What if nothing is sacred? Politics and bioethics without sanctity

by

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(first published *Australian Humanist* #119 (Spring 2015))

Introduction

I will examine some implications for bioethical debate – and more broadly, for political and cultural controversy – if we take to heart the work of American psychologist Jonathan Haidt and his collaborators.

In recent years, Haidt has achieved prominence as a social psychologist specializing in the study of morality and the emotions related to it, and especially in what he regards as the foundational values underlying various moral and political viewpoints. In his 2012 book, *The Righteous Mind*, he synthesizes much of his thinking in an accessible volume that focuses on the respective values underlying liberalism, conservatism, and libertarianism – as those terms are understood in US politics. Early in the book, he clarifies what he means by the slippery word *liberal*:

> In the United States, the word *liberal* refers to progressive or left-wing politics, and I will use the word in this sense. But in Europe and elsewhere, the word *liberal* is truer to its original meaning – valuing liberty above all else, including in economic activities. (*Righteous Mind*, p. xvi)

At this stage, allow me register a note of discomfort with this use of the word: individuals who embrace progressive or left-wing politics can sometimes be as authoritarian (and in that sense illiberal) as anyone else. Not all of them are strong proponents of traditional liberal ideas such as freedom of speech. Similar problems can arise with such terms as *conservative* and *libertarian*. Accordingly, I will handle these much-contested words with care. I take it, however, that Haidt's usage is familiar enough, and what follows should make it even clearer.

Haidt's attempts to identify foundational moral values are not without precedent; indeed, he refers to (and has been influenced by) the pre-existing literature in the field of psychological anthropology. His Moral Foundations model is, however, up-to-date, still evolving, highly influential, and (in my view) at least somewhat persuasive. Even if we were inclined to be sceptical about it, the model has obtained enough prominence and prestige for us to consider its implications.

Note, importantly, that Haidt does not confine himself to a purely descriptive study of foundational moral values, or of the various societies and cultures (or political tribes within a modern pluralist society) that endorse combinations of them. Beyond that scientific ambition, he regards his claims as having significance for how we should live our lives and treat each other, and for the government policies that we ought to support or oppose.

As he puts it, somewhat in passing: "My goal is to change the way a diverse group of readers – liberal and conservative, secular and religious – think about morality, politics, religion, and each other" (*Righteous Mind*, p. 50).

Haidt's model

Haidt identifies six foundational challenges addressed by human moral systems, each of which is labeled in terms of a value and a disvalue. The first five are: "caring for vulnerable children, forming partnerships with non-kin to reap the benefits of reciprocity, forming coalitions to compete with other coalitions, negotiating status hierarchies, and keeping oneself and one's kin free of parasites and pathogens, which spread quickly when people live in close proximity to each other" (*Righteous Mind*, p. 125). Later he adds a sixth, which relates to rebellion against domination (pp. 169-70). This gives us the following:

1. Care/harm.
2. Fairness/cheating.
3. Loyalty/betrayal.
4. Authority/subversion.
5. Sanctity/degradation.
6. Liberty/oppression.

Haidt suggests that liberals (in the relevant sense) rely mostly on the foundations of Care/harm and Liberty/oppression, and to a lesser extent on Fairness/cheating. Conservatives place more emphasis on Fairness/cheating, but they understand fairness in terms of proportionality, and they are more willing than liberals to see some people get hurt to achieve moral objectives. They also understand liberty as the right to be left alone, rather than emphasizing the rights of vulnerable or subordinated groups. Whereas liberals are ambivalent about the other three foundations, conservatives endorse them. Libertarians, by contrast, have little use for them.

Haidt defines sanctity as "the ability to endow ideas, objects, and events with infinite value, particularly those ideas, objects, and events that bind a group together into a single entity" (*Righteous Mind*, p. 166). Although he identifies this with his Sanctity foundation, he later suggests that there are values held by liberals, conservatives, and libertarians, respectively, that are associated in some cases with other foundations, and which they treat as sacred. Thus, the most sacred value for liberals is "Care for victims of oppression" (*Righteous Mind*, p. 297). For conservatives, it is "Preserve the institutions and traditions that sustain a moral community" (p. 306). The most sacred value for libertarians is "Individual liberty" (p. 302).

The model applied to bioethical issues

When it comes to bioethical issues – particularly issues relating to decisions at the beginning and end of life – it can seem difficult to understand what some of the arguments are about unless at least some participants are relying on concepts of sanctity, degradation, violation of a sacred natural order, and the like. Thus, Haidt comments (with some plausibility, I think): "If you dismiss the Sanctity foundation entirely, then it's hard to understand the fuss over most of today's biomedical controversies." He continues:

> The only ethical question about abortion becomes: At what point can a fetus feel pain? Doctor-assisted suicide becomes an obviously good thing: People

> who are suffering should be allowed to end their lives, and should be given medical help to do it painlessly. Same for stem cell research: Why not take tissue from all those embryos living in suspended animation in fertility clinics? They can't feel pain, but their tissues could help researchers develop cures that could spare sentient people from pain. (*Righteous Mind*, p. 152)

It appears to me that much of the heat in bioethical controversies comes from already-moralized conceptions of what would be harmful. From involvement in bioethical debates over the past 15 years or so, I've learned that conservative bioethicists are often worried about what they understand as spiritual or metaphysical harms: risks to the human spirit, or the natural order, or something else that they hold sacred or find deeply valuable and meaningful. Such risks may be explained, or rationalized, in various ways: whether they are understood in terms of an infinite value on biologically human life; the belief that divine souls are implanted in our bodies, and that these must not be defiled or their creator dishonoured (see *Righteous Mind*, pp. 98–100); or the idea of an inviolable natural order of things (perhaps established by God).

An obvious difficulty for this way of thinking is that we cannot easily justify belief in divine souls, an inviolable order of nature, or the infinite value of biologically human life. Furthermore, even if some apparently reasonable people do believe in (for example) divine souls implanted at the moment of conception, this is a highly controversial spiritual belief. Such beliefs provide a poor basis for public policy, or for a commonly shared morality among citizens who come from many spiritual, cultural, and philosophical traditions (see generally my own 2012 book, *Freedom of Religion and the Secular State*).

Haidt himself does not claim that anything really possesses the kind of extreme value that he associates with sanctity. On the contrary, he writes of the power of attributed sanctity "to invest objects with irrational and extreme values – both positive and negative – which are important for binding groups together" (*Righteous Mind*, p. 154). Note, here, his emphasis on the social importance of attributed sanctity, but also his choice of the word *irrational*. In any event, I believe he may be onto something, but that "something" is the power of our moral imaginations to project a kind of overlay, investing objects, ideas, and events (and symbols, beliefs, actions, political causes, etc.) with an extreme value or disvalue that they do not inherently possess.

This disconnect between the cold reality and the overlay of extreme value might not matter so much, for practical purposes, in a culturally closed society where values are widely shared and alternatives may be almost unthinkable. That, however, is the opposite of our situation. As Joshua Greene emphasizes throughout his recent book, *Moral Tribes* (2013), modern Western societies blend different groups with complex, diverse, yet intertwined, histories and traditions. Day-by-day, different cultural and political tribes confront each other within the same society, relying upon rival moral systems that they view as authoritative, brandishing rival symbols, and often struggling for political supremacy.

What one tribe holds in reverence may be seen in a different way by another: as degraded, demonic, or malign, or as a kind of pollution or blasphemy. If rival tribes insist on the imposition of their respective sacred values through public policy and the law, this is a recipe for escalating social conflict.

Philip Kitcher and bioethical controversies

One entry point to the discussion about sanctity in the context of bioethics is via Philip Kitcher's discussion, in his 2011 book *The Ethical Project*, of several issues relating to genetic technology. Kitcher advocates a moral theory that he terms "pragmatic naturalism": the general idea is that our remote ancestors invented morality to meet the needs of social living. Morality is, in effect, a kind of social technology to address the difficulties experienced within human groups (Kitcher, *The Ethical Project*, p. 3). I more or less agree with this, but where does it take us? I doubt that a theoretical position such as pragmatic naturalism can provide the foundation for a single "thick", or detailed morality that can guide each of our lives. More likely, it permits the citizens of our contemporary liberal democracies to have a very wide range of personal desires, values, plans, priorities, projects, and so on, and to strike balances in numerous ways.

I freely concede to Kitcher that pragmatic naturalism cannot count just *any* set of arbitrary standards of conduct as a viable moral system that produces social benefits (thus, it does not imply an extreme moral relativism). On the other hand, it may leave open many attitudes and practices related to bioethical issues, including more futuristic issues such as whether or not we should accept reproductive cloning and genetic enhancement.

Kitcher's discussion of advanced reproductive technology eventually leads him to suggest that we explore ideas of the "worth", or "sacredness", of early human life. Perhaps, he suggests, we need to use this sort of language in order to discourage eugenic thinking and callous attitudes to disabled children (*Ethical Project*, 406-408). This might involve not using purely biological terminology when we talk about early embryos, but employing language that assigns them some kind moral worth or inherent value.

I suppose it is *possible* that speaking in this way about early embryos would produce pragmatic social benefits. But it appears more obvious, at least to me, that it would tend to undermine our commitment to intellectual honesty. Furthermore, it might well produce harms to individuals. People who experience the use of such sacred language as dishonest – and as contrary to their self-conceptions and values – could find themselves punished if their preferred (more accurate) way of speaking came to be regarded as morally wrong. Furthermore, a social practice of insisting on emotionally and metaphysically charged language when speaking about early embryos could harm individuals and couples if it tended to hinder their ability to act on their own values without directly hurting anyone.

I am unlikely to agree to any policy that involves pretending that some things possess an extreme, "deep" value (perhaps given a supernatural, spiritual, or metaphysical rationalization) when they do not. Well-informed bioethical debates can go on with no such pretense. We can discuss, for example, whether a particular regulatory regime will adequately reduce the risks to individuals if we permit physician-assisted suicide. Here, we consider and weigh important but finite values, trying to reduce risks while giving genuine choices to people in terrible situations.

Again, we can do our best to assess the risks that some very powerful genetic and other technologies – such as genetic modification for therapy or enhancement – will eventually become available in an unequal world, leading to greater and more entrenched inequalities. We can try to weigh these important, but finite, risks against likely benefits, and against the direct and indirect harms that might be caused by various restrictive regulatory schemes. It is doubtful, however, whether any of this

should lead us to an emotionally charged, moralistic rejection of new procedures and technologies, or whether it could support any sweeping legal prohibitions.

Haidt revisited

Up to a point, and particularly when it comes to policy decisions, Haidt might agree with me. He suggests that there is no alternative to utilitarianism as our morality for public policy in Western democracies, though he want us to take into account what he characterizes as "Durkheimian" considerations – considerations to do with "social order and embeddedness" – in working out the overall good (*Righteous Mind*, p. 272). This opens up a whole new set of issues, however, so let it suffice to state that I don't propose utilitarianism as a public morality, merely that public policy deliberations adhere to well-understood liberal principles.

Here, I don't mean *liberal* in the sense of left-wing or "progressive". To gesture at what I mean: liberals traditionally value secular government, individual liberty, freedom of speech, and the rule of law; oppose authoritarianism and arbitrary government power; and at least tolerate (sometimes even welcome) experiments in living and diverse conceptions of the good.

In any event, Haidt may be correct to see a rise in the US – and perhaps more broadly in Western democracies – of what he describes as a Manichaeism in politics: a situation where political disputants treat their disagreements as a struggle between absolute good and evil. Ideological purity is demanded, compromise is viewed as a sin, and the result is a poisoned political environment (*Righteous Mind*, pp. 309–12). Indeed, I see evidence for this thesis every day, and although I can't prove this in a relatively brief paper I do invite you to see for yourself whether you don't also notice this kind of Manichaeism.

Haidt concludes *The Righteous Mind*, by restating one of its themes, that morality both binds and blinds: "It binds us into ideological teams that fight each other as though the fate of the world depended on our side winning each battle. It blinds us to the fact that each team is composed of good people who have something important to say" (*Righteous Mind*, 313).

Again, this seems generally plausible to me, but we should question what implications it has for how we are to live and speak, and for public policy. *The Righteous Mind* is aimed largely at Haidt's own original political tribe, i.e. American-style liberals. Haidt offers a useful argument that liberals (in this sense) ought to abandon their mindset that conservatives are motivated by bad childhoods, ugly personality traits, and so on. Instead, we (for I also come, more or less, from this tribe) can "start by assuming that conservatives are just as sincere as liberals, and then use Moral Foundation Theory to understand the moral matrices of both sides" (*Righteous Mind*, p. 164).

If this seems correct, we might each take stock as to whether we are unfairly demonizing people with whom we have political and cultural disagreements. It is all too easy to view opponents as merely greedy, corrupt, and callous, or perhaps as degenerate, decadent, and culpably proud, or as some other combination of despised traits – or even as sheer evildoers and civilizational enemies. Sometimes, I must concede, the worst ideologues and fanatics really are our civilizational enemies or worth regarding as evil. But that is not our usual situation when we engage others in controversy.

Very often, individuals who strike us as seriously wrong on particular issues may nonetheless be decent and thoughtful people in most ways, and the tendency to

demonize them quickly – attributing atrocious flaws of character to them, rather than sincere disagreement with our views – can be ugly and destructive.

It does not follow, however, that we should always see them as having "something important to say" about public policy – and more generally about current controversies. In some cases, we may need to resist strongly if opponents seek to impose their own sacred values on the rest of us.

Conclusion

Often it is assumed that restrictions on legitimate public policy considerations operate unfairly against conservative thinkers, and especially against religious conservatives. Up to a point, that is understandable: it is most likely to be religious conservatives who will attempt to bring concepts of spiritual or metaphysical harm, and perhaps of a literal and supernatural sanctity, into public policy – and all of the reasons for secular government stand against their being allowed to succeed (again see *Freedom of Religion and the Secular State*).

But it is worth acknowledging that left-wing thinkers can also elevate their favourite objects, ideas, symbols, beliefs, causes, and so on, into something of extreme value – if not viewed as literally sacred, nonetheless considered beyond criticism, questioning, satire, or levity – while treating other objects, ideas, etc., as equivalent to blasphemy or pollution, something to be met with loathing and disgust.

We can see this in contemporary debates over genetic technologies, where, as it appears to me, a mental association that they make with past eugenics movements drives some well-intentioned people on the Left to extremes of hostility. You may be able to think of other examples.

Haidt's work raises issues that go well beyond those to do with bioethics, and examining them any further would need to await another occasion. Still, I leave you with the thought that we can *all* lapse into taking extreme, dogmatic, even authoritarian, attitudes to opponents and their ideas. We can display closure to evidence, engage in uncharitable and hyperbolic attacks on others, and excuse behaviour from our allies that would move us to outrage if it came from opponents.

Self-interrogation about these things is a worthwhile discipline, I suggest. It may be a counter to the worst tendencies in contemporary debate over politics and culture.