

Causes of our moral intuitions

Suitable Grade Levels: 9th -12th	Time: 30 - 60 min
Materials: • Concept sorting materials • Online concept sorting materials • Video: Evolutionary origins of moral intuitions • Video: Developmental origins of moral intuitions	Prerequisites: Students should already be broadly familiar with the six moral intuitions or with challenges of group life, such as through the following lesson materials: • Lesson materials: Noticing moral intuitions • Lesson materials: Moral taste buds • Lesson materials: Life in groups Related content: • What is behavior / Tinbergen's questions • Cognitive biases and their functions • True stories of people who left radical movements

Lesson Overview

In this lesson students explore the causes of our moral intuitions with the help of a sorting activity based on the work of psychologist Jonathan Haidt and his book *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*. Students also evaluate the degree to which our evolved moral intuitions may lead to negative outcomes for ourselves and society in today's world.

In an optional extension project students could explore the [stories of people who have joined and then left radical movements](#) to understand the conditions under which prejudice, hatred and violence against other people or a group can arise and how they can dissolve again.

Learning goals

Competencies: Cooperation Competency, Evaluation Competency, Evolutionary Thinking, Metacognitive Competency, Self-Regulation Competency

Learning objectives and skills

Students are able to:

- describe various causes of human moral intuitions, including immediate triggers and associated emotions, their adaptive value and function in evolutionary history, their phylogenetic origins, and their development during a lifetime;
- identify current proximate causes as triggers of moral intuitions and to interpret reactions as possible instances of "evolutionary mismatch";
- identify causes for people joining radical movements and evaluate measures for the prevention of radicalisation.

Concepts

emotions, social emotions, cooperation, social behavior, behavior, dual-process theory (system 1/fast thinking/intuitions, system 2/slow thinking), causes of behavior (Tinbergen's questions), trigger, conditioning, learning, development, phylogeny, adaptive value, function, evolutionary mismatch

Essential questions

- What are the causes of our moral intuitions?
- Are we humans born with all the moral intuitions in place, or are they learned in some way during our lifetimes?
- How do humans come to be so different in what they consider "right" and "wrong"?
- What functions do our moral intuitions have?
- What moral intuitions do we have in common with other animals, and why?
- Can our moral intuitions lead to negative outcomes for ourselves and society in today's world? (*mismatch*)
- What can we do as individuals and as a society in order to deal with our moral intuitions so that they don't have negative outcomes for ourselves and society? What role should / could school education, technology, media or laws and regulations play?

Suggested Lesson Plan

Phase	Material	Questions
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Introductory reflection

(possibly capture individual student preconceptions on the question)

What are the causes of our moral intuitions?
Why do we humans have them? For example, why do we have empathy, or a sense of fairness?

Introduction to moral intuitions and to different kinds of causes that biologists consider for human behavior (*Tinbergen's questions*)

[see below](#)

What are the causes of our moral intuitions?
Why do we humans have them?

Optional: Video on exploring phylogeny, adaptive value of the moral intuitions

[Video](#)

What are the causes of our moral intuitions?
What functions do our moral intuitions have?
What moral intuitions do we have in common with other animals, and why?

Group work: Filling out the sorting table

[Materials / Online concept sorting materials](#)

[see below](#)

Discussion after the activity

Discussion on phylogeny

[see below](#)

What functions do our moral intuitions have?
What moral intuitions do we have in common with other animals?

Discussion of other "current triggers"

[see below](#)

Discussion on causes in individual development

[see below](#)
[Video](#)

Are we humans born with all the moral intuitions in place, or are they learned in some way during our lifetimes?

Optional: Group project on a story of a person *(possibly capture individual student preconceptions on the questions)*

[see here](#)

How do humans come to be so different in what they consider "right" and "wrong"?

Discussion on potential mismatch [see below](#)

(possibly capture individual student preconceptions on the questions)

Can our moral intuitions lead to negative outcomes for ourselves and society in today's world? Why, or why not? (*mismatch*)

What can we do as individuals and as a society in order to deal with our moral intuitions so that they don't have negative outcomes for ourselves and society? What role should / could school education, technology, media or laws and regulations play?

Final reflection

(students write a short essay reflecting on their learning in this lesson, using evidence from the assignments and discussions)

One or a few of the [essential questions](#), depending on the focus of the lesson / unit

Introduction

Jonathan Haidt is a social and moral psychologist, currently a Professor of Ethical Leadership at New York University's Stern School of Business. His primary research focus has been on the origins and cultural diversity of human morality. One important finding of Haidt and his colleagues is that moral judgment is mostly based on fast and automatic processes—moral intuitions—rather than on slow and conscious reasoning. Humans tend to decide quickly what is right and wrong, and only afterwards find reasons to support their initial intuitive reactions (this interplay between fast and slow information processing is generally described and captured by the *dual-process theory* in cognitive psychology).



Jonathan Haidt



Furthermore, through studying people from different sociocultural backgrounds, they found that a number of moral intuitions can be found universally in humans, similar to taste receptors on our tongues. These findings led to the development of *Moral Foundations Theory*.

These moral foundations (or moral intuitions) are:

- Care/ Harm
- Fairness/ cheating
- Liberty/ Oppression
- Loyalty/ betrayal
- Authority/ subversion
- Purity/ Disgust

According to this theory, people have similar abilities to react emotionally to certain social situations. So these six moral intuitions seem to be universally human. But humans differ in the degree to which they react to certain social stimuli. Jonathan Haidt therefore compares these moral intuitions with the taste buds on our tongue (see [Lesson materials: Moral taste buds](#)):

"In this analogy, morality is like cuisine: it's a cultural construction, influenced by accidents of environment and history, but it's not so flexible that anything goes. You can't have a cuisine based

on tree bark, nor can you have one based primarily on bitter tastes. Cuisines vary, but they all must please tongues equipped with the same five taste receptors. Moral matrices vary, but they all must please righteous minds equipped with the same six social receptors."

"We humans all have the same five taste receptors, but we don't all like the same foods.... Just knowing that everyone has sweetness receptors can't tell you why one person prefers Thai food to Mexican ... It's the same for moral judgments. To understand why people are so divided by moral issues, we can start with an exploration of our common evolutionary heritage, but we'll also have to examine the history of each culture and the childhood socialization of each individual within that culture."

(Haidt, 2012, p. 113, 114)

Why Do Humans Have These Moral Intuitions? To answer this question, biologists and behavioral researchers look into the past:

- the immediate past can give us clues as to what stimuli from the environment and which perceptions, emotions and other factors of the body have triggered a moral intuition and behavior;
 - individual experiences and social connections in the course of a person's individual development can give us clues as to how certain reactions to environmental factors have been learned;
 - the challenges to survival and reproduction throughout evolution can give us clues as to why we have inherited the capacity for developing these moral intuitions from our ancestors,
 - studying animals of different phylogenetic relation to us can give us clues as to how old these moral intuitions are in terms of phylogenetic history.
- (these four questions about causes of traits are often referred to as Tinbergen's questions, based on the ethologist Niko Tinbergen)*

The following table is based on Jonathan Haidt's book *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* (Haidt, 2012, Figure 6.2). The columns contain the six moral intuitions that Haidt and his colleagues identified as universal across cultures: care/harm, fairness/cheating, liberty/oppression, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and purity/disgust.

The first line is for the current trigger or *proximate* causes. These are signals in the social environment of today, which can tend to trigger these intuitions and reactions in some people.

The second line is for some emotions associated with a moral intuition, especially when there are strong signals in the environment to which a person has been especially conditioned in the

course of their individual development, influenced by their social environment. Such emotions also belong to the proximate causes or mechanisms that lead to certain behaviors.

The third line is for the original triggers or proximate causes for any moral intuition. These are the signals in the social environment of the evolutionary past that triggered the respective intuition and the corresponding behaviors.

The fourth line is for the functions or the adaptive value of a moral intuition, which favored the evolution of the respective moral intuition. These are the challenges in the abiotic, biotic and especially social environment that our ancestors faced over millions of years. Those individuals who had intuitions or mental abilities that enabled them to quickly notice situations and react quickly and appropriately to those situations would have higher chances of survival and reproduction (natural or social selection), as compared to individuals who responded slower or differently to these situations. Some causes of our moral intuitions go back further into the evolutionary past than others.

Moral intuition	Care/ Harm	Fairness/ cheating	Liberty/ Oppression	Loyalty/ betrayal	Authority/ subversion	Purity/ Disgust
Current triggers						
Emotions						
Original triggers (environmental stimuli)						
Initial function/ adaptive value						

Assignment: Completing the table

see activity materials [here](#)

Students work in groups to fill out the cells in the table using provided terms and phrases. Student can also watch [this video](#) beforehand to orient them to the moral intuitions and their evolutionary origins.

Note to Teacher: The task can be scaffolded in various ways, e.g. by filling in some cells of the table, or by first discussing and filling out some cells with the whole class.

Further Discussion Questions/Extensions

Phylogeny

Are humans the only species that have developed these moral intuitions, or do other organisms have similar emotion-guided behaviors? When did these emotions and intuitions first appear in the evolutionary history of life? For example, have other primates and mammals been subject to similar adaptive challenges during their evolutionary history?

Note: This extends the activity to phylogenetic history, which is not treated in Haidt's original table. Students can write down or discuss their initial conceptions on the questions.

Moral intuition	Care/Harm	Fairness/cheating	Liberty/Oppression	Loyalty/betrayal	Authority/subversion	Purity/Disgust
Phylogeny	Mammals	Social mammals	Vertebrates, social mammals with hierarchy	social mammals with hierarchy	social mammals with hierarchy	Vertebrates

The emotion or feeling of **disgust** has very old origins, and we find it in all the **vertebrates** as avoidance behavior, as it makes animals avoid pathogens. In humans, this ability to feel disgust is shaped by the socio-cultural environment (such as when we learn to be disgusted by certain things because our parents act in a way that indicates their disgust), and we can attach a feeling of disgust to many more things and beings than just pathogens and diseases, including disgust for certain people, ideas and behaviors.

The origins of a **sense of liberty/aversion to oppression** can also be traced back to the early vertebrates in the form of a need for play and exploration.

Social emotions such as anger, shame, and empathy that trigger aggressive, subservient, or caring behavior have emerged with the **evolution of mammals**. Mammals, in contrast to reptiles and fish, spend more time and energy caring for their offspring after birth. This **caring** behavior is significantly enabled and controlled by hormones and emotions.

Many mammal species also live in **social group associations** of different constellations. In these associations, the distribution of resources (especially food, mating partners) among the members often has to be regulated in some way. Tendencies for aggressive and subservient behavior regulate the distribution of resources and the relationships between the members. Among wolves, dogs and some primates, for example, it has been observed that they react aggressively to unequal distribution of resources. Many social mammals also live in associations where there is a **hierarchy**, including chimpanzees, our closest relatives. Associated with this is a social perception of this hierarchy - who stands where in the hierarchy, who is the most dominant and aggressive, when is there a need to show respect and subservient behavior towards this dominant individual, when is there a chance to form a coalition with other lower ranked ones in order to fight against a higher ranked individual, when is there a chance to take over the highest rank from someone else, etc. Group-living animals like chimpanzees also fight against other groups of conspecifics. The aversion to oppression, loyalty to coalitions or to one's group, and respect for authority stem from life in this social environment throughout our evolutionary history as social mammals and primates.

These capacities of social perception and social emotions among mammals, including primates, can be understood as a precursor of human social emotions and moral intuitions. In the course of human evolutionary history, these have been further developed, differentiated, and shaped, in particular by social norms, cultural customs and language.

Current triggers

What other "current triggers" (see table) for each of the moral intuitions come to mind based on your own experiences and observations, or based on current social events?

Hints: For example, consider:

- situations in which we feel unfairly treated (feeling that we get less than others or have to do more work than others, etc.)
- situations in which other people (and other beings) suffer, are treated unfairly, are suppressed, etc.
- What social problems cause people to take to the streets and participate in demonstrations? What is important to the people participating in the demonstrations?

Note to Teacher: Jonathan Haidt developed the examples of "current triggers" against the background of the socio-cultural environment of modern Western societies. You may need to adapt

or extend the current triggers to situations that are more relevant to the cultural and everyday lives of your students. This can be done before the activity is presented to the students, or as part of the activity itself, by discussing situations with students that can trigger certain moral intuitions, or discussing current social and political events in your country/region/community.

Look for examples in the media in which people show emotional responses to specific "current triggers" (see table and task 1) such as in articles, memes, posts, videos, social media comments. In these reactions, can you identify the influence of certain moral intuitions, e.g. by the use of certain words, expressions, symbols?

(See also: [Moral Language - Word List](#), [Lesson materials: Noticing moral intuitions](#))

Role of development

Do you think we humans are born with all of these moral intuitions in place, or are they learned in some way during our lifetimes? How do humans come to be so different in what they consider "right" and "wrong"? Describe and explain.

***Note:** This extends the activity to the developmental causes, which are not treated in Haidt's original table. Students can write down or discuss their initial conceptions on the questions.*

Then, let students watch [this video](#) about research on the origins of a sense of "right" and "wrong" and "like me" and "not like me" in babies. Then let them revise their understanding on the above questions.

Additionally, you can have **students create a report or presentation on the story of a person** that joined and then left a radical movement to discover the role of developmental experiences in people's moral opinions. Students form groups and each group studies one story with the help of videos and texts (see [here](#)).

They make a short presentation on the person and their story, in particular on the following questions:

- By what circumstances did this person become part of a radical movement? What is the movement and what characterizes it?
- What circumstances lead this person to change their previous attitudes and leave the movement?
- What role do the human need for belonging, identity and respect, as well as moral intuitions, play in this story?
- What role do the human capacities for flexibility, empathy and learning play in the story?
- What did you find most surprising, interesting or inspiring about the story, or about what the person said (use quotes)?

- What important conclusions do you draw from the experiences and insights of the person?
- What can we, as individuals, as a school, and as a community, do to ensure that people do not succumb to radical beliefs or join radical groups?
- How should we treat people who have radical beliefs or belong to a radical group?

Afterwards, the class brings together the impressions of all stories, compares and discusses their similarities and differences.

Finally, students revise and discuss again their understanding on the above questions regarding the development of our moral intuitions and attitudes.

Mismatch

In evolutionary biology, the term "*mismatch*" is used for the function of traits that have once been adapted to certain environmental conditions but are detrimental to the organism under the present environment. This can happen when organisms are relatively quickly confronted with changing (natural or social) environmental conditions.

Can our moral intuitions lead to negative outcomes for ourselves and society in today's world? Why, or why not?

Discuss under what circumstances the emotional reactions to current social triggers could be interpreted as mismatch.

- *social conflicts between groups, esp. those that degenerate into violence or jeopardize and paralyze peaceful coexistence of a community, are costly, cost human lives, etc. (sports teams, political left and right, violent protests, terrorist attacks, dissemination of false information)*

Discuss what we as individuals and as a society can or should do to deal with these potential mismatches? What role should / could school education, technology, media or laws and regulations play?

According to some psychologists and behavioral scientists (including Jonathan Haidt), what we humans can do is become more aware of our evolved behavioral tendencies, so that we don't impulsively react to them, but instead may be more flexible in deciding how we should behave in a situation, in line with what is actually best for us and our surrounding in the long-term.

Some psychologists call this mindfulness and "psychological flexibility".

Furthermore, we can acknowledge the fact that humans tend to learn many things from the environment they grow up in, and we can learn about and try to understand why humans behave in certain ways or develop certain opinions and attitudes towards certain people, taking into account their experiences and circumstances, rather than judging them as inherently "evil" or "ignorant". We can work to create nurturing and caring social environments so that people don't develop anger,

hatred or disgust towards certain groups and so that people don't have a need to affiliate with groups that have anti-social agendas.

Jonathan Haidt and others think that education can play an important role by teaching people about our behavioral tendencies (including our moral intuitions), letting them notice them in everyday lives, teach them different ways to deal with them better, and making them aware of the role of social environments in shaping human behaviors and attitudes. One could think of these as a new "cultural adaptation" to the social environment of today, where many people of different cultural backgrounds have to coexist and make decisions together.

References and other resources

Haidt, J. (2003). The Moral Emotions. In RJ Davidson, KR Scherer, & HH Goldsmith (Eds.), Handbook of Affective Sciences (pp. 852-870). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

http://faculty.virginia.edu/haidtlab/articles/alternate_versions/haidt.2003.the-moral-emotions.pub025-as-html.html

Haidt, J. (2012). The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion. New York, NY, USA: Pantheon Books.

Figures and tables:

<http://righteousmind.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/08/Figures-for-The-Righteous-Mind.pdf>

Chapter 7 of the book: http://righteousmind.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/08/ch07.RighteousMind.final_.pdf

<http://moralfoundations.org/>

<http://yourmorals.org>

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If you would like to use this material in your classroom, we would be happy if you contact us.
For more information and teaching materials, visit our website:

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<http://openevo.eva.mpg.de>



This material was developed in collaboration with the department of Comparative Cultural Psychology at the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology.



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<https://www.eva.mpg.de/comparative-cultural-psychology/education.html>

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