

# Haidt 2001: Moral (etc.) Dumbfounding

Kevin Dorst  
kevindorst@pitt.edu

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## I. Rationalism vs. Intuitionism

Haidt sets up his discussion as contrasting two approaches to moral psychology (/epistemology?):

**Rationalism:** moral reasoning is what leads to and determines moral judgments.

**Social-Intuitionism:** Intuitive, gut-level reactions are the main input to moral judgments; reasoning is ex post facto and primarily social.

Haidt's going to argue for the latter, and thinks this should lead us to rethink our moral psychology in big ways.

**Q:** How much of this argument applies to reasoning *fully generally*, with nothing in particular to do with *moral* reasoning? Is it just an irrationalist reading of the JDM literature, applied to morality?

How different would the story be if we focused on *linguistic* or *visual* or *social* or *intentionality* or *motor* judgments?

## III. The Social-Intuitionist Model

Basically, this is a dual-process model of cognition applied to moral judgment.

Moral reasoning = slow, effortful, conscious.

Moral intuition = fast, reflexive, automatic, easy.

Most of our judgments come from the latter. Sometimes we engage the former, but mostly in ex-post-facto reasoning and/or in social justifications.

Think Mercier and Sperber.

Haidt is going to give a variety of reasons for doubting the importance of moral reasoning in judgment.

**Q:** Why care? Is there an assumed equation (equivocation?) between "(conscious) reasoning" and *having (being sensitive to) reasons*?

Perhaps the way to read Railton is as drawing that out.

## III. Initial Evidence

Moral judgments are correlated with factually-relevant information.

Haidt: but correlation doesn't equal causation! [...]

So let's see what better predicts people's moral judgments: ickiness or harmfulness. Let's ask people how they think about folks who eat their dead pet dogs, or masturbate using a chicken carcass, or clean their toilet with the national flag.

E.g. whether abortion is wrong correlated with whether think a fetus is a person. E.g. willingness to punish illegal immigration depends on beliefs about how economy/social welfare affected by it.

Lo and behold! Affective reactions are better predictors of moral judgments than harm is in these cases.

**Q:** What's the background moral theory here? Something close to act-utilitarianism, plus a clear emphasis on just evaluating the *act*, not the person or the disposition or what it makes sense to do if you found out someone did one of those things.

So we've discovered... ..that people are not myopic act utilitarians.

This sort of case can lead to **moral dumbfounding**.

Julie and Mark are brother and sister. They are traveling together in France on summer vacation from college. One night they are staying alone in a cabin near the beach. They decide that it would be interesting and fun if they tried making love. At the very least it would be a new experience for each of them. Julie was already taking birth control pills, but Mark uses a condom too, just to be safe. They both enjoy making love, but they decide not to do it again. They keep that night as a special secret, which makes them feel even closer to each other. What do you think about that? Was it OK for them to make love?

People give reasons why it was wrong, in terms of bad consequences it could have and so on. Researchers refuse to accept any of them as good reasons ("Look, it didn't have bad consequences!"). People end up with no more reasons but still confident in their judgments.

Haidt: "But what model of moral judgment allows a person to know that something is wrong without knowing why?" (1024)

Compare:

Julie wakes up and opens her eyes and sees that she has hands. But how can she *know* that she has hands? What if while she slept she was envatted by mad scientists? What if she's dreaming? What if an evil demon is making her hallucinate? What do you think about this? Does Julie know that she has hands?

As any undergrad epistemology course will demonstrate, it's easy to point to flaws in any of the spontaneous suggestions untrained students will come up with. Some of them will relent and say that Julie doesn't know. Others will continue to think she does but will be confused. Are these latter students making a mistake?

But what model of epistemological judgment allows a person to know that Julie knows she has hands without knowing why?

Almost all of them.

**Q:** Is there any difference between Haidt's case and these other, mundane cases of how strange scenarios can dumbfound people?

Likewise for moral judgment. Or linguistic judgment. Or visual judgment. Or social judgment. Or, seemingly, any kind of judgment.

#### IV. Four problems

##### The Dual-Process Problem

In general, dual-process approach to cognition is right.

Also, the way we should understand System 1 is as irrational, statistically unsophisticated, etc. (says Haidt).

(As far as I can tell, there's nothing special about *moral* judgment here, as opposed to basically any other type of judgment.)

### The Motivated-Reasoning Problem

Evolutionary story: moral judgments are more about coordinating with others than figuring out the truth.

Evidence: people move toward the moral judgments of others *without hearing their reasons*, when they find out what those judgments are.

Reply: they do this for *any* type of judgment, as the literature on the "group polarization effect" shows (Isenberg 1986).

Evidence from cognitive dissonance literature. People are often *defense motivated*: they have a "desire to hold attitudes and beliefs that are congruent with existing self-definitional attitudes and beliefs" (1033).

And arguably for good reason: learning other people's opinions provides you with evidence!

Imagine if they didn't. Even a desire for coherent beliefs gets a bad rap!

### The Post-Hoc Problem

People cite things in explaining their judgments and actions that couldn't have mattered.

E.g. Nisbett and Wilson giving people a placebo and seeing their tolerance for electric shocks; citing their childhood experiences.

E.g. Harshness of moral judgment increased by dirty tissues on the desk. E.g. judges's sentencing harsher right before lunch.

**Q:** Is this an equivocation on 'couldn't'? Experimenters know that the reasons people cite are not the (primary? only?) causal reason for their judgment/action.

But subjects don't know that! They feel resilient, and search for a reason why. They feel revulsion at the act—maybe it's because of the dirty tissues, but maybe it's because the act is bad; they're not sure. They feel unhappy and angry hearing the inmate's testimony—maybe it's just because they're hungry, or maybe it's because the testimony is suspicious. Etc.

### The Action Problem

Moral action co-varies with moral emotion more than it does with moral reasoning.

Moral reasoning is *correlated* with moral action, but Haidt suggests there could be a third factor causing both (IQ<sup>1</sup>, or self-regulation).

Surprising, insofar as emotions are tightly linked to desires and, you know, belief-desire psychology?

<sup>1</sup> [Cringe]

Damasio, psychopathy, decisions, and somatic marker hypothesis.

## References

- Haidt, Jonathan, 2001. 'The emotional dog and its rational tail: A social intuitionist approach to moral judgment'. *Psychological Review*, 108(4):814-834.
- Isenberg, Daniel J., 1986. 'Group Polarization. A Critical Review and Meta-Analysis'. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 50(6):1141-1151.