Moral rigidity as a proximate facilitator of group cohesion and combativeness

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Abstract: De Dreu and Gross's description of the proximate mechanisms conditioning success in intergroup conflict omits humans' deontological morality. Drawing on research on sacralization and moral objectivism, I show how "moral rigidity" may have evolved through partner selection mechanisms to foster coalitions' cohesion and combativeness in intergroup conflict.

De Dreu and Gross's argument that attack and defense are distinct strategies underpinned by different neuropsychological circuitries is an original refinement of the theory of conflict. However, their description of the proximate mechanisms facilitating success in intergroup competition (sect. 4, target article) omits humans' deontological moral intuitions. In interaction with overconfidence biases, hostile attributions, and the enforcement of "cultural rituals and sanctioning systems" (sect. 4, para. 1), what may crucially help groups of individuals cohere and prevail in conflict are high levels of "moral rigidity" in their tribal members, that is, of inflexible loyalty to their interpersonal commitments within the group.

Proximate processes of moral rigidity. *Sacralization* is the valuation of core social obligations (e.g., loyalty to comrades, individual freedom), symbols (the Koran, the flag), or resources (the Holy City, Hindus' cows) far beyond their practical utility. Individuals who sacralize tend to disregard consequences, opportunity costs, and the maximization of aggregate welfare, and to perceive trade-offs with secular values as taboo and morally contaminating (Atran 2010; Baron & Spranca 1997; Graham & Haidt 2012; Tetlock 2003; Tetlock et al. 2000). *Folk moral objectivism* is the intuitive propensity to represent some moral obligations as “facts” of nature, externally imposed on human wills and irreducible to mere subjective preferences (Beebe et al. 2015; Goodwin & Darley 2010, 2012; Stanford 2018).

Sacralization as a motivational process, and folk objectivism as an intuitive ontological commitment (Quine 1948), are low-level cognitive mechanisms. Both tendencies underlie what I propose to call “moral rigidity”, the inclination to treat key interpersonal obligations as non-negotiable and to reify them.

Individuals and subcultures vary as to which moral norms, “foundations”, and resources they sacralize (Graham et al. 2013; Haidt 2012; Atran 2010). Moreover, recent studies on Western samples found variability in the degree to which individuals provide deontological (vs. consequentialist) justifications for their moral judgments (Piazza & Sousa 2013) and objectify moral prescriptions (Goodwin & Darley 2010, 2012). Still, evidence suggests that children are predisposed to moral objectivism (Wainryb et al. 2004), and that most normally developing individuals, regardless of political orientation, have some sacred values (Frimer et al. 2016; Haidt 2012). Taken together, advances support the hypothesis that human minds may be innately prepared for moral rigidity, understood as a set of domain-specific, yet culturally flexible, cognitive adaptations to the demands of social life.

Why would the cognitive adaptations underlying moral rigidity have evolved? And what role do they play in intergroup conflict? I defend the hypothesis that humans evolved tendencies to sacralize and reify moral obligations so as to behave and be seen as devoted partners, and avoid threats on their coalition's cooperative and competitive potential. These tendencies, which proximately manifest as moral rigidity, would have helped maintain costly investment in risky coalitionary ventures, from collaborative hunting to violent intergroup conflict.

From interdependence to a proportionality-based morality. Much of hominin life

has been about achieving social integration in fluid groups by (1) reliably signaling one's willingness to respect others' welfare, while simultaneously (2) protecting oneself from exploitation. Evolutionary theorists (Alexander 1987; Baumard et al. 2013; Frank 1988; Trivers 1971) have argued that selection pressures resulting from competitive altruism (Barclay & Willer 2007), and increasingly refined abilities to sanction insufficient dedication in potential partners (e.g., gossip and shunning), have selected for moral preferences calibrated for securing conditional cooperation (in hunting, gathering, shared parenting, combat, etc.), by sharing its costs and benefits equally among stakeholders. As a result, humans evolved intuitions that individuals with whom they interact are persons with inalienable rights, and that one's commitment to their interests should be proportionate to the amount of benefits one can expect to secure (or losses one can hope to avoid) through them (Aktipis et al. 2018; Baumard et al. 2013).

Moral rigidity as an error management “bias”. The logic of partner choice mutualism implies that to any type of joint venture corresponds a minimal level of cooperative engagement that each team member would obligatorily demand of his partners. As long as (i) groups cohabitated peacefully or natural resources abounded, for instance, one can expect within-group interdependence to have been moderate. Social selection pressures would have mainly been on individuals' ability to demonstrate unconditional respect for their in-groups' physical integrity and property, and the community's resources, in order to avoid being left out of everyday ventures like hunting and gathering. However, (ii) ancestral hominins also faced recurrent intergroup competition and warfare (LeBlanc & Register 2003; Tooby & Cosmides 2010). In such circumstances, lethal threats coming from outside the group and the possibility of losing reproductive resources (such as territory or women) to rival coalitions would have driven costs of insufficient commitment to skyrocket, thereby dramatically elevating the level of prosocial engagement demanded of each group member.

Insufficient dedication to one's partners' interests, whether in situations (i) or (ii), would on average have led to reproductive impasses. In terms of error management theory (Haselton et al. 2015), evolution should therefore have selected for moral heuristics that are “biased” in favor of the most adaptive strategy: (1) making absolutely sure the individual will display the minimal level of prosocial commitment demanded by the contextual level of interdependence, while (2) showing automatic aversion to acts that could endanger the coalition's cooperative potential and combativeness in intergroup conflict. In this respect,

intuitively sacralizing and objectifying core interpersonal obligations may constitute the most cost-effective computational way of completely isolating them from the temptation to trade them off with immediate self-interest (Marie & Fitouchi in preparation).

In line with this hypothesis, experiments find that potential partners expressing deontological moral judgments in everyday settings – a proxy of underlying moral rigidity – are judged more trustworthy and are more likely to be chosen (Everett et al. 2016). Furthermore, the anthropology and psychology of contemporary parochial altruism in military, insurgent, and terrorist behavior suggest that moral rigidity may have been shaped by ancestral warfare to bolster defense of in-groups, territory, and communal resources. The values and goals for which contemporary attackers and defenders fight (e.g., the Reich, the Caliphate) often undergo ritualistic processes of sacralization and objectification (Atran 2010, 2016), up to a point where activists end up representing them as absolute coordinates of reality, and become blinded to exit strategies. By turning fighters into “devoted actors”, activation of high levels of moral rigidity – often complemented by “identity fusion” (Whitehouse 2019) – predicts individuals’ willingness to engage in costly sacrifice, including death, for their comrades and cause, and *ceteris paribus* significantly increases fighters chances’ to prevail in combat (Atran 2016; Gomez et al. 2017).

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