Original Paper

The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion by Jonathan Haidt: Book Review

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Abstract

In The Righteous Mind, Jonathan Haidt examines the moral grounds that people intuitively believe. He presented his idea by asking why good people are divided by politics and religion. Then, he asked about morality by asking, "Where does morality come from?" (Haidt, 2012, p. 3). He explained that people understand social morality in different ways. People live in unique societies that shape their understanding of social norms, which are based on many factors, such as culture, religion, and education. Haidt based his ideas about the righteous mind on three principles and demonstrated them through three metaphors to help his readers understand his theory. The first principle is "intuitions come first," and its central metaphor is that the mind is like a rider on an elephant, where the rider's job is to serve the elephant. The second principle is "there is more to morality than harm and fairness," and its central metaphor is that the righteous mind is like a tongue with six taste receptors. The third principle is "morality binds and blinds," and its metaphor is that we are 90 percent chimp and 10 percent bee (Pp. 3, 109, 217).

Keywords

righteous mind, good people, morality, societies, social norms, culture, religion, education

1. Introduction

Jonathan Haidt (2012) divided his book into three parts, each of which includes one principle of moral psychology. The first principle of moral psychology is "intuitions come first, strategic reasoning second," based on the "elephant and the rider" metaphor (p. 3). He explained this first principle via its metaphor throughout four chapters: "Where Does Morality Come From?" "The Intuitive Dog and Its Rational Tail," "Elephant Rule," and "Vote for Me (Here's Why)" (Haidt, 2012, pp. 3-108). The second

part includes the second principle of moral psychology: "there is more to morality than harm and fairness," which is connected to the metaphor that "the righteous mind is like a tongue with six taste receptors." This principle encompasses four chapters: "There's More to Morality Than Harm and Fairness," "Taste Buds of The Righteous Mind," "The Moral Foundations of Politics," and "The Conservative Advantage" (Haidt, 2012, pp. 111- 216). The third part includes the third principle of moral psychology (i.e., "morality binds and blinds"), which hinges on the "we are 90 percent Chimp and 10 percent bee" metaphor (Haidt, 2012, pp. 220- 366).

This book aims to encourage college students majoring in social work to keep the principle of individual differences in mind when engaging in the social work profession. Thus, the ideas of this book should be applied by social work professionals. By doing so, such professionals would be better able to appreciate people's differences while understanding their social, moral, religious, and political backgrounds and bringing them together to discuss their clients' thoughts peacefully and without discrimination.

2. Author's Review

The author arouses thoughts about matters that people do not usually think about. He explained how people see things from different angles based on their moral thoughts and beliefs. This idea is based on the influence of social culture, religion, and political tendencies. These components shape people's judgments of each other, which, in turn, influence their social, political communications. The author urges readers to reject bigotry, open their minds to other people's minds, and understand others and work together for societal good.

In the first chapter of The Righteous Mind, Haidt explained his first principle: "intuitions come first, strategic reasoning second," alongside the metaphor of the elephant and rider's purpose to serve the elephant. He described individuals' passions using the image of the elephant, which moves based on its intuition. Meanwhile, individuals' reasoning represents the rider, who works as the servant of the elephant (passions). Thus, the rider's role is to justify, not to control, the elephant's movements (Lucas, 2013). In Haidt's explanation, intuition comes first, and reasoning comes second. He told a story about incest to clarify how the intuition of the elephant made it follow its passion—only later on was did the rider think about the action. In the story, Julie and Mark had sex, allowing their elephants (passions) to commit incest, while their riders (reasoning) merely waited to consider the situation and whether it was right or wrong. They wondered whether what they had done was wrong and questioned whether any harm had been done since no one from their society saw them.

This story reminded me of a story Jennifer told while she was working in a pathology lab. As a vegetarian, she cared about the environment and protected creatures for moral reasons. At the same time, when she was asked to incinerate a fresh animal corpse, she cut a chunk of flesh off and had it for dinner. No one was hurt, and no one saw, so what was wrong with her action? (UbeL, 2013).

I agree with the Malagasy argument about these kinds of stories. Committing incest is a catastrophe in

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itself because it tears down the fabric of kin relationships and social coherence. In addition, it goes against the divine religions. The Malagasy people appeal to society to repair this kind of social dysfunction (Astuti & Bloch, 2015). I have trouble accepting the reasoning that an action is not morally wrong as long as no one is hurt, as this implies that anything that no one knows about is morally right. What is the difference between being a human and being an animal? Our God allows us to be human in the best picture, not only in our features but also in our behaviors, to build civilizations and let our riders (reasoning) grow and work for good, not bad. Our passions have to be controlled by our morality which gains from our culture and religion. We were reared on the social values that shaped our personality.

In discussing the second principle, Haidt depicted the foundations of morality: care/harm, liberty/oppression, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, and sanctity/degradation (Haidt, 2012, pp 32- 60). People prioritize these foundations differently, which divides them into groups. I agree with Haidt that people's preferences regarding moral foundations are different from people's perspectives of the same foundations. However, I think the priorities assigned to moral foundations vary among people because their tongue taste receptors (metaphor) taste the values differently based on the influences of their social environments. Some groups taste sanctity/degrading strongly and rank such values as more important than other values (e.g., fairness/cheating might be considered secondary values). This is because their taste makes them understand that one right value brings other good values. The weight of values did not comes from emptiness but from experiences, and they believe in these norms.

If we respect the sanctity of our religion and culture, degradation will disappear. As a result, fairness will spread, and cheating will decrease gradually. However, the way people absorb norms makes it difficult for them to converge because their differences are related to how people evaluate their tastes. A person's tastes for different values are primarily influenced by their cultures and beliefs.

The differences between liberals and conservatives serve as a good example. The values that liberals consider to be the most important are perceived by conservatives as secondary. According to Graham and Haidt, liberals and conservatives value harm/care and justice/reciprocity differently (as cited in Powell, 2012). Liberals prioritize these values, while conservatives give them less weight than the values of loyalty, respect, and purity norms (Powell, 2012). Therefore, social conservatives care about welfare and family stability, while liberals care about materialistic gains—if they do not earn, they will be harmed, and they do not want to be harmed by redistribution (Saletan,2012).

In the third part of the book, Haidt presented the idea that "morality binds and blinds" with the metaphor that "we are 90 percent chimp and 10 percent bee" (Haidt, 2012, pp. 256-284). He argued that individuals like to live in selective groups based on shared interests. I agree with this—we are humans, and humans are social creatures. Thus, we like living in groups because we cannot achieve our goals as isolated individuals. Hence, our existence in groups is necessary for us to continue our social lives.

Additionally, our God has supplied us with mechanisms that facilitate flexible interactions between

individuals within a group and between groups living in the same social environment. Thus, people use mechanisms to enhance their coherence and protect themselves from harm and extermination. The first mechanism is selfishness, which makes people look for personal benefits from being in a group, much like a "chimp." The second mechanism is selflessness. Through this mechanism, people work for the sake of the group and support their group against other groups, much like "bees." This second mechanism promotes group bonding. However, I disagree with the idea that the group is blind because being blind means there always is a winner and a loser. In turn, the elephants of the winners will trample the losers' rights.

Haidt referred to social mechanisms as "group selection," by which individuals put themselves into various groups (e.g., political, religious, and business groups) based on their interests and concerns. These different groups assign different weights to moral norms. Some groups align the values of morality with their political or materialistic interests and objectives, while others weigh their moral values based on their beliefs. Thus, individuals within a group align their moral norms with those of the group and blindly follow these norms when interacting with other groups. This blindness usually causes individuals from different groups to criticize each other and enter conflicts (Alloro, 2012).

3. Conclusion

Haidt's book about the righteous mind explains how morality has been understood differently by different people. In various ways, these differences determine whether we accept each other based on our bigotry or interests instead of the truth. The metaphors that Haidt associated with the principles made ideas understandable. These include the metaphor of the elephant and the rider for the first principle ("intuitions come first, strategic reasoning second"), the tongue and taste receptors metaphor for the second principle ("there is more to morality than harm and fairness"), and the 90 percent chimp 10 percept bee metaphor for the third principle ("morality binds and blinds"). I really enjoyed reading this book and would recommend it to anyone. Reading this book gives readers the chance to open their minds to new thoughts and perspectives.

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