology in Latin America was not very scientific. It was heavily theoretical, and much of that theory was Marxist, focused on oppression, colonialism, and power. I was beginning to despair

when I chanced upon a session run by some Brazilian psychologists who were using Kohlbergian methods to study moral development. I spoke afterward to the chair of the session, Angela Biaggio, and her graduate student Silvia Koller. Even though they both liked Kohlberg's approach, they were interested in hearing about alternatives. Biaggio invited me to visit them after the conference at their university in Porto Alegre, the capital of the southernmost state in Brazil.

Southern Brazil is the most European part of the country, settled largely by Portuguese, German, and Italian immigrants in the nineteenth century. With its modern architecture and middle-class prosperity, Porto Alegre didn't look anything like the Latin America of my imagination, so at first I was disappointed. I wanted my cross-cultural study to involve someplace exotic, like Orissa. But Silvia Koller was a wonderful collaborator, and she had two great ideas about how to increase our cultural diversity. First, she suggested we run the study across social class. The divide between rich and poor is so vast in Brazil that it's as though people live in different countries. We decided to interview adults and children from the educated middle class, and also from the lower class—adults who worked as servants for wealthy people (and who rarely had more than an eighth-grade education) and children from a public school in the neighborhood where many of the servants lived. Second, Silvia had a friend who had just been hired as a professor in Recife, a city in the northeastern tip of the country, a region that is culturally very different from Porto Alegre. Silvia arranged for me to visit her friend, Graça Dias, the following month.

Silvia and I worked for two weeks with a team of undergraduate students, translating the harmless taboo stories into Portuguese, selecting the best ones, refining the probe questions, and testing our interview script to make sure that everything was understandable, even by the least educated subjects, some of whom were illiterate. Then I went off to Recife, where Graça and I trained a team of students to conduct interviews in exactly the way they were being done in Porto Alegre. In Recife I finally felt like I was working in an exotic tropical locale, with Brazilian music wafting through the streets and ripe mangoes falling from the trees. More important, the people of

northeast Brazil are mostly of mixed ancestry (African and European), and the region is poorer and much less industrialized than Porto Alegre.

When I returned to Philadelphia, I trained my own team of interviewers and supervised the data collection for the four groups of subjects in Philadelphia. The design of the study was therefore what we call "three by two by two," meaning that we had three cities, and in each city we had two levels of social class (high and low), and within each social class we had two age groups: children (ages ten to twelve) and adults (ages eighteen to twenty-eight). That made for twelve groups in all, with thirty people in each group, for a total of 360 interviews. This large number of subjects allowed me to run statistical tests to examine the independent effects of city, social class, and age. I predicted that Philadelphia would be the most individualistic of the three cities (and therefore the most Turiel-like) and Recife would be the most sociocentric (and therefore more like Orissa in its judgments).

The results were as clear as could be in support of Shweder. First, all four of my Philadelphia groups confirmed Turiel's finding that Americans make a big distinction between moral and conventional violations. I used two stories taken directly from Turiel's research: a girl pushes a boy off a swing (that's a clear moral violation) and a boy refuses to wear a school uniform (that's a conventional violation). This validated my methods. It meant that any differences I found on the harmless taboo stories could not be attributed to some quirk about the way I phrased the probe questions or trained my interviewers. The upper-class Brazilians looked just like the Americans on these stories. But the working-class Brazilian kids usually thought that it was wrong, and universally wrong, to break the social convention and not wear the uniform. In Recife in particular, the working-class kids judged the uniform rebel in exactly the same way they judged the swing-pusher. This pattern supported Shweder: the size of the moral-conventional distinction varied across cultural groups.

The second thing I found was that people responded to the harmless taboo stories just as Shweder had predicted: the upper-class Philadelphians judged them to be violations of social conventions,

and the lower-class Recifeans judged them to be moral violations. There were separate significant effects of city (Porto Alegreans moralized more than Philadelphians, and Recifeans moralized more than Porto Alegreans), of social class (lower-class groups moralized more than upper-class groups), and of age (children moralized more than adults). Unexpectedly, the effect of social class was much larger than the effect of city. In other words, well-educated people in all three cities were more similar to each other than they were to their lower-class neighbors. I had flown five thousand miles south to search for moral variation when in fact there was more to be found a few blocks west of campus, in the poor neighborhood surrounding my university.

My third finding was that all the differences I found held up when I controlled for perceptions of harm. I had included a probe question that directly asked, after each story: "Do you think anyone was harmed by what [the person in the story] did?" If Shweder's findings were caused by perceptions of hidden victims (as Turiel proposed), then my cross-cultural differences should have disappeared when I removed the subjects who said yes to this question. But when I filtered out these people, the cultural differences got *bigger*, not smaller. This was very strong support for Shweder's claim that the moral domain goes far beyond harm. Most of my subjects said that the harmless-taboo violations were universally wrong even though they harmed nobody.

In other words, Shweder won the debate. I had replicated Turiel's findings using Turiel's methods on people like me—educated Westerners raised in an individualistic culture—but had confirmed Shweder's claim that Turiel's theory didn't travel well. The moral domain varied across nations and social classes. For most of the people in my study, the moral domain extended well beyond issues of harm and fairness.

It was hard to see how a rationalist could explain these results. How could children self-construct their moral knowledge about disgust and disrespect from their private analyses of harmfulness? There must be other sources of moral knowledge, including cultural learning (as Shweder argued), or innate moral intuitions about disgust and disrespect (as I began to argue years later).

I once overheard a Kohlberg-style moral judgment interview being conducted in the bathroom of a McDonald's restaurant in northern Indiana. The person interviewed—the subject—was a Caucasian male roughly thirty years old. The interviewer was a Caucasian male approximately four years old. The interview began at adjacent urinals:

INTERVIEWER: *Dad, what would happen if I pooped in here [the urinal]?*

SUBJECT: *It would be yucky. Go ahead and flush. Come on, let's go wash our hands.*

*[The pair then moved over to the sinks]*

INTERVIEWER: *Dad, what would happen if I pooped in the sink?*

SUBJECT: *The people who work here would get mad at you.*

INTERVIEWER: *What would happen if I pooped in the sink at home?*

SUBJECT: *I'd get mad at you.*

INTERVIEWER: *What would happen if you pooped in the sink at home?*

SUBJECT: *Mom would get mad at me.*

INTERVIEWER: *Well, what would happen if we all pooped in the sink at home?*

SUBJECT: *[pause] I guess we'd all get in trouble.*

INTERVIEWER: *[laughing] Yeah, we'd all get in trouble!*

SUBJECT: *Come on, let's dry our hands. We have to go.*

Note the skill and persistence of the interviewer, who probes for a deeper answer by changing the transgression to remove the punisher. Yet even when everyone cooperates in the rule violation so that nobody can play the role of punisher, the subject still clings to a notion of cosmic justice in which, somehow, the whole family would "get in trouble."

Of course, the father is not really trying to demonstrate his best moral reasoning. Moral reasoning is usually done to influence other people (see chapter 4), and what the father is trying to do is get his curious son to feel the right emotions—disgust and fear—to motivate appropriate bathroom behavior.

## INVENTING VICTIMS

Even though the results came out just as Shweder had predicted, there were a number of surprises along the way. The biggest surprise was that so many subjects tried to invent victims. I had written the stories carefully to remove all conceivable harm to other people, yet in 38 percent of the 1,620 times that people heard a harmless-offensive story, they claimed that somebody was harmed. In the dog story, for example, many people said that the family itself would be harmed because they would get sick from eating dog meat. Was this an example of the "informational assumptions" that Turiel had talked about? Were people really condemning the actions *because* they foresaw these harms, or was it the reverse process—were people *inventing* these harms because they had already condemned the actions?

I conducted many of the Philadelphia interviews myself, and it was obvious that most of these supposed harms were post hoc fabrications. People usually condemned the actions very quickly—they didn't seem to need much time to decide what they thought. But it often took them a while to come up with a victim, and they usually offered those victims up halfheartedly and almost apologetically. As one subject said, "Well, I don't know, maybe the woman will feel guilty afterward about throwing out her flag?" Many of these victim claims were downright preposterous, such as the child who justified his condemnation of the flag shredder by saying that the rags might clog up the toilet and cause it to overflow.

But something even more interesting happened when I or the other interviewers challenged these invented-victim claims. I had trained my interviewers to correct people gently when they made claims that contradicted the text of the story. For example, if someone said, "It's wrong to cut up the flag because a neighbor might see her do it, and he might be offended," the interviewer replied, "Well, it says here in the story that nobody saw her do it. So would you still say it was wrong for her to cut up her flag?" Yet even when subjects recognized that their victim claims were bogus, they still refused to say that the act was OK. Instead, they kept searching for another victim. They

said things like "I know it's wrong, but I just can't think of a reason why." They seemed to be *morally dumbfounded*—rendered speechless by their inability to explain verbally what they knew intuitively.<sup>29</sup>

These subjects were reasoning. They were working quite hard at reasoning. But it was not reasoning in search of truth; it was reasoning in support of their emotional reactions. It was reasoning as described by the philosopher David Hume, who wrote in 1739 that "reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them."<sup>30</sup>

I had found evidence for Hume's claim. I had found that moral reasoning was often a servant of moral emotions, and this was a challenge to the rationalist approach that dominated moral psychology. I published these findings in one of the top psychology journals in October 1993<sup>31</sup> and then waited nervously for the response. I knew that the field of moral psychology was not going to change overnight just because one grad student produced some data that didn't fit into the prevailing paradigm. I knew that debates in moral psychology could be quite heated (though always civil). What I did not expect, however, was that there would be no response at all. Here I thought I had done the definitive study to settle a major debate in moral psychology, yet almost nobody cited my work—not even to attack it—in the first five years after I published it.

My dissertation landed with a silent thud in part because I published it in a social psychology journal. But in the early 1990s, the field of moral psychology was still a part of developmental psychology. If you called yourself a moral psychologist, it meant that you studied moral reasoning and how it changed with age, and you cited Kohlberg extensively whether you agreed with him or not.

But psychology itself was about to change and become a lot more emotional.

## IN SUM

Where does morality come from? The two most common answers have long been that it is innate (the nativist answer) or that it comes

from childhood learning (the empiricist answer). In this chapter I considered a third possibility, the rationalist answer, which dominated moral psychology when I entered the field: that morality is self-constructed by children on the basis of their experiences with harm. Kids know that harm is wrong because they hate to be harmed, and they gradually come to see that it is therefore wrong to harm others, which leads them to understand fairness and eventually justice. I explained why I came to reject this answer after conducting research in Brazil and the United States. I concluded instead that:

- The moral domain varies by culture. It is unusually narrow in Western, educated, and individualistic cultures. Sociocentric cultures broaden the moral domain to encompass and regulate more aspects of life.
- People sometimes have gut feelings—particularly about disgust and disrespect—that can drive their reasoning. Moral reasoning is sometimes a post hoc fabrication.
- Morality can't be entirely self-constructed by children based on their growing understanding of harm. Cultural learning or guidance must play a larger role than rationalist theories had given it.

If morality doesn't come primarily from reasoning, then that leaves some combination of innateness and social learning as the most likely candidates. In the rest of this book I'll try to explain how morality can be innate (as a set of evolved intuitions) and learned (as children learn to apply those intuitions within a particular culture). We're born to be righteous, but we have to learn what, exactly, people like us should be righteous about.

## SEVEN

## The Moral Foundations of Politics

Behind every act of altruism, heroism, and human decency you'll find either selfishness or stupidity. That, at least, is the view long held by many social scientists who accepted the idea that *Homo sapiens* is really *Homo economicus*.<sup>1</sup> "Economic man" is a simple creature who makes all of life's choices like a shopper in a supermarket with plenty of time to compare jars of applesauce. If that's your view of human nature, then it's easy to create mathematical models of behavior because there's really just one principle at work: self-interest. People do whatever gets them the most benefit for the lowest cost.

To see how wrong this view is, answer the ten questions in figure 7.1. *Homo economicus* would put a price on sticking a needle into his own arm, and a lower price—perhaps zero—on the other nine actions, none of which hurts him directly or costs him anything.

More important than the numbers you wrote are the comparisons between columns. *Homo economicus* would find the actions in column B no more aversive than those in column A. If you found any of the actions in column B worse than their counterparts in column A, then congratulations, you are a human being, not an economist's fantasy. You have concerns beyond narrow self-interest. You have a working set of moral foundations.

How much would someone have to pay you to perform each of these actions? Assume that you'd be paid secretly and that there would be no social, legal, or other harmful consequences to you afterward. Answer by writing a number from 0 to 4 after each action, where:

0 = \$0, I'd do it for free

1 = \$100

2 = \$10,000

3 = \$1,000,000

4 = I would not do this for any amount of money

Column A	Column B
1a. Stick a sterile hypodermic needle into your arm. ____	1b. Stick a sterile hypodermic needle into the arm of a child you don't know. ____
2a. Accept a plasma-screen television that a friend of yours wants to give you. You know that the friend got the TV a year ago when the company that made it sent it to your friend, by mistake and at no charge. ____	2b. Accept a plasma-screen television that a friend of yours wants to give you. You know that your friend bought the TV a year ago from a thief who had stolen it from a wealthy family. ____
3a. Say something critical about your nation (which you believe to be true) while calling in, anonymously, to a talk-radio show in your nation. ____	3b. Say something critical about your nation (which you believe to be true) while calling in, anonymously, to a talk-radio show in a foreign nation. ____
4a. Slap a male friend in the face (with his permission) as part of a comedy skit. ____	4b. Slap your father in the face (with his permission) as part of a comedy skit. ____
5a. Attend a short avant-garde play in which the actors act like fools for thirty minutes, including failing to solve simple problems and falling down repeatedly onstage. ____	5b. Attend a short avant-garde play in which the actors act like animals for 30 minutes, including crawling around naked and grunting like chimpanzees. ____
Total for Column A: ____	Total for Column B: ____

FIGURE 7.1. What's your price?

I wrote these five pairs of actions so that the B column would give you an intuitive flash from each foundation, like putting a grain of salt or sugar on your tongue. The five rows illustrate violations of Care (hurting a child), Fairness (profiting from someone else's undeserved loss), Loyalty (criticizing your nation to outsiders), Authority (disrespecting your father), and Sanctity (acting in a degrading or disgusting way).

In the rest of this chapter I'll describe these foundations and how they became part of human nature. I'll show that these foundations are used differently, and to different degrees, to support moral matrices on the political left and right.

#### A NOTE ON INNATENESS

It used to be risky for a scientist to assert that anything about human behavior was innate. To back up such claims, you had to show that the trait was hardwired, unchangeable by experience, and found in all cultures. With that definition, not much is innate, aside from a few infant reflexes such as that cute thing they do when you put one finger into their little hands. If you proposed that anything more complex than that was innate—particularly a sex difference—you'd be told that there was a tribe somewhere on Earth that didn't show the trait, so therefore it's not innate.

We've advanced a lot since the 1970s in our understanding of the brain, and now we know that traits can be innate without being either hardwired or universal. As the neuroscientist Gary Marcus explains, "Nature bestows upon the newborn a considerably complex brain, but one that is best seen as *prewired*—flexible and subject to change—rather than *hardwired*, fixed, and immutable."<sup>2</sup>

To replace wiring diagrams, Marcus suggests a better analogy: The brain is like a book, the first draft of which is written by the genes during fetal development. No chapters are complete at birth, and some are just rough outlines waiting to be filled in during childhood. But not a single chapter—be it on sexuality, language, food preferences, or morality—consists of blank pages on which a society

can inscribe any conceivable set of words. Marcus's analogy leads to the best definition of innateness I have ever seen:

Nature provides a first draft, which experience then revises. . . . "Built-in" does not mean unmalleable; it means "*organized in advance of experience*."<sup>3</sup>

The list of five moral foundations was my first attempt to specify how the righteous mind was "organized in advance of experience." But Moral Foundations Theory also tries to explain how that first draft gets revised during childhood to produce the diversity of moralities that we find across cultures—and across the political spectrum.

#### 1. THE CARE/HARM FOUNDATION

Reptiles get a bad rap for being cold—not just cold-blooded but coldhearted. Some reptile mothers do hang around after their babies hatch, to provide some protection, but in many species they don't. So when the first mammals began suckling their young, they raised the cost of motherhood. No longer would females turn out dozens of babies and bet that a few would survive on their own.

Mammals make fewer bets and invest a lot more in each one, so mammals face the challenge of caring for and nurturing their children for a long time. Primate moms place even fewer bets and invest still more in each one. And human babies, whose brains are so enormous that a child must be pushed out through the birth canal a year before he or she can walk, are bets so huge that a woman can't even put her chips on the table by herself. She needs help in the last months of pregnancy, help to deliver the baby, and help to feed and care for the child for years after the birth. Given this big wager, there is an enormous adaptive challenge: to care for the vulnerable and expensive child, keep it safe, keep it alive, keep it from harm.

It is just not conceivable that the chapter on mothering in the book of human nature is entirely blank, leaving it for mothers to learn everything by cultural instruction or trial and error. Mothers who



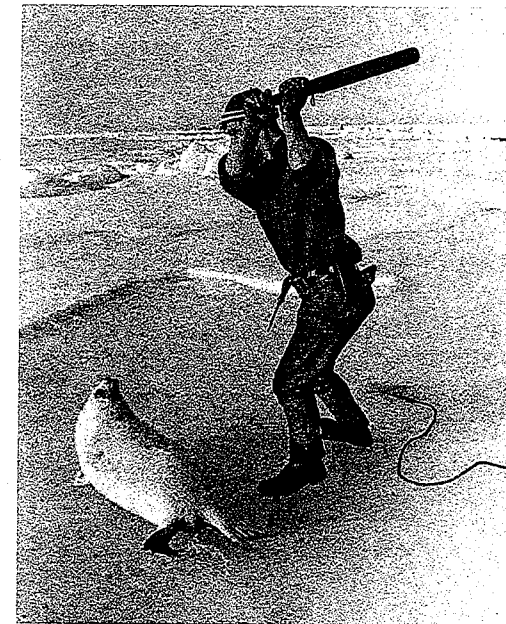
FIGURE 7.2. *Baby Gogo, Max, and Gogo.*

were innately sensitive to signs of suffering, distress, or neediness improved their odds, relative to their less sensitive sisters.

And it's not only mothers who need innate knowledge. Given the number of people who pool their resources to bet on each child, evolution favored women and (to a lesser extent) men who had an automatic reaction to signs of need or suffering, such as crying, from children in their midst (who, in ancient times, were likely to be kin).<sup>4</sup> The suffering of your own children is the original trigger of one of the key modules of the Care foundation. (I'll often refer to foundations using only the first of their two names—Care rather than Care/harm.) This module works with other related modules<sup>5</sup> to meet the adaptive challenge of protecting and caring for children.

This is not a just-so story. It is my retelling of the beginning of attachment theory, a well-supported theory that describes the system by which mothers and children regulate each other's behavior so that the child gets a good mix of protection and opportunities for independent exploration.<sup>6</sup>

The set of current triggers for any module is often much larger than the set of original triggers. The photo in figure 7.2 illustrates this expansion in four ways. First, you might find it cute. If you do, it's because your mind is automatically responsive to certain proportions

FIGURE 7.3. *A current trigger for the Care/harm foundation.*

and patterns that distinguish human children from adults. Cuteness primes us to care, nurture, protect, and interact.<sup>7</sup> It gets the elephant leaning. Second, although this is not your child, you might still have an instant emotional response because the Care foundation can be triggered by any child. Third, you might find my son's companions (Gogo and Baby Gogo) cute, even though they are not real children, because they were designed by a toy company to trigger your Care foundation. Fourth, Max loves Gogo; he screams when I accidentally sit on Gogo, and he often says, "I am Gogo's mommy," because his attachment system and Care foundation are developing normally.

If your buttons can get pushed by a photo of a child sleeping with two stuffed monkeys, just imagine how you'd feel if you saw a child or a cute animal facing the threat of violence, as in figure 7.3.

It makes no evolutionary sense for you to care about what happens to my son Max, or a hungry child in a faraway country, or a baby seal. But Darwin doesn't have to explain why you shed any *particular*

tear. He just has to explain why you have tear ducts in the first place, and why those ducts can sometimes be activated by suffering that is not your own.<sup>8</sup> Darwin must explain the original triggers of each module. The current triggers can change rapidly. We care about violence toward many more classes of victims today than our grandparents did in their time.<sup>9</sup>

Political parties and interest groups strive to make their concerns become current triggers of your moral modules. To get your vote, your money, or your time, they must activate at least one of your moral foundations.<sup>10</sup> For example, figure 7.4 shows two cars I photographed in Charlottesville. What can you guess about the drivers' politics?

Bumper stickers are often tribal badges; they advertise the teams we support, including sports teams, universities, and rock bands. The driver of the "Save Darfur" car is announcing that he or she is on the liberal team. You know that intuitively, but I can give a more formal reason: The moral matrix of liberals, in America and elsewhere, rests more heavily on the Care foundation than do the matrices of conservatives, and this driver has selected three bumper stickers urging people to protect innocent victims.<sup>11</sup> The driver has no relationship to these victims. The driver is trying to get you to connect your thinking about Darfur and meat-eating to the intuitions generated by your Care foundation.

It was harder to find bumper stickers related to compassion for conservatives, but the "wounded warrior" car is an example. This driver is also trying to get you to care, but conservative caring is somewhat different—it is aimed not at animals or at people in other countries but at those who've sacrificed for the group.<sup>12</sup> It is not universalist; it is more local, and blended with loyalty.

## 2. THE FAIRNESS/CHEATING FOUNDATION

Suppose a coworker offers to take on your workload for five days so that you can add a second week to your Caribbean vacation. How would you feel? *Homo economicus* would feel unalloyed pleasure, as though he had just been given a free bag of groceries. But the rest



FIGURE 7.4. Liberal and conservative caring.

of us know that the bag isn't free. It's a big favor, and you can't repay your coworker by bringing back a bottle of rum. If you accept her offer, you're likely to do so while gushing forth expressions of gratitude, praise for her kindness, and a promise to do the same for her whenever she goes on vacation.

Evolutionary theorists often speak of genes as being “selfish,” meaning that they can only influence an animal to do things that will spread copies of that gene. But one of the most important insights into the origins of morality is that “selfish” genes can give rise to generous creatures, as long as those creatures are selective in their generosity. Altruism toward kin is not a puzzle at all. Altruism toward non-kin, on the other hand, has presented one of the longest-running puzzles in the history of evolutionary thinking.<sup>13</sup> A big step toward its solution came in 1971 when Robert Trivers published his theory of reciprocal altruism.<sup>14</sup>

Trivers noted that evolution could create altruists in a species where individuals could remember their prior interactions with other individuals and then limit their current niceness to those who were likely to repay the favor. We humans are obviously just such a species. Trivers proposed that we evolved a set of moral emotions that make us play “tit for tat.” We’re usually nice to people when we first meet them. But after that we’re selective: we cooperate with those who have been nice to us, and we shun those who took advantage of us.

Human life is a series of opportunities for mutually beneficial cooperation. If we play our cards right, we can work with others to enlarge the pie that we ultimately share. Hunters work together to bring down large prey that nobody could catch alone. Neighbors watch each other’s houses and loan each other tools. Coworkers cover each other’s shifts. For millions of years, our ancestors faced the adaptive challenge of reaping these benefits without getting suckered. Those whose moral emotions compelled them to play “tit for tat” reaped more of these benefits than those who played any other strategy, such as “help anyone who needs it” (which invites exploitation), or “take but don’t give” (which can work just once with each person; pretty soon nobody’s willing to share pie with you).<sup>15</sup> The original triggers of the Fairness modules are acts of cooperation or selfishness that people show toward us. We feel pleasure, liking, and friendship when people show signs that they can be trusted to reciprocate. We feel anger, contempt, and even sometimes disgust when people try to cheat us or take advantage of us.<sup>16</sup>

The current triggers of the Fairness modules include a great

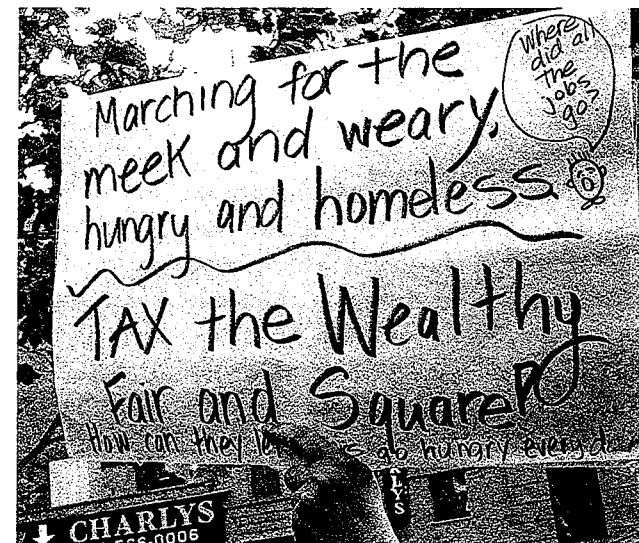


FIGURE 7.5. *Fairness left and right.* Top: Sign at Occupy Wall Street, Zuccotti Park, New York City. Bottom: Sign at Tea Party rally, Washington, DC (photo by Emily Elkins). Everyone believes that taxes should be “fair.”

many things that have gotten linked, culturally and politically, to the dynamics of reciprocity and cheating. On the left, concerns about equality and social justice are based in part on the Fairness

foundation—wealthy and powerful groups are accused of gaining by exploiting those at the bottom while not paying their “fair share” of the tax burden. This is a major theme of the Occupy Wall Street movement, which I visited in October 2011 (see figure 7.5).<sup>17</sup> On the right, the Tea Party movement is also very concerned about fairness. They see Democrats as “socialists” who take money from hardworking Americans and give it to lazy people (including those who receive welfare or unemployment benefits) and to illegal immigrants (in the form of free health care and education).<sup>18</sup>

Everyone cares about fairness, but there are two major kinds. On the left, fairness often implies equality, but on the right it means proportionality—people should be rewarded in proportion to what they contribute, even if that guarantees unequal outcomes.

## The Conservative Advantage

In January 2005, I was invited to speak to the Charlottesville Democratic Party about moral psychology. I welcomed the chance because I had spent much of 2004 as a speechwriter for John Kerry's presidential campaign. Not a paid speechwriter—just a guy who, while walking his dog every evening, mentally rewrote some of Kerry's ineffectual appeals. For example, in Kerry's acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention, he listed a variety of failures of the Bush administration and after each one he proclaimed, "America can do better" and "Help is on the way." The first slogan connected to no moral foundation at all. The second one connected weakly to the Care/harm foundation, but only if you think of America as a nation of helpless citizens who need a Democratic president to care for them.

In my rewrite, Kerry listed a variety of Bush's campaign promises and after each one he asked, "You gonna pay for that, George?" That simple slogan would have made Bush's many new programs, coming on top of his tax cuts and vast expenditures on two wars, look like shoplifting rather than generosity. Kerry could have activated the cheater detection modules of the Fairness/cheating foundation.

The message of my talk to the Charlottesville Democrats was

simple: *Republicans understand moral psychology. Democrats don't.* Republicans have long understood that the elephant is in charge of political behavior, not the rider, and they know how elephants work.<sup>1</sup> Their slogans, political commercials, and speeches go straight for the gut, as in the infamous 1988 ad showing a mug shot of a black man, Willie Horton, who committed a brutal murder after being released from prison on a weekend furlough by the "soft-on-crime" Democratic candidate, Governor Michael Dukakis. Democrats have often aimed their appeals more squarely at the rider, emphasizing specific policies and the benefits they'll bring to you, the voter.

Neither George W. Bush nor his father, George H. W. Bush, had the ability to move audiences to tears, but both had the great fortune to run against cerebral and emotionally cool Democrats (Michael Dukakis, Al Gore, and John Kerry). It is no coincidence that the only Democrat since Franklin Roosevelt to win election and then reelection combined gregariousness and oratorical skill with an almost musical emotionality. Bill Clinton knew how to charm elephants.

Republicans don't just aim to cause fear, as some Democrats charge. They trigger the full range of intuitions described by Moral Foundations Theory. Like Democrats, they can talk about innocent victims (of harmful Democratic policies) and about fairness (particularly the unfairness of taking tax money from hardworking and prudent people to support cheaters, slackers, and irresponsible fools). But Republicans since Nixon have had a near-monopoly on appeals to loyalty (particularly patriotism and military virtues) and authority (including respect for parents, teachers, elders, and the police, as well as for traditions). And after they embraced Christian conservatives during Ronald Reagan's 1980 campaign and became the party of "family values," Republicans inherited a powerful network of Christian ideas about sanctity and sexuality that allowed them to portray Democrats as the party of Sodom and Gomorrah. Set against the rising crime and chaos of the 1960s and 1970s, this five-foundation morality had wide appeal, even to many Democrats (the so-called Reagan Democrats). The moral vision offered by the Democrats since the 1960s, in contrast, seemed narrow, too focused on helping victims and fighting for the rights of the oppressed. The Democrats offered

just sugar (Care) and salt (Fairness as equality), whereas Republican morality appealed to all five taste receptors.

That was the story I told to the Charlottesville Democrats. I didn't blame the Republicans for trickery. I blamed the Democrats for psychological naiveté. I expected an angry reaction, but after two consecutive losses to George W. Bush, Democrats were so hungry for an explanation that the audience seemed willing to consider mine. Back then, however, my explanation was just speculation. I had not yet collected any data to support my claim that conservatives responded to a broader set of moral tastes than did liberals.<sup>2</sup>

### MEASURING MORALS

Fortunately, a graduate student arrived at UVA that year who made an honest man out of me. If Match.com had offered a way to pair up advisors and grad students, I couldn't have found a better partner than Jesse Graham. He had graduated from the University of Chicago (scholarly breadth), earned a master's degree at the Harvard Divinity School (an appreciation of religion), and then spent a year teaching English in Japan (cross-cultural experience). For Jesse's first-year research project, he created a questionnaire to measure people's scores on the five moral foundations.

We worked with my colleague Brian Nosek to create the first version of the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ), which began with these instructions: "When you decide whether something is right or wrong, to what extent are the following considerations relevant to your thinking?" We then explained the response scale, from 0 ("not at all relevant—this has nothing to do with my judgments of right and wrong") to 5 ("extremely relevant—this is one of the most important factors when I judge right and wrong"). We then listed fifteen statements—three for each of the five foundations—such as "whether or not someone was cruel" (for the Care foundation) or "whether or not someone showed a lack of respect for authority" (for the Authority foundation).

Brian was the director of ProjectImplicit.org, one of the largest

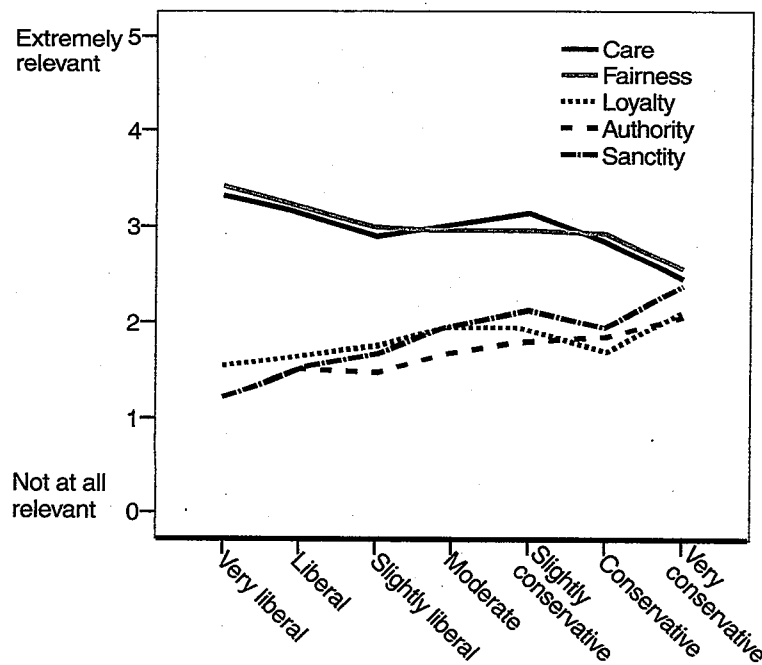


FIGURE 8.1. *The first evidence for Moral Foundations Theory.* (Adapted with permission from Graham, Haidt, and Nosek 2009, p. 1033; published by the American Psychological Association.)

research sites on the Internet, so we were able recruit 1,600 subjects to fill out the MFQ within a week. When Jesse graphed the data, he found exactly the differences we had predicted. I've reprinted Jesse's graph in figure 8.1, which shows responses from people who said they were "very liberal" on the far left, and then moves along the political spectrum through moderates (in the middle) to people who self-identified as "very conservative" (on the far right).<sup>3</sup>

As you can see, the lines for Care and Fairness (the two top lines) are moderately high across the board. Everyone—left, right, and center—says that concerns about compassion, cruelty, fairness, and injustice are relevant to their judgments about right and wrong. Yet still, the lines slope downward. Liberals say that these issues are a bit more relevant to morality than do conservatives.

But when we look at the Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity foundations, the story is quite different. Liberals largely reject these considerations. They show such a large gap between these foundations versus the Care and Fairness foundations that we might say, as shorthand, that liberals have a two-foundation morality.<sup>4</sup> As we move to the right, however, the lines slope upward. By the time we reach people who are "very conservative," all five lines have converged. We can say, as shorthand, that conservatives have a five-foundation morality. But can it really be true that conservatives care about a broader range of moral values and issues than do liberals? Or did this pattern only arise because of the particular questions that we happened to ask?

Over the next year, Jesse, Brian, and I refined the MFQ. We added questions that asked people to rate their agreement with statements we wrote to trigger intuitions related to each foundation. For example, do you agree with this Care item: "One of the worst things a person can do is to hurt a defenseless animal"? How about this Loyalty item: "It is more important to be a team player than to express oneself"? Jesse's original findings replicated beautifully. We found the same pattern as in figure 8.1, and we found it in subjects from many countries besides the United States.<sup>5</sup>

I began to show our graphs whenever I gave lectures about moral psychology. Ravi Iyer, a graduate student at the University of Southern California, heard me speak in the fall of 2006 and emailed me to ask if he could use the MFQ in his research on attitudes about immigration. Ravi was a skilled Web programmer, and he offered to help Jesse and me create a website for our own research. At around the same time, Sena Koleva, a graduate student at the University of California at Irvine, asked me if she could use the MFQ. Sena was studying political psychology with her advisor, Pete Ditto (whose work on "motivated reasoning" I described in chapter 4). I said yes to both requests.

Every January, social psychologists from all over the world flock to a single conference to learn about each other's work—and to gossip, network, and drink. In 2007, that conference was held in Memphis, Tennessee. Ravi, Sena, Pete, Jesse, and I met late one evening at the hotel bar, to share our findings and get to know one another.

All five of us were politically liberal, yet we shared the same concern about the way our liberal field approached political psychology. The goal of so much research was to explain what was wrong with conservatives. (Why don't conservatives embrace equality, diversity, and change, like normal people?) Just that day, in a session on political psychology, several of the speakers had made jokes about conservatives, or about the cognitive limitations of President Bush. All five of us felt this was wrong, not just morally (because it creates a hostile climate for the few conservatives who might have been in the audience) but also scientifically (because it reveals a motivation to reach certain conclusions, and we all knew how easy it is for people to reach their desired conclusions).<sup>6</sup> The five of us also shared a deep concern about the polarization and incivility of American political life, and we wanted to use moral psychology to help political partisans understand and respect each other.

We talked about several ideas for future studies, and for each one Ravi said, "You know, we could do that online." He proposed that we create a website where people could register when they first visit, and then take part in dozens of studies on moral and political psychology. We could then link all of their responses together and develop a comprehensive moral profile for each (anonymous) visitor. In return, we'd give visitors detailed feedback, showing them how they compared to others. If we made the feedback interesting enough, people would tell their friends about the site.

Over the next few months, Ravi designed the website—www.YourMorals.org—and the five of us worked together to improve it. On May 9 we got approval from the UVA human subjects committee to conduct the research, and the site went live the next day. Within a few weeks we were getting ten or more visitors a day. Then, in August, the science writer Nicholas Wade interviewed me for an article in the *New York Times* on the roots of morality.<sup>7</sup> He included the name of our website. The article ran on September 18, and by the end of that week, 26,000 new visitors had completed one or more of our surveys.

Figure 8.2 shows our data on the MFQ as it stood in 2011, with more than 130,000 subjects. We've made many improvements since

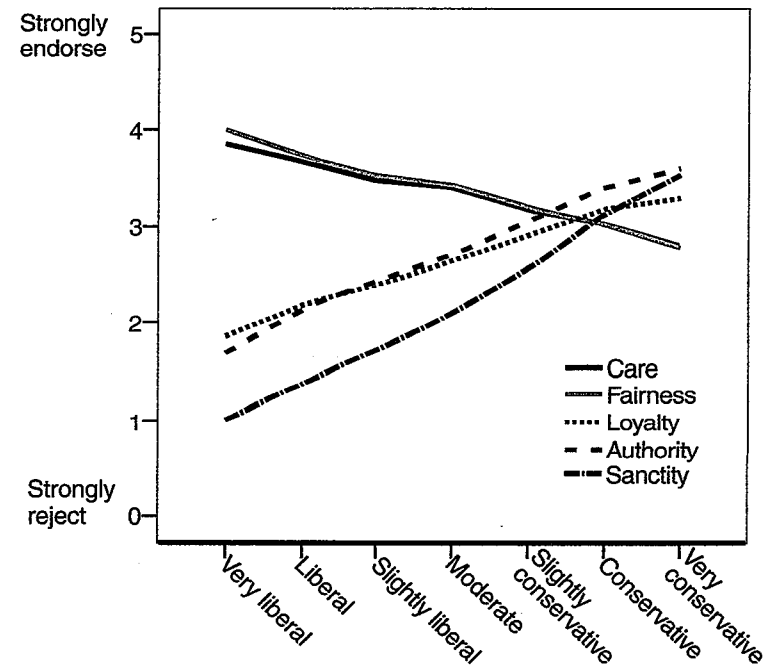


FIGURE 8.2. Scores on the MFQ, from 132,000 subjects, in 2011. Data from YourMorals.org.

Jesse's first simple survey, but we always find the same basic pattern that he found in 2006. The lines for Care and Fairness slant downward; the lines for Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity slant upward. Liberals value Care and Fairness far more than the other three foundations; conservatives endorse all five foundations more or less equally.<sup>8</sup>

We've found this basic difference no matter how we ask the questions. For example, in one study we asked people which traits would make them more or less likely to choose a particular breed of dog as a pet. On which side of the political spectrum do you suppose these traits would be most appealing?

- The breed is extremely gentle.
- The breed is very independent-minded and relates to its owner as a friend and equal.



- The breed is extremely loyal to its home and family and it doesn't warm up quickly to strangers.
- The breed is very obedient and is easily trained to take orders.
- The breed is very clean and, like a cat, takes great care with its personal hygiene.

We found that people want dogs that fit their own moral matrices. Liberals want dogs that are gentle (i.e., that fit with the values of the Care foundation) and relate to their owners as equals (Fairness as equality). Conservatives, on the other hand, want dogs that are loyal (Loyalty) and obedient (Authority). (The Sanctity item showed no partisan tilt; both sides prefer clean dogs.)

The converging pattern shown in figure 8.2 is not just something we find in Internet surveys. We found it in church too. Jesse obtained the text of dozens of sermons that were delivered in Unitarian (liberal) churches, and dozens more that were delivered in Southern Baptist (conservative) churches. Before reading the sermons, Jesse identified hundreds of words that were conceptually related to each foundation (for example, *peace*, *care*, and *compassion* on the positive side of Care, and *suffer*, *cruel*, and *brutal* on the negative side; *obey*, *duty*, and *honor* on the positive side of Authority, and *defy*, *disrespect*, and *rebel* on the negative side). Jesse then used a computer program called LIWC to count the number of times that each word was used in the two sets of texts.<sup>9</sup> This simple-minded method confirmed our findings from the MFQ: Unitarian preachers made greater use of Care and Fairness words, while Baptist preachers made greater use of Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity words.<sup>10</sup>

We find this pattern in brain waves too. We teamed up with Jamie Morris, a social neuroscientist at UVA, to present liberal and conservative students with sixty sentences that came in two versions. One version endorsed an idea consistent with a particular foundation, and the other version rejected the idea. For example, half of our subjects read "Total equality in the workplace is necessary." The other half read "Total equality in the workplace is unrealistic." Subjects wore a special cap to measure their brain waves as the words in

each sentence were flashed up on a screen, one word at a time. We later looked at the encephalogram (EEG) to determine whose brains showed evidence of surprise or shock at the moment that the key word was presented (e.g., *necessary* versus *unrealistic*).<sup>11</sup>

Liberal brains showed more surprise, compared to conservative brains, in response to sentences that rejected Care and Fairness concerns. They also showed more surprise in response to sentences that endorsed Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity concerns (for example, "In the teenage years, parental advice should be heeded" versus "... should be questioned"). In other words, when people choose the labels "liberal" or "conservative," they are not just choosing to endorse different values on questionnaires. Within the first half second after hearing a statement, partisan brains are already reacting differently. These initial flashes of neural activity *are* the elephant, leaning slightly, which then causes their riders to reason differently, search for different kinds of evidence, and reach different conclusions. Intuitions come first, strategic reasoning second.

#### WHAT MAKES PEOPLE VOTE REPUBLICAN?

When Barack Obama clinched the Democratic nomination for the presidential race, I was thrilled. At long last, it seemed, the Democrats had chosen a candidate with a broader moral palate, someone able to speak about all five foundations. In his book *The Audacity of Hope*, Obama showed himself to be a liberal who understood conservative arguments about the need for order and the value of tradition. When he gave a speech on Father's Day at a black church, he praised marriage and the traditional two-parent family, and he called on black men to take more responsibility for their children.<sup>12</sup> When he gave a speech on patriotism, he criticized the liberal counterculture of the 1960s for burning American flags and for failing to honor veterans returning from Vietnam.<sup>13</sup>

But as the summer of 2008 went on, I began to worry. His speech to a major civil rights organization was all about social justice and corporate greed.<sup>14</sup> It used only the Care and Fairness foundations,

and fairness often meant equality of outcomes. In his famous speech in Berlin, he introduced himself as "a fellow citizen of the world" and he spoke of "global citizenship."<sup>15</sup> He had created a controversy earlier in the summer by refusing to wear an American flag pin on the lapel of his jacket, as American politicians typically do. The controversy seemed absurd to liberals, but the Berlin speech reinforced the emerging conservative narrative that Obama was a liberal universalist, someone who could not be trusted to put the interests of his nation above the interests of the rest of the world. His opponent, John McCain, took advantage of Obama's failure to build on the Loyalty foundation with his own campaign motto: "Country First."

Anxious that Obama would go the way of Gore and Kerry, I wrote an essay applying Moral Foundations Theory to the presidential race. I wanted to show Democrats how they could talk about policy issues in ways that would activate more than two foundations. John Brockman, who runs an online scientific salon at Edge.org, invited me to publish the essay at Edge,<sup>16</sup> as long as I stripped out most of the advice and focused on the moral psychology.

I titled the essay "What Makes People Vote Republican?" I began by summarizing the standard explanations that psychologists had offered for decades: Conservatives are conservative because they were raised by overly strict parents, or because they are inordinately afraid of change, novelty, and complexity, or because they suffer from existential fears and therefore cling to a simple worldview with no shades of gray.<sup>17</sup> These approaches all had one feature in common: they used psychology to explain away conservatism. They made it unnecessary for liberals to take conservative ideas seriously because these ideas are caused by bad childhoods or ugly personality traits. I suggested a very different approach: start by assuming that conservatives are just as sincere as liberals, and then use Moral Foundations Theory to understand the moral matrices of both sides.

The key idea in the essay was that there are two radically different approaches to the challenge of creating a society in which unrelated people can live together peacefully. One approach was exemplified by John Stuart Mill, the other by the great French sociologist Emile Durkheim. I described Mill's vision like this:

First, imagine society as a social contract invented for our mutual benefit. All individuals are equal, and all should be left as free as possible to move, develop talents, and form relationships as they please. The patron saint of a contractual society is John Stuart Mill, who wrote (in *On Liberty*) that "the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others." Mill's vision appeals to many liberals and libertarians; a Millian society at its best would be a peaceful, open, and creative place where diverse individuals respect each other's rights and band together voluntarily (as in Obama's calls for "unity") to help those in need or to change the laws for the common good.

I showed how this vision of society rests exclusively on the Care and Fairness foundations. If you assume that everyone relies on those two foundations, you can assume that people will be bothered by cruelty and injustice and will be motivated to respect each other's rights. I then contrasted Mill's vision with Durkheim's:

Now imagine society not as an agreement among individuals but as something that emerged organically over time as people found ways of living together, binding themselves to each other, suppressing each other's selfishness, and punishing the deviants and free riders who eternally threaten to undermine cooperative groups. The basic social unit is not the individual, it is the hierarchically structured family, which serves as a model for other institutions. Individuals in such societies are born into strong and constraining relationships that profoundly limit their autonomy. The patron saint of this more binding moral system is the sociologist Emile Durkheim, who warned of the dangers of anomie (normlessness) and wrote, in 1897, that "man cannot become attached to higher aims and submit to a

rule if he sees nothing above him to which he belongs. To free himself from all social pressure is to abandon himself and demoralize him." A Durkheimian society at its best would be a stable network composed of many nested and overlapping groups that socialize, reshape, and care for individuals who, if left to their own devices, would pursue shallow, carnal, and selfish pleasures. A Durkheimian society would value self-control over self-expression, duty over rights, and loyalty to one's groups over concerns for out-groups.

I showed that a Durkheimian society cannot be supported by the Care and Fairness foundations alone.<sup>18</sup> You have to build on the Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity foundations as well. I then showed how the American left fails to understand social conservatives and the religious right because it cannot see a Durkheimian world as anything other than a moral abomination.<sup>19</sup> A Durkheimian world is usually hierarchical, punitive, and religious. It places limits on people's autonomy and it endorses traditions, often including traditional gender roles. For liberals, such a vision must be combated, not respected.

If your moral matrix rests entirely on the Care and Fairness foundations, then it's hard to hear the sacred overtones in America's unofficial motto: *E pluribus unum* (from many, one). By "sacred" I mean the concept I introduced with the Sanctity foundation in the last chapter. It's the ability to endow ideas, objects, and events with infinite value, particularly those ideas, objects, and events that bind a group together into a single entity. The process of converting *pluribus* (diverse people) into *unum* (a nation) is a miracle that occurs in every successful nation on Earth.<sup>20</sup> Nations decline or divide when they stop performing this miracle.

In the 1960s, the Democrats became the party of *pluribus*. Democrats generally celebrate diversity, support immigration without assimilation, oppose making English the national language, don't like to wear flag pins, and refer to themselves as citizens of the world. Is it any wonder that they have done so poorly in presidential elections since 1968?<sup>21</sup> The president is the high priest of what sociologist Rob-

ert Bellah calls the "American civil religion."<sup>22</sup> The president must invoke the name of God (though not Jesus), glorify America's heroes and history, quote its sacred texts (the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution), and perform the transubstantiation of *pluribus* into *unum*. Would Catholics ever choose a priest who refuses to speak Latin, or who considers himself a devotee of all gods?

In the remainder of the essay I advised Democrats to stop dismissing conservatism as a pathology and start thinking about morality beyond care and fairness. I urged them to close the sacredness gap between the two parties by making greater use of the Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity foundations, not just in their "messaging," but in how they think about public policy and the best interests of the nation.<sup>23</sup>

#### WHAT I HAD MISSED

The essay provoked strong reactions from readers, which they sometimes shared with me by email. On the left, many readers stayed locked inside their Care-based moral matrices and refused to believe that conservatism was an alternative moral vision. For example, one reader said that he agreed with my diagnosis but thought that narcissism was an additional factor that I had not mentioned: "Lack of compassion fits them [Republicans], and narcissists are also lacking this important human trait." He thought it was "sad" that Republican narcissism would prevent them from understanding my perspective on their "illness."

Reactions from the right were generally more positive. Many readers with military or religious backgrounds found my portrayal of their morality accurate and useful, as in this email:

I recently retired from the U.S. Coast Guard after 22 years of service. . . . After I retired, I took a job with [a government science agency]. The [new office's] culture tends more towards the liberal independent model. . . . What I am finding here is an organization

to do so.<sup>47</sup> We hate to see people take without giving. We want to see cheaters and slackers “get what’s coming to them.” We want the law of karma to run its course, and we’re willing to help enforce it.

When people trade favors, both parties end up equal, more or less, and so it is easy to think (as I had) that reciprocal altruism was the source of moral intuitions about equality. But egalitarianism seems to be rooted more in the hatred of domination than in the love of equality *per se*.<sup>48</sup> The feeling of being dominated or oppressed by a bully is very different from the feeling of being cheated in an exchange of goods or favors.

Once my team at YourMorals.org had identified Liberty/oppression as a (provisionally) separate sixth foundation, we began to notice that in our data, concerns about political equality were related to a dislike of oppression and a concern for victims, not a desire for reciprocity.<sup>49</sup> And if the love of political equality rests on the Liberty/oppression and Care/harm foundations rather than the Fairness/cheating foundation, then the Fairness foundation no longer has a split personality; it’s no longer about equality *and* proportionality. It is primarily about proportionality.

When people work together on a task, they generally want to see the hardest workers get the largest gains.<sup>50</sup> People often want equality of outcomes, but that is because it is so often the case that people’s inputs were equal. When people divide up money, or any other kind of reward, equality is just a special case of the broader principle of proportionality. When a few members of a group contributed far more than the others—or, even more powerfully, when a few contributed nothing—most adults do *not* want to see the benefits distributed equally.<sup>51</sup>

We can therefore refine the description of the Fairness foundation that I gave in the last chapter. It’s still a set of modules that evolved in response to the adaptive challenge of reaping the rewards of cooperation without getting exploited by free riders.<sup>52</sup> But now that we’ve begun to talk about moral communities within which cooperation is maintained by gossip and punishment, we can look beyond *individuals* trying to choose partners (which I talked about in the last chapter). We can look more closely at people’s strong

desires to protect their *communities* from cheaters, slackers, and free riders, who, if allowed to continue their ways without harassment, would cause others to stop cooperating, which would cause society to unravel. The Fairness foundation supports righteous anger when anyone cheats you directly (for example, a car dealer who knowingly sells you a lemon). But it also supports a more generalized concern with cheaters, leeches, and anyone else who “drinks the water” rather than carries it for the group.

The current triggers of the Fairness foundation vary depending on a group’s size and on many historical and economic circumstances. In a large industrial society with a social safety net, the current triggers are likely to include people who rely upon the safety net for more than an occasional lifesaving bounce. Concerns about the abuse of the safety net explain the angry emails I received from economic conservatives, such as the man who did not want his tax dollars going to “a non-producing, welfare collecting, single mother, crack baby producing future democrat.” It explains the conservative’s list of reasons why people vote Democratic, such as “laziness” and “You despise people who work hard for their money, live their own lives, and don’t rely on the government for help cradle to grave.” It explains Santelli’s rant about bailing out homeowners, many of whom had lied on their mortgage applications to qualify for large loans they did not deserve. And it explains the campaign poster in figure 8.6, from David Cameron’s Conservative Party in the United Kingdom.

### THREE VERSUS SIX

To put this all together: Moral Foundations Theory says that there are (at least) six psychological systems that comprise the universal foundations of the world’s many moral matrices.<sup>53</sup> The various moralities found on the political left tend to rest most strongly on the Care/harm and Liberty/oppression foundations. These two foundations support ideals of social justice, which emphasize compassion for the poor and a struggle for political equality among the subgroups that comprise society. Social justice movements emphasize solidarity—



FIGURE 8.6. *Fairness as proportionality.* The right is usually more concerned about catching and punishing free riders than is the left. (Campaign poster for the Conservative Party in the UK parliamentary elections of 2010.)

they call for people to come together to fight the oppression of bullying, domineering elites. (This is why there is no separate equality foundation. People don't crave equality for its own sake; they fight for equality when they perceive that they are being bullied or dominated, as during the American and French revolutions, and the cultural revolutions of the 1960s.)<sup>54</sup>

Everyone—left, right, and center—cares about Care/harm, but liberals care more. Across many scales, surveys, and political controversies, liberals turn out to be more disturbed by signs of violence and suffering, compared to conservatives and especially to libertarians.<sup>55</sup>

Everyone—left, right, and center—cares about Liberty/oppression, but each political faction cares in a different way. In the contemporary United States, liberals are most concerned about the rights of certain vulnerable groups (e.g., racial minorities, children, animals), and they look to government to defend the weak against oppression by the strong. Conservatives, in contrast, hold more traditional ideas of liberty as the right to be left alone, and they often resent liberal programs that use government to infringe on their liberties in order to protect the groups that liberals care most about.<sup>56</sup> For example, small business owners overwhelmingly support the Republican Party<sup>57</sup> in part because they resent the government telling them how to run

their businesses under its banner of protecting workers, minorities, consumers, and the environment. This helps explain why libertarians have sided with the Republican Party in recent decades. Libertarians care about liberty almost to the exclusion of all other concerns,<sup>58</sup> and their conception of liberty is the same as that of the Republicans: it is the right to be left alone, free from government interference.

The Fairness/cheating foundation is about proportionality and the law of karma. It is about making sure that people get what they deserve, and do not get things they do not deserve. Everyone—left, right, and center—cares about proportionality; everyone gets angry when people take more than they deserve. But conservatives care more, and they rely on the Fairness foundation more heavily—once fairness is restricted to proportionality. For example, how relevant is it to your morality whether “everyone is pulling their own weight”? Do you agree that “employees who work the hardest should be paid the most”? Liberals don't reject these items, but they are ambivalent. Conservatives, in contrast, endorse items such as these enthusiastically.<sup>59</sup>

Liberals may think that they own the concept of karma because of its New Age associations, but a morality based on compassion and concerns about oppression forces you to violate karma (proportionality) in many ways. Conservatives, for example, think it's self-evident that responses to crime should be based on proportionality, as shown in slogans such as “Do the crime, do the time,” and “Three strikes and you're out.” Yet liberals are often uncomfortable with the negative side of karma—retribution—as shown on the bumper sticker in figure 8.7. After all, retribution causes harm, and harm activates the Care/harm foundation. A recent study even found that liberal professors give out a narrower range of grades than do conservative professors. Conservative professors are more willing to reward the best students and punish the worst.<sup>60</sup>

The remaining three foundations—Loyalty/betrayal, Authority/subversion, and Sanctity/degradation—show the biggest and most consistent partisan differences. Liberals are ambivalent about these foundations at best, whereas social conservatives embrace them. (Libertarians have little use for them, which is why they tend to support

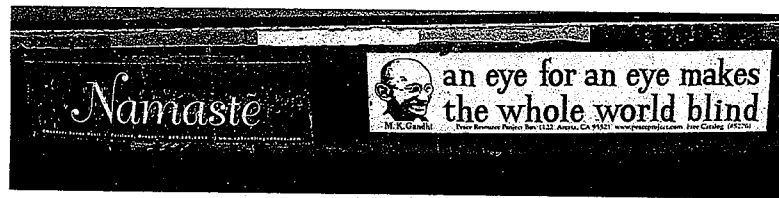


FIGURE 8.7. A car in Charlottesville, Virginia, whose owner prefers compassion to proportionality.

liberal positions on social issues such as gay marriage, drug use, and laws to “protect” the American flag.)

I began this chapter by telling you our original finding: Liberals have a two-foundation morality, based on the Care and Fairness foundations, whereas conservatives have a five-foundation morality. But on the basis of what we’ve learned in the last few years, I need to revise that statement. Liberals have a three-foundation morality, whereas conservatives use all six. Liberal moral matrices rest on the Care/harm, Liberty/oppression, and Fairness/cheating foundations, although liberals are often willing to trade away fairness (as proportionality) when it conflicts with compassion or with their desire to fight oppression. Conservative morality rests on all six foundations, although conservatives are more willing than liberals to sacrifice Care and let some people get hurt in order to achieve their many other moral objectives.

#### IN SUM

Moral psychology can help to explain why the Democratic Party has had so much difficulty connecting with voters since 1980. Republicans understand the social intuitionist model better than do Democrats. Republicans speak more directly to the elephant. They also have a better grasp of Moral Foundations Theory; they trigger every single taste receptor.

I presented the Durkheimian vision of society, favored by social conservatives, in which the basic social unit is the family, rather than

the individual, and in which order, hierarchy, and tradition are highly valued. I contrasted this vision with the liberal Millian vision, which is more open and individualistic. I noted that a Millian society has difficulty binding *pluribus* into *unum*. Democrats often pursue policies that promote *pluribus* at the expense of *unum*, policies that leave them open to charges of treason, subversion, and sacrilege.

I then described how my colleagues and I revised Moral Foundations Theory to do a better job of explaining intuitions about liberty and fairness:

- We added the Liberty/oppression foundation, which makes people notice and resent any sign of attempted domination. It triggers an urge to band together to resist or overthrow bullies and tyrants. This foundation supports the egalitarianism and antiauthoritarianism of the left, as well as the don’t-tread-on-me and give-me-liberty antigovernment anger of libertarians and some conservatives.
- We modified the Fairness foundation to make it focus more strongly on proportionality. The Fairness foundation begins with the psychology of reciprocal altruism, but its duties expanded once humans created gossiping and punitive moral communities. Most people have a deep intuitive concern for the law of karma—they want to see cheaters punished and good citizens rewarded in proportion to their deeds.

With these revisions, Moral Foundations Theory can now explain one of the great puzzles that has preoccupied Democrats in recent years: Why do rural and working-class Americans generally vote Republican when it is the Democratic Party that wants to redistribute money more evenly?

Democrats often say that Republicans have duped these people into voting against their economic self-interest. (That was the thesis of the popular 2004 book *What’s the Matter with Kansas?*.)<sup>61</sup> But from the perspective of Moral Foundations Theory, rural and working-class

voters were in fact voting for their *moral* interests. They don't want to eat at The True Taste restaurant, and they don't want their nation to devote itself primarily to the care of victims and the pursuit of social justice. Until Democrats understand the Durkheimian vision of society and the difference between a six-foundation morality and a three-foundation morality, they will not understand what makes people vote Republican.

In Part I of this book I presented the first principle of moral psychology: *Intuitions come first, strategic reasoning second*. In Part II, I described those intuitions in detail while presenting the second principle: *There's more to morality than harm and fairness*. Now we're ready to examine how moral diversity can so easily divide good people into hostile groups that do not want to understand each other. We're ready to move on to the third principle: *Morality binds and blinds*.

## Religion Is a Team Sport

Every Saturday in the fall, at colleges across the United States, millions of people pack themselves into stadiums to participate in a ritual that can only be described as tribal. At the University of Virginia, the ritual begins in the morning as students dress in special costumes. Men wear dress shirts with UVA neckties, and if the weather is warm, shorts. Women typically wear skirts or dresses, sometimes with pearl necklaces. Some students paint the logo of our sports teams, the Cavaliers (a *V* crossed by two swords), on their faces or other body parts.

The students attend pregame parties that serve brunch and alcoholic drinks. Then they stream over to the stadium, sometimes stopping to mingle with friends, relatives, or unknown alumni who have driven for hours to reach Charlottesville in time to set up tailgate parties in every parking lot within a half mile of the stadium. More food, more alcohol, more face painting.

By the time the game starts, many of the 50,000 fans are drunk, which makes it easier for them to overcome self-consciousness and participate fully in the synchronous chants, cheers, jeers, and songs that will fill the next three hours. Every time the Cavaliers score, the students sing the same song UVA students have sung together on such occasions for over a century. The first verse comes straight out of

Durkheim and Ehrenreich. The students literally lock arms and sway as a single mass while singing the praises of their community (to the tune of "Auld Lang Syne"):

*That good old song of Wab-hoo-wab—we'll sing it o'er and o'er  
It cheers our hearts and warms our blood to hear them shout and roar  
We come from old Virgin-i-a, where all is bright and gay  
Let's all join hands and give a yell for dear old U-V-A.*

Next, the students illustrate McNeill's thesis that "muscular bonding" warms people up for coordinated military action.<sup>1</sup> The students let go of each other's arms and make aggressive fist-pumping motions in the air, in sync with a nonsensical battle chant:

*Wab-hoo-wab! Wab-hoo-wab! Uni-v, Virgin-i-a!  
Hoo-rah-ray! Hoo-rah-ray! Ray, ray—U-V-A!*

It's a whole day of hiving and collective emotions. Collective effervescence is guaranteed, as are feelings of collective outrage at questionable calls by the referees, collective triumph if the team wins, and collective grief if the team loses, followed by more collective drinking at postgame parties.

Why do the students sing, chant, dance, sway, chop, and stomp so enthusiastically during the game? Showing support for their football team may help to motivate the players, but is that the *function* of these behaviors? Are they done *in order to* achieve victory? No. From a Durkheimian perspective these behaviors serve a very different function, and it is the same one that Durkheim saw at work in most religious rituals: *the creation of a community*.

A college football game is a superb analogy for religion.<sup>2</sup> From a naive perspective, focusing only on what is most visible (i.e., the game being played on the field), college football is an extravagant, costly, wasteful institution that impairs people's ability to think rationally while leaving a long trail of victims (including the players themselves, plus the many fans who suffer alcohol-related injuries). But from a sociologically informed perspective, it is a religious rite that does just



what it is supposed to do: it pulls people up from Durkheim's lower level (the profane) to his higher level (the sacred). It flips the hive switch and makes people feel, for a few hours, that they are "simply a part of a whole." It augments the school spirit for which UVA is renowned, which in turn attracts better students and more alumni donations, which in turn improves the experience for the entire community, including professors like me who have no interest in sports.

Religions are social facts. Religion cannot be studied in lone individuals any more than hivishness can be studied in lone bees. Durkheim's definition of religion makes its binding function clear:

A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.<sup>3</sup>

In this chapter I continue exploring the third principle of moral psychology: *Morality binds and blinds*. Many scientists misunderstand religion because they ignore this principle and examine only what is most visible. They focus on individuals and their supernatural beliefs, rather than on groups and their binding practices. They conclude that religion is an extravagant, costly, wasteful institution that impairs people's ability to think rationally while leaving a long trail of victims. I do not deny that religions do, at times, fit that description. But if we are to render a fair judgment about religion—and understand its relationship to morality and politics—we must first describe it accurately.

#### THE LONE BELIEVER

When nineteen Muslims hijacked four planes and used them to destroy the World Trade Center and a section of the Pentagon, they forced into the open a belief that many in the Western world had harbored since the 1980s: that there is a special connection between Islam and terrorism. Commentators on the right were quick to

blame Islam. Commentators on the left were just as quick to say that Islam is a religion of peace and that the blame should be placed on fundamentalism.<sup>4</sup>

But an interesting rift opened up on the left. Some scientists whose politics were otherwise quite liberal began to attack not just Islam but all religions (other than Buddhism).<sup>5</sup> After decades of culture war in the United States over the teaching of evolution in public schools, some scientists saw little distinction between Islam and Christianity. All religions, they said, are delusions that prevent people from embracing science, secularism, and modernity. The horror of 9/11 motivated several of these scientists to write books, and between 2004 and 2007, so many such books were published that a movement was born: the New Atheism.

The titles were combative. The first one out was Sam Harris's *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, followed by Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion*, Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, and, with the most explicit title of all, Christopher Hitchens's *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. These four authors are known as the four horsemen of New Atheism, but I'm going to set Hitchens aside because he is a journalist whose book made no pretense to be anything other than a polemical diatribe. The other three authors, however, are men of science: Harris was a graduate student in neuroscience at the time, Dawkins is a biologist, and Dennett is a philosopher who has written widely on evolution. These three authors claimed to speak for science and to exemplify the values of science—particularly its open-mindedness and its insistence that claims be grounded in reason and empirical evidence, not faith and emotion.

I also group these three authors together because they offer similar definitions of religion, all focusing on belief in supernatural agents. Here is Harris: "Throughout this book, I am criticizing faith in its ordinary, scriptural sense—as belief in, and life orientation toward, certain historical and metaphysical propositions."<sup>6</sup> Harris's own research examines what happens in the brain when people believe or disbelieve various propositions, and he justifies his focus on religious belief with this psychological claim: "A belief is a lever

that, once pulled, moves almost everything else in a person's life."<sup>7</sup> For Harris, beliefs are the key to understanding the psychology of religion because in his view, believing a falsehood (e.g., martyrs will be rewarded with seventy-two virgins in heaven) makes religious people do harmful things (e.g., suicide bombing). I've illustrated Harris's psychological model in figure 11.1.

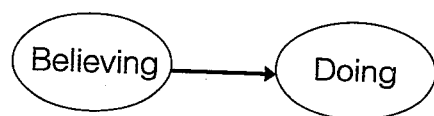


FIGURE 11.1. *The New Atheist model of religious psychology.*

Dawkins takes a similar approach. He defines the "God Hypothesis" as the proposition that "there exists a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us."<sup>8</sup> The rest of the book is an argument that "God, in the sense defined, is a delusion; and, as later chapters will show, a pernicious delusion."<sup>9</sup> Once again, religion is studied as a set of beliefs about supernatural agents, and these beliefs are said to be the cause of a wide range of harmful actions. Dennett takes that approach too.<sup>10</sup>

Supernatural agents do of course play a central role in religion, just as the actual football is at the center of the whirl of activity on game day at UVA. But trying to understand the persistence and passion of religion by studying beliefs about God is like trying to understand the persistence and passion of college football by studying the movements of the ball. You've got to broaden the inquiry. You've got to look at the ways that religious beliefs work with religious practices to create a religious community.<sup>11</sup>

Believing, doing, and belonging are three complementary yet distinct aspects of religiosity, according to many scholars.<sup>12</sup> When you look at all three aspects at the same time, you get a view of the psychology of religion that's very different from the view of the New Atheists. I'll call this competing model the Durkheimian model, because it says that the function of those beliefs and practices is ulti-

mately to create a community. Often our beliefs are post hoc constructions designed to justify what we've just done, or to support the groups we belong to.

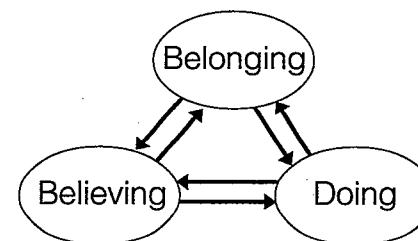


FIGURE 11.2. *The Durkheimian model of religious psychology.*

The New Atheist model is based on the Platonic rationalist view of the mind, which I introduced in chapter 2: Reason is (or at least could be) the charioteer guiding the passions (the horses). So as long as reason has the proper factual beliefs (and has control of the unruly passions), the chariot will go in the right direction. In chapters 2, 3, and 4, however, I reviewed a great deal of evidence against the Platonic view and in favor of a Humean view in which reason (the rider) is a servant of the intuitions (the elephant).

Let's continue the debate between rationalism and social intuitionism as we examine religion. To understand the psychology of religion, should we focus on the false beliefs and faulty reasoning of individual believers? Or should we focus on the automatic (intuitive) processes of people embedded in social groups that are striving to create a moral community? That depends on what we think religion is, and where we think it came from.

#### THE NEW ATHEIST STORY: BY-PRODUCTS, THEN PARASITES

To an evolutionist, religious behaviors "stand out like peacocks in a sunlit glade," as Dennett put it.<sup>13</sup> Evolution ruthlessly elimi-

nates costly and wasteful behaviors from an animal's repertoire (over many generations), yet, to quote Dawkins, "no known culture lacks some version of the time-consuming, wealth-consuming, hostility-provoking rituals, the anti-factual, counterproductive fantasies of religion."<sup>14</sup> To resolve this puzzle, either you have to grant that religiosity is (or at least, used to be) beneficial or you have to construct a complicated, multistep explanation of how humans in all known cultures came to swim against the tide of adaptation and do so much self-destructive religious stuff. The New Atheists choose the latter course. Their accounts all begin with a discussion of multiple evolutionary "by-products" that explain the accidental origin of God beliefs, and some then continue on to an account of how these beliefs evolved as sets of parasitic memes.<sup>15</sup>

The first step in the New Atheist story—one that I won't challenge—is the hypersensitive agency detection device.<sup>16</sup> The idea makes a lot of sense: we see faces in the clouds, but never clouds in faces, because we have special cognitive modules for face detection.<sup>17</sup> The face detector is on a hair trigger, and it makes almost all of its mistakes in one direction—false positives (seeing a face when no real face is present, e.g., ☺), rather than false negatives (failing to see a face that is really present). Similarly, most animals confront the challenge of distinguishing events that are caused by the presence of another animal (an agent that can move under its own power) from those that are caused by the wind, or a pinecone falling, or anything else that lacks agency.

The solution to this challenge is an agency detection module, and like the face detector, it's on a hair trigger. It makes almost all of its mistakes in one direction—false positives (detecting an agent when none is present), rather than false negatives (failing to detect the presence of a real agent). If you want to see the hypersensitive agency detector in action, just slide your fist around under a blanket, within sight of a puppy or a kitten. If you want to know why it's on a hair trigger, just think about which kind of error would be more costly the next time you are walking alone at night in the deep forest or a dark alley. The hypersensitive agency detection device is finely tuned to maximize survival, not accuracy.

But now suppose that early humans, equipped with a hypersensi-

tive agency detector, a new ability to engage in shared intentionality, and a love of stories, begin to talk about their many misperceptions. Suppose they begin attributing agency to the weather. (Thunder and lightning sure make it *seem* as though somebody up in the sky is angry at us.) Suppose a group of humans begins jointly creating a pantheon of invisible agents who cause the weather, and other assorted cases of good or bad fortune. Voilà—the birth of supernatural agents, not as an adaptation for anything but as a by-product of a cognitive module that is otherwise highly adaptive. (For a more mundane example of a by-product, think about the bridge of the nose as an anatomical feature useful for holding up eyeglasses. It evolved for other reasons, but we humans reuse it for an entirely new purpose.)

Now repeat this sort of analysis on five or ten more traits. Dawkins proposes a "gullible learning" module: "There will be a selective advantage to child brains that possess the rule of thumb: believe, without question, whatever your grown-ups tell you."<sup>18</sup> Dennett suggests that the circuitry for falling in love has gotten commandeered by some religions to make people fall in love with God.<sup>19</sup> The developmental psychologist Paul Bloom has shown that our minds were designed for dualism—we think that minds and bodies are different but equally real sorts of things—and so we readily believe that we have immortal souls housed in our temporary bodies.<sup>20</sup> In all cases the logic is the same: a bit of mental machinery evolved because it conferred a real benefit, but the machinery sometimes misfires, producing accidental cognitive effects that make people prone to believing in gods. *At no point* was religion itself beneficial to individuals or groups. *At no point* were genes selected because individuals or groups who were better at "godding" outcompeted those who failed to produce, fear, or love their gods. According to these theorists, the genes for constructing these various modules were all in place by the time modern humans left Africa, and *the genes did not change in response to selection pressures* either for or against religiosity during the 50,000 years since then.

The gods changed, however, and this brings us to the second step of the New Atheist story: cultural evolution. Once people began to believe in supernatural agents, and to talk about them and transmit

them to their children, the race was on. But the race was not run by people or genes; it was a race among the various supernatural *concepts* that people generated. As Dennett put it:

The memorable nymphs and fairies and goblins and demons that crowd the mythologies of every people are the imaginative offspring of a hyperactive habit of finding agency wherever anything puzzles or frightens us. This mindlessly generates a vast overpopulation of agent-ideas, most of which are too stupid to hold our attention for an instant; only a well-designed few make it through the rehearsal tournament, mutating and improving as they go. The ones that get shared and remembered are the souped-up winners of billions of competitions for rehearsal time in the brains of our ancestors.<sup>21</sup>

To Dennett and Dawkins, religions are sets of memes that have undergone Darwinian selection.<sup>22</sup> Like biological traits, religions are heritable, they mutate, and there is selection among these mutations. The selection occurs not on the basis of the benefits religions confer upon individuals or groups but on the basis of their ability to survive and reproduce themselves. Some religions are better than others at hijacking the human mind, burrowing in deeply, and then getting themselves transmitted to the next generation of host minds. Dennett opens *Breaking the Spell* with the story of a tiny parasite that commandeers the brains of ants, causing them to climb to the tops of blades of grass, where they can more easily be eaten by grazing animals. The behavior is suicide for the ant, but it's adaptive for the parasite, which requires the digestive system of a ruminant to reproduce itself. Dennett proposes that religions survive because, like those parasites, they make their hosts do things that are bad for themselves (e.g., suicide bombing) but good for the parasite (e.g., Islam). Dawkins similarly describes religions as viruses. Just as a cold virus makes its host sneeze to spread itself, successful religions make their hosts expend precious resources to spread the "infection."<sup>23</sup>

These analogies have clear implications for social change. If reli-

gion is a virus or a parasite that exploits a set of cognitive by-products for its benefit, not ours, then we ought to rid ourselves of it. Scientists, humanists, and the small number of others who have escaped infection and are still able to reason must work together to break the spell, lift the delusion, and bring about the end of faith.

#### A BETTER STORY: BY-PRODUCTS, THEN CULTURAL GROUP SELECTION

Scientists who are not on the New Atheist team have been far more willing to say that religion might be an adaptation (i.e., it might have evolved because it conferred benefits on individuals or groups). The anthropologists Scott Atran and Joe Henrich recently published a paper that tells a more nuanced story about the evolution of religiosity, one that is consistent with a broader set of empirical findings.<sup>24</sup>

Like the New Atheists, their story has two steps, and the first step is the same: a diverse set of cognitive modules and abilities (including the hypersensitive agency detector) evolved as adaptations to solve a variety of problems, but they often misfired, producing beliefs (such as in supernatural agents) that then contributed (as by-products) to the earliest quasi-religious behaviors. These modules were all in place by the time humans began leaving Africa more than 50,000 years ago. As with the New Atheists, this first step was followed by a second step involving cultural (not genetic) evolution. But instead of talking about religions as parasitic memes evolving for their own benefit, Atran and Henrich suggest that religions are sets of cultural innovations that spread to the extent that they make groups more cohesive and cooperative. Atran and Henrich argue that the cultural evolution of religion has been driven largely by competition among groups. Groups that were able to put their by-product gods to some good use had an advantage over groups that failed to do so, and so their ideas (not their genes) spread. Groups with less effective religions didn't necessarily get wiped out; often they just adopted the more effective variations. So it's really the *religions* that evolved, not the people or their genes.<sup>25</sup>

Among the best things to do with a by-product God, according to Atran and Henrich, is to create a moral community. The gods of

hunter-gatherers are often capricious and malevolent. They sometimes punish bad behavior, but they bring suffering to the virtuous as well. As groups take up agriculture and grow larger, however, their gods become far more moralistic.<sup>26</sup> The gods of larger societies are usually quite concerned about actions that foment conflict and division within the group, such as murder, adultery, false witness, and the breaking of oaths.

If the gods evolve (culturally) to condemn selfish and divisive behaviors, they can then be used to promote cooperation and trust within the group. You don't need a social scientist to tell you that people behave less ethically when they think nobody can see them. That was Glaucon's point about the ring of Gyges, and a great many social scientists have proven him right. For example, people cheat more on a test when the lights are dimmed.<sup>27</sup> They cheat less when there is a cartoonlike image of an eye nearby,<sup>28</sup> or when the concept of God is activated in memory merely by asking people to unscramble sentences that include words related to God.<sup>29</sup> Creating gods who can see everything, and who hate cheaters and oath breakers, turns out to be a good way to reduce cheating and oath breaking.

Another helpful cultural innovation, according to Atran and Henrich, are gods who administer collective punishment. When people believe that the gods might bring drought or pestilence on the whole village for the adultery of two people, you can bet that the villagers will be much more vigilant for—and gossip about—any hint of an extramarital liaison. Angry gods make shame more effective as a means of social control.

Atran and Henrich begin with the same claim about by-products as do the New Atheists. But because these anthropologists see groups as real entities that have long been in competition, they are able to see the role that religion plays in helping some groups to win that competition. There is now a great deal of evidence that religions do in fact help groups to cohere, solve free rider problems, and win the competition for group-level survival.

The clearest evidence comes from the anthropologist Richard Sosis, who examined the history of two hundred communes founded in the United States in the nineteenth century.<sup>30</sup> Communes are natural experiments in cooperation without kinship. Communes can

survive only to the extent that they can bind a group together, suppress self-interest, and solve the free rider problem. Communes are usually founded by a group of committed believers who reject the moral matrix of the broader society and want to organize themselves along different principles. For many nineteenth-century communes, the principles were religious; for others they were secular, mostly socialist. Which kind of commune survived longer? Sosis found that the difference was stark: just 6 percent of the secular communes were still functioning twenty years after their founding, compared to 39 percent of the religious communes.

What was the secret ingredient that gave the religious communes a longer shelf life? Sosis quantified everything he could find about life in each commune. He then used those numbers to see if any of them could explain why some stood the test of time while others crumbled. He found one master variable: the number of costly sacrifices that each commune demanded from its members. It was things like giving up alcohol and tobacco, fasting for days at a time, conforming to a communal dress code or hairstyle, or cutting ties with outsiders. For religious communes, the effect was perfectly linear: the more sacrifice a commune demanded, the longer it lasted. But Sosis was surprised to discover that demands for sacrifice did not help secular communes. Most of them failed within eight years, and there was no correlation between sacrifice and longevity.<sup>31</sup>

Why doesn't sacrifice strengthen secular communes? Sosis argues that rituals, laws, and other constraints work best when they are sacralized. He quotes the anthropologist Roy Rappaport: "To invest social conventions with sanctity is to hide their arbitrariness in a cloak of seeming necessity."<sup>32</sup> But when secular organizations demand sacrifice, every member has a right to ask for a cost-benefit analysis, and many refuse to do things that don't make logical sense. In other words, *the very ritual practices that the New Atheists dismiss as costly, inefficient, and irrational turn out to be a solution to one of the hardest problems humans face: cooperation without kinship*. Irrational beliefs can sometimes help the group function more rationally, particularly when those beliefs rest upon the Sanctity foundation.<sup>33</sup> Sacredness binds people together, and then blinds them to the arbitrariness of the practice.

Sosis's findings support Atran and Henrich. Gods really do help groups cohere, succeed, and outcompete other groups. This is a form of group selection, but Atran and Henrich say it's purely *cultural* group selection. Religions that do a better job of binding people together and suppressing selfishness spread at the expense of other religions, but not necessarily by killing off the losers. Religions can spread far faster than genes, as in the case of Islam in the seventh and eighth centuries, or Mormonism in the nineteenth century. A successful religion can be adopted by neighboring people or by vanquished populations.

Atran and Henrich therefore doubt that there has been any *genetic* evolution for religiosity. Moralistic high gods are just too recent, they say, having emerged along with agriculture in the last 10,000 years.<sup>34</sup> Atran and Henrich believe that gene-culture coevolution happened slowly during the Pleistocene (when the modules were forged that later produced gods as by-products). By the time humans left Africa, the genes were set and the rest is all culture. Atran and Henrich join the New Atheists in claiming that our minds were not shaped, tuned, or adapted for religion.

But now that we know how quickly genetic evolution can occur, I find it hard to imagine that the genes stood still for more than 50,000 years.<sup>35</sup> How could the genetic partner in the "swirling waltz"<sup>36</sup> of gene-culture coevolution not take a single step as the cultural partner began dancing to religious music? Fifty thousand years may not be enough time to evolve a complex new module (such as the hypersensitive agency detector or the hive switch) from scratch. But how could there be no optimizing, no fine-tuning of modules to make people more prone to adaptive forms of hiving, sacralizing, or godding, and less prone to self-destructive or group-destructive forms?

#### THE DURKHEIMIAN STORY: BY-PRODUCTS, THEN MAYPOLES

David Sloan Wilson, a biologist at Binghamton University, was the most vigorous protester at the trial, conviction, and banishment of

group selection in the 1970s. He then spent thirty years trying to prove that group selection was innocent. He produced mathematical demonstrations that genetic group selection could indeed occur, under special conditions that might well have been the conditions of earlier human societies.<sup>37</sup> And then he did the difficult cross-disciplinary work of exploring the history of many religions, to see if they truly provided those special conditions.<sup>38</sup>

Wilson's great achievement was to merge the ideas of the two most important thinkers in the history of the social sciences: Darwin and Durkheim. Wilson showed how they complete each other. He begins with Darwin's hypothesis about the evolution of morality by group selection, and he notes Darwin's concern about the free rider problem. He then gives Durkheim's definition of religion as a "unified system of beliefs and practices" that unites members into "one single moral community." If Durkheim is right that religions create cohesive groups that can function like organisms, then it supports Darwin's hypothesis: tribal morality can emerge by group selection. And if Darwin is right that we are products of multilevel selection, including group selection, then it supports Durkheim's hypothesis: we are *Homo duplex*, designed (by natural selection) to move back and forth between the lower (individual) and higher (collective) levels of existence.

In his book *Darwin's Cathedral*, Wilson catalogues the ways that religions have helped groups cohere, divide labor, work together, and prosper.<sup>39</sup> He shows how John Calvin developed a strict and demanding form of Christianity that suppressed free riding and facilitated trust and commerce in sixteenth-century Geneva. He shows how medieval Judaism created "cultural fortresses that kept outsiders out and insiders in."<sup>40</sup> But his most revealing example (based on research by the anthropologist Stephen Lansing)<sup>41</sup> is the case of water temples among Balinese rice farmers in the centuries before Dutch colonization.

Rice farming is unlike any other kind of agriculture. Rice farmers must create large irrigated paddies that they can drain and fill at precise times during the planting cycle. It takes a cast of hundreds. In one region of Bali, rainwater flows down the side of a high volcano



through rivulets and rivers in the soft volcanic rock. Over several centuries the Balinese carved hundreds of terraced pools into the mountainside and irrigated them with an elaborate series of aqueducts and tunnels, some running underground for more than a kilometer. At the top of the whole system, near the crest of the volcano, they built an immense temple for the worship of the Goddess of the Waters. They staffed the temple with twenty-four full-time priests selected in childhood, and a high priest who was thought to be the earthly representative of the goddess herself.

The lowest level of social organization was the *subak*, a group of several extended families that made decisions democratically. Each *subak* had its own small temple, with its own deities, and each *subak* did the hard work of rice farming more or less collectively. But how did the *subaks* work together to build the system in the first place? And how did they maintain it and share its waters fairly and sustainably? These sorts of common dilemmas (where people must share a common resource without depleting it) are notoriously hard to solve.<sup>42</sup>

The ingenious religious solution to this problem of social engineering was to place a small temple at every fork in the irrigation system. The god in each such temple united all the *subaks* that were downstream from it into a community that worshipped that god, thereby helping the *subaks* to resolve their disputes more amicably. This arrangement minimized the cheating and deception that would otherwise flourish in a zero-sum division of water. The system made it possible for thousands of farmers, spread over hundreds of square kilometers, to cooperate without the need for central government, inspectors, and courts. The system worked so efficiently that the Dutch—who were expert hydrologists themselves—could find little to improve.

What are we to make of the hundreds of gods and temples woven into this system? Are they just by-products of mental systems that were designed for other purposes? Are they examples of what Dawkins called the “time-consuming, wealth-consuming . . . counterproductive fantasies of religion?” No. I think the best way to understand these gods is as maypoles.

Suppose you observe a young woman with flowers in her hair,

dancing in a clockwise circle while holding one end of a ribbon. The other end is attached to the top of a tall pole. She circles the pole repeatedly, but not in a neat circle. Rather, she bobs and weaves a few steps closer to or further from the pole as she circles. Viewed in isolation, her behavior seems pointless, reminiscent of mad Ophelia on her way to suicide. But now add in five other young women doing exactly what she is doing, and add in six young men doing the same thing in



FIGURE 11.3. *The maypole dance*. From *The Illustrated London News*, August 14, 1858, p. 150.

a counterclockwise direction, and you've got a maypole dance. As the men and women pass each other and swerve in and out, their ribbons weave a kind of tubular cloth around the pole. The dance symbolically enacts the central miracle of social life: *e pluribus unum*.

Maypole dancing seems to have originated somewhere in the mists of pre-Christian northern Europe, and it is still done regularly in Germany, the United Kingdom, and Scandinavia, often as part of May Day festivities. Whatever its origins, it's a great metaphor for the role that gods play in Wilson's account of religion. Gods (like maypoles) are tools that let people bind themselves together as a community by circling around them. Once bound together by circling, these communities can function more effectively. As Wilson puts it: "Religions exist primarily for people to achieve together what they cannot achieve on their own."<sup>43</sup>

According to Wilson, this kind of circling and binding has been going on a lot longer than 10,000 years. You don't need moralistic high gods thundering against adultery to bring people together; even the morally capricious gods of hunter-gatherers can be used to create trust and cohesion. One group of !Kung, for example, believe in an omnipotent sky god named //Gauwa, and in spirits of the dead, called //gawwasi (! and // indicate click sounds). These supernatural beings offer no moral guidance, no rewards for good behavior, and no punishments for sin; they simply cause things to happen. One day your hunt goes well because the spirits helped you, and the next day a snake bites you because the spirits turned against you. These beings are perfect examples of the hypersensitive agency detector in action: people perceive agency where there is none.

Yet even these sometimes nasty spirits play a crucial role in the "healing dances" that are among the central religious rites of the !Kung. The anthropologist Lorna Marshall describes them like this:

People bind together subjectively against external forces of evil. . . . The dance draws everyone together. . . . Whatever their relationship, whatever the state of their feelings, whether they like or dislike each other, whether they are on good terms or bad terms with each other,

they become a unit, singing, clapping, moving together in an extraordinary unison of stamping feet and clapping hands, swept along by the music. No words divide them; they act in concert for their spiritual and physical good and do something together that enlivens them and gives them pleasure.<sup>44</sup>

I think the !Kung would have a great time at a UVA football game.

If human groups have been doing this sort of thing since before the exodus from Africa, and if doing it in some ways rather than others improved the survival of the group, then it's hard to believe that there was no gene-culture coevolution, no reciprocal fitting of mental modules to social practices, during the last 50,000 years. It's particularly hard to believe that the genes for all those by-product modules sat still even as the genes for everything else about us began changing more rapidly, reaching a crescendo of genetic change during the Holocene era,<sup>45</sup> which is precisely the time that gods were getting bigger and more moralistic. If religious behavior had consequences, for individuals and for groups, in a way that was stable over a few millennia, then there was almost certainly some degree of gene-culture coevolution for righteous minds that believed in gods and then used those gods to create moral communities.

In *The Faith Instinct* the science writer Nicholas Wade reviews what is known about prehistoric religious practices and strongly endorses Wilson's theory of religion. He notes that it's hard to tell an evolutionary story in which these ancient practices conferred an advantage on individuals as they competed with their less religious neighbors in the same group, but it's obvious that these practices helped groups to compete with other groups. He summarizes the logic of group selection lucidly:

People belonging to such a [religiously cohesive] society are more likely to survive and reproduce than those in less cohesive groups, who may be vanquished by their enemies or dissolve in discord. In the population as a whole, *genes that promote religious behavior are likely to*



*become more common* in each generation as the less cohesive societies perish and the more united ones thrive.<sup>46</sup>

Gods and religions, in sum, are group-level adaptations for producing cohesiveness and trust. Like maypoles and beehives, they are created by the members of the group, and they then organize the activity of the group. Group-level adaptations, as Williams noted, imply a selection process operating at the group level.<sup>47</sup> And group selection can work very quickly (as in the case of those group-selected hens that became more peaceful in just a few generations).<sup>48</sup> Ten thousand years is plenty of time for gene-culture coevolution, including some genetic changes, to have occurred.<sup>49</sup> And 50,000 years is more than plenty of time for genes, brains, groups, and religions to have coevolved into a very tight embrace.

This account—Wilson's account—has implications profoundly different from those of the pure by-product theories we considered earlier. In Wilson's account, human minds and human religions have been coevolving (just like bees and their physical hives) for tens or hundreds of thousands of years. And if this is true, then we cannot expect people to abandon religion so easily. Of course people can and do forsake *organized* religions, which are extremely recent cultural innovations. But even those who reject all religions cannot shake the basic religious psychology of figure 11.2: doing linked to believing linked to belonging. Asking people to give up all forms of sacralized belonging and live in a world of purely "rational" beliefs might be like asking people to give up the Earth and live in colonies orbiting the moon. It can be done, but it would take a great deal of careful engineering, and even after ten generations, the descendants of those colonists might find themselves with inchoate longings for gravity and greenery.

#### IS GOD A FORCE FOR GOOD OR EVIL?

Does religion make people good or bad? The New Atheists assert that religion is the root of most evil. They say it is a primary cause

of war, genocide, terrorism, and the oppression of women.<sup>50</sup> Religious believers, for their part, often say that atheists are immoral, and that they can't be trusted. Even John Locke, one of the leading lights of the Enlightenment, wrote that "promises, covenants, and oaths, which are the bonds of human society, can have no hold upon an atheist. The taking away of God, though but even in thought, dissolves all." So who is right?

For several decades, the contest appeared to be a draw. On surveys, religious people routinely claimed to give more money to charity, and they expressed more altruistic values. But when social psychologists brought people into the lab and gave them the chance to actually help strangers, religious believers rarely acted any better than did nonbelievers.<sup>51</sup>

But should we really expect religion to turn people into *unconditional* altruists, ready to help strangers under any circumstances? Whatever Christ said about the good Samaritan who helped an injured Jew, if religion is a group-level adaptation, then it should produce *parochial* altruism. It should make people exceedingly generous and helpful toward members of their own moral communities, particularly when their reputations will be enhanced. And indeed, religion does exactly this. Studies of charitable giving in the United States show that people in the least religious fifth of the population give just 1.5 percent of their money to charity. People in the most religious fifth (based on church attendance, not belief) give a whopping 7 percent of their income to charity, and the majority of that giving is to religious organizations.<sup>52</sup> It's the same story for volunteer work: religious people do far more than secular folk, and the bulk of that work is done for, or at least through, their religious organizations.

There is also some evidence that religious people behave better in lab experiments—especially when they get to work with each other. A team of German economists asked subjects to play a game in which one person is the "truster," who is given some money on each round of the game.<sup>53</sup> The truster is then asked to decide how much money, if any, to pass on to an anonymous "trustee." Any money passed gets tripled by the experimenter, at which point the "trustee" can choose how much, if any, to return to the truster. Each person plays many

rounds of the game, with different people each time, sometimes as the truster, sometimes as the trustee.

Behavioral economists use this game often, but the novel twist in this study was to reveal one piece of real, true personal information about the trustees to the trusters, before the trusters made their initial decision to trust. (The information was taken from questionnaires that all subjects had filled out weeks before.) In some cases, the truster learned the trustee's level of religiosity, on a scale of 1 to 5. When trusters learned that their trustee was religious, they transferred more money, which shows that these Germans held the same belief as did Locke (about religious believers being more trustworthy). More important, the religious trustees really did transfer back more money than did the nonreligious trustees, even though they never knew anything about their trusters. The highest levels of wealth, therefore, would be created when religious people get to play a trust game with other religious people. (Richard Sosis found this same outcome too, in a field experiment done at several Israeli kibbutzim.)<sup>54</sup>

Many scholars have talked about this interaction of God, trust, and trade. In the ancient world, temples often served an important commercial function: oaths were sworn and contracts signed before the deity, with explicit threats of supernatural punishment for abrogation.<sup>55</sup> In the medieval world, Jews and Muslims excelled in long-distance trade in part because their religions helped them create trustworthy relationships and enforceable contracts.<sup>56</sup> Even today, markets that require very high trust to function efficiently (such as a diamond market) are often dominated by religiously bound ethnic groups (such as ultra-Orthodox Jews), who have lower transaction and monitoring costs than their secular competitors.<sup>57</sup>

So religions do what they are supposed to do. As Wilson put it, they help people "to achieve together what they cannot achieve on their own." But that job description applies equally well to the Mafia. Do religions help their practitioners by binding them together into superorganisms that can prey on—or at least turn their backs on—everyone else? Is religious altruism a boon or a curse to outsiders?

In their book *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, political scientists Robert Putnam and David Campbell analyzed a variety of data sources to describe how religious and nonreligious

Americans differ. Common sense would tell you that the more time and money people give to their religious groups, the less they have left over for everything else. But common sense turns out to be wrong. Putnam and Campbell found that the more frequently people attend religious services, the more generous and charitable they become across the board.<sup>58</sup> Of course religious people give a lot to religious charities, but they also give as much as or more than secular folk to secular charities such as the American Cancer Society.<sup>59</sup> They spend a lot of time in service to their churches and synagogues, but they also spend more time than secular folk serving in neighborhood and civic associations of all sorts. Putnam and Campbell put their findings bluntly:

By many different measures religiously observant Americans are better neighbors and better citizens than secular Americans—they are more generous with their time and money, especially in helping the needy, and they are more active in community life.<sup>60</sup>

Why are religious people better neighbors and citizens? To find out, Putnam and Campbell included on one of their surveys a long list of questions about religious beliefs (e.g., "Do you believe in hell? Do you agree that we will all be called before God to answer for our sins?") as well as questions about religious practices (e.g., "How often do you read holy scriptures? How often do you pray?"). These beliefs and practices turned out to matter very little. Whether you believe in hell, whether you pray daily, whether you are a Catholic, Protestant, Jew, or Mormon . . . none of these things correlated with generosity. The only thing that was reliably and powerfully associated with the moral benefits of religion was *how enmeshed people were in relationships with their co-religionists*. It's the friendships and group activities, carried out within a moral matrix that emphasizes selflessness. That's what brings out the best in people.

Putnam and Campbell reject the New Atheist emphasis on belief and reach a conclusion straight out of Durkheim: "It is religious belongingness that matters for neighborliness, not religious believing."<sup>61</sup>

## CHIMPS AND BEES AND GODS

Putnam and Campbell's work shows that religion in the United States nowadays generates such vast surpluses of social capital that much of it spills over and benefits outsiders. But there is no reason to think that religion in most times and places has provided so much benefit beyond its borders. Religions, I'm claiming, are sets of cultural practices that coevolved with our religious minds by a process of multilevel selection. To the extent that some group-level selection occurred, we can expect religions and religious minds to be parochial—focused on helping the in-group—even when a religion preaches universal love and benevolence. Religiosity evolved because successful religions made groups more efficient at “turning resources into offspring,” as Lesley Newson put it (in chapter 9).

Religion is therefore well suited to be the handmaiden of groupishness, tribalism, and nationalism. To take one example, religion does not seem to be the *cause* of suicide bombing. According to Robert Pape, who has created a database of every suicide terrorist attack in the last hundred years, suicide bombing is a nationalist response to military occupation by a culturally alien democratic power.<sup>62</sup> It's a response to boots and tanks on the ground—never to bombs dropped from the air. It's a response to contamination of the sacred homeland. (Imagine a fist punched into a beehive, and left in for a long time.)

Most military occupations don't lead to suicide bombings. There has to be an ideology in place that can rally young men to martyr themselves for a greater cause. The ideology can be secular (as was the case with the Marxist-Leninist Tamil Tigers of Sri Lanka) or it can be religious (as was the case with the Shi'ite Muslims who first demonstrated that suicide bombing works, driving the United States out of Lebanon in 1983). Anything that binds people together into a moral matrix that glorifies the in-group *while at the same time demonizing another group* can lead to moralistic killing, and many religions are well suited for that task. Religion is therefore often an *accessory* to atrocity, rather than the driving force of the atrocity.

But if you look at the long history of humanity and see our righteous minds as nearly miraculous freaks of evolution that cry out for explanation, then you might feel some appreciation for the role that religion played in getting us here. We are *Homo duplex*; we are 90 percent chimp and 10 percent bee. Successful religions work on both levels of our nature to suppress selfishness, or at least to channel it in ways that often pay dividends for the group. Gods were helpful in creating moral matrices within which Glauconian creatures have strong incentives to conform. And gods were an essential part of the evolution of our hivish overlay; sometimes we really do transcend self-interest and devote ourselves to helping others, or our groups.

Religions are moral exoskeletons. If you live in a religious community, you are enmeshed in a set of norms, relationships, and institutions that work primarily on the elephant to influence your behavior. But if you are an atheist living in a looser community with a less binding moral matrix, you might have to rely somewhat more on an internal moral compass, read by the rider. That might sound appealing to rationalists, but it is also a recipe for anomie—Durkheim's word for what happens to a society that no longer has a shared moral order.<sup>63</sup> (It means, literally, “normlessness.”) We evolved to live, trade, and trust within shared moral matrices. When societies lose their grip on individuals, allowing all to do as they please, the result is often a decrease in happiness and an increase in suicide, as Durkheim showed more than a hundred years ago.<sup>64</sup>

Societies that forgo the exoskeleton of religion should reflect carefully on what will happen to them over several generations. We don't really know, because the first atheistic societies have only emerged in Europe in the last few decades. They are the least efficient societies ever known at turning resources (of which they have a lot) into offspring (of which they have few).

## THE DEFINITION OF MORALITY (AT LAST)

You're nearly done reading a book on morality, and I have not yet given you a definition of morality. There's a reason for that. The

definition I'm about to give you would have made little sense back in chapter 1. It would not have meshed with your intuitions about morality, so I thought it best to wait. Now, after eleven chapters in which I've challenged rationalism (in Part I), broadened the moral domain (in Part II), and said that groupishness was a key innovation that took us beyond selfishness and into civilization (Part III), I think we're ready.

Not surprisingly, my approach starts with Durkheim, who said: "What is moral is everything that is a source of solidarity, everything that forces man to . . . regulate his actions by something other than . . . his own egoism."<sup>65</sup> As a sociologist, Durkheim focused on social facts—things that exist outside of any individual mind—which constrain the egoism of individuals. Examples of such social facts include religions, families, laws, and the shared networks of meaning that I have called moral matrices. Because I'm a psychologist, I'm going to insist that we include inside-the-mind stuff too, such as the moral emotions, the inner lawyer (or press secretary), the six moral foundations, the hive switch, and all the other evolved psychological mechanisms I've described in this book.

My definition puts these two sets of puzzle pieces together to define moral *systems*:

Moral systems are interlocking sets of values, virtues, norms, practices, identities, institutions, technologies, and evolved psychological mechanisms that work together to suppress or regulate self-interest and make cooperative societies possible.<sup>66</sup>

I'll just make two points about this definition now, and then we'll use it in the final chapter to examine some of the major political ideologies in Western society.

First, this is a functionalist definition. I define morality by what it *does*, rather than by specifying what content counts as moral. Turiel, in contrast, defined morality as being about "justice, rights, and welfare."<sup>67</sup> But any effort to define morality by designating a few issues as the truly moral ones and dismissing the rest as "social convention"

is bound to be parochial. It's a moral community saying, "Here are our central values, and we define morality as being about our central values; to hell with the rest of you." As I showed in chapters 1 and 7, Turiel's definition doesn't even apply to all Americans; it's a definition by and for educated and politically liberal Westerners.

Of course, it is possible that one moral community actually *has* gotten it right in some sense, and the rest of the world is wrong, which brings us to the second point. Philosophers typically distinguish between *descriptive* definitions of morality (which simply describe what people happen to think is moral) and *normative* definitions (which specify what is really and truly right, regardless of what anyone thinks). So far in this book I have been entirely descriptive. I told you that some people (especially secular liberals such as Turiel, Kohlberg, and the New Atheists) think that morality refers to matters of harm and fairness. Other people (especially religious conservatives and people in non-WEIRD cultures) think that the moral domain is much broader, and they use most or all of the six moral foundations to construct their moral matrices. These are empirical, factual, verifiable propositions, and I offered evidence for them in chapters 1, 7, and 8.

But philosophers are rarely interested in what people happen to think. The field of normative ethics is concerned with figuring out which actions are *truly* right or wrong. The best-known systems of normative ethics are the one-receptor systems I described in chapter 6: utilitarianism (which tells us to maximize overall welfare) and deontology (which in its Kantian form tells us to make the rights and autonomy of others paramount). When you have a single clear principle, you can begin making judgments across cultures. Some cultures get a higher score than others, which means that they are morally superior.

My definition of morality was designed to be a descriptive definition; it cannot stand alone as a normative definition. (As a normative definition, it would give high marks to fascist and communist societies as well as to cults, so long as they achieved high levels of cooperation by creating a shared moral order.) But I think my definition works well as an adjunct to other normative theories, particularly those that

have often had difficulty seeing groups and social facts. Utilitarians since Jeremy Bentham have focused intently on individuals. They try to improve the welfare of society by giving individuals what they want. But a Durkheimian version of utilitarianism would recognize that human flourishing requires social order and embeddedness. It would begin with the premise that social order is extraordinarily precious and difficult to achieve. A Durkheimian utilitarianism would be open to the possibility that the binding foundations—Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity—have a crucial role to play in a good society.

I don't know what the best normative ethical theory is for individuals in their private lives.<sup>68</sup> But when we talk about making laws and implementing public policies in Western democracies that contain some degree of ethnic and moral diversity, then I think there is no compelling alternative to utilitarianism.<sup>69</sup> I think Jeremy Bentham was right that laws and public policies should aim, as a first approximation, to produce the greatest total good.<sup>70</sup> I just want Bentham to read Durkheim and recognize that we are *Homo duplex* before he tells any of us, or our legislators, how to go about maximizing that total good.<sup>71</sup>

#### IN SUM

If you think about religion as a set of beliefs about supernatural agents, you're bound to misunderstand it. You'll see those beliefs as foolish delusions, perhaps even as parasites that exploit our brains for their own benefit. But if you take a Durkheimian approach to religion (focusing on belonging) and a Darwinian approach to morality (involving multilevel selection), you get a very different picture. You see that religious practices have been binding our ancestors into groups for tens of thousands of years. That binding usually involves some blinding—once any person, book, or principle is declared sacred, then devotees can no longer question it or think clearly about it.

Our ability to believe in supernatural agents may well have begun as an accidental by-product of a hypersensitive agency detection device, but once early humans began believing in such agents, the

groups that used them to construct moral communities were the ones that lasted and prospered. Like those nineteenth-century religious communes, they used their gods to elicit sacrifice and commitment from members. Like those subjects in the cheating studies and trust games, their gods helped them to suppress cheating and increase trustworthiness. Only groups that can elicit commitment and suppress free riding can grow.

This is why human civilization grew so rapidly after the first plants and animals were domesticated. Religions and righteous minds had been coevolving, culturally and genetically, for tens of thousands of years before the Holocene era, and both kinds of evolution sped up when agriculture presented new challenges and opportunities. Only groups whose gods promoted cooperation, and whose individual minds responded to those gods, were ready to rise to these challenges and reap the rewards.

We humans have an extraordinary ability to care about things beyond ourselves, to circle around those things with other people, and in the process to bind ourselves into teams that can pursue larger projects. That's what religion is all about. And with a few adjustments, it's what politics is about too. In the final chapter we'll take one last look at political psychology. We'll try to figure out why people choose to bind themselves into one political team or another. And we'll look especially at how team membership blinds people to the motives and morals of their opponents—and to the wisdom that is to be found scattered among diverse political ideologies.