

This file contains a version of chapter 5 from the book *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*© by Jonathan Haidt. This version has been edited slightly to be used as a stand-alone reading as part of the OpenMind Library.

The first four chapters of the book present research showing that moral judgments are based primarily on intuitions and emotions, which arise immediately when people hear a story, or read a newspaper article, or hear gossip. These rapid intuitive reactions then drive our reasoning. Moral reasoning is largely done post-hoc, in the seconds after we have made a moral judgment. It is done to help us justify our judgments to other people. The book uses the metaphor that the mind is divided like a small rider (conscious reasoning) on the back of a large elephant (all the automatic intuitive processes that occur rapidly and often outside of conscious awareness). The rider-and-elephant metaphor is helpful for understanding why it's almost impossible to win a political argument: each person's "rider" composes arguments aimed at the other person's rider, but the elephant is really in charge. Unless you can change the elephant, you can't persuade the other person.

Chapter five begins the analysis of why moral judgments differ across cultures, including the "cultures" of left and right in many countries.

CHAPTER 5

Beyond WEIRD Morality

I got my Ph.D. at McDonald's. Part of it, anyway, given the hours I spent standing outside of a McDonald's restaurant in West Philadelphia trying to recruit working-class adults to talk with me for my dissertation research. When someone agreed, we'd sit down together at the restaurant's outdoor seating area, and I'd ask them what they thought about the family that ate its dog, the woman who used her flag as a rag, and all the rest. I got some odd looks as the interviews progressed, and also plenty of laughter—particularly when I told people about the guy and the chicken. I was expecting that, because I had written the stories to surprise and even shock people.

[Note: The chicken story is one of the moral judgment stories that I used in my dissertation research, which was described in chapter 1. The stories were designed to trigger moral intuitions of condemnation because the actions in them were disgusting or disrespectful, yet the actions were all completely harmless. Do people make moral judgments based on their gut feelings, or on their reasoning about harm, rights, and justice? The chicken story is this: "A man goes to the supermarket once a week and buys a chicken. But before cooking the chicken, he has sexual intercourse with it. Then he cooks it and eats it. What do you think, was it wrong for him to do this?" I asked these questions to adults and to adolescents, in

Philadelphia and two Brazilian cities, from high and low social classes—Twelve groups, 360 interviews in all.]

But what I didn't expect was that these working-class subjects would sometimes find my request for justifications so perplexing. Each time someone said that the people in a story had done something wrong, I asked, "Can you tell me why that was wrong?" When I had interviewed college students on the Penn campus a month earlier, this question brought forth their moral justifications quite smoothly. But a few blocks west, this same question often led to long pauses and disbelieving stares. Those pauses and stares seemed to say, *You mean you don't know why it's wrong to do that to a chicken? I have to explain this to you? What planet are you from?*

These subjects were right to wonder about me because I really was weird. I came from a strange and different moral world—the University of Pennsylvania. Penn students were the most unusual of all twelve groups in my study. They were unique in their unwavering devotion to the "harm principle," which John Stuart Mill had put forth in 1859: "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."¹ As one Penn student said: "It's his chicken, he's eating it, nobody is getting hurt."

The Penn students were just as likely as people in the other eleven groups to say that it would bother them to witness the taboo violations, but they were the *only* group that frequently ignored their own feelings of disgust and said that an action that bothered them was nonetheless morally permissible. And they were the only group in which a majority (73 percent) were able to tolerate the chicken story. As one Penn student said: "It's perverted, but if it's done in private, it's his right."

I and my fellow Penn students were weird in a second way too. In 2010, the cultural psychologists Joe Henrich, Steve Heine, and Ara Norenzayan published a profoundly important article titled "The Weirdest People in the World?"² The authors pointed out that nearly all research in psychology is conducted on a very small subset of the human population: people from cultures that are Western, educated, industrialized, rich, and democratic (forming the acronym WEIRD). They then reviewed dozens of studies showing that WEIRD people are statistical outliers; they are the least typical, least representative people you could study if you want to make generalizations about human nature. Even within the West, Americans are more extreme outliers than Europeans, and within the United States, the educated upper middle class (like my Penn sample) is the most unusual of all.

Several of the peculiarities of WEIRD culture can be captured in this simple generalization: *the WEIRDer you are, the more you see a world full of separate objects, rather than relationships*. It has long been reported that Westerners have a more independent and autonomous concept of the self than do East Asians.³ For example, when asked to write twenty

¹ Mill 2003/1859, p. 80.

² Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan 2010.

³ Markus and Kitayama 1991.

statements beginning with the words “I am . . .,” Americans are likely to list their own internal psychological characteristics (happy, outgoing, interested in jazz), whereas East Asians are more likely to list their roles and relationships (a son, a husband, an employee of Fujitsu).

The differences run deep; even visual perception is affected. In what’s known as the framed-line task, you are shown a square with a line drawn inside it. You then turn the page and see an empty square that is larger or smaller than the original square. Your task is to draw a line that is the same as the line you saw on the previous page, either in absolute terms (same number of centimeters; ignore the new frame) or in relative terms (same proportion relative to the frame). Westerners, and particularly Americans, excel at the absolute task, because they saw the line as an independent object in the first place and stored it separately in memory. East Asians, in contrast, outperform Americans at the relative task, because they automatically perceived and remembered the relationship among the parts.⁴

Related to this difference in perception is a difference in thinking style. Most people think holistically (seeing the whole context and the relationships among parts), but WEIRD people think more analytically (detaching the focal object from its context, assigning it to a category, and then assuming that what’s true about the category is true about the object).⁵ Putting this all together, it makes sense that WEIRD philosophers since Kant and Mill have mostly generated moral systems that are individualistic, rule-based, and universalist. That’s the morality you need to govern a society of autonomous individuals.

But when holistic thinkers in a non-WEIRD culture write about morality, we get something more like the Analects of Confucius, a collection of aphorisms and anecdotes that can’t be reduced to a single rule.⁶ Confucius talks about a variety of relationship-specific duties and virtues (such as filial piety and the proper treatment of one’s subordinates).

If WEIRD and non-WEIRD people think differently and see the world differently, then it stands to reason that they’d have different moral concerns. If you see a world full of individuals, then you’ll want a morality that protects those individuals and their individual rights⁷. You’ll emphasize concerns about harm and fairness.

But if you live in a non-WEIRD society in which people are more likely to see relationships, contexts, groups, and institutions, then you won’t be so focused on protecting individuals. You’ll have a more *sociocentric* morality, which means that you place the needs of groups and institutions first, often ahead of the needs of individuals. If you do that, then a morality based on concerns about harm and fairness won’t be sufficient. You’ll have additional concerns, and you’ll need additional virtues to bind people together.

⁴ For a review of these sorts of cultural differences, see Kitayama et al. 2009.

⁵ Nisbett et al. 2001.

⁶ In Analects 15:24, Confucius is asked whether there is a single word that could guide one’s life. He responds: “Should it not be reciprocity? What you do not wish for yourself, do not do to others” (Lays, 1997). But there is no way to reduce the moral teachings of the analects to the golden rule. As I read them, the Analects rely upon all six of the moral foundations I’ll present in chapters 7 and 8.

⁷ The original text of this chapter refers to the writings of Lawrence Kohlberg and Elliot Turiel, who emphasized moral reasoning about harm, rights, and justice.

This chapter and the next three are about those additional concerns and virtues. These chapters are about the second principle of moral psychology: *There's more to morality than harm and fairness*. [Note: The first principle was: "Intuition comes first; strategic reasoning second." Or: "The elephant is in control; the rider usually just tries to help."] I'm going to try to convince you that this principle is true *descriptively*—that is, as a portrait of the moralities we see when we look around the world. I'll set aside the question of whether any of these alternative moralities are *really* good, true, or justifiable. As an intuitionist, I believe it is a mistake to even *raise* that emotionally powerful question until we've calmed our elephants and cultivated some understanding of what such moralities are trying to accomplish. It's just too easy for our riders to build a case against every morality, political party, and religion that we don't like.⁸ So let's try to understand moral diversity first, before we judge other moralities.

Three Ethics Are More Descriptive than One

The University of Chicago is proud of its ranking by *Playboy* magazine as the "worst party school" in the United States. Winters are long and brutal, bookstores outnumber bars, and students wear T-shirts showing the university crest above phrases such as "Where Fun Goes to Die" and "Hell Does Freeze Over." I arrived at the university on a September evening in 1992, unpacked my rental truck, and went out for a beer. At the table next to mine, there was a heated argument. A bearded man slammed his hands on the table and shouted, "Damn it, I'm talking about Marx!"

This was Richard Shweder's culture. I had been granted a fellowship to work with Shweder for two years after I finished my Ph.D. at Penn. Shweder was the leading thinker in cultural psychology—a new discipline that combined the anthropologist's love of context and variability with the psychologist's interest in mental processes.⁹ A dictum of cultural psychology is that "culture and psyche make each other up."¹⁰ In other words, you can't study the mind while ignoring culture, as psychologists usually do, because minds function only once they've been filled out by a particular culture. And you can't study culture while ignoring psychology, as anthropologists usually do, because social practices and institutions (such as initiation rites, witchcraft, and religion) are to some extent shaped by concepts and desires rooted deep within the human mind, which explains why they often take similar forms on different continents.

I was particularly drawn to a new theory of morality Shweder had developed based on his research in Orissa (which I described in chapter 1). After he published that study, he and his colleagues continued to analyze the six hundred interview transcripts they had collected. They

⁸ See, for example, the books of Sam Harris, such as *The End of Faith* and *The Moral Landscape*.

⁹ Not entirely new. As Shweder 1990a explains, it has arisen several times in psychology. But if someone today calls herself a cultural psychologist, she probably orients herself to the field as it was reborn in the ten years after the publication of Shweder and LeVine 1984.

¹⁰ Shweder 1990a.

found three major clusters of moral themes, which they called the ethics of autonomy, community, and divinity.¹¹ Each one is based on a different idea about what a person really is.

The ethic of *autonomy* is based on the idea that people are, first and foremost, autonomous individuals with wants, needs, and preferences. People should be free to satisfy these wants, needs, and preferences as they see fit, and so societies develop moral concepts such as rights, liberty, and justice, which allow people to coexist peacefully without interfering too much in each other's projects. This is the dominant ethic in individualistic societies. You find it in the writings of utilitarians such as John Stuart Mill and Peter Singer¹² (who value justice and rights only to the extent that they increase human welfare), and you find it in the writings of deontologists such as Kant and Kohlberg (who prize justice and rights even in cases where doing so may reduce overall welfare).

But as soon as you step outside of Western secular society, you hear people talking in two additional moral languages. The ethic of *community* is based on the idea that people are, first and foremost, members of larger entities such as families, teams, armies, companies, tribes, and nations. These larger entities are more than the sum of the people who compose them; they are real, they matter, and they must be protected. People have an obligation to play their assigned roles in these entities. Many societies therefore develop moral concepts such as duty, hierarchy, respect, reputation, and patriotism. In such societies, the Western insistence that people should design their own lives and pursue their own goals seems selfish and dangerous—a sure way to weaken the social fabric and destroy the institutions and collective entities upon which everyone depends.

The ethic of *divinity* is based on the idea that people are, first and foremost, temporary vessels within which a divine soul has been implanted.¹³ People are not just animals with an extra serving of consciousness; they are children of God and should behave accordingly. The body is a temple, not a playground. Even if it does no harm and violates nobody's rights when a man has sex with a chicken carcass, he still shouldn't do it because it degrades him, dishonors his creator, and violates the sacred order of the universe. Many societies therefore develop moral concepts such as sanctity and sin, purity and pollution, elevation and degradation. In such societies, the personal liberty of secular Western nations looks like libertinism, hedonism, and a celebration of humanity's baser instincts.¹⁴

I first read about Shweder's three ethics in 1991, after I had collected my data in Brazil but before I had written my dissertation. I realized that all of my best stories—the ones that got people to react emotionally without being able to find a victim—involved either disrespect,

¹¹ The first published mention of the three ethics was Shweder 1990b. The major statement of the theory is Shweder et al. 1997.

¹² Peter Singer is the most prominent utilitarian philosopher of our time. See P. Singer 1979.

¹³ It need not be a soul in anything like the Christian sense. As Paul Bloom (2004) has shown, we are “natural born dualists.” Despite wide religious variations, most people (including many atheists) believe that the mind, spirit, or soul is something separable from the body, something that inhabits the body.

¹⁴ This, for example, was the conclusion drawn by Sayyid Qutb, an Egyptian who spent two years studying in America in the 1940s. He was repulsed, and this moral repulsion influenced his later work as an Islamist philosopher and theorist, one of the main inspirations for Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda.

which violated the ethics of community (for example, using a flag as a rag), or disgust and carnality, which violated the ethics of divinity (for example, the thing with the chicken).

I used Shweder's theory to analyze the justifications people gave (when I asked them "Can you tell me why?"), and it worked like magic. The Penn students spoke almost exclusively in the language of the ethic of autonomy, whereas the other groups (particularly the working-class groups) made much more use of the ethic of community, and a bit more use of the ethic of divinity.¹⁵

Soon after I arrived in Chicago, I applied for a Fulbright fellowship to spend three months in India, where I hoped to get a closer look at the ethic of divinity. (It had been the rarest of the three ethics in my dissertation data.) Because I was able to draw on Shweder's extensive network of friends and colleagues in Bhubaneswar, the capital city of Orissa, it was easy for me to put together a detailed research proposal, which was funded. After spending a year in Chicago reading cultural psychology and learning from Shweder and his students, I flew off to India in September 1993.

How I Became a Pluralist

I was extraordinarily well hosted and well treated. I was given the use of a lovely apartment, which came with its own full-time cook and servant.¹⁶ For \$5 a day I rented a car and driver. I was welcomed at the local university by Professor Biranchi Puhan, an old friend of Shweder's, who gave me an office and introduced me to the rest of the psychology department, from which I recruited a research team of eager students. Within a week I was ready to begin my work, which was supposed to be a series of experiments on moral judgment, particularly violations of the ethics of divinity. But these experiments taught me little in comparison to what I learned just from stumbling around the complex social web of a small Indian city and then talking with my hosts and advisors about my confusion.

One cause of confusion was that I had brought with me two incompatible identities. On one hand, I was a twenty-nine-year-old liberal atheist with very definite views about right and wrong. On the other hand, I wanted to be like those open-minded anthropologists I had read so much about and had studied with, such as Alan Fiske and Richard Shweder. My first few weeks in Bhubaneswar were therefore filled with feelings of shock and dissonance. I dined with men whose wives silently served us and then retreated to the kitchen, not speaking to me the entire evening. I was told to be stricter with my servants, and to stop thanking them for serving me. I watched people bathe in and cook with visibly polluted water that was held to be sacred. In short, I was immersed in a sex-segregated, hierarchically stratified, devoutly religious society, and I was committed to understanding it on its own terms, not on mine.

¹⁵ These text analyses are reported in Haidt et al. 1993. See also work by Lene Arnett Jensen (1997, 1998), which reached similar findings applying Shweder's three ethics to differences between progressive and orthodox participants, in India and in the United States.

¹⁶ I am forever grateful to the late Sukumar Sen and his son Surojit Sen, of Cuttack and Bhubaneswar for their generosity and kindness.

It only took a few weeks for my dissonance to disappear, not because I was a natural anthropologist but because the normal human capacity for empathy kicked in. I *liked* these people who were hosting me, helping me, and teaching me. Wherever I went, people were kind to me. And when you're grateful to people, it's easier to adopt their perspective. My elephant leaned toward them, which made my rider search for moral arguments in their defense. Rather than automatically rejecting the men as sexist oppressors and pitying the women, children, and servants as helpless victims, I began to see a moral world in which families, not individuals, are the basic unit of society, and the members of each extended family (including its servants) are intensely interdependent. In this world, equality and personal autonomy were not sacred values. Honoring elders, gods, and guests, protecting subordinates, and fulfilling one's role-based duties were more important.

I had read about Shweder's ethic of community and had understood it intellectually. But now, for the first time in my life, I began to feel it. I could see beauty in a moral code that emphasizes duty, respect for one's elders, service to the group, and negation of the self's desires. I could still see its ugly side: I could see that power sometimes leads to pomposity and abuse. And I could see that subordinates—particularly women—were often blocked from doing what they wanted to do by the whims of their elders (male and female). But for the first time in my life, I was able to step outside of my home morality, the ethic of autonomy. I had a place to stand, and from the vantage point of the ethic of community, the ethic of autonomy now seemed overly individualistic and self-focused. In my three months in India I met very few Americans. But when I boarded the plane to fly back to Chicago I heard a loud voice with an unmistakably American accent saying, "Look, you tell him that this is the compartment over *my* seat, and I have a *right* to use it." I cringed.

The same thing happened with the ethic of divinity. I understood intellectually what it meant to treat the body as a temple rather than as a playground, but that was an analytical concept I used to make sense of people who were radically different from me. I personally was quite fond of pleasure and could see little reason to choose less of it rather than more. And I was quite devoted to efficiency, so I could see little reason to spend an hour or two each day saying prayers and performing rituals. But there I was in Bhubaneswar, interviewing Hindu priests, monks, and laypeople about their concepts of purity and pollution and trying to understand why Hindus place so much emphasis on bathing, food choices, and concerns about what or whom a person has touched. Why do Hindu gods care about the state of their devotees' bodies? (And it's not just Hindu gods; the Koran and the Hebrew Bible reveal similar concerns, and many Christians believe that "cleanliness is next to godliness.")¹⁷

In graduate school I had done some research on moral disgust, and that prepared me to think about these questions. I had teamed up with Paul Rozin (one of the leading experts on the psychology of food and eating) and Clark McCauley (a social psychologist at nearby Bryn Mawr

¹⁷ In the Koran, see 2:222, 4:43, 24:30. In the Hebrew Bible, see the book of Leviticus in particular. For Christianity, see Thomas 1983, chapter 1. Also see New Testament passages on the purifications of Jesus and his followers, e.g., John 3:25, 11:55; Acts 15:9 20:26, 21:26, 24:18.

College). We wanted to know why the emotion of disgust—which clearly originated as an emotion that keeps us away from dirty and contaminating things—can now be triggered by some moral violations (such as betrayal or child abuse) but not by others (such as robbing a bank or cheating on one’s taxes).¹⁸

Our theory, in brief, was that the human mind automatically perceives a kind of vertical dimension of social space, running from God or moral perfection at the top down through angels, humans, other animals, monsters, demons, and then the devil, or perfect evil, at the bottom.¹⁹ The list of supernatural beings varies from culture to culture, and you don’t find this vertical dimension elaborated in every culture. But you do find the idea that high = good = pure = God whereas low = bad = dirty = animal quite widely. So widely, in fact, that it seems to be a kind of archetype (if you like Jungian terminology) or innately prepared idea (if you prefer the language of evolutionary psychology).

Our idea was that moral disgust is felt whenever we see or hear about people whose behavior shows them to be low on this vertical dimension. People feel degraded when they think about such things, just as they feel elevated by hearing about virtuous actions.²⁰ A man who robs a bank does a bad thing, and we want to see him punished. But a man who betrays his own parents or who enslaves children for the sex trade seems monstrous—lacking in some basic human sentiment. Such actions revolt us and seem to trigger some of the same physiology of disgust as would seeing rats scampering out of a trash can.²¹

That was our theory, and it was rather easy to find evidence for it in India. Hindu notions of reincarnation could not be more explicit: our souls reincarnate into higher or lower creatures in the next life, based on the virtue of our conduct during this life. But as with the ethic of community, the big surprise for me was that after a few months I began to *feel* the ethic of divinity in subtle ways.

Some of these feelings were related to the physical facts of dirt and cleanliness in Bhubaneswar. Cows and dogs roamed freely around town, so you had to step carefully around their droppings; you sometimes saw people defecating by the roadside; and garbage was often heaped into fly-swarmed piles. It therefore began to feel natural to me to adopt the Indian practice of removing my shoes when I entered any private home, creating a sharp boundary between dirty and clean spaces. As I visited temples I became attuned to their spiritual topography: the courtyard is higher (more pure) than the street; the antechamber of the temple higher still, and the inner sanctum, where the god was housed, could be entered only by the

¹⁸ We also wanted to explain why so many languages extend their word for “disgust” to apply not just to physically repulsive things like excrement but also to some moral violations—but not all violations, and not always the same ones across cultures (Haidt, Rozin, McCauley & Imada 1997).

¹⁹ People intuitively associate up with good and down with bad, even when up and down are just relative positions on a computer monitor (Meier and Robinson 2004). For overviews of research on this psychological dimension see Brandt and Reyna 2011; Rozin, Haidt, and McCauley 2008; and chapter 9 of *The Happiness Hypothesis*

²⁰ I describe my research on moral elevation and disgust in detail in chapter 9 of *The Happiness Hypothesis*. See also www.ElevationResearch.com.

²¹ Moral violations have often been shown to activate the frontal insula, a brain area important for disgust (Rilling et al. 2008; Sanfey et al. 2003), although so far the moral violations used have mostly involved cheating, not what Rozin, McCauley and I would call moral disgust. See Rozin, Haidt, and Fincher 2009.

Brahmin priest, who had followed all the necessary rules of personal purity. Private homes had a similar topography, and I had to be sure never to enter the kitchen or the room where offerings were made to deities. The topography of purity even applies to your own body: you eat with your right hand (after washing it), and you use your left hand to clean yourself (with water) after defecation, so you develop an intuitive sense that left = dirty and right = clean. It becomes second nature that you don't give things to others using your left hand.

If these new feelings were just a new ability to detect invisible dirt rays emanating from objects, they would have helped me to understand obsessive-compulsive disorder, but not morality. These feelings were more than that. In the ethic of divinity, there is an order to the universe, and things (as well as people) should be treated with the reverence or disgust that they deserve. When I returned to Chicago, I began to feel positive essences emanating from some objects. It felt right to me to treat certain books with reverence—not leaving them on the floor or taking them into the bathroom. Funeral services and even burial (which had previously seemed to me to be such a waste of money and space) began to make more emotional sense. The human body does not suddenly become an object, like that of any other animal corpse, at the moment of death. There are right ways and wrong ways of treating bodies, even when there is no conscious being inside the body to experience mistreatment.

I also began to understand why the American culture wars involved so many battles over sacrilege. Is a flag just a piece of cloth, which can be burned as a form of protest? Or does each flag contain within it something nonmaterial such that when protesters burn it, they have done something bad (even if nobody were to see them do it)? When an artist submerges a crucifix in a jar of his own urine, or smears elephant dung on an image of the Virgin Mary, do these works belong in art museums?²² Can the artist simply tell religious Christians, “If you don't want to see it, don't go to the museum”? Or does the mere existence of such works make the world dirtier, more profane, and more degraded?

If you can't see anything wrong here, try reversing the politics. Imagine that a conservative artist had created these works using images of Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela instead of Jesus and Mary. Imagine that his intent was to mock the quasi-deification by the left of so many black leaders. Could such works be displayed in museums in New York or Paris without triggering angry demonstrations? Might some on the left feel that the museum itself had been polluted by racism, even after the paintings were removed?²³

As with the ethic of community, I had read about the ethic of divinity before going to India, and had understood it intellectually. But in India, and in the years after I returned, I felt it. I could see beauty in a moral code that emphasized self-control, resistance to temptation,

²² Andres Serrano's “Piss Christ” is a particularly difficult case because the resulting image is visually stunning. Strong light shining through the yellow urine gives the photo a quasi-divine glow. See also Chris Ofili's painting *The Holy Virgin Mary*, and the controversy over its exhibition in New York City in 1999. The painting portrayed the Virgin Mary as a black woman surrounded by images of vulvas cut out from pornographic magazines and smeared with actual elephant dung.

²³ After I wrote this hypothetical example, Bruce Buchanan pointed out to me that something very much like it happened in Chicago in 1988. See the Wikipedia entry for “Mirth & Girth,” a painting that satirized the revered and recently deceased African-American mayor of Chicago, Harold Washington.

cultivation of one's higher, nobler self, and negation of the self's desires. I could see the dark side of this ethic too: once you allow visceral feelings of disgust to guide your conception of what God wants, then minorities who trigger even a hint of disgust in the majority (such as homosexuals or obese people) can be ostracized and treated cruelly. The ethic of divinity is sometimes incompatible with compassion, egalitarianism, and basic human rights.²⁴

But at the same time, it offers a valuable perspective from which we can understand and critique some of the ugly parts of secular societies. For example, why are many of us bothered by rampant materialism? If some people want to work hard in order to earn money in order to buy luxury goods in order to impress others, how can we criticize them using the ethic of autonomy?

To offer another example, I was recently eating lunch at a UVA dining hall. At the table next to me two young women were talking. One of them was very grateful for something the other had agreed to do for her. To express her gratitude she exclaimed, "Oh my God! If you were a guy, I'd be so on your dick right now!" I felt a mixture of amusement and revulsion, but how could I criticize her from within the ethic of autonomy?

The ethic of divinity lets us give voice to inchoate feelings of elevation and degradation—our sense of "higher" and "lower." It gives us a way to condemn crass consumerism and mindless or trivialized sexuality. We can understand long-standing laments about the spiritual emptiness of a consumer society in which everyone's mission is to satisfy their personal desires.²⁵

Stepping out of the Matrix

Among the most profound ideas that has arisen around the world and across eras is that the world we experience is an illusion, akin to a dream. Enlightenment is a form of waking up. You find this idea in many religions and philosophies,²⁶ and it's also a staple of science fiction, particularly since William Gibson's 1984 novel *Neuromancer*. Gibson coined the term *cyberspace* and described it as a "matrix" that emerges when a billion computers are connected and people get enmeshed in "a consensual hallucination."

The creators of the movie *The Matrix* developed Gibson's idea into a gorgeous and frightening visual experience. In one of its most famous scenes, the protagonist, Neo, is given a choice. He can take a red pill, which will disconnect him from the matrix, dissolve the hallucination, and give him command of his actual, physical body (which is lying in a vat of goo). Or he can take a blue pill, forget he was ever given this choice, and his consciousness will return to the rather pleasant hallucination in which nearly all human beings spend their conscious existence. Neo swallows the red pill, and the matrix dissolves around him.

²⁴ Martha Nussbaum (2004) has made this case powerfully, in an extended argument with Leon Kass beginning with Kass 1997.

²⁵ Popes Benedict XVI and John Paul II have been particularly eloquent on these points. See also R. Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton 1985. <<Why give Bellah's first initial? And why list all the authors here, when sometimes articles with more than 3 authors are shortened to "et al.?">>

²⁶ For example, the Hindu veil of Maya; the Platonic world of Forms and the escape from Plato's cave.

It wasn't quite as dramatic for me, but Shweder's writings were my red pill. I began to see that many moral matrices coexist within each nation. Each matrix provides a complete, unified, and emotionally compelling worldview, easily justified by observable evidence and nearly impregnable to attack by arguments from outsiders.

I grew up Jewish in the suburbs of New York City. My grandparents had fled czarist Russia and found work in New York's garment industry. For their generation, socialism and labor unions were effective responses to the exploitation and terrible working conditions they faced. Franklin Roosevelt was the heroic leader who protected workers and defeated Hitler. Jews ever since have been among the most reliable voters for the Democratic Party.²⁷

My morality wasn't just shaped by my family and ethnicity. I attended Yale University, which was ranked at the time as the second most liberal of the Ivy League schools. It was not uncommon during class discussions for teachers and students to make jokes and critical comments about Ronald Reagan, the Republican Party, or the conservative position on controversial current events. Being liberal was cool; being liberal was righteous. Yale students in the 1980s strongly supported the victims of apartheid, the people of El Salvador, the government of Nicaragua, the environment, and Yale's own striking labor unions, which deprived us all of dining halls for much of my senior year.

Liberalism seemed so obviously ethical. Liberals marched for peace, workers' rights, civil rights, and secularism. The Republican Party was (as we saw it) the party of war, big business, racism, and evangelical Christianity. I could not understand how any thinking person would voluntarily embrace the party of evil, and so I and my fellow liberals looked for psychological explanations of conservatism, but not liberalism. *We* supported liberal policies because we saw the world clearly and wanted to help people, but *they* supported conservative policies out of pure self-interest (lower my taxes!) or thinly veiled racism (stop funding welfare programs for minorities!). We never considered the possibility that there were alternative moral worlds in which reducing harm (by helping victims) and increasing fairness (by pursuing group-based equality) were not the main goals.²⁸ And if we could not imagine other moralities, then we could not believe that conservatives were as sincere in their moral beliefs as we were in ours.

When I moved from Yale to Penn, and then from Penn to the University of Chicago, the matrix stayed pretty much the same. It was only in India that I had to stand alone. Had I been there as a tourist it would have been easy to maintain my matrix membership for three months; I'd have met up now and then with other Western tourists, and we would have swapped stories about the sexism, poverty, and oppression we had seen. But because I was there to study cultural psychology I did everything I could to fit into another matrix, one woven mostly from the ethics of community and divinity.

²⁷ According to data from the American National Election Survey. Jews are second only to African Americans in their support for the Democratic Party. Between 1992 and 2008, 82 percent of Jews identified with or leaned toward the Democratic Party.

²⁸ As I'll say in chapter 8, it is only recently that I've come to realize that conservatives care at least as much about fairness as do liberals; they just care more about proportionality than about equality.

When I returned to America, social conservatives no longer seemed so crazy. I could listen to leaders of the “religious right” such as Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson with a kind of clinical detachment. They want more prayer and spanking in schools, and less sex education and access to abortion? I didn’t think those steps would reduce AIDS and teen pregnancy, but I could see why Christian conservatives wanted to “thicken up” the moral climate of schools and discourage the view that children should be as free as possible to act on their desires. Social conservatives think that welfare programs and feminism increase rates of single motherhood and weaken the traditional social structures that compel men to support their own children? Well, now that I was no longer on the defensive, I could see that those arguments made sense, even if there are also many good effects of liberating women from dependence on men. I had escaped from my prior partisan mind-set (reject first, ask rhetorical questions later) and began to think about liberal and conservative policies as manifestations of deeply conflicting but equally heartfelt visions of the good society.²⁹

It felt good to be released from partisan anger. And once I was no longer angry, I was no longer committed to reaching the conclusion that righteous anger demands: we are right, they are wrong. I was able to explore new moral matrices, each one supported by its own intellectual traditions. It felt like a kind of awakening.

In 1991, Shweder wrote about the power of cultural psychology to cause such awakenings:

Yet the conceptions held by others are available to us, in the sense that when we truly understand their conception of things we come to recognize *possibilities latent within our own rationality . . .* and those ways of conceiving of things become salient for us for the first time, or once again. In other words, there is no homogeneous “backcloth” to our world. We are multiple from the start.³⁰

I cannot overstate the importance of this quotation for moral and political psychology. We are multiple from the start. Our minds have the potential to become righteous about many different concerns, and only a few of these concerns are activated during childhood. Other potential concerns are left undeveloped and unconnected to the web of shared meanings and values that become our adult moral matrix. If you grow up in a WEIRD society, you become so well educated in the ethic of autonomy that you can detect oppression and inequality even where the apparent victims see nothing wrong. But years later, when you travel, or become a parent, or perhaps just read a good novel about a traditional society, you might find some other moral

²⁹ I am not saying that all moral visions and ideologies are equally good, or equally effective at creating humane and morally ordered societies. I am not a relativist. I will address the issue of how well ideologies fit with human nature in chapter 12. But for now I want to insist on the point that long-standing ideological struggles almost invariably involve people who are pursuing a moral vision in which they believe passionately and sincerely. We often have the urge to attribute ulterior motives to our opponents, such as monetary gain. This is usually an error.

³⁰ Shweder 1991, p. 5.

intuitions latent within yourself. You might find yourself responding to dilemmas involving authority, sexuality, or the human body in ways that are hard to explain.

Conversely, if you are raised in a more traditional society, or within an evangelical Christian household in the United States, you become so well educated in the ethics of community and divinity that you can detect disrespect and degradation even where the apparent victims see nothing wrong. But if you then face discrimination yourself (as conservatives and Christians sometimes do in the academic world), or if you simply listen to Martin Luther King Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech, you may find a new resonance in moral arguments about oppression and equality.

In Sum

The second principle of moral psychology is: *There's more to morality than harm and fairness.* In support of this claim I described research showing that people who grow up in Western, educated, industrial, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) societies are statistical outliers on many psychological measures, including measures of moral psychology. I also showed that:

- The WEIRDer you are, the more you perceive a world full of separate objects, rather than relationships.
- Moral pluralism is true *descriptively*. As a simple matter of anthropological fact, the moral domain varies across cultures.
- The moral domain is unusually narrow in WEIRD cultures, where it is largely limited to the ethic of autonomy (i.e., moral concerns about individuals harming, oppressing, or cheating other individuals). It is broader—including the ethics of community and divinity—in most other societies, and within religious and conservative moral matrices within WEIRD societies.
- Moral matrices bind people together and blind them to the coherence, or even existence, of other matrices. This makes it very difficult for people to consider the possibility that there might really be more than one form of moral truth, or more than one valid framework for judging people or running a society.

In the next three chapters I'll catalogue the moral intuitions, showing exactly what there is beyond harm and fairness. I'll show how a small set of innate and universal moral foundations can be used to construct a great variety of moral matrices. I'll offer tools you can use to understand moral arguments emanating from matrices that are not your own.