**Why Are Political/Social Discussions So Difficult**

Rex Mitchell - 1/9/21

Moral foundations theory offers some insight. This is a social psychological theory intended to explain the origins of and variation in human moral reasoning on the basis of six innate, modular foundations, listed here as dichotomies:

Care/harm

Liberty/oppression

Fairness/cheating

Loyalty/betrayal

Authority/subversion

Sanctity/degradation

These manifest differently across individuals, especially the first three foundations. *Care* can focus on humanity in general and/or on individuals - in contrast to care for those in “our group.” *Liberty* can focus on helping underdogs, victims, and powerless individuals and groups - in contrast to don’t tread on me (with welfare and high taxes), don’t tread on my business (with your laws and regulations, and don’t tread on my nation (with your United Nations and your sovereignty-reducing international treaties). *Fairness* can focus on promoting equality and fighting for civil and human rights - in contrast to proportionality (receive only according to what you contribute).

Care (humanity/individuals - our group)

Liberty (help the vulnerable - don’t restrict what I do)

Fairness (equality - proportionality)

Loyalty (virtues of patriotism, national pride, and self-sacrifice for the group)

Authority (deference to legitimate authority and respect for traditions)

Sanctity/purity

Liberals rely more heavily upon the first three foundations, specifically Care (for humanity/individuals), Liberty (help the vulnerable), and Fairness (equality) - with less emphasis on the last three.

Conservatives rely more heavily on the last three, Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity - while also considering versions of the first three, Care (our group), Liberty (don’t restrict what I do), and Fairness (proportionality).

The mind could be thought of as divided into two parts, like a rider (logic, reasoning, controlled processes) on an elephant (intuition, emotion, automatic processes). The rider evolved to serve the elephant. That’s why Haidt says that “intuitions come first, strategic reasoning second. This is the first rule of moral psychology: feelings come first and tilt the mental playing field on which reasons and arguments compete. If people want to reach a conclusion, they can usually find a way to do so.

We do moral reasoning not to reconstruct the actual reasons why we ourselves came to a judgment; we reason to find the best possible reasons why somebody else ought to join us in our judgment.

Therefore, if you want to change someone’s mind about a moral or political issue, talk to the elephant first. If you ask people to believe something that violates their intuitions, they will devote their efforts to finding a reason to doubt your argument or conclusion. They will almost always succeed.

If you really want to change someone’s mind on a moral or political matter, you’ll need to see things from that person’s angle as well as your own. And if you do truly see it the other person’s way — deeply and intuitively — you might even find your own mind opening in response.

Morality binds and blinds. We all get sucked into tribal moral communities. We circle around sacred values and then share post hoc arguments about why we are so right and they are so wrong. We think the other side is blind to truth, reason, science, and common sense, but in fact everyone goes blind when talking about their sacred objects.

If you want to understand another group, follow the sacredness. As a first step, think about the six moral foundations, and try to figure out which one or two are carrying the most weight in a particular controversy. And if you really want to open your mind, open your heart first. If you can have at least one friendly interaction with a member of the "other" group, you'll find it far easier to listen to what they're saying, and maybe even see a controversial issue in a new light. You may not agree, but you'll probably shift from Manichaean disagreement (good vs evil and compromise is a sin) to a more respectful and constructive yin-yang disagreement

These ideas and many of the words are from Haidt, Jonathan (2012). *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*. New York: Random House