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Why Socio-Political Beliefs Trump Individual Morality: An Evolutionary Perspective

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That morality originated through a co-evolutionary process of cultural and biological evolution to reap the benefits of cooperation in social dilemma situations has become a well accepted and empirically supported view in the literature (Curry et al. 2019; Veit 2019). However, the picture provided by these accounts has hitherto failed to map onto a large cluster of behavioral phenomena that can be considered the “dark side of morality”—that is, morally-motivated behavior that is harmful and violent.

The view of morality as an evolved institution and trait for the facilitation of cooperation makes it all too tempting to go along with the “moralizing view” that harmful behavior cannot be moral and must instead be a result of a mistake or disorder in cognitive processing. However, simply because morality evolved to promote cooperation within societies does not follow that it will then only ever lead to this outcome. Rather than a perfect prosocial tool, it is instead a set of psychological and behavioral predispositions that typically act as a heuristic to this end, but which can also lead elsewhere. Here a distinction must be drawn between “morality as a normative system” and “morality as a natural evolved phenomenon.” The moralizing perspective of the first view can interfere with the scientific study of our moral psychology and how it evolved¹, as well as understanding how it currently functions.

When large groups across the political spectrum are reverting to violence and public resistance, there could not be a timelier paper than “The dark side of morality: Neural mechanisms underpinning moral convictions and judgments about violence” by Workman et al. (2020). That a strong commitment to

a socio-political movement fosters the willingness to sacrifice individual values is a phenomenon that has long been observed in humans. Scientific consensus on the neurocognitive mechanisms that lead otherwise peaceful individuals to come to endorse violence has hitherto been lacking. Those who oppose the political goals of violent groups often assert that the individuals involved have existing predispositions toward violence, but Workman et al. suggest a different picture—one in which anyone is capable of committing violence, or at least endorsing it, under the right sociopolitical circumstances. The neurological findings of Workman et al. are truly astonishing, revealing a picture in which the natural aversion to harm that is often attributed as a core component of our morality can be overridden by strong moral convictions about sociopolitical issues (or what we may call social justice) and beliefs about the appropriateness of ideological violence in achieving desired ends (something we call the vigilantism factor).

Opposition to political violence frequently seems to be concerned not so much with the intended political goals but the methods by which the goals are achieved. This is nicely illustrated in the fictional difference between Magneto and Professor X in the *X-Men* franchise. They both want to achieve the same goal: justice and equality for mutants, but they use vastly different methods, one choosing violence and the other peaceful coexistence, thus serving as the moral anchor point of the story. Indeed, they bear straightforward similarities to the Black Rights activists Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. The central question is one that appears throughout human

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¹Indeed, many have argued that a scientific understanding of our moral behaviour and emotions undermines the idea of a true and objective morality (see e.g. Veit 2018).

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history: how far can one go in order to promote what one perceives to be justice?

Malcolm X was far less opposed to the use of violence than Martin Luther King Jr, a fact that seems rooted in the conditions of his childhood. He has stated that he was strongly impacted by white supremacists burning down his house and killing his father, when he was only six years old (Malcolm 2015). These types of hate crimes are rarely described as acts of “morality”—unsurprising, since the term has a ring of endorsement to it. However, in order to understand this sort of violence against blacks and other minorities, we may very well have to come to terms with the idea that this is—at least in part—a result of our evolved moral psychology: a tendency or predisposition toward violence against those not considered part of the community, or “in group.” Particularly for those raised under the conditions of observing depictions of violence used by an opposing group against them, it seems only natural that natural inclinations against violence would weaken. The perceived use of violence to promote “unjust” ends can make its use by oneself for “just” ends appear far more permissible.

We argue that an evolutionary perspective can help us here in making sense of the rise of political violence within the US and in other states across the world. Vigilantism is an interesting social phenomena, and one that can be conceived of as a type of punishment behavior. Moving away from the external moral perspective and instead viewing violence from the perspective of those engaging in it, we can see it as a form of punishment, an attempt to restore a moral order that is perceived to be damaged. This type of behavior has long interested evolutionary game theorists, since there is an obvious advantage to “passivity.” Punishing others is costly, as it not only takes energy but also carries the risk of injury, so why engage in this behavior? Within the last decades, there has been much work on the evolution of punishment in the human lineage (Boyd and Richerson 1992; Boyd et al. 2003). The context in which this behavior evolved, however, was small hunter-gatherer groups and our evolved morality is simply not adapted to the massive size of the human societies we see today.

Instead, what we see nowadays is the presence of multiple groups with widely different perspectives on what they perceive “justice” to be. Through this, other groups come to be seen as “evil” rather than just differing in opinion—a viewpoint which substantially overestimates their political differences (Levendusky and Malhotra 2016). An evolved mechanism through which we see members of different groups as threatening “outsiders” has been coopted into political and


ideological views. Our social decision-making process is profoundly impacted by which group we belong to, thus revealing a dark side to the *hyper-sociality* usually associated with the human species (Bowles 2012). This is underpinned by the neurocognitive mechanisms demonstrated by Workman et al., with political commitments both weakening our natural revulsion toward violence and strengthening the subjective evaluation of political activism.

Under this picture, recent failed replication on inherent differences between conservatives and liberals are particularly interesting (Bakker et al. 2020). If, as the research suggests, there are no physiological differences between different political groups, political polarization seems to be a much more culturally plastic phenomenon, in which the social environment largely determines one’s political views. This makes sense if considered from an evolutionary point of view. Crucial to the success of human societies is cohesion and cooperation, and it is thus important to be accepted by the group in order to survive and receive the benefits of cooperation. However, this may not only require demonstrated commitment to those within your group, but also disregard or even suspicion or aggression toward those outside. In the modern supersized societies of today, this creates political polarization which can lead to conflict, and sometimes violently so.

To conclude, both political violence and polarization have increased enormously in recent years. If we are interested in reducing conflict and violence, we have to move away from the idea that “morality” is a phenomenon that is itself intrinsically good and accept that the underlying evolved moral psychology has a dark side, one that can justify the most heinous acts, such as the Holocaust. Even the Nazis acted through a conviction that they were doing the “right” thing. Evolved morality determines the strength of conviction, where its content appears to be much more plastic. Understanding this can allow us to harness research on the evolution of morality to reduce and prevent future violence and unnecessary harms. If societal cooperation and peaceful coexistence is our goal, morality may not be the ally we have imagined it to be. We may even have to go against our natural evolved moral inclinations to promote civil agreement across the divide.²

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²A point that has similarly been argued for in the moral enhancement literature (Persson and Savulescu 2012).

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What We Talk About When We Talk About Morality

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The article by Workman et al. (2020) stands out for its great technical refinement but seems unable to combine a rich theoretical premise with the operationalization of the concepts that it purports to analyze at the brain level. The concept of morality is too complex and interwoven with too many meanings to be reduced to a series of simple activations of brain areas at the present state of knowledge. The results of the research as they are presented appear to be an over-interpretation with regards to neuroscientific data. The manifestation of moral judgments is much more nuanced than the discrimination we can find by looking at the brain areas involved. Greater progress could perhaps be attained by reducing the scope of these studies, circumscribing the goal to be achieved with the investigation of limited phenomena. In so doing, piece by piece, we might eventually draw up the brain map of morality in the future.

DERANGED MORALITY OR FANATICISM?

The main point is the so-called dark side of morality. Does it exist? This is not an easy question, but it is certainly crucial if we want to identify the neuronal correlates and brain mechanisms of “shared values that, when held with moral conviction, can serve as a compelling mandate capable of facilitating support for ideological violence.” The authors start from the idea that there are moral invariants in the form of “a set of biological and cultural solutions for solving cooperative problems in social interactions.” This kind of approach is problematic in itself because it crystallizes as natural and substantially unchangeable the separation between “us and them,” which is the typical product of cooperation within small groups as it evolved in human history. This seems to exclude the possibility of moral progress, i.e. the fact that “even if it is highly unlikely that there be complete agreement