

**The Social Intuitionist Model: Some Counter-Intuitions**

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Haidt and Bjorklund offer two important correctives to the longstanding cognitive perspective of moral reasoning. As Haidt and Bjorklund point out, psychological science is in the process of abandoning the view that humans make decisions in the classical sense, as rational decision makers who reason deliberately under full conscious control. Instead, human cognition and decision making is influenced to a large degree by non-conscious systems. The second corrective endorsed by Haidt and Bjorklund is the fact that human cognition is a social phenomenon, highly influenced by one’s social situation and community, and not the individualistic activity that western tradition has emphasized. Although these are important and worthwhile correctives, the social-intuitionist model has several worrisome elements that bear some reflection.

*1. Only a Small Sample of Moral Judgment and Reasoning Processes Are Addressed*

Haidt and Bjorklund limit their discussion of moral judgment to the cognitive appraisal of the action or character of a person. [See Haidt, 2001: “Moral judgments are therefore defined as evaluations (good versus bad) of the actions or character of a person that are made with respect to a set of virtues held by a culture or subculture to be obligatory”, p x]. The equally narrow definition of *moral reasoning* (“transforming given information about people in order to reach a moral judgment”, *ibid*) is again limited to

processing information about others. It is not clear how social intuitionist theory addresses aspects of moral judgment and reasoning beyond such cognitive appraisals. For example, most philosophical discussion since Kant has addressed moral decision making. Moral decision making includes such things as ascertaining which personal goals and plans to set (Williams, 1973), determining what one’s responsibilities are (Frankfurt, 1993), weighing which action choice among alternatives is best (Rawls, 1971), reconciling multiple considerations (Wallace, 1988), evaluating the quality of moral decisions made and actions taken (Blum, 1994), as well as juggling metacognitive skills such as monitoring progress on a particular moral goal or controlling attention to fulfill moral goals (Kekes, 1988). It is not clear where these types of activities fit in the social intuitionist model. Although intuitions may play a role in these activities, I argue below that at least some of the time moral deliberation and conscious reasoning may be required.

*2. Flashes of Affect and Intuition Are Overcredited While Deliberative Reasoning is Undervalued*

Haidt and Bjorklund propose that moral judgment is the result of quick intuitions that evaluate events according to good-bad categories, and that these intuitions drive moral judgment. While it may be true that individuals react to stimuli emotionally, with approach-avoidant reactions, a quick flash of affect is but *one* piece of information that humans use to make decisions about their goals and behaviors (Hogarth, 2000). A person may attend to physical reactions and interpret them (correctly or not) when making a decision (e.g., “my stomach is tight, I must not like x, so I won’t do x”), but this is only one contributing factor among many factors. Numerous elements play a role in moral decisions along with gut feelings, such as current goals and preferences (Darley & Batson, 1969), mood and energy (Hornstein, LaKind, Frankel & Manne, 1975; Isen, 1970; Isen & Levin, 1972), environmental affordances (Gibson, 1979), situational press (Fiske, 2004), contextual cue quality (Staub, 1978), social influence (Hornstein, 1976), logical coherence with self image (Colby & Damon, 1991) and with prior history (Grusec, 2002).

People wrestle with moral decisions, commitments, transgressions, and judgments in a more complex fashion (e.g., Gilligan, 1982; Klinger, 1978) than Haidt and Bjorklund allow (“People sometimes do look on both sides of an issue, thereby triggering intuitions on both sides....but it must be stressed that such deadlocks are fairly rare in our moral lives...”). Everyday moral decisions are not necessarily, as they say, “like aesthetic

judgments ...made quickly, effortlessly, and intuitively” (p. 7). In response to the authors’ suggestion of a diary study to determine the nature of moral judgment, the Table 1 lists a sampling of thoughts/issues from two days in my life recently, which I think suggest that moral deliberation is not the rare event Haidt and Bjorklund assume.

Table 1.

## Moral Issues that Involved Intuition and Deliberation

“He looks upset; what could it be; what should I say?”  
 “Did I handle the kids well enough? What would be better next time?”  
 “I don’t want to hurt her feelings; what do I do?”  
 “I’m feeling anxious. How do I keep that from affecting my caregiving?”  
 “This meeting is a waste of time. What can I do to make it worthwhile for everyone?”  
 “Whoops, I screwed that up. How do I make it up to them?”  
 “What’s the fairest way to distribute my limited time today?”  
 “I suppose I should stop over there and say hi, but I don’t feel like it.”  
 “Oh dear, another person needs my help but I have a deadline to meet.”  
 “I’m really mad at her but I promised I would call her.”  
 “How do I tell my boss that the workload is unfair?”  
 “I can’t believe I am expected to use my time this way. How can the system be changed?”

Wrestling with these issues included a simultaneous assessment of multiple factors: certainly my gut feelings, but also my principles (e.g., being a kind sister, being a fair child caregiver, doing excellent work, being a team player, etc.); weighing my goals/needs and the goals/needs of others in the circumstances; encouraging myself to be patient, loving and non-judgmental; keeping track of reactions and outcomes (mine and others’); and consciously letting go of conflicting (sometimes moral) goals. Instead of intuition dominating the process, intuition danced with conscious reasoning, taking turns doing the leading. At different times one or the other provided energy and drive, or a moral compass. I played “moral musical chairs” in terms of “feeling out” consequences of different decisions. As Krebs and Denton (2005) point out, my deliberations did not necessarily require postconventional reasoning in making choices. Nevertheless, intuition and reasoning worked hand in hand as an iterative process (much like social information processing is an iterative process among conscious, pre-conscious, and post-conscious processes—see Hassin, Uleman, & Bargh, 2005).

In fact, one might suggest that my reasoning process resembles something of an internalized “common morality” approach to decision making (Beauchamp & Childress, 1995; Gert, 2005) in which principles and intuitions are integrated with the history, needs, and goals of local circumstance. Particularities are taken into account in light of principled goals, providing a unique response to each situation. Whereas Haidt and Bjorklund say the real action lies in “gut feelings and moral emotions” (p.6), I contend that the real action occurs in the iterative pattern among the feelings, thoughts, drives and reactions in the particular circumstances. Perhaps it is more appropriate to name this process *practical wisdom*, for it requires applying the appropriate virtues in the right way for the particular situation. Practical wisdom coordinates intuitions, reasoning and action systems for the circumstances. These are applied automatically by those with more experience (experts) but more deliberately, if at all, by non-experts. The real work of moral decision making is found in practical wisdom in action.

### 3. Human Moral Development Requires More Psychology

Haidt and Bjorklund’s explanation of moral development in children can be criticized both from the perspective of developmental psychology and from the perspective of neuroscience. In the view of Haidt and Bjorklund, the child seems to be a relatively passive creature, subject to the timed maturation of moral modules and the shaping of the cultural environment (“morality is better described as emerging from the children...on a particular developmental schedule [p.21];” “morality requires guidance and examples from the local culture to externalize and configure itself properly [ibid];” “each of the five moral modules matures at a different point in development”). Genetic constraints and subsequent maturation interact with cultural shaping to “externalize” moral modules with a set of socially-constructed virtues, all of which apparently requires little self-construction on the part of the individual. Contemporary developmental psychologists emphasize ecological contextualism where active individuals play leading roles in shaping their own development within many arenas of interaction (e.g., Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 1999; Lerner, 1998). Individuals interact with multiple social environments, constructing understanding, building schemas and operations at a far greater and faster pace than initially understood by the acknowledged progenitor of developmental psychology, Jean Piaget. Moreover, a developmental systems model accepts a *biopsychosocial* approach. The

social intuitionist model seems to include the biological and the social, but not the psychological.

There is equal doubt from the perspective of affective neuroscience. To propose the existence of modules in the human brain is a common practice these days among evolutionary psychologists (e.g., Cosmides & Tooby, 2000). Unfortunately, such suggestions are more rooted in creative thinking than in empirical evidence (Panksepp & Panksepp, 2000). Although there is vast evidence for many specialized neurodynamic units in subcortical structures of the brain that humans share with other mammals, “there is no comparable evidence in support of highly resolved genetically dictated adaptations that produce socio-emotional cognitive strategies within the circuitry of the human neocortex” (Panksepp & Panksepp, 2000, p. 111). Indeed, Haidt and Bjorklund do not cite physiological evidence for their modularity theory. Nor does their theory appear to have roots in what is known about mammalian brain circuitry, which is hardwired with specialized functions.<sup>4</sup> In contrast to subcortical regions, the very plastic neocortex, rather than being set up with genetically-wired adaptive functions, is specialized via experience (Panksepp, 2005). The propensities that Haidt and Bjorklund describe would better be described within the ecological contextualism of developmental systems theory (Lerner, 1998) as experience-based units formed as a result of the plasticity of the neocortex grounded within the limits and propensities of subcortical adaptations (Panksepp, 1998).

It may be better to frame the development of automaticity in moral judgment with the novice-to-expert paradigm, a paradigm nearly universally accepted among cognitive researchers. Individuals start as novices and develop towards expertise in most domains of life, including morality (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1990; Bransford et al., 1999; Varela, 1995). When there are no intuitions, as with a novice in a new domain, performance can be ineffective. Novices are typically overwhelmed with stimulation that they cannot sort out. In such situations, novices and children (as universal novices) can appear dumbfounded. Their intuitions are often wrong, demonstrating a lack of experience and inadequate conceptualization. Ask novices for their intuitions about a set of wines, poems or paintings and their answers will differ markedly from the experts because they do not have the conceptual structures to perceive and interpret the affordances and variability that experts perceive. Novices do not have the sensibilities to notice excellence in the domain, for example, to appreciate exquisite brushstrokes or feel the beauty in a sublime turn of phrase. Novices will focus on the most concrete and superficial elements, and often not realize what they missed.

Dreyfus (2005) suggests at least six levels of expertise development. Novices initially memorize and follow rules. Only with extensive practice and development of competencies do rules become internalized and eventually surpassed in the expert. For example, the “interview” transcript Haidt and Bjorklund present could be interpreted as an attempt by the advanced beginner to figure out when and where the rules apply because the rules have not yet been fully internalized as intuitions. This intertwining of deliberative reasoning and intuition cultivation, with increasing reliance on intuition, is the hallmark of expertise development.

Expert-education in a particular domain cultivates reasoning and intuitions simultaneously. Immersion in the domain and theory are presented together, to cultivate both intuitions and deliberative understanding (Abernathy & Hamm, 1995). Through the course of expertise training, perceptions are fine tuned and developed into chronically accessed constructs; interpretive frameworks are learned and, with practice, applied automatically; action schemas are honed to high levels of automaticity (Hogarth, 2000). What is painfully rule-based as a novice becomes, with vast experience, automatic and quick for an expert (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1990).

Moral development occurs in a similar fashion (see Narvaez, 2005; Narvaez & Lapsley, 2005). Moral expertise requires a whole host of processes and action-schemes most easily described using Rest’s Four Component Model (Narvaez & Rest, 1995; Rest, 1983). Those with more expertise have more and better organized knowledge (declarative, procedural, conditional) and are able to employ this knowledge more effortlessly and skillfully. The four components of the model are described in a logical order although they may influence one another in an iterative fashion in any order. First, a person must notice a need or an opportunity for moral action and employ the skills of ethical sensitivity primarily through moral imagination (identifying key players, possible actions and outcomes, possible reactions and results). This requires the iterative back and forth interplay of intuition and other cognitions (e.g., perception, attention, motivation, reason). Second, once the array of possibilities are laid out, the actor must choose the most moral action by employing a set of principles or rules or, with extensive practice to tune up automaticity, by deciding intuitively which is the most moral choice. But this is not enough either. Third, the actor must focus attentional resources and energy to seek the goal, setting aside other concerns or interests. Chronic moral goal setting becomes automatic. Yet this is still not enough for moral behavior to take place. Fourth, the actor must implement the goal by taking the necessary steps to complete the task and persevere to the end. The

successful completion of these four processes (ethical sensitivity, ethical judgment, ethical focus, ethical action) result in an ethical behavior. Failure is possible at any point due to weaknesses in particular skills and other factors such as competing moral goals. The mismatch between intuition and reason may thwart an ethical action, but so too may other misfirings or inadequate skill deployment.

In summary, moral development is an active process. The individual acts on the environment and responds to environmental influences based on cultural and psychological factors and biological propensities. Individuals build moral expertise through social experience, particularly peer relations and with guidance from the more experienced (Piaget, 1932/1965). Individuals construct cognitive-affective-action schemas that become more complex and sophisticated with more relevant experience (Rest et al., 1999) and are shaped by the particularities of their experience. Human moral development is proactive and autopoietic (Juarrero, 1999; Varela, 1999).

#### *4. Enculturation and Moral Development Are Not Equivalent*

The social-intuitionist theory seems to operate outside of one of the most critical discussions in the history of moral development research. In the early years of the cognitive developmental tradition there was a distinction made between social conformity and moral development (Kohlberg, 1969). This distinction was necessary in order to explain how in some situations (e.g., Germany in the 1930s) social conformity worked against moral development, and in others, resisting social pressures (U.S. Civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s) was the virtuous path. Thus it is shocking to read Haidt & Bjorklund assert that “a fully enculturated person is a virtuous person” (p. 29). Apparently Hitler youth and Pol Pot’s Khmer Rouge were virtuous and most moral exemplars are not. Much like the behaviorists and psychoanalysts did before the cognitive revolution and Kohlberg’s achievements, Haidt and Bjorklund praise moral conventionality. Kohlberg’s enterprise was to fight the acceptance of relativism that pervaded psychology from its inception. Although it may be an open question whether psychological theory should be judged on whether it gives aid or comfort to ethical relativism, it is startling to see mere conventionality held up as the goal of moral formation.

Haidt and Bjorklund give no indication that they believe that intuitions can be flawed or wrong. Samenow (1984) points out the distinctive intuitions of the criminal mind, which focus on finding personal advantage at the expense of others in every situation. The intuitions of the

criminal mind are not “good” intuitions. But how does social intuitionist theory judge the goodness or badness of particular intuitions? Intuitions appear to be (equally) meritorious, as are all cultural practices, if they conform with the norms of one’s social group (“full enculturation”). This is precisely the attitude that drove Kohlberg to mount his research program—how to support the law-breaking behavior of Martin Luther King, Jr., and condemn the law-abiding behavior of the Nazi soldier. If one understands cultural influences as those influences to which youth are most exposed, enculturation today means becoming a good consumer, a celebrity groupie, and a materialist. Self interest is cultivated more than moral citizenship. This is a situation that many are beginning to lament because it does not lead to psychological or community flourishing (e.g., Kasser, 2002; Linn, 2004).

#### *Conclusion*

Haidt and Bjorklund have initiated a substantial and important conversation about the nature of moral development and decision making. They are to be commended for pushing us to incorporate recent data and insights into moral psychological theory in an effort to make theory more true to life. I agree with many of their points. For example, I concur that intuition and automaticity are more intelligent than they are credited for and that a naturalized ethics is fundamental to moral philosophizing. We should appreciate their efforts at highlighting the role of intuition and affect, but note that there may be better ways of incorporating such insights into a more theoretically robust moral psychology.

#### *Footnote*

1 Panksepp and Panksepp (2000, p. 119) suggest that if evolutionary psychology wants to propose modules, it should start with the dedicated circuitry found in mammalian brains for care, fear, lust, panic, play, and rage.

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