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The Embodied Dynamism of Moral Becoming: Reply to Haidt (2010)

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Jon Haidt (2001) has done a great service to the field of moral psychology by drawing our attention to the importance of intuition in moral evaluation. He has proposed provocative new models and hypotheses that can be tested in experimental situations and has inspired additional models and theories about intuition. But there is much more work to be done. Here are four things that need deep study before a truly synthetic moral psychology theory is possible (Haidt, 2010, this issue).

Study How Moral Functioning Is Embodied

Our tools for adaptation are inextricably intertwined: body and thought, reasoning and emotion, reasoning and intuition, and person and context (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999; Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991). Although science likes to separate component processes for closer analysis, sometimes this gives the wrong impression—as if one can truly separate the person from the situation, reason from emotion, or intuition from unconscious reason. As Lakoff and Johnson (1999) point out, reasoning, like intuition, is not only an evolved capacity shared with other animals, it is shaped and bound by our unique bodies and brains. That is, we think in and through our bodies, making our reason primarily unconscious, metaphorical, and imaginative. Thinking is formed during early emotion cosignaling with caregivers (Greenspan & Shanker, 2004), which shapes the embodied concepts (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999) that provide the sensorimotor foundation for our inferences and imagination (Piaget, 1952).

Focus on the Dynamic Interplay of Multiple Capacities

Mature moral functioning requires multiple capacities in which reasoning and intuition are dynamically interrelated (e.g., habituated empathic concern, moral self-regulation). As with salt in cooking, conscious deliberation in a situation is more often a light but essential guiding hand ensuring that things don't fall flat. That is, conscious reasoning may be useful mostly in small doses. For example, conscious reasoning is essential in selecting among options to determine the best path for the situation—after which, unconscious reasoning and intuition can take over.

Study the Neurobiology of "Moral Becoming"

Initial conditions are critical for any dynamic system. The type of morality that is dispositionally preferred depends on the type of nurturing received (Lakoff, 1996; Narvaez, 2008; Tomkins, 1965). When nurturing is poor, a "bunker" morality dominates personality, whereas when nurturing is good, capacities for "harmonious" morality are enhanced (Narvaez, in press). Children are likely to develop a highly prosocial brain and personality with the kind of social upbringing experienced by our ancestors and by peaceful small-band groups around the world (Fry, 2006). In contrast, in the United States we seem to be testing how socially toxic we can make the environment and still survive (Lewis, Amini, & Lannon, 2000). Most supports for virtue development that our ancestors experienced at all ages have been eliminated. We can surmise that these included high social embeddedness (mostly with kin); virtuous (not vicious) role models; socially purposeful living; deep social enjoyment, including activities that promote social bonding hormones; extensive freedom and leisure; egalitarianism; and partnership with the natural world. We are just learning how important each of these is for individual development and sociality (Narvaez & Gleason, in press).

Back to the Future: The Study of Cooperation

Although the study of egoistic morality is worthwhile (i.e., competition, judgment/evaluation of others), an increasing number of researchers in different fields are focusing on the evolution of human cooperation (e.g., de Waal, 2009; Gintis,

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Bowles, Boyd, & Fehr, 2009; Hrdy, 2009; Roughgarden, 2009). Modern moral psychology research began with the study of cooperation (Piaget, 1932/1965) and perhaps should return to the study of its complexities.

In short, there is much more to do before a synthesis in moral psychology makes sense. We have hardly begun to study, let alone understand, how "the human brain is a self-organized, complex adaptive system that encodes stimuli with context-sensitive constraints" (Juarrero, 1999, p. 7).

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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