

Moral Foundations Theory

Psychologist Jonathan Haidt and his colleagues wanted to make sense of a puzzling question: Why are there so many similarities in morality across cultures, traditions, and individuals, but also so many differences?



To answer this question, they examined different fields of research, including evolutionary and cognitive psychology, cultural anthropology, sociology, philosophy, and religion.

Based on their research, these psychologists developed a theory called **Moral Foundations Theory** to explain how we develop our moral worldviews.

The six "taste buds" of morality

Haidt developed a metaphor to explain why we have fundamental differences in worldviews. The metaphor is that **the mind is like a tongue with six taste buds.**

We all have the same taste buds on our tongues (salty, sweet, sour, bitter, and savory), but we all have different taste preferences. Some of us have a strong sweet tooth; others prefer more salty foods.



Each culture ends up generating its own cuisine with its own flavors and seasonings. And even within any given culture, people vary. They don't all react to the same foods in the same way. We all end up with our own unique taste palate.

Psychologists believe morality works in a similar way. Haidt suggests that we all share a set of innate and universal **moral foundations**, which serve as the building blocks of morality — just as our taste buds serve as the building blocks of our food preferences.

Like with our taste buds, we all begin with the same six moral foundations: Care, Fairness, Liberty, Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity (more detail below).

Although we all share these same foundations, we draw on them in different ways and to different degrees to form our specific moral worldviews. The way in which we rely on these foundations shapes our core values and worldview.

Similarly to how we form our taste preferences, we form our moral worldview through a combination of many factors:

- We all begin with the same moral foundations, which stem from our **shared evolutionary heritage**
- Our worldview is then influenced by the **cultures** in which we are raised
- Our **specific upbringing** influences how our worldview develops
- Our own **unique life experiences** continue to inform our worldview



We all end up with worldviews that are as unique as our fingerprints!

The Six Moral Foundations

Here's a closer look at each of the six foundations.



1. Care

The Care foundation serves as the basis for caring for others and trying to prevent harm. This underlies the values of kindness and compassion.

A person who relies heavily on the Care foundation would probably prioritize being gentle and kind, and would probably value this in other people.

A person who doesn't rely on this foundation very much is more likely to value being tough and independent.

The Care foundation underlies support for programs for those in need (e.g., welfare, healthcare, childcare).

2. Fairness

We all want to be treated fairly and we dislike when people cheat, even when we're not the ones who are directly affected by the cheater's actions.

This foundation underlies the values of justice, equality, and reciprocity. It's also connected to the values of honesty and integrity.



Those on the political right and left tend to interpret fairness differently. Those on the political right tend to think about fairness in terms of proportionality (people should benefit in proportion to which they contributed). Those on the political left tend to think about fairness in terms of equality (people should have equal outcomes). This underlies the tension between equality and equity.



3. Liberty

The Liberty foundation underlies our desire for autonomy — the freedom to make our own decisions. This serves as the basis for the ideal of individual freedom, as well as the desire to eliminate oppression.

Those on the political left and political right tend to care a great deal about the liberty foundation. However, they tend to apply it differently.

Those on the political left tend to rely on the liberty foundation to advocate for vulnerable populations who they believe are oppressed by the dominant population. Those on the political right tend to rely on the liberty foundation in their desire for freedom from government regulation.

The Liberty foundation underlies ideas such as voting rights, abortion, reducing taxes, and reducing regulation.

4. Loyalty

The Loyalty foundation underlies the drive to be loyal to groups that we're a part of — for instance, our family, company, neighborhood, religious community, sports team, etc.



The Loyalty foundation also forms the basis of values like patriotism, being a team player, and self-sacrifice for the sake of the group.

The Loyalty foundation underlies policies that support one's own group (e.g., programs that might support your specific community).



5. Authority

The Authority foundation underlies the value of respecting traditions, laws, leaders, elders, and other forms of authority that you consider legitimate.

If you value treating your parents or grandparents with respect, this stems from the Authority foundation.

The Authority foundation underlies policies that promote security and the rule of law.

6. Sanctity

The Sanctity foundation underlies the notion that certain things are "pure" or sacred, and that they should be protected or treated with reverence.

This can manifest in treating objects and beliefs as sacred. It can also underlie the notion of treating the human body like a temple that must not be desecrated.



The Sanctity foundation underlies ideas related to religion, or the protection of symbols that people view as sacred (e.g., flags and monuments). It can also underlie the desire to protect the environment.

Moral Foundations and Politics

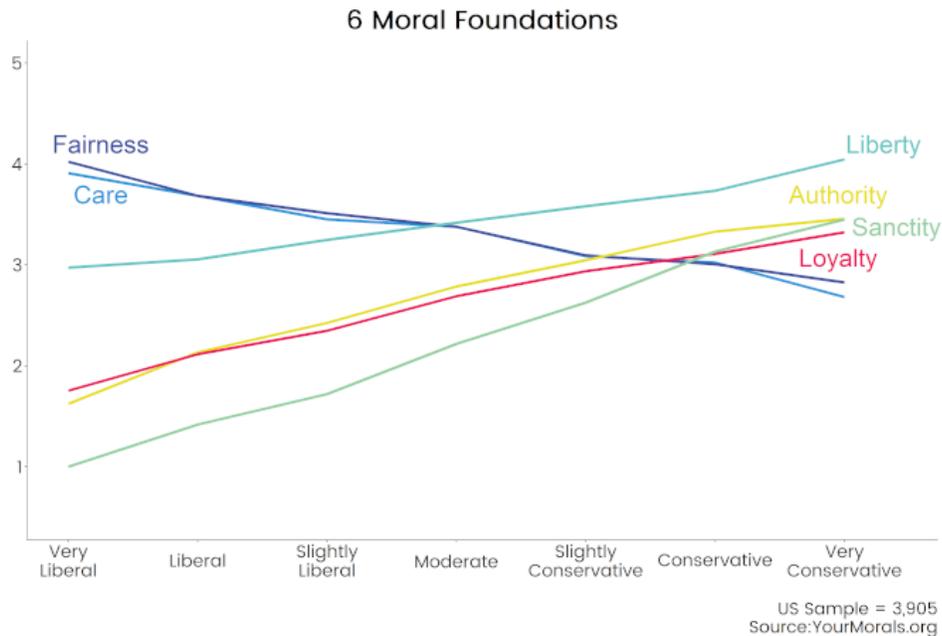
The moral foundations reveal a pattern that can help us understand our political divides.



Research shows that people on the political left and right tend to build moral worldviews that rely primarily on different moral foundations. This pattern has been found across hundreds of thousands of people, and it can be seen in political divisions across countries all over the world.

As the graph below illustrates:

- People on the political left tend to rely mostly on the Care, Fairness, and Liberty foundations.
- People on the political right also rely on the Care and Fairness foundations, but to a lesser extent. But they rely a lot on Liberty, as well as Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity.



There are two very important things to keep in mind about these research findings.

First, just because these patterns exist doesn't mean we can jump to conclusions about another person's moral worldview, simply because we have some idea of their political orientation.

Knowing how progressives and conservatives tend to apply the moral foundations can clue us into why someone might have a specific view when you disagree. But these patterns can't pinpoint the exact viewpoint of specific individuals.

These findings don't mean that any of the moral foundations are exclusive to certain groups of people based on their political identity.

Rather, we all draw upon all six moral foundations, regardless of our political orientation. We just tend to apply the foundations in different ways and to different degrees depending on the issue at hand. But everyone makes use of all of the six foundations at some point or another.

This means that if we take the time to truly listen to what the other person is saying, we can recognize the values and foundations underneath their positions. This can help us understand where they're coming from — even if we still disagree with them.

To learn more, visit [OpenMindPlatform.org](https://www.openmindplatform.org).