

The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion

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CHAPTER 7

The Moral Foundations of Politics

Behind every act of altruism, heroism, and human decency you'll find either selfishness or stupidity. That, at least, is the view long held by many social scientists who accepted the idea that *Homo sapiens* is really *Homo economicus*.¹ “Economic man” is a simple creature who makes all of life’s choices like a shopper in a supermarket with plenty of time to compare jars of applesauce. If that’s your view of human nature, then it’s easy to create mathematical models of behavior because there’s really just one principle at work: self-interest. People do whatever gets them the most benefit for the lowest cost.

To see how wrong this view is, answer the ten questions in Figure 7.1. *Homo economicus* would put a price on sticking a needle into his own arm, and a lower price—perhaps zero—on the other nine actions, none of which hurts him directly or costs him anything.

More important than the numbers you wrote are the comparisons between columns. *Homo economicus* would find the actions in column B no more aversive than those in column A. If you found any of the actions in column B worse than their counterparts in column A, then congratulations, you are a human being, not an economist’s fantasy. You have concerns beyond narrow self-interest. You have a working set of moral foundations.

I wrote these five pairs of actions so that the B column would give you an intuitive flash from each foundation, like putting a grain of salt or sugar on your tongue. The five rows illustrate violations of Care (hurting a child), Fairness (profiting from someone else’s undeserved loss), Loyalty (criticizing your nation to outsiders), Authority (disrespecting your father), and Sanctity (acting in a degrading or disgusting way).

In the rest of this chapter I’ll describe these foundations and how they became part of human nature. I’ll show that these foundations are used differently, and to different degrees, to support moral matrices on the political left and right.

¹ E.g., Luce and Raiffa 1957.

How much would someone have to pay you to perform each of these actions? Assume that you'd be paid secretly and that there would be no social, legal, or other harmful consequences to you afterward. Answer by writing a number from 0 to 4 after each action, where:

0 = \$0, I'd do it for free

1 = \$100

2 = \$10,000

3 = \$1,000,000

4 = I would not do this for any amount of money

Column A	Column B
<p>1a. Stick a sterile hypodermic needle into your arm. _____</p> <p>2a. Accept a plasma-screen television that a friend of yours wants to give you. You know that the friend got the TV a year ago when the company that made it sent it to your friend, by mistake and at no charge. _____</p> <p>3a. Say something critical about your nation (which you believe to be true) while calling in, anonymously, to a talk-radio show in your nation. _____</p> <p>4a. Slap a male friend in the face (with his permission) as part of a comedy skit. _____</p> <p>5a. Attend a short avant-garde play in which the actors act like fools for thirty minutes, including failing to solve simple problems and falling down repeatedly onstage. _____</p>	<p>1b. Stick a sterile hypodermic needle into the arm of a child you don't know. _____</p> <p>2b. Accept a plasma-screen television that a friend of yours wants to give you. You know that your friend bought the TV a year ago from a thief who had stolen it from a wealthy family. _____</p> <p>3b. Say something critical about your nation (which you believe to be true) while calling in, anonymously, to a talk-radio show in a foreign nation. _____</p> <p>4b. Slap your father in the face (with his permission) as part of a comedy skit. _____</p> <p>5b. Attend a short avant-garde play in which the actors act like animals for 30 minutes, including crawling around naked and grunting like chimpanzees. _____</p>
<p>Total for Column A: _____</p>	<p>Total for Column B: _____</p>

Figure 7.1. *What's your price?*

A Note on Innateness

It used to be risky for a scientist to assert that anything about human behavior was innate. To back up such claims, you had to show that the trait was hardwired, unchangeable by experience, and found in all cultures. With that definition, not much is innate, aside from a few infant reflexes such as that cute thing they do when you put one finger into their little hands. If you proposed that anything more complex than that was innate—particularly a sex difference—you’d be told that there was a tribe somewhere on earth that didn’t show the trait, so therefore it’s not innate.

We’ve advanced a lot since the 1970s in our understanding of the brain, and now we know that traits can be innate without being either hardwired or universal. As the neuroscientist Gary Marcus explains, “Nature bestows upon the newborn a considerably complex brain, but one that is best seen as *prewired*—flexible and subject to change—rather than *hardwired*, fixed, and immutable.”²

To replace wiring diagrams, Marcus suggests a better analogy: the brain is like a book, the first draft of which is written by the genes during fetal development. No chapters are complete at birth, and some are just rough outlines waiting to be filled in during childhood. But not a single chapter—be it the one on sexuality, language, food preferences, or morality—consists of blank pages on which a society can inscribe any conceivable set of words. Marcus’s analogy leads to the best definition of innateness I have ever seen:

Nature provides a first draft, which experience then revises. . . . “Built-in” does not mean unmalleable; it means “*organized in advance of experience*.”³

The list of five moral foundations was my first attempt to specify how the righteous mind was “organized in advance of experience.” But Moral Foundations Theory also tries to explain how that first draft gets revised during childhood to produce the diversity of moralities that we find across cultures—and across the political spectrum.

1. The Care/harm Foundation

Reptiles get a bad rap for being cold—not just cold-blooded but cold-hearted. Some reptile mothers do hang around after their babies hatch, to provide some protection, but in many species they don’t. So when the first mammals began suckling their young, they raised the cost of motherhood. No longer would females turn out dozens of babies and bet that a few would survive on their own.

Mammals make fewer bets and invest a lot more in each one, so mammals face the challenge of caring for and nurturing their children for a long time. Primate moms place even

² Marcus 2004, p. 12.

³ Marcus 2004. I stitched this definition together from two pages. The first sentence is on p. 34, the second is on p. 40. But it’s all part of a unified discussion in chapter 3.

fewer bets and invest still more in each one. And human babies, whose brains are so enormous that they must be pushed out through the birth canal a year before the child can walk, are bets so huge that a woman can't even put her chips on the table by herself. She needs help in the last months of pregnancy, help to deliver the baby, and help to feed and care for the child for years after the birth. Given this big wager, there is an enormous adaptive challenge: to care for the vulnerable and expensive child, keep it safe, keep it alive, keep it from harm.

It is just not conceivable that the chapter on mothering in the book of human nature is entirely blank, leaving it for mothers to learn everything by cultural instruction or trial and error. Mothers who were innately sensitive to signs of suffering, distress, or neediness improved their odds, relative to their less sensitive sisters.

And it's not only mothers who need innate knowledge. Given the number of people who pool their resources to bet on each child, evolution favored women and (to a lesser extent) men who had an automatic reaction to signs of need or suffering, such as crying, from children in their midst (who, in ancient times, were likely to be kin).⁴ The suffering of your own children is the original trigger of one of the key modules of the Care foundation. (I'll often refer to foundations using only the first of their two names, e.g., "Care" rather than "Care/harm".) This module works with other related modules⁵ to meet the adaptive challenge of protecting and caring for children.

This is not a just-so story. It is my retelling of the beginning of attachment theory, a well-supported theory that describes the system by which mothers and children regulate each other's behavior so that the child gets a good mix of protection and opportunities for independent exploration.⁶

⁴ It has recently been discovered that genetic kinship in hunter-gatherer groups is not nearly as high as anthropologists had long assumed (Hill et al. 2011). I assume, however, that this drop in relatedness came in the last few hundred thousand years, as our cultural complexity increased. I assume that the care foundation had already been modified and intensified in the few million years before that, as our brain size and length of childhood increased.

⁵ Such as for tracking degree of kinship, or for distinguishing intentional from accidental harm so that you know when to get angry at someone who causes your child to cry. I repeat my note from the last chapter that these are not modules as Fodor 1983 originally defined them. Fodor's criteria were so stringent that pretty much nothing in higher cognition could qualify. For a discussion of how higher cognition can be partially modularized, see Haidt and Joseph 2007, and see Barrett and Kurzban on modules as functional systems, rather than as spots in the brain.

⁶ Bowlby 1969.



Figure 7.2. *Baby Gogo, Max, and Gogo.*

The set of current triggers for any module is often much larger than the set of original triggers. The photo in Figure 7.2 illustrates this expansion in four ways. First, you might find it cute. If you do, it's because your mind is automatically responsive to certain proportions and patterns that distinguish human children from adults. Cuteness primes us to care, nurture, protect, and interact.⁷ It gets the elephant leaning. Second, although this is not your child, you might still have an instant emotional response because the Care foundation can be triggered by any child. Third, you might find my son's companions (Gogo and Baby Gogo) cute, even though they are not real children, because they were designed by a toy company to trigger your Care foundation. Fourth, Max loves Gogo; he screams when I accidentally sit on Gogo, and he often says, "I am Gogo's mommy," because his attachment system and Care foundation are developing normally.

If your buttons can get pushed by a photo of a child sleeping with two stuffed monkeys, just imagine how you'd feel if you saw a child or a cute animal facing the threat of violence.



Figure 7.3. *A current trigger for the Care/harm foundation.*

⁷ See Sherman and Haidt 2011 for a review.

It makes no evolutionary sense for you to care about what happens to my son Max, a hungry child in a faraway country, or a baby seal. But Darwin doesn't have to explain why you shed any *particular* tear. He just has to explain why you have tear ducts in the first place, and why those ducts can sometimes be activated by suffering that is not your own.⁸ Darwin must explain the original triggers of each module. The current triggers can change rapidly. We care about violence toward many more classes of victims today than our grandparents did in their time.⁹

Political parties and interest groups strive to make their concerns become current triggers of your moral modules. To get your vote, your money, or your time, they must activate at least one of your moral foundations.¹⁰ For example, here are two cars I photographed in Charlottesville. What can you guess about the drivers' politics?



⁸ For a recent account of the evolution and neurology of empathy, see Decety 2011.

⁹ See Pinker 2011 on the long and steady rise of repugnance toward violence. For example, jokes about wife-beating were common and acceptable in American movies and television programs up through the 1960s.

¹⁰ Sometimes a political bumper sticker will appeal to fear or monetary self-interest (e.g., “drill here, drill now, pay less” for Republicans in 2008) but this is rare compared to moralistic appeals.

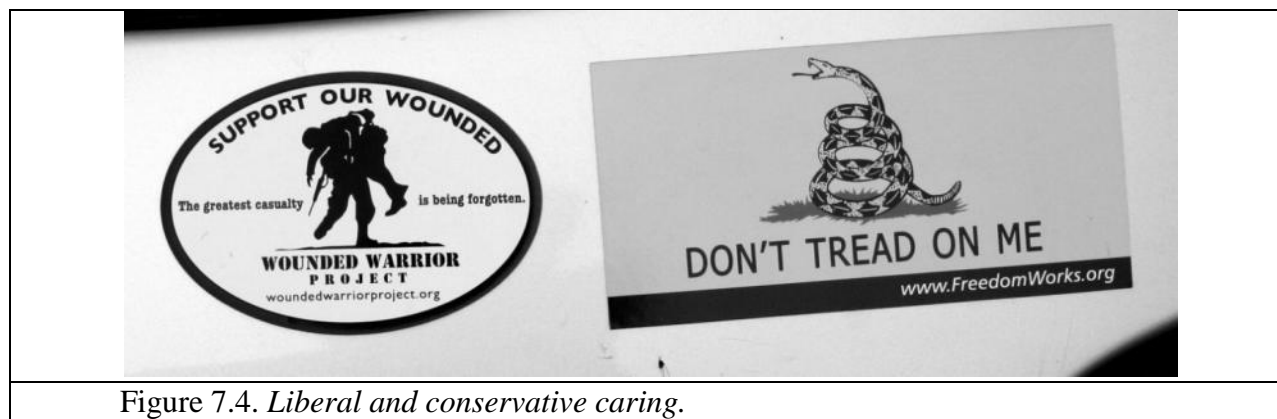


Figure 7.4. *Liberal and conservative caring.*

Bumper stickers are often tribal badges; they advertise the teams we support, including sports teams, universities, and rock bands. The driver of the “Save Darfur” car is announcing that he or she is on the liberal team. You know that intuitively, but I can give a more formal reason: the moral matrix of liberals, in America and elsewhere, rests more heavily on the Care foundation than do the matrices of conservatives, and this driver has selected three bumper stickers urging people to protect innocent victims.¹¹ The driver has no relationship to these victims. The driver is trying to get you to connect your thinking about Darfur and meat-eating to the intuitions generated by your Care foundation.

It was harder to find bumper stickers related to compassion for conservatives, but the “wounded warrior” car is an example. This driver is also trying to get you to care, but conservative caring is somewhat different—it is aimed not at animals or at people in other countries but at those who’ve sacrificed for the group.¹² It is not universalist; it is more local, and blended with loyalty.

2. *The Fairness/cheating Foundation*

Suppose a coworker offers to take on your workload for five days so that you can add a second week to your Caribbean vacation. How would you feel? *Homo economicus* would feel unalloyed pleasure, as though he had just been given a free bag of groceries. But the rest of us know that the bag isn’t free. It’s a big favor, and you can’t repay your coworker by bringing back a bottle of rum. If you accept her offer, you’re likely to do so while gushing forth expressions of gratitude, praise for her kindness, and a promise to do the same for her whenever she goes on vacation.

¹¹ For non-American readers I note again that by *liberal* I mean the political left. The data I’ll show in the next chapter indicate that people on the left, in every country we have examined, score higher on the Care/harm foundation than do people on the political right.

¹² Conservative Christians do send a great deal of money abroad, and do provide a great deal of help and relief to the poor, but it is generally done through missionary groups that strive to add converts to the group. It is still a form of parochial caring, not universalist caring.

Evolutionary theorists often speak of genes as being “selfish,” meaning that they can only influence an animal to do things that will spread copies of that gene. But one of the most important insights into the origins of morality is that “selfish” genes can give rise to generous creatures, as long as those creatures are selective in their generosity. Altruism toward kin is not a puzzle at all. Altruism toward non-kin, on the other hand, has presented one of the longest-running puzzles in the history of evolutionary thinking.¹³ A big step toward its solution came in 1971 when Robert Trivers published his theory of reciprocal altruism.¹⁴

Trivers noted that evolution could create altruists in a species where individuals could remember their prior interactions with other individuals and then limit their current niceness to those who were likely to repay the favor. We humans are obviously just such a species. Trivers proposed that we evolved a set of moral emotions that make us play “tit for tat.” We’re usually nice to people when we first meet them. But after that we’re selective: we cooperate with those who have been nice to us, and we shun those who took advantage of us.

Human life is a series of opportunities for mutually beneficial cooperation. If we play our cards right, we can work with others to enlarge the pie that we ultimately share. Hunters work together to bring down large prey that nobody could catch alone. Neighbors watch each other’s houses and loan each other tools. Coworkers cover each other’s shifts. For millions of years, our ancestors faced the adaptive challenge of reaping these benefits without getting suckered. Those whose moral emotions compelled them to play “tit for tat” reaped more of these benefits than those who played any other strategy, such as “help anyone who needs it” (which invites exploitation), or “take but don’t give” (which can work just once with each person; pretty soon nobody’s willing to share pie with you).¹⁵ The original triggers of the Fairness modules are acts of cooperation or selfishness that people show toward us. We feel pleasure, liking, and friendship when people show signs that they can be trusted to reciprocate. We feel anger, contempt, and even sometimes disgust when people try to cheat us or take advantage of us.¹⁶

The current triggers of the Fairness modules include a great many things that have gotten linked, culturally and politically, to the dynamics of reciprocity and cheating. On the left, concerns about equality and social justice are based in part on the Fairness foundation—wealthy and powerful groups are accused of gaining by exploiting those at the bottom while not paying their “fair share” of the tax burden. This is a major theme of the Occupy Wall Street movement, which I visited in October 2011 (see figure 7.5). On the right, the Tea Party movement is also very concerned about fairness. They see Democrats as “socialists” who take money from hard working Americans and give it to lazy people (including those who receive welfare or

¹³ It was a major concern for Darwin, in *Origin of Species* and in *Descent of Man*. I’ll return to Darwin’s puzzlement and his solutions in chapter 9.

¹⁴ Trivers 1971.

¹⁵ This point was demonstrated elegantly in Robert Axelrod’s 1984 famous tournament in which strategies competed in an evolutionary simulation on a computer. No strategy was able to beat tit for tat. (But see Nowak 2010 for a discussion of his “Win Stay, Lose Shift” strategy, which is superior when you take account of errors and misperceptions.)

¹⁶ Rozin, Lowery, Imada, and Haidt 1999; Sanfey et al. 2003.

unemployment benefits) and to illegal immigrants (in the form of free health care and education).¹⁷



Figure 7.5: *Fairness Left and Right*. Top: Sign at Occupy Wall Street, Zuccotti Park, New York City. Bottom: Sign at Tea Party rally, Washington DC (Photo by Emily Ekins). Everyone believes that taxes should be “fair.”

Everyone cares about fairness, but there are two major kinds. On the left, fairness often implies equality, but on the right it means proportionality—people should be rewarded in proportion to what they contribute, even if that guarantees unequal outcomes.

3. *The Loyalty/betrayal Foundation*

In the summer of 1954, Muzafar Sherif convinced twenty-two sets of working-class parents to let him take their twelve-year-old boys off their hands for three weeks. He brought the boys to a summer camp he had rented in Robbers Cave State Park, Oklahoma. There he conducted one of the most famous studies in social psychology, and one of the richest for understanding the foundations of morality. Sherif brought the boys to the camp in two groups of eleven, on two consecutive days, and housed them in different parts of the park. For the first five days, each group thought it was alone. Yet even still, they set about marking territory and creating tribal identities.

One group called themselves the “Rattlers,” and the other group took the name “Eagles.” The Rattlers discovered a good swimming hole upstream from the main camp and, after an initial swim, they made a few improvements to the site, such as laying a rock path down to the water. They then claimed the site as their own, as their special hideout, which they visited each day.

¹⁷ I visited just as this book was going to press. I published a photo essay applying Moral Foundations Theory to the signs at Occupy Wall Street at <http://reason.com/archives/2011/10/20/the-moral-foundations-of-occupy>

The Rattlers were disturbed one day to discover paper cups at the site (which in fact they themselves had left behind); they were angry that “outsiders” had used their swimming hole.

A leader emerged in each group by consensus. When the boys were deciding what to do, they all suggested ideas. But when it came time to choose one of those ideas, the leader usually made the choice. Norms, songs, rituals, and distinctive identities began to form in each group (Rattlers are tough and never cry; Eagles never curse). Even though they were there to have fun, and even though they believed they were alone in the woods, each group ended up doing the sorts of things that would have been quite useful if they were about to face a rival group that claimed the same territory. Which they were.

On day 6 of the study, Sherif let the Rattlers get close enough to the baseball field to hear that other boys—the Eagles—were using it, even though the Rattlers had claimed it as their field. The Rattlers begged the camp counselors to let them challenge the Eagles to a baseball game. As he had planned to do from the start, Sherif then arranged a weeklong tournament of sports competitions and camping skills. From that point forward, Sherif says, “performance in all activities which might now become competitive (tent pitching, baseball, etc.) was entered into with more zest and also with more efficiency.”¹⁸ Tribal behavior increased dramatically. Both sides created flags and hung them in contested territory. They destroyed each other’s flags, raided and vandalized each other’s bunks, called each other nasty names, made weapons (socks filled with rocks), and would often have come to blows had the counselors not intervened.

We all recognize this portrait of boyhood. The male mind appears to be innately tribal—that is, structured in advance of experience so that boys and men *enjoy* doing the sorts of things that lead to group cohesion and success in conflicts between groups (including warfare).¹⁹ The virtue of loyalty matters a great deal to both sexes, though the objects of loyalty tend to be teams and coalitions for boys, in contrast to two-person relationships for girls.²⁰

Despite some claims by anthropologists in the 1970s, human beings are not the only species that engages in war or kills its own kind. It now appears that chimpanzees guard their territory, raid the territory of rivals, and, if they can pull it off, kill the males of the neighboring group and take their territory and their females.²¹ And it now appears that warfare has been a constant feature of human life since long before agriculture and private property.²² For millions of years, therefore, our ancestors faced the adaptive challenge of forming and maintaining coalitions that could fend off challenges and attacks from rival groups. We are the descendants of successful tribalists, not their more individualistic cousins.

Many psychological systems contribute to effective tribalism and success in inter-group competition. The Loyalty/betrayal foundation is just a part of our innate preparation for meeting the adaptive challenge of forming cohesive coalitions. The original trigger for the Loyalty

¹⁸ Sherif et al. 1961/1954, p. 94.

¹⁹ For example, boys spontaneously organize themselves for team competitions far more often than do girls (Maccoby 1998), and male college students get more cooperative when a task is framed as an intergroup competition; female students are unaffected by the manipulation (Van Vugt, De Cremer, and Janssen 2007).

²⁰ Baumeister and Sommer 1997; Maccoby 1998.

²¹ Boehm 2012; Goodall 1986.

²² Keeley 1996.

foundation is anything that tells you who is a team player and who is a traitor, particularly when your team is fighting with other teams. But because we love tribalism so much, we seek out ways to form groups and teams that can compete just for the fun of competing. Much of the psychology of sports is about expanding the current triggers of the Loyalty foundation so that people can have the pleasures of binding themselves together to pursue harmless trophies. (A trophy is evidence of victory. The urge to take trophies—including body parts from slain foes—is widespread in warfare, occurring even during modern times.)²³

I can't be certain that the owner of the car in Figure 7.6 is a man, but I'm fairly confident that the owner is a Republican based on his or her choice to decorate the car using only the Loyalty foundation. The V with crossed swords is the symbol of the UVA sports teams (the Cavaliers) and the owner chose to pay an extra \$20 every year to have a customized license plate honoring the American flag ("Old Glory") and American unity ("United We Stand").

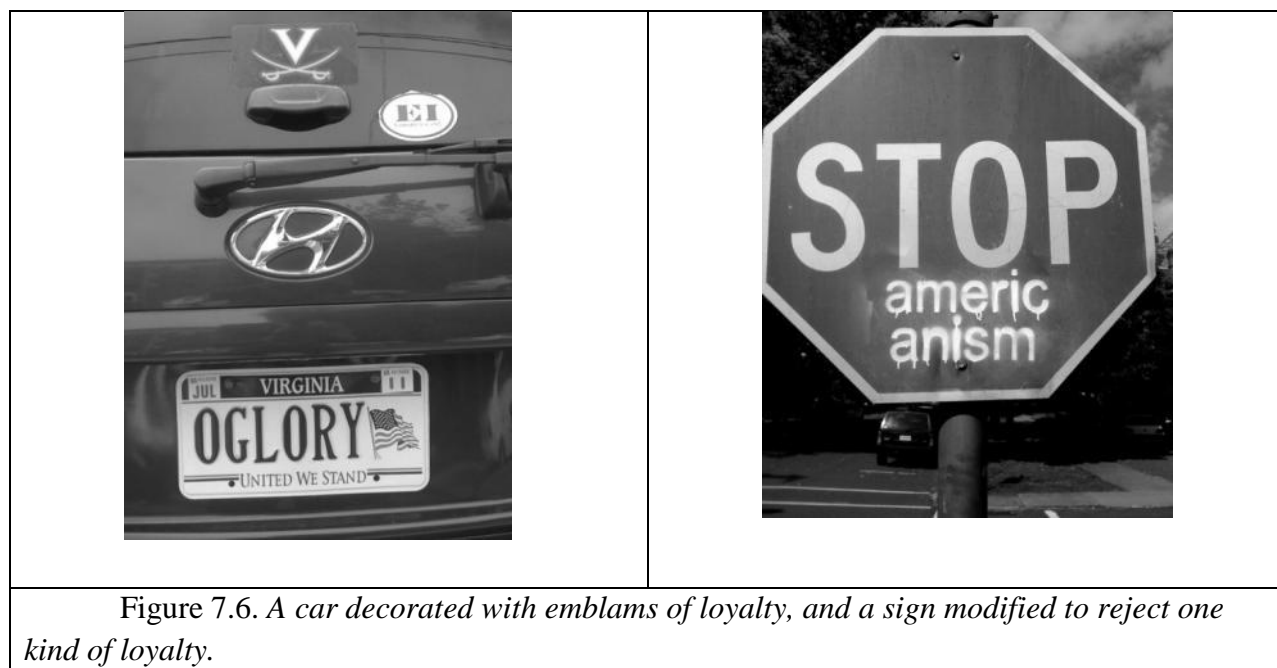


Figure 7.6. A car decorated with emblems of loyalty, and a sign modified to reject one kind of loyalty.

The love of loyal teammates is matched by a corresponding hatred of traitors, who are usually considered to be far worse than enemies. The Koran, for example, is full of warnings about the duplicity of out-group members, particularly Jews, yet the Koran does not command Muslims to kill Jews. Far worse than a Jew is an apostate—a Muslim who has betrayed or simply abandoned the faith. The Koran commands Muslims to kill apostates, and Allah himself promises that he “shall certainly roast them at a Fire; as often as their skins are wholly burned, We shall give them in exchange other skins, that they may taste the chastisement. Surely God is All-mighty, All-wise.”²⁴ Similarly, in *The Inferno*, Dante reserves the innermost circle of hell—

²³ Glover 2000.

²⁴ This verse is from Koran 4:56 Sura 4, “The Women,” translated by Arberry 1955. For more on killing apostates, see Koran 4:89, as well as many Hadith verses, e.g., Bukhari 52:260, Bukhari 84:58.

and the most excruciating suffering—for the crime of treachery. Far worse than lust, gluttony, violence, or even heresy is the betrayal of one’s family, team, or nation.

Given such strong links to love and hate, is it any wonder that the Loyalty foundation plays an important role in politics? The left tends toward universalism and away from nationalism,²⁵ so it often has trouble connecting to voters who rely on the Loyalty foundation. Indeed, because of its strong reliance upon the Care foundation, American liberals are often hostile to American foreign policy. For example, during the last year of George W. Bush’s presidency, somebody vandalized a stop sign near my home (Figure 7.6). I can’t be certain that the vandal rejects teams and groups of all sorts, but I can be confident that he or she is far to the left of the owner of “OGLORY.” The two photographs show opposing statements about the need for Americans to be team players at a time when America was fighting wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Liberal activists often make it easy for conservatives to connect liberalism to the Loyalty foundation—and not in a good way. The title of Ann Coulter’s 2003 book says it all: *Treason: Liberal Treachery from the Cold War to the War on Terrorism*.²⁶

4. The Authority/subversion Foundation

Soon after I returned from India I was talking with a taxi driver who told me that he had just become a father. I asked him if he planned on staying in the United States or returning to his native Jordan. I’ll never forget his response: “We will return to Jordan because I never want to hear my son say ‘fuck you’ to me.” Now, most American children will never say such an awful thing to their parents, but some will, and many more will say it indirectly. Cultures vary enormously in the degree to which they demand that respect be shown to parents, teachers, and others in positions of authority.

The urge to respect hierarchical relationships is so deep that many languages encode it directly. Romance languages such as French are not unusual in forcing speakers to choose whether they’ll address someone using the respectful form (*vous*) or the familiar form (*tu*). Even English, which doesn’t embed status into verb conjugations, embeds it elsewhere. Until recently, Americans addressed strangers and superiors using title plus last name (Mrs. Smith, Dr. Jones), whereas intimates and subordinates were called by first name. If you’ve ever felt a flash of distaste when a salesperson called you by first name without being invited to do so, or if you felt a pang of awkwardness when an older person you have long revered asked you to call him by first name, then you have experienced the activation of some of the modules that comprise the Authority/subversion foundation.

The obvious way to begin thinking about the evolution of the Authority foundation is to consider the pecking orders and dominance hierarchies of chickens, dogs, chimpanzees, and so many other species that live in groups. The displays made by low-ranking individuals are often similar across species because their function is always the same—to appear submissive, which

²⁵ Scholars of liberalism often point this out e.g., Gray 1995, and we find it in many studies on www.YourMorals.org; see Iyer et al. 2011.

²⁶ Coulter 2003.

means small and nonthreatening. The failure to detect signs of dominance and then to respond accordingly often results in a beating.

So far this doesn't sound like a promising origin story for a "moral" foundation; it sounds like the origin of oppression of the weak by the powerful. But authority should not be confused with power.²⁷ Even among chimpanzees, where dominance hierarchies are indeed about raw power and the ability to inflict violence, the alpha male performs some socially beneficial functions, such as taking on the "control role."²⁸ He resolves some disputes and suppresses much of the violent conflict that erupts when there is no clear alpha male. As the primatologist Frans de Waal puts it: "Without agreement on rank and a certain respect for authority there can be no great sensitivity to social rules, as anyone who has tried to teach simple house rules to a cat will agree."²⁹

This control role is quite visible in human tribes and early civilizations. Many of the earliest legal texts begin by grounding the king's rule in divine choice, and then they dedicate the king's authority to providing order and justice. The very first sentence of the Code of Hammurabi (eighteenth century BCE) includes this clause: "Then Anu and Bel [two gods] called by name me, Hammurabi, the exalted prince, who feared God, to bring about the rule of righteousness in the land, to destroy the wicked and the evil-doers; so that the strong should not harm the weak."³⁰

Human authority, then, is not just raw power backed by the threat of force. Human authorities take on responsibility for maintaining order and justice. Of course, authorities often exploit their subordinates for their own benefit while believing they are perfectly just. But if we want to understand how human civilizations burst forth and covered the earth in just a few thousand years, we'll have to look closely at the role of authority in creating moral order.

When I began graduate school I subscribed to the common liberal belief that hierarchy = power = exploitation = evil. But when I began to work with Alan Fiske, I discovered that I was wrong. Fiske's theory of the four basic kinds of social relationships includes one called "Authority Ranking." Drawing on his own fieldwork in Africa, Fiske showed that people who relate to each other in this way have mutual expectations that are more like those of a parent and child than those of a dictator and his fearful underlings:

In Authority Ranking, people have asymmetric positions in a linear hierarchy in which subordinates defer, respect, and (perhaps) obey, while superiors take precedence and take pastoral responsibility for subordinates. Examples are military hierarchies . . . ancestor worship ([including] offerings of filial piety and expectations of protection and enforcement of norms), [and] monotheistic religious moralities . . . Authority Ranking

²⁷ A point made forcefully by the sociologist Robert Nisbet 1993/1966 in his chapters 1 and 4.

²⁸ Boehm 1999; de Waal 1996.

²⁹ De Waal 1996, 92.

³⁰ From a translation by L. W. King, retrieved from www.holybooks.org/babylonia/the_code_of_hammurabi/ham04.html

relationships are based on perceptions of legitimate asymmetries, not coercive power; they are not inherently exploitative.³¹

The Authority foundation, as I describe it, is borrowed directly from Fiske. It is more complex than the other foundations because its modules must look in two directions—up toward superiors and down toward subordinates. These modules work together to help individuals meet the adaptive challenge of forging beneficial relationships within hierarchies. We are the descendants of the individuals who were best able to play the game—to rise in status while cultivating the protection of superiors and the allegiance of subordinates.³²

The original triggers of some of these modules include patterns of appearance and behavior that indicate higher versus lower rank. Like chimpanzees, people track and remember who is above whom.³³ When people within a hierarchical order act in ways that negate or subvert that order, we feel it instantly, even if we ourselves have not been directly harmed. If authority is in part about protecting order and fending off chaos, then everyone has a stake in supporting the existing order and in holding people accountable for fulfilling the obligations of their station.³⁴

The current triggers of the Authority/subversion foundation, therefore, include anything that is construed as an act of obedience, disobedience, respect, disrespect, submission, or rebellion, with regard to authorities perceived to be legitimate. Current triggers also include acts that are seen to subvert the traditions, institutions, or values that are perceived to provide stability. As with the Loyalty foundation, it is much easier for the political right to build on this foundation than it is for the left, which often defines itself in part by its opposition to hierarchy, inequality, and power. It should not be difficult for you to guess the politics of the magazine advertised in Figure 7.7. Conversely, while Methodists are not necessarily conservative, the sign in front of their church tells you they ain't no Unitarians.

³¹ This quote is from an overview of the theory on Fiske's website:

www.sscnet.ucla.edu/anthro/faculty/fiske/reimodov.htm. For the full presentation of the theory, see Fiske 1991.

³² The evolutionary story is actually more complicated, and I'll address the important fact that humans went through a long period of egalitarianism in the next chapter. For now, I hope you'll simply entertain the possibility that we have some cognitive modules that make most people good at detecting and caring about hierarchy and respect.

³³ De Waal 1996; Fiske 1991.

³⁴ This is my explanation of why people low down in a hierarchy generally support the hierarchy. For more detail, see Haidt and Graham, 2009. For an alternative view see work on "system justification theory," e.g., Jost and Hunyady 2002.

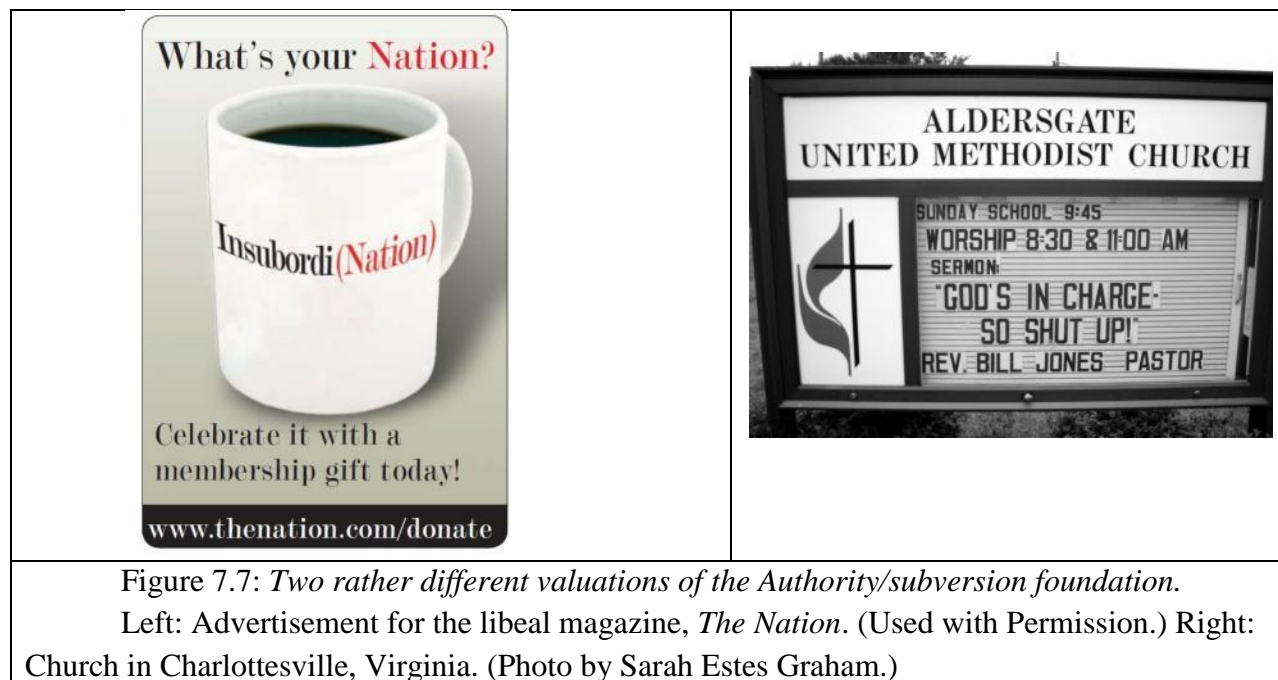


Figure 7.7: Two rather different valuations of the Authority/subversion foundation.

Left: Advertisement for the liberal magazine, *The Nation*. (Used with Permission.) Right: Church in Charlottesville, Virginia. (Photo by Sarah Estes Graham.)

5. The Sanctity/degradation Foundation

In early 2001, Armin Meiwes, a German computer technician, posted an unusual advertisement on the Web: “Looking for a well-built 21-to-30-year-old to be slaughtered and then consumed.” Hundreds of men responded by email, and Meiwes interviewed a few of them at his farmhouse. Bernd Brandes, a forty-three-year-old computer engineer, was the first respondent who didn’t change his mind when he realized that Meiwes was engaging in mere fantasy. (Warning: squeamish readers should skip the entire next paragraph.)

On the evening of March 9, the two men made a video to prove that Brandes fully consented to what was about to happen. Brandes then took some sleeping pills and alcohol, but he was still alert when Meiwes cut off Brandes’s penis, after being unable to bite it off (as Brandes had requested). Meiwes then sautéed the penis in a frying pan with wine and garlic. Brandes took a bite of it, then went off to a bathtub to bleed to death. A few hours later Brandes was not yet dead, so Meiwes kissed him, stabbed him in the throat, and then hung the body on a meat hook to strip off the flesh. Meiwes stored the flesh in his freezer and ate it gradually over the next ten months. Meiwes was ultimately caught, arrested, and tried, but because Brandes’s participation was fully voluntary, Meiwes was convicted only of manslaughter, not murder, the first time the case went to trial.³⁵

If your moral matrix is limited to the ethic of autonomy, you’re at high risk of being dumbfounded by this case. You surely find it disturbing, and the violence of it probably activates your Care/harm foundation. But any attempt to condemn Meiwes or Brandes runs smack into

³⁵ Due to public outrage at the manslaughter sentence the prosecutor’s office appealed the sentence, won a retrial, and ultimately won a conviction for murder and a sentence of imprisonment for life. For a full account of this case, see Stampf 2008.

John Stuart Mill’s harm principle, which I introduced in chapter 5: “The only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others.” The next line of the original quote is: “His own good, either physical or moral, is not sufficient warrant.” From within the ethic of autonomy, people have a right to live their lives as they please (as long as they harm nobody), and they have a right to end their lives how and when they please (as long as they leave no dependents unsupported). Brandes chose an extraordinarily revolting means of death, but as the Penn students in my dissertation research often said, just because something is disgusting, that doesn’t make it wrong. Yet most people feel that there *was* something terribly wrong here, and that it should be against the law for adults to engage in consensual activities such as this. Why?

Imagine that Meiwes served his prison sentence and then returned to his home. (Assume that a team of psychiatrists established that he posed no threat to anyone who did not explicitly ask to be eaten.) Imagine that his home was one block away from your home. Would you find his return unsettling? If Meiwes was then forced by social pressure to move out of your town, might you feel some relief? And what about the house where this atrocity happened? How much would someone have to pay you to live in it for a week? Might you feel that the stain would be expunged only if the house was burned to the ground?

These feelings—of stain, pollution, and purification—are irrational from a utilitarian point of view, but they make perfect sense in Shweder’s ethic of divinity. Meiwes and Brandes colluded to treat Brandes’s body as a piece of meat, to which they added the extra horror of a splash of sexuality. They behaved monstrously—as low as any humans can go on the vertical dimension of divinity that I discussed in chapter 5. Only worms and demons eat human flesh. But why do we care so much what other people choose to do with their bodies?

Most animals are born knowing what to eat. A koala bear’s sensory systems are “structured in advance of experience” to guide it to eucalyptus leaves. Humans, however, must learn what to eat. Like rats and cockroaches, we’re omnivores.

Being an omnivore has the enormous advantage of flexibility: You can wander into a new continent and be quite confident that you’ll find something to eat. But it also has the disadvantage that new foods can be toxic, infected with microbes, or riddled with parasitic worms. The “omnivore’s dilemma,” a term coined by Paul Rozin,³⁶ is that omnivores must seek out and explore new potential foods while remaining wary of them until they are proven safe.

Omnivores therefore go through life with two competing motives: neophilia (an attraction to new things) and neophobia (a fear of new things). People vary in terms of which motive is stronger, and this variation will come back to help us in later chapters: liberals score higher on measures of neophilia (also known as “openness to experience”), not just for new foods but also for new people, music, and ideas. Conservatives are higher on neophobia; they prefer to stick with what’s tried and true, and they care a lot more about guarding borders, boundaries, and traditions.³⁷

³⁶ Rozin 1976 introduced this term. Michael Pollan then borrowed the term as the title of his best-selling book.

³⁷ McCrae 1996.

The emotion of disgust evolved initially to optimize responses to the omnivore's dilemma.³⁸ Individuals who had a properly calibrated sense of disgust were able to consume more calories than their overly disgusting cousins while consuming fewer dangerous microbes than their insufficiently disgusting cousins. But it's not just food that posed a threat: when early hominids came down from the trees and began living in larger groups on the ground, they greatly increased their risk of infection from each other, and from each other's waste products. The psychologist Mark Schaller has shown that disgust is part of what he calls the "behavioral immune system"—a set of cognitive modules that are triggered by signs of infection or disease in other people and that make you want to get away from those people.³⁹ It's a lot more effective to prevent infection by washing your food, casting out lepers, or simply avoiding dirty people than it is to let the microbes into your body and then hope that your biological immune system can kill every last one of them.

The original adaptive challenge that drove the evolution of the Sanctity foundation, therefore, was the need to avoid pathogens, parasites, and other threats that spread by physical touch or proximity. The original triggers of the key modules that compose this foundation include smells, sights, or other sensory patterns that predict the presence of dangerous pathogens in objects or people. (Examples include human corpses, excrement, scavengers such as vultures, and people with visible lesions or sores.)

The current triggers of the Sanctity foundation, however, are extraordinarily variable and expandable across cultures and eras. A common and direct expansion is to out-group members. Cultures differ in their attitudes toward immigrants, and there is some evidence that liberal and welcoming attitudes are more common in times and places where disease risks are lower.⁴⁰ Plagues, epidemics, and new diseases are usually brought in by foreigners—as are many new ideas, goods, and technologies—so societies face an analogue of the omnivore's dilemma, balancing xenophobia and xenophilia.

As with the Authority foundation, Sanctity seems to be off to a poor start as a foundation of morality. Isn't it just a primitive response to pathogens? And doesn't this response lead to prejudice and discrimination? Now that we have antibiotics, we should reject this foundation entirely, right?

Not so fast. The Sanctity foundation makes it easy for us to regard some things as "untouchable," both in a bad way (because something is so dirty or polluted we want to stay away) and in a good way (because something is so hallowed, so sacred, that we want to protect it from desecration). If we had no sense of disgust, I believe we would also have no sense of the sacred. And if you think, as I do, that one of the greatest unsolved mysteries is how people ever came together to form large cooperative societies, then you might take a special interest in the

³⁸ Rozin and Fallon 1987. We don't know when disgust arose, but we know that it does not exist in any other animal. Other mammals reject foods based on their taste or smell, but only humans reject them based on what they have touched, or who handled them.

³⁹ Schaller and Park 2011.

⁴⁰ Thornhill, Fincher, and Aran 2009. Schaller's team has even demonstrated that they can increase Canadian students' fears of unfamiliar immigrants just by showing them images of disease and infection compared to students who saw images of other threats, such as electrocution (Faulkner et al. 2004).

psychology of sacredness. Why do people so readily treat objects (flags, crosses), places (Mecca, a battlefield related to the birth of your nation), people (saints, heroes), and principles (liberty, fraternity, equality) as though they were of infinite value? Whatever its origins, the psychology of sacredness helps bind individuals into moral communities.⁴¹ When someone in a moral community desecrates one of the sacred pillars supporting the community, the reaction is sure to be swift, emotional, collective, and punitive.

To return, finally, to Meiwes and Brandes: They caused no harm to anyone in a direct, material, or utilitarian way.⁴² But they desecrated several of the bedrock moral principles of Western society, such as our shared beliefs that human life is supremely valuable, and that the human body is more than just a walking slab of meat. They trampled on these principles not out of necessity, and not in service to a higher goal, but out of carnal desire. If Mill's harm principle prevents us from outlawing their actions, then Mill's harm principle seems inadequate as the basis for a moral community. Whether or not God exists, people feel that some things, actions, and people are noble, pure, and elevated; others are base, polluted, and degraded.

Does the Meiwes case tell us anything about politics? It's too revolting a case to use in research; I'm confident that liberals and conservatives would all condemn Meiwes (although I'm not so sure about libertarians⁴³). But if we turn down the disgust a few notches, we see vast difference between left and right over the use of concepts such as sanctity and purity. American conservatives are more likely to talk about the "sanctity of life" and the "sanctity of marriage." Conservatives—particularly religious conservatives—are more likely to view the body as a temple, housing a soul within, rather than as a machine to be optimized, or as a playground to be used for fun.

The two images in Figure 7.8 show exactly the contrast that Shweder had described in his ethic of divinity. The image on the left is from a fifteenth-century painting, *The Allegory of Chastity*.⁴⁴ It shows the Virgin Mary raised and protected by an amethyst rock formation. From beneath her flows a stream (symbolizing her purity) guarded by two lions. The painting portrays chastity as a virtue, a treasure to be guarded.

⁴¹ I will address the evolutionary origins of sacralization and religion in chapters 9 and 11.

⁴² One might object that their actions were sure to disgust and offend people who learned about them. But that argument would commit you to prohibiting gay or interracial sex, or eating foods such as chicken feet and fish eyes, in the privacy of one's home, within communities that would be disgusted by such actions.

⁴³ Libertarians experience less empathy and weaker disgust, on average (Iyer et al., 2011), and they are more willing to allow people to violate taboos (Tetlock et al. 2000).

⁴⁴ By the German-born painter Hans Memling, 1475. In the Musée Jacquemart-André, Paris. For information on this painting see <http://www.ghc.edu/faculty/sandgren/sample2.pdf>.

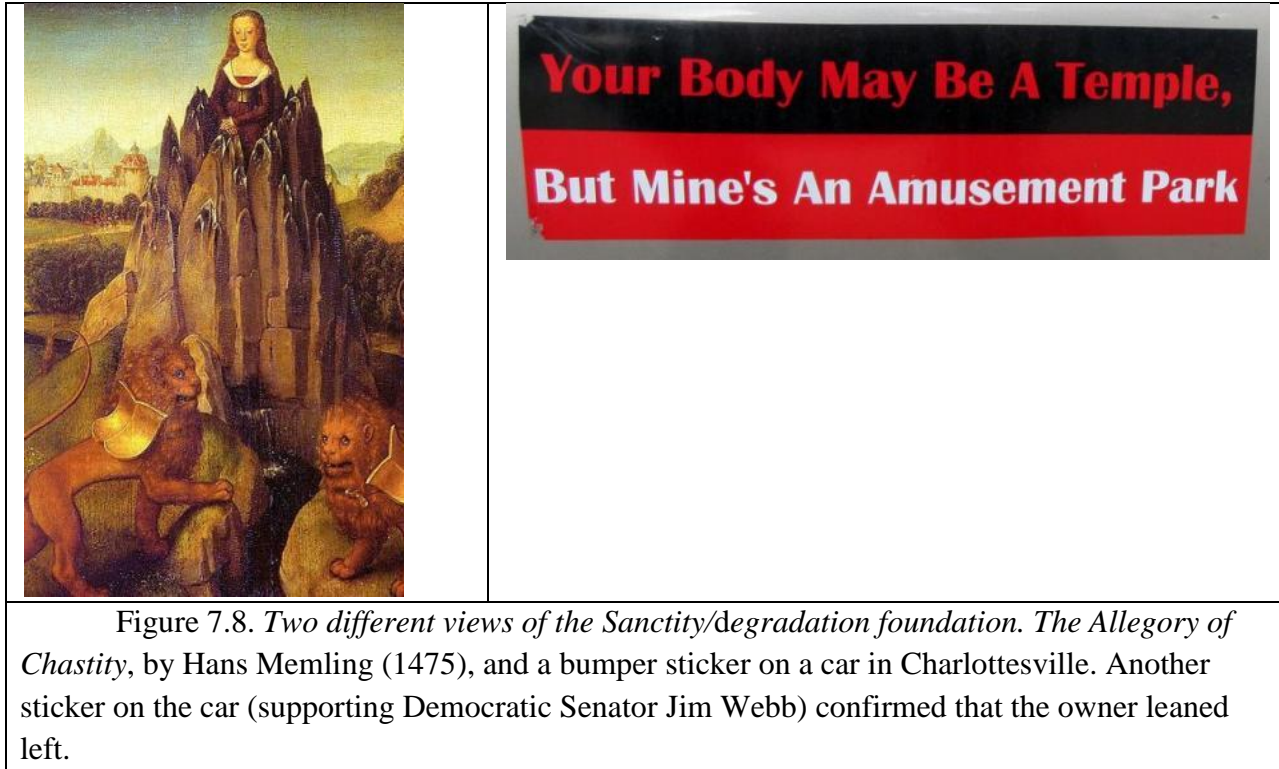


Figure 7.8. Two different views of the Sanctity/degradation foundation. *The Allegory of Chastity*, by Hans Memling (1475), and a bumper sticker on a car in Charlottesville. Another sticker on the car (supporting Democratic Senator Jim Webb) confirmed that the owner leaned left.

This idea is not just ancient history; it inspired a virginity pledge movement in the United States as recently as the 1990s. The group Silver Ring Thing asks its members to vow to remain celibate and pure until marriage. Those who make the vow are given a silver ring, to wear like a wedding ring, inscribed with the name of Bible verses such as “1 Thessalonians 4:3–4.” Those verses state: “For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication; that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor.”⁴⁵

On the left, however, the virtue of chastity is usually dismissed as outdated and sexist. Jeremy Bentham urged us to maximize our “hedons” (pleasures) and minimize our “dolors” (pains). If your morality focuses on individuals and their conscious experiences, then why on earth should anyone *not* use their body as a playground? Devout Christians are often lampooned by secular liberals as uptight, pleasure-fearing prudes.

The Sanctity foundation is used most heavily by the religious right, but it is also used on the spiritual left. You can see the foundation’s original impurity-avoidance function in New Age grocery stores, where you’ll find a variety of products that promise to cleanse you of “toxins.” And you’ll find the Sanctity foundation underlying some of the moral passions of the environmental movement. Many environmentalists revile industrialism, capitalism, and automobiles not just for the physical pollution they create but also for a more symbolic kind of pollution—a degradation of nature, and of humanity’s original nature, before it was corrupted by industrial capitalism.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ NRSV.

⁴⁶ See D. Jensen 2008 as an example.

The Sanctity foundation is crucial for understanding the American culture wars, particularly over biomedical issues. If you dismiss the Sanctity foundation entirely, then it's hard to understand the fuss over most of today's biomedical controversies. The only ethical question about abortion becomes: at what point can a fetus feel pain? Doctor-assisted suicide becomes an obviously good thing: people who are suffering should be allowed to end their lives, and should be given medical help to do it painlessly. Same for stem cell research: why not take tissue from all those embryos living in suspended animation in fertility clinics? They can't feel pain, but their tissues could help researchers develop cures that would spare sentient people from pain?

The philosopher Leon Kass is among the foremost spokesman for Shweder's ethic of divinity, and for the Sanctity foundation on which it is based. Writing in 1997, the year after Dolly the sheep became the first cloned mammal, Kass lamented the way that technology often erases moral boundaries and brings people ever closer to the dangerous belief that they can do anything they want to do. In an essay titled "The Wisdom of Repugnance," Kass argued that our feelings of disgust can sometimes provide us with a valuable warning that we are going too far, even when we are morally dumbfounded and can't justify those feelings by pointing to victims:

Repugnance, here as elsewhere, revolts against the excesses of human willfulness, warning us not to transgress what is unspeakably profound. Indeed, in this age in which everything is held to be permissible so long as it is freely done, in which our given human nature no longer commands respect, in which our bodies are regarded as mere instruments of our autonomous rational wills, repugnance may be the only voice left that speaks up to defend the central core of our humanity. Shallow are the souls that have forgotten how to shudder.⁴⁷

In Sum

I began this chapter by trying to trigger your intuitions about the five moral foundations that I introduced in chapter 6. I then defined innateness as "organized in advance of experience," like the first draft of a book that gets revised as individuals grow up within diverse cultures. This definition allowed me to propose that the moral foundations are innate. Particular rules and virtues vary across cultures, so you'll get fooled if you look for universality in the finished books. You won't find a single paragraph that exists in identical form in every human culture. But if you look for links between evolutionary theory and anthropological observations, you can take some educated guesses about what was in the universal first draft of human nature. I tried to make (and justify) five such guesses:

- The Care/harm foundation evolved in response to the adaptive challenge of caring for vulnerable children. It makes us sensitive to signs of suffering and need; it makes us despise cruelty and want to care for those who are suffering.

⁴⁷ Kass 1997.

- The Fairness/cheating foundation evolved in response to the adaptive challenge of reaping the rewards of cooperation without getting exploited. It makes us sensitive to indications that another person is likely to be a good (or bad) partner for collaboration and reciprocal altruism. It makes us want to shun or punish cheaters.
- The Loyalty/betrayal foundation evolved in response to the adaptive challenge of forming and maintaining coalitions. It makes us sensitive to signs that another person is (or is not) a team player. It makes us trust and reward such people, and it makes us want to hurt, ostracize, or even kill those who betray us or our group.
- The Authority/subversion foundation evolved in response to the adaptive challenge of forging relationships that will benefit us within social hierarchies. It makes us sensitive to signs of rank or status, and to signs that other people are (or are not) behaving properly, given their position.
- The Sanctity/degradation foundation evolved initially in response to the adaptive challenge of the omnivore's dilemma, and then to the broader challenge of living in a world of pathogens and parasites. It includes the behavioral immune system, which can make us wary of a diverse array of symbolic objects and threats. It makes it possible for people to invest objects with irrational and extreme values—both positive and negative—which are important for binding groups together.

I showed how the two ends of the political spectrum rely upon each foundation in different ways, or to different degrees. It appears that the left relies primarily on the Care and Fairness foundations, whereas the right uses all five. If this is true, then is the morality of the left like the food served in the True Taste restaurant? Does left-wing morality activate just one or two taste receptors, whereas right-wing morality engages a broader palate, including loyalty, authority, and sanctity? And if so, does that give conservative politicians a broader variety of ways to connect with voters?