

Commentary

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Commentary on Narvaez

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Moral Psychology Must Not Be Based on Faith and Hope

Commentary on Narvaez (2010)

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Abstract

Narvaez (2010, this issue) calls for a moral psychology in which reasoning and intuitions are equal partners. But empirical research on the power of implicit processes and on the weakness of everyday reasoning indicate that the partnership is far from an equal one. The ancient rationalist faith that good reasoning can be taught and that it will lead to improved behavior is no longer justified. The social intuitionist model (Haidt, 2001) is a more realistic portrayal of the ways that moral intuition and reasoning work together.

Keywords

It's hard to think of an academic dispute in which somebody didn't try to split the difference, bridge the gap, or call for balance. That's a laudable goal and an effective heuristic. When two well-intentioned, well-informed people or groups disagree, the odds are that each side really is right on some points and wrong on others.

In the debate between rationalism and intuitionism, Darcia Narvaez is well placed to be a bridge builder. Her excellent work on the development of expertise shows the importance of both processes, and her recent efforts to integrate neuroscience and evolution with more traditional rationalist moral psychology show that she is aiming for a comprehensive theory, not for a victory for her side (Narvaez, 2010, this issue). But is the bridge she proposes as sturdy as the one that's already in place?

### **WHAT EXACTLY ARE THE TWO SIDES?**

There are two ways to frame this debate, and the choice of frame is crucial for its resolution. One way is to pit two psychological processes against each other—reasoning versus intuition—and to ask whether one process can explain away or eliminate the need for the other. Narvaez shows that one can't construct a credible theory to account for the phenomena she studies out of just one process. You need both, and so you need a theory of how they work together as partners. I quite agree, and I proposed the social intuitionist model to do just that. Four of the six links in the model are kinds of reasoning. The model says that moral reasoning is ubiquitous, but it is best studied not as a private search for truth but as an aspect of our sociality. Thinking is for doing, and moral reasoning is a part of our constant efforts to manage our alliances and reputations. I ended my 2001 review with a section titled "Integrating Rationalism and Intuitionism," in which I wrote:

The debate between rationalism and intuitionism is an old one, but the divide between the two approaches may not be unbridgeable. Both sides agree that people have emotions and intuitions, people engage in reasoning, and people are influenced by each other. The challenge, then, is to specify how these processes fit together (Haidt, 2001, p. 828).

I stand by those words, and Narvaez stands with me. That brings us to the second way of framing the debate: as a contest between models of the partnership between reasoning and intuition. The three models stemming from this are as follows:

1. Reasoning as senior partner. Intuition and emotion are acknowledged, but most of the action is in moral reasoning, which can “channel” moral emotions, and which can and ought to drive moral behavior. This was Kohlberg’s view.

2. Equal partnership. Both processes are (roughly) equally important in our daily lives, and both can work independently to reach different conclusions. This is Narvaez’s view. She described her own efforts to wrestle with choices about moral action in these words: “Instead of intuition’s dominating the process, intuition danced with conscious reasoning, taking turns doing the leading” (Narvaez, 2008, p. 235).

3. Intuition as senior partner. Reasoning is acknowledged, but most of the action is in moral intuition, which can “motivate” moral reasoning, and which often drives moral behavior. This is my position, which was shaped strongly by the work of David Hume, Robert Zajonc, Antonio Damasio, John Bargh, and Richard Shweder.

Stated in this way, it is clear that no more bridges are needed. Rather, the task for moral psychology now is to evaluate the three bridges we already have. Which one handles the empirical traffic best?

## **REASONING IS FOR JUSTIFYING**

Narvaez and I both agree that the game-changing shift in psychology since Kohlberg's time has been the realization of the power and ubiquity of rapid, automatic, implicit processes (Bargh & Morsella, 2008). Any model that doesn't reflect these new discoveries, such as the "reasoning as senior partner" model, is now outdated. But our understanding of reasoning has changed a great deal since Kohlberg's time as well. It is no longer clear that reasoning is up to the task of "dancing" with intuition on an equal footing. Research on everyday reasoning and on the ubiquity of biases indicate that the sort of independent, unbiased, look-on-both-sides reasoning that Narvaez describes in her essay is rare and hard to teach.

Deanna Kuhn (1991) asked people to engage in a variety of tasks, such as speculating on the reasons why people drop out of school. She found people to be quite adept at coming up with an initial hypothesis and at conducting a post hoc search for anecdotes and pseudoevidence to support that hypothesis. But they hardly ever looked for potentially disconfirming evidence. David Perkins conducted similar research and found similarly dreadful results (Perkins, Farady, & Bushey, 1991). Most disturbingly, he found that IQ was by far the best predictor of performance but that it only predicted the number of "myside" arguments. Smart people were much better at the post hoc search for supporting reasons, but they didn't show much sign of the balanced and unbiased reasoning that Narvaez says is the partner in her equal-partner model.

To make matters worse, this dismal performance happened under very favorable circumstances, when there were no emotions at work and no motivations or ideologies pushing people toward a prespecified conclusion. If good reasoning can barely get off the ground under ideal conditions in the lab, how does it do so in the hurricane of real life? Just listen to talk radio, follow the rounds of arguments in blog debates, or read the voluminous literature on motivated reasoning (Ditto, Pizarro, & Tannenbaum, 2009). Kunda (1990) and Gilovich (1991) showed that people are pretty darn good at believing what they want to believe, although Kunda thought that

the process was limited by the need to construct a justification that would persuade a dispassionate observer. But Kunda was talking about reasoning in general, whereas moral reasoning is often far more social. Morality is in large part a team sport (Haidt & Kesebir, in press); we must fit into our team and help it along, not impress an impartial observer.

Human beings have long been ultrasocial creatures embedded in webs of accountability (Lerner & Tetlock, 2003) with a constant need to justify our own actions, monitor the actions of others, and persuade third parties to trust and support us. We are all descended from ancestors who excelled at those tasks. We are quite skilled at reasoning in those contexts and for those purposes (Mercier & Sperber, 2009). Reasoning is a great lawyer but a clumsy dance partner.

### **RATIONALISTS HAVE FAITH**

Rationalism—the view that reason is the chief source of valid knowledge—has long been based on faith and hope, not on observations of actual human behavior. It’s the faith of Plato that our god-given souls were perfectly rational before their brief sojourn in the decay-prone material world, and so if the soul’s charioteer (reason) can be taught to control the two wild horses (passions and appetites), then men (but not women) can live and rule wisely—that is, dispassionately. Kant asserted that there is a noumenal world containing a priori moral truths and that real human beings could and should use their reasoning powers to ascertain those truths and then live by them. The otherworldliness of rationalism entered the 20th century in John Rawls’ claim that if people were placed behind a “veil of ignorance,” they would design a social order consistent with liberal principles of justice. Rationalism has always been more of a normative model than a descriptive one.

Narvaez posits no alternate worlds, but she does describe an idealized form of moral reasoning that is rarely spotted in this world. It is a kind of “critical thinking” including “actively

seeking alternate viewpoints after formulating one's first intuition," and a "committed habit to use [these thinking skills] to guide behavior" (p. xx). Nobody has yet found a way to teach people such skills, particularly if the criterion for success is measured outside the context in which the teaching took place (Willingham, 2007). Efforts to reduce biases, such as the confirmation bias, have been similarly disappointing (Lilienfeld, Ammirati, & Landfield, 2009).

I welcome Narvaez' distinction between naive and educated intuition, and I grant her opening point that our intuitive psychology attracts us to "truthiness" when it conflicts with truth. But how should moral psychology respond to this shortcoming? Narvaez proposes that we embrace the "equal partner" model as a normative ideal and then design interventions to help people attain that ideal. But I'd like to close by offering three reasons why the "intuition-as-senior-partner" model is ultimately the one offering greater hope:

1. Social intuitionism can account for moral maturity and moral complexity. Narvaez is correct that the social intuitionist model began with the study of gut feelings, which led to a focus on in-the-moment moral judgment. But now that the model has been supplemented by an account of the five "foundations" of moral judgment (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009), along with an account of virtue ethics as cultivated intuition connected to a web of cultural meanings (Haidt & Joseph, 2007), the model has been integrated with Dan McAdams' multilevel model of personality (Haidt, Graham, & Joseph, 2009) and his narrative approach to moral meaning (McAdams et al., 2008). If you build on solid empirical ground, you can build as high as you want.

2. Social intuitionism points to easy and effective interventions. Because behavior is largely run by automatic processes, it is easier to make people more honest and altruistic by changing their social context, activating accountability concerns, or triggering other unconscious

processes (e.g., Ariely, 2008; Norenzayan & Shariff, 2008) than by teaching them to think well on their own.

3. Social intuitionism is part of the “new synthesis.” The proof of a scientific theory is not its accordance with our normative ideals but its ability to integrate new findings. In 1975, E.O. Wilson predicted that the study of ethics would soon undergo a new synthesis, as multiple fields were brought together by their shared appreciation of the emotional basis of moral thinking and by a common interest in the evolutionary origins and brain basis of those emotions. A review of the field, including an analysis of PsycINFO citations (Haidt, 2007, Fig. S1), shows that Wilson’s new synthesis has arrived. It’s where the action is in moral psychology.<sup>1</sup>

Narvaez uses the metaphor of a pendulum that has swung too far. She calls for a return to balance. But sometimes, movement from one theory to another is simple progress.

<sup>1</sup>For a detailed review of the new synthesis, see Haidt & Kesebir (in press), available at [www.JonathanHaidt.com](http://www.JonathanHaidt.com).

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