Jonathan Haidt (pronounced "height") is a social psychologist. He is the Thomas Cooley Professor of Ethical Leadership at New York University's Stern School of Business. His academic specialization is morality and the moral emotions. Haidt is the author of two books: The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom (2006) and The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion (2012), which became a New York Times bestseller. He was named one of the "top global thinkers" by Foreign Policy Magazine, and one of the "top world thinkers" by Prospect magazine. His three TED talks have been viewed more than 3 million times.

Education and Career

Haidt was born in New York City and raised in Scarsdale, New York. He earned a BA in philosophy from Yale University in 1985, and a PhD in psychology from the University of Pennsylvania in 1992. He then studied cultural psychology at the University of Chicago as a post-doctoral fellow. His supervisors were Jonathan Baron and Alan Fiske (at the University of Pennsylvania,) and cultural anthropologist Richard Shweder (University of Chicago).

During his post-doctoral appointment, Haidt won a Fulbright fellowship to fund three months of research on morality in Orissa, India. In 1995, Haidt was hired as an assistant professor at the University of Virginia, where he worked until 2011, winning four awards for teaching, including a statewide award conferred by the Governor of Virginia.

In 1999 Haidt became active in the new field of positive psychology, studying positive moral emotions. This work led to the publication of an edited volume, titled Flourishing, in 2003, and then to The Happiness Hypothesis in 2006. In 2004, Haidt began to apply moral psychology to the study of politics, doing research on the psychological foundations of ideology. This work led to the publication in 2012 of The Righteous Mind. Haidt spent the 2007-2008 academic year at Princeton University as the Laurance S. Rockefeller Visiting Professor for Distinguished Teaching. In 2011, Haidt moved to the Leonard N. Stern School of Business. His current research applies moral psychology to the study of business ethics. He is also engaged in efforts to foster greater political civility and to increase the ideological diversity of social psychology and other social sciences.

Research Contributions

Haidt's research on morality has led to publications and theoretical advances in four primary areas:

1) The Social Intuitionist Model. Haidt's principle line of research since graduate school has been on the nature and mechanisms of moral judgment. In the 1990s he developed the Social Intuitionist Model of moral judgment, which posits that moral judgment is mostly based on automatic processes – moral intuitions – rather than on conscious reasoning. People engage in reasoning largely to find evidence to support their initial intuitions. Haidt's main paper on the Social Intuitionist Model, "The Emotional Dog and its Rational Tail," has been cited over 2700 times.

2) Moral Disgust. Together with Paul Rozin and Clark McCauley, Haidt developed the Disgust Scale, which has been widely used to measure individual differences in sensitivity to disgust. Haidt, Rozin, and McCauley have written extensively on the psychology of disgust as an emotion that began as a guardian of the mouth (against pathogens), but then expanded during biological and cultural evolution to become a guardian of the body more generally, and of the social and moral order.

3) Moral Elevation. With Sara Algoe, Haidt demonstrated that exposure to stories about moral beauty (the opposite of moral disgust) cause a common set of responses, including warm, loving feelings, calmness, and a desire to become a better person. Haidt called the emotion "moral elevation," as a tribute to Thomas Jefferson, who had described the emotion in detail in a letter discussing the benefits of reading great literature. Feelings of moral elevation cause lactation in breast-feeding mothers, suggesting the involvement of the hormone oxytocin. There is now a large body of research on elevation and related emotions.

4) Moral Foundations Theory. In 2004, Haidt began to extend the Social Intuitionist Model to specify the most important categories of moral intuition. The result was Moral Foundations Theory, co-developed with Craig Joseph and Jesse Graham, and based in part on the writings of Richard Shweder. The theory posits that there are (at least) six innate moral foundations, upon which cultures develop their various moralities, just as there are five innate taste receptors on the tongue, which cultures have used to create many different cuisines. The six are: Care/harm, Fairness/cheating, Liberty/oppression, Loyalty/betrayal, Authority/subversion, and Sanctity/degradation.

The theory was developed to explain cross-cultural differences in morality, but Haidt and his collaborators at YourMorals.org have found that the theory works well to explain political differences as well. Liberals (leftists) tend to endorse primarily the Care, Fairness, and Liberty foundations, whereas conservatives (rightists) tend to endorse all six foundations more equally.