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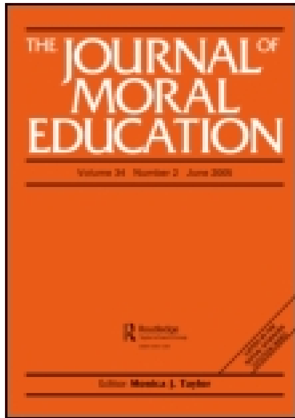

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The righteous mind: why good people are divided by religion and politics

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The righteous mind: why good people are divided by religion and politics
Jonathan Haidt, 2012
New York, Pantheon Books
$28.95 (hbk), 448 pp.
ISBN 978-0-307-37790-6

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Jonathan Haidt is arguably today's most influential moral psychologist during a time of upheaval in a field that is struggling to interpret a wide variety of new research findings. Haidt has a special gift for synthesizing the new research using his Social Intuitionist Model (SIM) and communicating the results clearly. A great strength of his new book is to alert us to the subtle workings of our unconscious moral minds (what he refers to as our 'elephant') as it produces the 'groupish' biases and other exclusionary tendencies that make up our 'righteous minds'. Central to his argument is a characterization of conscious moral reasoning (what he calls 'the rider') that operates in a decidedly post hoc fashion relative to our moral decisions and behaviour. While this too is an important insight strongly supported by his and other research, I think Haidt overstates his case as when he describes the 'rider' as so strongly subservient to the 'elephant' (not quite its slave, but its inner lawyer). And if he were correct, it would render the challenge of moral education daunting. Haidt's claim is stated most clearly by what he calls his 'first principle of moral psychology' that '*Intuitions come first, strategic reasoning second*' (p. 70; italics in original). Haidt goes even further by claiming that the rationalist philosophers' faith in reason is a 'delusion', 'an example of faith in something that doesn't exist' (p. 92).

While there is not space for any comprehensive rebuttal I would present three quick points. First, a useful analogy can be made to the recent debate regarding the relation between conscious thought and behaviour. As Roy Baumeister and others have shown, the fact that conscious processing most often follows behaviour need not diminish the role conscious thought plays in influencing *future* behaviour. In other words, what Haidt may not adequately consider is that the lawyer's client is concerned with its management of moral feelings, emotions and intuitions in *impending* moral contexts, and not just the justification of its past behaviours and choices. Baumeister has shown that in a wide variety of contexts conscious reasoning is well suited to managing this task so there is no reason to suspect that moral reasoning would not be also. Relatedly, making the likely assumption that conscious moral reasoning has played a key role in the evolution of humanity's moral sense it seems unlikely, at least to me, that this was accomplished as a purely strategic or post hoc add-on to unconscious moral processing and behavior. Finally, it should be noted that reason is also accountable to its own internal standards and not just its elephant's reputation.

Along a similar tack, while I would count myself as one sympathetic to Haidt's claim that research in moral psychology has been too narrow, there is something oddly ironic about his polemical portrayal of the rationalist's supposed 'great nar-

rowing' of moral psychology to justice, autonomy and rights. Adopting an evolutionary perspective, as Haidt generally recommends, many have argued that it was in fact this focus on autonomy and rights that played such a critical role in widening our moral circle. To consider an historical example, attending more to the sovereignty of human bodies and the perspective of individuals appeared to make it harder for human beings to continue to apply more dubious moral and religious standards to human behaviour. One very concrete indication of progress would be the reduction in the number and kinds of capital offenses over the last few years of the last millennium, e.g., now essentially murder, versus sodomy, buggery, bestiality, adultery, witchcraft, slave rebellion and horse thievery, etc. It appears from the view of the wider social or evolutionary stage this 'narrowing' was associated *both* with greater freedom and compassion for human beings and fewer feelings of disgust and intolerance toward a wide suite of their behaviours. Might the greater inclusivity of the SIM come with some associated moral costs?

Finally, speaking of our human propensity for intolerance and disgust, later in the book Haidt extols social liberals to more actively engage and make use of the entire suite of SIM's moral foundations as their more conservative counterparts clearly do, shown in his recent research. If Haidt intends this as purely rhetorical advice, and to some extent I think he does, well and good—e.g., liberals will be more effective if they learn to 'speak to the elephant'. But if the appeal were intended to carry more prescriptive weight, it would be reasonable to question the moral basis of any proposed inclusiveness. For example, evidence that conservatives are, say, more likely to both feel disgust toward acts of homosexuality and condemn homosexuals (as important recent research indeed does demonstrate) could also be interpreted to suggest 'moral' conservatives ought to 'narrow' and more fairly deploy their moral foundations. Some might wish to go further and challenge whether Haidt's proposed inclusivity is a disguised form of liberal guilt and insist that feelings of disgust and in-group/out-group loyalty are best understood as the lower if not more obsolete denizens of our moral sensibility. Otherwise stated, Haidt's appeal for liberals to adopt a more 'balanced' blend of moral foundations requires a more substantive moral or prescriptive warrant.

While these criticisms are, hopefully, worthy of some attention they should not distract from Haidt's larger goal: to inject today's especially acrimonious political culture with some non-partisan understanding and dialogue. It is in this regard that the book is largely successful. He has certainly convinced me of the importance for moral educators to pay more attention to the elephant. Haidt is indeed an observant and insightful student of human nature and he is adept at marshalling a wide sample of important cross-disciplinary research relevant to this task. Many may not like all of the contours of the portrait he paints, but that might just be the point. Helping us to see ourselves as we are, rather than how we like to present ourselves, may be one of the most important benefits of his book.

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The better angels of our nature: why violence has declined
Steven Pinker, 2011
New York, Viking
$40.00 (hbk), 802 pp.
ISBN 978-0-670-02295-3

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This thick tome argues that humanity has enjoyed a global decline of violence in every sense: over centuries and millennia, in every corner of the globe, and with respect to all kinds of physical violence from war, to genocide, to torture and cruel punishment, to slavery, bloody vendetta and even in the treatment of animals. It is an audacious thesis and deliberately so. With it, Pinker seems intent on settling a few accounts. The book replies to criticisms of his earlier work, *The blank slate* (2002), which took to task the cherished liberal ideas that human behaviour is mostly malleable and that modern, 'civilized' people are the real savages, not humans living in traditional hunter-gather societies. Pinker's assertions in *The blank slate* about the relatively low levels of violence in traditional societies some of his critics' claimed, could not stand up against the anthropological evidence. In reply to this charge, *Better angels* painstakingly documents a vast array of evidence showing that pre-modernity was indeed more violent than modernity and significantly so. Pinker's second concern is to counter what he considers to be a pervasive innumeracy in contemporary journalistic and intellectual culture which lulls people into a false sense of insecurity. Unless we are vigilant about keeping an eye on the numbers, Pinker suggests, the journalistic principle 'if it bleeds, it leads' can easily create the wrong impression that we are living in exceptionally violent times.

Pinker's attempt to marshal the numbers to debunk the myth of the noble savage is on the whole less convincing than his statistical challenge to the 'lugubrious conventional wisdom' (p. 671) about rates of violence in modern societies.

The case against the myth of the noble savage, presented in the second chapter, draws mainly on two data sets: rates and percentages of death in war in non-state versus state societies and homicide rates in non-state societies versus state societies.

The first figures, though highly suggestive, seem inconclusive. Although the statistical chance of dying a violent death during the bloody twentieth century (about 3%) pales in comparison with the percentage of war deaths in hunter-gatherer societies at the top end of the scale (20% or more), the least warlike non-state societies compare quite favourably to state societies. Pinker's consistent portrayal of the wars and genocides of the twentieth century throughout this book as an