

Individual Morality, Hive Morality, and Terrorism

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Overview of Issue

Morality varies across cultures, and some commentators believe that the current conflict between America and Islamic extremism is part of a larger clash of civilizations. Whether or not this is true, it will be useful for DHS to have classification schemes to analyze the moral foundations of cultures, subcultures, and political movements. One recent system (Haidt & Graham, in press) identifies five universal and innate psychological foundations of human morality, and then describes the processes by which cultures generate unique configurations of virtues and narratives. Some configurations are more conducive to terrorist violence than others.

Many Western researchers have written about the evolutionary origins of human morality, and nearly all such writings focus on two processes: kin altruism (the willingness to help kin, particularly one's own children) and reciprocal altruism (the willingness to help those who may later help you). These two evolutionary processes do appear to have equipped human beings with two sets of moral intuitions and emotions: 1) a sensitivity to harm and suffering, particularly of weak or vulnerable individuals, and 2) a sensitivity to issues of reciprocity and fairness, including emotions of anger when one is cheated, or gratitude when one is the recipient of a favor. These two foundations are appealing to Western theorists because they help to justify our central moral concerns: protecting individuals from harm, and guarding people's rights against infringement from each other, and from governments.

However, nearly all traditional and non-Western societies see the moral domain as being much broader. Non-Western moral systems are not trying to maximize the freedom and well-being of individuals; they are usually more concerned with the welfare, integrity, and order of the group. A recent review of research on cultural diversity in morality (Haidt & Joseph, 2004) identified five clusters of concerns that were found in nearly all human cultures. In addition to the two described above (*harm/suffering*, and *reciprocity/fairness*), there were three more: concerns about *ingroup/outgroup* (including hypervigilance to treason and betrayal), concerns about *hierarchy/respect* (including the idea that society is like a body, and each person is like an organ which should perform its allotted function), and concerns about *purity/pollution* (including the idea that carnal pleasures are degrading, and that one must control one's desires and live in a way that honors the divinity that created each person).

Recent research demonstrates that the "culture war" in the United States can be understood as a battle between liberals, who base their moral worldview on the first two foundations (*harm/suffering*, and *reciprocity/fairness*), and conservatives, who rely upon all five foundations. The "clash" between the West and Islam, at least as Bin Laden presents it in his writings, is based on the same split: Islamists who call for Sharia, or who oppose the secular values of the West, say that our way of living is too "thin" – it encourages individuals to do whatever they want. When individualism is celebrated, individuals often live in ways that are antithetical to creating a tightly-ordered, hierarchically structured, and divinely guided society. Thick or "hive-like" societies, on the other hand, satisfy people's needs for order, structure, and meaning, but they are usually oppressive to those who do not fit in, and they easily become dangerous to any group that is seen as a threat to the hive. Suicide terrorism, in fact, appears to occur almost exclusively when a culture that has a thick (five-foundation) morality perceives that it has been occupied by the forces of foreign country that is a democracy – and that might therefore be swayed by terrorism (Pape, 2005).

Recommendations and applications

- 1) Suicide terrorism is orchestrated and produced by people who feel that they are part of a hive – a larger collective enterprise that is worth living and dying for. America must learn how to deal with human hives: how to avoid upsetting them whenever possible, and how to pacify them or make them less hive-like when necessary.
- 2) Terrorist organizations work hard to make the claim that they represent the hive of their culture. America's actions can either help them to claim that mantle (for example, by killing civilians or torturing detainees), or it can strip them of it (by garnering respect, trust, and affection from the populace).

References

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