What is the relationship between morals and politics?

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Abstract

What's the relationship between morals and politics? According to Moral Foundations Theory (MFT), people rely on multiple evolved intuitive "foundations" when making moral decisions, including: Care, Fairness, Loyalty, Authority, and Purity. A substantial body of previous research has found that, when making moral decisions, political liberals place more emphasis on Care and Fairness, whereas political conservatives place more emphasis on Loyalty, Authority, and Purity. However: the way that this research has conceptualised moral and politics has been criticised; there have been some anomalous and contradictory empirical findings; and it remains unclear whether the relationship between morals and politics is causal as opposed to merely correlational. Here I review the literature and make suggestions for future research.

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Introduction

What is morality? What is politics? And how are the two related? Recent research suggests that morality is a collection of instincts, intuitions, inventions and institutions designed to promote cooperative social relations (Curry, 2016; Greene, 2015:40; Haidt & Kesebir, 2010:800; Rai & Fiske, 2011:59; Sterelny & Fraser, 2016:1; Tomasello & Vaish, 2013:231). There are many types of cooperation, and so this view suggests that there will be many different types of morality. Politics, meanwhile, can be seen as coalitional conflict over which types of cooperation to promote, what cooperative schemes and collective goods governments should pursue, and how the benefits generated by this cooperation should be distributed (Petersen, Sznycer, Sell, Cosmides, & Tooby, 2013). These conflicts are typically won by the larger, more powerful coalition (Pietraszewski, Curry, Petersen, Cosmides, & Tooby, 2015; Riker, 1962).

Together, these theories predict that there should be a relationship between a person's morals and politics, because both reflect underlying preferences for cooperation. Individuals who benefit from a particular type of cooperation will endorse the corresponding moral values, and support policies that promote that form of cooperation (Weeden & Kurzban, 2015). For example, someone who benefits from a supportive kin network is likely to endorse morals relating to family values, and to support political parties that promote family-friendly policies. To the extent that individuals benefit from different types of cooperative social arrangements, they will be likely to hold different moral and political views. And individuals with different portfolios of cooperative preferences may form different political parties to pursue their common interests. As we shall see, recent empirical research has indeed found evidence of such a relationship between morals and politics.

Moral Foundations

To date, most empirical research investigating the link between morals and politics has been conducted within the framework provided by Moral Foundations Theory (MFT; Haidt & Joseph, 2004).

MFT argues that "Moral systems are interlocking sets of values, virtues, norms, practices, identities, institutions, technologies, and evolved psychological mechanisms that work together to suppress or regulate selfishness and make cooperative social life possible"

(Haidt & Kesebir, 2010). What's more, MFT argues that, because humans face multiple social problems, they have multiple moral values. They rely on multiple 'foundations' when making moral decisions. These foundations include: Care, Fairness, Loyalty, Authority, and Purity. Care is concerned with "the suffering of others, including virtues of caring and compassion". Fairness is concerned with "unfair treatment, cheating, and more abstract notions of justice and rights". Loyalty is concerned with the "obligations of group membership, such as loyalty, self-sacrifice, and vigilance against betrayal". Authority is concerned with "social order and the obligations of hierarchical relationships, such as obedience, respect, and the fulfillment of role-based duties". And Purity is concerned with "physical and spiritual contagion, including virtues of chastity, wholesomeness, and control of desires" (Haidt & Kesebir, 2010). These Moral Foundations have been operationalised, and measured, by the Moral Foundations Questionnaire (MFQ; Graham et al., 2011).

Liberals and Conservatives

Early work using the MFQ found that liberals tend to place greater emphasis on the moral foundations of Care and Fairness, whereas conservatives place greater emphasis on the moral foundations of Loyalty, Authority and Purity (see Figure 1, from: Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009). (See also: Graham, Nosek, & Haidt, 2012; Koleva, Graham, Iyer, Ditto, & Haidt, 2012). Indeed, one of the original motivations behind the development of MFT was to demonstrate that American liberals did not have a monopoly on morality, that there was more to morality than care and fairness, and that some of the concerns of conservatives could properly be described as moral too.

Subsequent research has provided considerable evidence for this pattern. A large on-line sample using the MFQ found the same pattern of liberal-conservative differences around the world (Graham et al., 2011). The pattern has also been partially or fully replicated by independent research teams in France (Metayer & Pahlavan, 2014), Sweden (Nilsson & Erlandsson, 2015), Italy (Milesi, 2017), Turkey (Yalcindag et al., 2019; Yilmaz & Saribay, 2019; Yilmaz, Saribay, Bahcekapili, & Harma, 2016), Finland (Kivikangas, Lonnqvist, & Ravaja, 2017), Russia (Sychev, Belousov, & Protasova, 2019) and Taiwan (Hsu, Huang, & Hwang, 2019).

Research has also found that endorsement of the liberal and conservative foundations correlate with: responses to questions about hot button culture-war issues such as abortion, teaching creationism same-sex marriage, gun control, terrorism, flag burning, immigration, stem cell research (Koleva et al., 2012) and especially traditional sexual morality (Malka et al., 2016); support for 'cooperative' and 'militant' internationalist foreign policy views (Kertzer, Powers, Rathbun, & Iyer, 2014); and willingness to participate in civic organisations promoting left-wing (gender equity and water rights) and right-wing (religious and business) causes (Milesi & Alberici, 2018). Endorsement of liberal

Figure 1: The relationship between political identity and five moral foundations

foundations (especially Fairness) and conservative foundations (especially Purity) also correlated with support for Barack Obama and Mitt Romney respectively in the 2012 US Presidential election (Franks & Scherr, 2015). And a combined measure of the conservative foundations of Authority and Purity correlated with support for Donald Trump in the 2016 election (Weinschenk & Dawes, 2019).

Aside from survey research, thematic analysis of open-ended justifications offered for party affiliation showed that Democrats referred more to liberal moral foundations, and Republicans referred more to conservative moral foundations (Rempala, Okdie, & Garvey, 2016). Similarly, analysis of open-ended discussion of vote preferences from the 2012 American National Election Study found that: “Liberals are more likely to mention considerations related to care and fairness, whereas conservatives are more likely to emphasize the moral foundation of loyalty” (Kraft, 2018). A similar pattern, with some exceptions, has been observed in analyses of tweets from the US public and politicians (except for harm, loyalty, and purity; Sterling & Jost, 2018); and political extremists (except for loyalty; Alizadeh, Weber, Cioffi-Revilla, Fortunato, & Macy, 2019). (But see: Neiman, Gonzalez, Wilkinson, Smith, & Hibbing, 2016).

Finally, experiments have found that framing political policies with liberal or conservative moral foundations entrenched support among their respective bases (Day, Fiske, Downing, & Trail, 2014; see also: Miles, 2016). And framing liberal economic policies with conservative moral values (“like patriotism, family, and respect for tradition—as opposed to more liberal value concerns like equality and social justice”) increased support among

conservatives (and moderates) without decreasing support from liberals (Voelkel & Willer, 2019).

These findings chime with previous research that has identified a fundamental distinction between “contractual” and “communal” values (Schwartz, 1992), or with David Goodhart’s distinction between the ‘anywheres’ and the ‘somewheres’ (Goodhart, 2017). (See also: Inglehart & Baker, 2000). And they are consistent with the notion that underlying differences in social preferences are expressed in moral and political ways. Specifically, liberals appear more individualist and impartial, benefitting more from (and hence placing a greater value on) novel relationships, whereas conservatives appear more community-minded and partial, benefitting more from (and hence placing a greater value on) established familial, communal and hierarchical relationships. Or to put it another way: liberals seek new relationships, conservatives defend the ones they already have.

The loyal opposition

However, this body of work has its limits, and has been criticised.

First, it has been argued that MFT omits some important moral values (such as special obligations to kin, heroism, and property rights), and conflates others (such as reciprocity and fairness) (Curry, 2019; Curry, Jones Chesters, & Van Lissa, 2019). And some research has questioned whether Purity constitutes a distinct moral domain (Gray, Schein, & Ward, 2014).

Second, MFT’s five-factor model of morality has not been well supported by studies using the MFQ (Curry, 2019; Curry et al., 2019). Despite promising five moral foundations, the MFQ typically delivers only two – a combined Care-Fairness foundation, and a combined Loyalty-Authority-Purity foundation – and it is these two dimensions that are usually used in research on moral and political psychology. And so, rather than revealing how political ideology varies on five dimensions, this research shows how it varies on two – the two that were originally designed to capture liberal and conservative concerns.

Third, it has been argued that the operationalisation and measurement of the moral foundations has introduced confounds, such that some results may be exaggerated or an artefact of the questionnaire wording. For example, conservatives may endorse respect for authority not because of any general tendency to be more authoritarian, but because participants in surveys tend to implicitly assume that the authorities referred to are conservative (and would give a different answer if asked about liberal authorities). This effect can also be caused by the explicit content of the items. Questions about the relevance and import of ‘loyalty to one’s country’ are likely to elicit different responses from questions about ‘loyalty to one’s labor union’ (Voelkel & Brandt, 2019). (See also: S

Clifford, 2017). And, sure enough, in studies where these artefacts are removed, the differences between liberals' and conservatives' moral values decrease (but do not disappear; Scott Clifford, Iyengar, Cabeza, & Sinnott-Armstrong, 2015; Voelkel & Brandt, 2019). Similarly, Purity items that refer to 'acting in a way that God would approve of' elicit different responses in liberal and conservative religious congregations; the relationship between conservatism and Authority and Purity was weaker in liberal religious black students (Davis et al., 2016).

Fourth, there is evidence of liberals and conservatives relying on the same foundations in some instances. For example, liberals cite fairness and rights in support of same-sex, whereas conservatives cite purity to defend traditional marriage. And conservatives cite fairness and rights in support of economic development (the Keystone XL oil pipeline), whereas liberals cite purity to defend the environment (Frimer, Tell, & Motyl, 2017). Liberals and conservatives also seem to rely on the same moral foundations (care, fairness, and purity, but not authority or loyalty) when evaluating influential people as moral exemplars (Frimer, Biesanz, Walker, & MacKinlay, 2013). And a recent large meta-analysis of liberal and conservative texts has not replicated previous findings: compared to liberals, conservatives used slightly more authority and purity words, but fewer loyalty words, and the same number of care and fairness words (Frimer, 2020)

Fifth, it has been argued that political ideology does not vary along a single dimension (such as liberal-conservative, or left-right), and that the use of more complicated measures, that capture for example, the distinct dimensions of social and economic conservatism (Everett, 2013), can and do yield more complicated patterns of results (Haidt, Graham, & Joseph, 2009; Weber & Federico, 2013). (For an attempt to insert libertarianism into moral foundations, see: Iyer, Koleva, Graham, Ditto, & Haidt, 2012).

Finally, it is unclear whether the relationship between morals and politics is causal, as opposed to correlational, or whether both are caused by a third variable. For example, cross-lagged correlations of survey data suggest that Morality at Time 1 does not predict Politics measured at Time 2 (but Politics measured at Time 1 does predict Morals at Time 2) (Hatemi, Crabtree, & Smith, 2019). The authors of this study conclude provocatively: "Moral Foundations do not cause or meaningfully predict political ideology. Political orientations are more stable across time than Moral Foundations, and Moral Foundations are more likely a product of political orientations rather than the reverse" (Hatemi et al., 2019). On this view, instead of prior moral values determining the political groups you join, the groups you join determine the moral values you hold.

Conclusion

There does seem to be a relationship between morality and politics; and this relationship is consistent with the view that morals and politics reflect underlying preferences for patterns of cooperative social relationships. However, the precise nature of the relationship remains unclear, and it remains to be seen whether more sophisticated theories and measures, and more explicit tests of variables that might explain them both, can yield a more penetrating analysis, and a more unified theory, of morality and politics.

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