

**Commentary on Aaron Preston’s,
“Jonathan Haidt and the Disappearance of Moral Knowledge”**

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Like Aaron Preston, I admire Jonathan Haidt’s efforts—on both the scholarly and popular levels—to encourage civil debate and cooperative engagement on divisive moral or political issues. I agree with his critique of the turn from character to quandary ethics (as would Dallas). As a member of Haidt’s Heterodox Academy, I commend his efforts to cultivate viewpoint diversity in higher education. His moral psychology, as presented in *The Righteous Mind* and elsewhere, is an impressive synthesis of empirical research. Haidt’s Moral Foundations Theory is an intriguing account of patterns of moral reasoning across cultures, and across our own liberal-conservative divide.

But like Preston, I believe that Haidt’s evolutionary and cross-cultural moral psychology needs to be supplemented by more robust philosophical resources. In fact, without this additional philosophical grounding, Haidt’s project may unintentionally contribute to the disappearance of moral knowledge. I will come at this conclusion, however, from a different angle than Aaron’s paper. We can take Haidt’s project as a kind of case study of how accounts based on evolutionary psychology or the sociology of knowledge are incapable by themselves of recovering moral knowledge as a publicly available resource.

While interesting from the empirical standpoint, Haidt’s moral psychology is not capable of doing the work that he wants it to do. His account cannot, for example, promote civil discourse. Haidt is probably correct when he argues that one’s political leanings are, in part, a product of one’s personality; and he is certainly right when he argues that one’s personality is, in part, the product of one’s biology. Psychologists can argue about the details of his particular descriptive scheme, but most would affirm these basic premises. So far so good.

Haidt’s next move, however, is not warranted by his account of our moral psychology. He wants to say, as Aaron’s paper summarized it, that “we therefore shouldn’t demonize each other for our political preferences, any more than we would blame someone for their basic personality traits.” But it does not necessarily follow that we should avoid demonizing one another for our political preferences. Haidt suggests that these preferences are strongly influenced, or determined in part, by our innate temperaments—and therefore these preferences are not the product of rational choice. Granting this, it provides no reason for us to *accept* or *respect* our differences when it comes to political preferences or moral outlook. His account might help us

understand, in part, *why* we have different views on contested moral issues; but it provides few resources to *tolerate* others' views or *adjudicate* between our views.

Perhaps Willard would have posed the following question to Haidt: from whence comes your injunction to civility, regard, or respect for our political and moral difference? Indeed, if our cherished ideas—such as political ideals or moral beliefs—are determined in large part by our neurobiology, why should we work to push against them? It could be argued, instead, that this account undermines the basis for rational deliberation or debate. After all, on this view our ideas are the product of unconscious forces as much as they are the product of rational reflection and conscious choice. When ideas are determined by irrational forces (and this is admittedly putting it more strongly than Haidt does) this leaves open only the exercise of power as the method of adjudicating such differences. If our ideas and preferences are basically determined by materialistic forces, why would we avoid using force in order that our ideas and preferences prevail?

Now, this outcome is clearly the opposite of what Haidt wants, and runs contrary to everything he is working toward in the public square. He has done admirable work as a public intellectual precisely to avoid this outcome and encourage rational deliberation and civil debate. But it is not at all clear that his arguments from social or biological psychology actually advance this aim. Instead, as the late Italian philosopher Augusto Del Noce has argued, on a deterministic view of the origin of ideas—whether these be materialist or historicist accounts, in which ideas are merely the foam on the wave of lower biological, instinctual, or social forces—we have no basis for shared rational deliberation. All we have are non-rational forces that may happen to coincide or may happen to conflict. If this is the case, culture (the realm of ideas and ideals) is necessarily subsumed into politics, and politics risks becoming total war.

Haidt wants to say that, instead of squaring off in opposition and conflict, we should try to appreciate that liberals and conservatives have different ways of assessing a range of almost universally recognized goods. That there are universally recognized goods seems to be, in Haidt's account, an empirically grounded claim. But the fact that some goods are recognized widely does not, in and of itself, establish that these are indeed *goods*—only that many people happen to consider them to be goods. But this could merely be an accident of evolutionary biology. Furthermore, as just described, in other contexts Haidt encourages us to work against our biologically driven tendencies. Willard would point out, as he does in Chapter 1 of *Disappearance*, that descriptive accounts of what people take to be goods are not sufficient to qualify as moral knowledge.

In this respect, Haidt's project in *The Righteous Mind* is situated within the “constructed and largely empiricist self” that, in Willard's estimation, “left the human being opaque or elusive, at best, so far as moral knowledge is concerned” (*Disappearance*, 10). Willard explains:

The human being is increasingly taken to be the kind of thing that could *not* be a subject of moral knowledge, because—even if it exists—the ‘soul’ is governed by unconscious forces beyond or other than self-awareness or rational self-direction. The inner dynamic of a non-physical soul or person, weaving its life together by choosing to follow

rationally grounded moral insights, disappeared from possible cognitive view—it was not ‘scientific’—and with it the moral knowledge that had such a person as its subject matter. Moral knowledge naturally disappears when its subject matter disappears (10).

Haidt’s project appears to be an example of the sociology of knowledge, which Willard takes to be hugely influential in the disappearance of moral knowledge. As Willard describes it, the sociology of knowledge “deals with the causal conditions that bring about the general *acceptance* of certain thoughts and beliefs as representations of reality—moral or otherwise” (12). But in the realist sense of moral knowledge that Willard wants to advance, this is insufficient: any such knowledge generated by the social sciences is only knowledge by general consensus and can therefore easily disappear when this consensus changes.

Let’s suppose that there are universal goods—truth, justice, beauty, for example (as an aside, I take it that there are indeed such goods). Haidt’s psychological account of tribalist tendencies among liberals and conservatives does not necessarily move us closer to the acknowledgement of universal goods that all of us should try to advance. We can rightly ask Haidt why he thinks we should work to counteract, or lean against, our natural or innate tendencies toward self-righteous tribalism. We can also ask Haidt why a stable and peaceful common life is better than tribalist warfare. We can question his assumption that understanding promotes tolerance (there are many historical counterexamples). I imagine he will have answers to these questions, but the answers will come *not* from his moral psychology, but from an unacknowledged philosophy.

Aaron’s point that Hume is the wrong lodestar for Haidt is, of course, correct. It is not surprising that Haidt’s project slides into a species of emotivism when he transitions from descriptive moral psychology into prescriptive moral philosophy. In place of Hume, I would direct Haidt’s attention toward the classical platonic tradition—that is, “platonic” broadly understood. I mean here not necessarily Plato’s particular doctrine of the forms or his epistemology of recollection; I refer rather to the general notion that runs through central strands of Western philosophy, which we could roughly describe as the doctrine of participation: all normally functioning human beings participate by a kind of intuition in the *logos* – in a universal reason or ordering principle. This participation allows us both to know the world, which is rationally ordered and intelligible, and to reason and deliberate together in the pursuit of truth and goodness.

Some version of this (the specific details are not important for our purposes) is, it seems to me, the only basis for an ethics of civil discourse and cooperative deliberation between and among human beings. Affirming our participation in the universality of reason is the only way to avoid killing one another over deeply divisive political or moral questions. This doctrine of participation in the *logos* or universal reason runs from Plato and Aristotle in the Ancient period, to the Church fathers (most notably Augustine) in late antiquity, to Aquinas in the Medieval period, and to Pascal and Rosmini in the Modern period, among others.

It seems to me that Willard’s work, although it employs phenomenological methods, is situated within this tradition—even if he himself perhaps would not articulate his metaphysical first principles in precisely these terms. His phenomenological analysis of the good person forms the basis for a universal and rationally intelligible science of moral knowledge. Willard arrives at universal conclusions starting from a careful description of individual moral acts and widely

recognized moral valuations. He endorses the notion that pretty much all of us have a fundamental moral intuition that can perceive good and evil, right and wrong actions, starting from particular cases.

I would be interested to hear more from the group about Willard's understanding of his work in ethics in relation not just to Husserl and the tradition of 20th Century phenomenology, but also in relation to the earlier history of Western philosophy. I imagine that, as a Christian thinker, the idea of participation in the logos is a notion that Willard would have found congenial. At the same time, he apparently did not take this as his starting point. Neither, for that matter, does Haidt's moral psychology.

In closing, I would like to pose a few questions: How can the recovery of moral knowledge help to ground projects in moral psychology like Haidt's? To some extent Haidt, and to a greater extent Willard, have made valuable contributions to the long conversation about the moral life that traces its roots back to Athens and Jerusalem. How can both projects be brought into conversation with—and perhaps supported by—the classical or broadly platonic tradition of Western philosophy and Christian theology?

*The displacement of philosophy by the human sciences (sociology/psychology), as part of a broader tendency toward scientism in the West after World War II.

*In a technological or scientific society, we look to sciences (evolutionary psychology, sociology) for answers to questions that science cannot provide. Haidt's project may be an example of this.

**Willard: *"The idea that knowledge—and of course reality—is limited to the world of the natural sciences is the single most destructive idea on the stage of life today."*

*Haidt's attempt to encourage moral behavior illustrate the lack of intellectual resources available to many contemporary thinkers to achieve these aims. (Nicholas Christakis' recent book attempting to give an account of human society and flourishing based in evolutionary biology would be another example of this.)

*Totalitarian societies defined by a denial of the universality of reason. Bourgeois rationality vs. proletariat rationality; Jew rationality vs. Arian rationality, etc.