# Moral Foundations Theory: The Righteous Mind

Jonathan Haidt is a social psychologist who studies morality. To do so, he went to various places in a variety of cultures and gave questionnaires asking people about questions of right and wrong. From this research emerged five dimensions of morality (with explanations from moralfoundations.org):

* **Care/harm:** This foundation is related to our long evolution as mammals with attachment systems and an ability to feel (and dislike) the pain of others. It underlies virtues of kindness, gentleness, and nurturance.
* **Fairness/cheating:** This foundation is related to the evolutionary process of reciprocal altruism. It generates ideas of justice, rights, and autonomy. [Note: In our original conception, Fairness included concerns about equality, which are more strongly endorsed by political liberals. However, as we reformulated the theory in 2011 based on new data, we emphasize proportionality, which is endorsed by everyone, but is more strongly endorsed by conservatives]
* **Loyalty/betrayal:** This foundation is related to our long history as tribal creatures able to form shifting coalitions. It underlies virtues of patriotism and self-sacrifice for the group. It is active anytime people feel that it’s “one for all, and all for one.”
* **Authority/subversion:** This foundation was shaped by our long primate history of hierarchical social interactions. It underlies virtues of leadership and followership, including deference to legitimate authority and respect for traditions.
* **Sanctity/degradation:** This foundation was shaped by the psychology of disgust and contamination. It underlies religious notions of striving to live in an elevated, less carnal, more noble way. It underlies the widespread idea that the body is a temple which can be desecrated by immoral activities and contaminants (an idea not unique to religious traditions).

There are additional candidates for possible moral foundations, including, most prominently:

* **Liberty/oppression:** This foundation is about the feelings of reactance and resentment people feel toward those who dominate them and restrict their liberty. Its intuitions are often in tension with those of the authority foundation. The hatred of bullies and dominators motivates people to come together, in solidarity, to oppose or take down the oppressor. We report some preliminary work on this potential foundation in [this paper](http://www.plosone.org/article/info:doi/10.1371/journal.pone.0042366), on the psychology of libertarianism and liberty.

According to MFT, these foundations lead people to have different moral priorities and can help explain why people disagree about certain moral issues. He argues that people use reason primarily to justify their moral intuitions and to persuade others to adopt those same intuitions.

## Intersection with Politics

Haidt has shown convincing evidence that moral foundations theory gives clues as to why people identify as politically on the left or right. For example, the more right-leaning you are, the more interested in questions of authority/subversion, and loyalty/betrayal you will be; the more you lean left, the more likely it is that you will be interested in questions of fairness/cheating and care/harm.

[Watch on YouTube](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8SOQduoLgRw&amp;autoplay=1)  
Optional Content

## Critiques

Perhaps the strongest critique of MFT is that it is overstated: yes, people have moral foundations, and yes, those impact politics, but there is far more room for individual context and agency than this theory sometimes leads people to believe. One can be a conservative who values care/harm, just as one can be a leftist who believes in authority.

Additional critiques include:

1. Western bias: Critics argue that MFT primarily focuses on Western cultures and might not be as applicable or relevant in non-Western cultural contexts. The theory's foundation is rooted in Western individualistic societies, which could limit its universality and cross-cultural validity.
2. Simplification of moral complexity: Critics contend that MFT reduces the complexity of moral reasoning to a small set of fundamental dimensions. It might oversimplify the intricate and multifaceted nature of human morality, potentially neglecting important nuances in how people actually make moral judgments.
3. Questionable empirical evidence: Some researchers have questioned the empirical basis of MFT, suggesting that its theoretical framework doesn't always align with real-world data or may not fully capture the intricacies of human moral decision-making.
4. Political biases: Critics argue that MFT may be influenced by Jonathan Haidt's own political biases, leading to potential favoritism of certain moral foundations over others. This could raise concerns about the theory's objectivity and neutrality.
5. Limited emphasis on reasoning: MFT focuses on moral intuitions, emotions, and psychological foundations but pays less attention to moral reasoning. Critics argue that moral judgments often involve reflective reasoning, which the theory does not fully account for.
6. Categorization of moral foundations: Some researchers suggest that the division of moral foundations into specific categories (e.g., care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, sanctity/degradation) may not accurately capture the full spectrum of moral considerations.
7. Lack of predictive power: While MFT provides valuable insights into moral psychology, critics argue that it may not offer strong predictive power in understanding real-world behavior and attitudes in specific situations.
8. Neglecting social and cultural factors: Critics claim that MFT doesn't adequately address how social and cultural factors influence moral development and moral variations across different groups and societies.

## References

Frenzl, S. (2013, January 17). The elephant, the rider and you: Stef Frenzl at TEDxMontlakeCut [Video]. YouTube. <https://youtu.be/Nk8V-R1IFcU?si=nAjGq91tC1K8VaFv>

Pendleton, B. K., Minute, M. R., & Minutes, V. V. (n.d.). The elephant, the rider, and the path to change in health care. The Elephant, The Rider, and the Path to Change in Health Care. <https://accelerate.uofuhealth.utah.edu/leadership/bob-pendleton-on-the-elephant-the-rider-and-change-in-health-care>

Twowp. (2021, July 30). Dual process theory: A simple summary. The World of Work Project. <https://worldofwork.io/2019/07/dual-process-theory/>

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## Additional Readings

* <https://moralfoundations.org/>
* <https://behavioralscientist.org/whats-wrong-with-moral-foundations-theory-and-how-to-get-moral-psychology-right/>

Read this online at <https://books.byui.edu/science_of_learning/sbWHAQzA>