

Review

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**Haidt, J. (2014). *Prawy umysł.
Dlaczego dobrych ludzi dzieli religia i polityka?*
[*The Righteous Mind. Why Good People
Are Divided by Politics and Religion*]
(trans. A. Nowak-Młynikowska). Smak Słowa**

I

Even though it has been twelve years since the world premiere of *The Righteous Mind* and ten since its Polish edition, it still remains a relevant work constituting a significant contribution to psychological research on morality (see Ellemers et al., 2019). Jonathan Haidt, in his work, popularised the moral foundations theory, originally proposed in the work of Haidt and Joseph (2004), according to which there are culturally diverse foundations of moral judgments and moral actions that combine emotional (intuitive) and rational (cultural) components (more on them below). Today, this theory constitutes an autonomous field of psychological research on morality and is widely discussed and developed (including expanding the list of foundations; see Atari et al., 2020). It also has a number of applications, providing explanations for both cultural and gender differences in morality, political differences (e.g., between political right and left), and ideological differences (e.g., on issues such as abortion or vaccination). The latter issue seems particularly important. In the contemporary world, political and ideological polarisation is deep as never before. Although Haidt's

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book provides tools for understanding the differences among us, which in turn could lead to reducing tribalism, antagonisms, and mutual dislike, it seems that these tools are still not widely known and used outside the academic context. Therefore, I believe that it is still worth returning to *The Righteous Mind*: we will all benefit from it, because we are all practitioners of morality.

II

The book is divided into three parts, each addressing one moral principle. The first part concerns the principle according to which emotions (rather than reason) govern our choices and moral judgments. The deliberations begin with a consideration of the source of morality. Haidt considers three options: nativism (morality is innate), empiricism (morality is the result of learning), and rationalism (morality is the result of the activity of reason). The author focusses primarily on rationalism. He presents a series of studies conducted by himself and other researchers indicating that people often make moral judgments about the behaviour of others in an automatic (emotion-based) and often unconscious manner. Furthermore, the author makes more general considerations regarding the relationship between emotions and reason. He distinguishes three models explaining this relationship: the Platonic (reason rules over emotions), the Jeffersonian (reason and emotions are independent orders), and the Humean (emotions rule over reason) and argues for the validity of the latter model. He presents a series of empirical observations and studies indicating that human reason very rarely acts as an objective observer of events focused on seeking truth. Usually, reason is directed toward action, based on achieving practical goals, influencing others, and seeking recognition from others. Haidt proposes a metaphorical description of the relationship between reason and emotions. He suggests a metaphor in which emotions can be identified with an elephant, while reason is the rider on the elephant. Contrary to what might seem, the author argues that it is not the rider who directs the elephant, but rather the behaviour of the elephant dictates particular reactions from the rider. From this illustrative description and the numerous studies cited by the author supporting it, it follows that reason is not autonomous, nor is it the driver of emotional reactions. If reason is involved in the process of moral judgment at all, all it does is provide *post hoc* justifications for emotional reactions and primal moral judgments built upon them.

The next part of the book concerns the second moral principle, which states that morality is more than just care and fairness. In other words, there are moral foundations that organise emotional reactions, among which care and fairness are just one of several. This principle deepens the analysis of earlier discussions. In the first part, we learnt that people make moral judgments based more on emotional rather than rational grounds. In the second part, we learn about the patterns of these moral judgments and the emotional attitudes underlying them. The author distinguishes six such moral foundations: care, fairness,

loyalty, authority, sanctity, and liberty². Then he points out that moral judgments based on the foundations of care and fairness, despite being the main foundations of Western culture, are neither privileged nor the most widespread moral foundations in the world. They are rather exceptions to the rule, as in reality, most non-Western societies, due to their sociocentric organization of social life, emphasising collectivism rather than individualism, utilise other moral foundations such as authority, loyalty, or sanctity.

The author discusses a series of studies indicating the evolutionary basis of all the moral foundations. Moral foundations are mechanisms responsible for coping with certain adaptive requirements. In Haidt's view, they are innate receptors responsible for shaping moral judgment. Worth emphasising is that although these foundations are innate, their expression is culturally conditioned (see Haidt, 2014, p. 173). This in turn makes it possible to explain the diversity of societies in terms of what each of them considers as good and bad, while maintaining a set of certain rules which are common to all societies and which govern the behaviour of each society individually. In other words, it becomes possible to interpret contemporary societies and primitive societies (e.g., hunter-gatherer societies) as utilising in various ways the exact same set of patterns of moral judgments.

The last, third part of the book attempts to challenge the dominant view in the psychology of morality stemming from the paradigm of evolutionary psychology, according to which humans (similarly to their genes) are by nature selfish because their need for survival and passing on genetic material to offspring inclines them towards such attitudes. The author challenges this view by attacking the Darwinian dogma, according to which evolution occurs only at the level of the individual organism. In extensive deliberations, Haidt argues that evolution occurs not only at the individual's level, but also at the level of groups (see Haidt, 2014, pp. 253–290). However, biological arguments are only a prelude to the proper analysis of human group behaviour and thinking. Haidt argues that morality inherently binds people together into groups. There are positive and negative consequences of this. On the one hand, thanks to groupism, people can be more productive, feel safer, or achieve goals that would not be possible to achieve alone. However, the morality associated with belonging to a particular group that shares the same foundations and moral beliefs can blind people. A strong sense of belonging to one group naturally makes people more tribal, causing them to prefer members of their own group and cultivate their own customs, often regarding others as violating, for example, the foundation of sanctity. The main challenge that the author faces in the final sections of the book is how to make people fulfil their own moral foundations while simultaneously accepting differences and avoiding tribal consciousness. A simple recipe is not proposed; we are only given a direction to follow. From the fact that culture influences the expression of natural predispositions to make moral judgments, it

² Haidt emphasizes, however, that further research conducted by him and his team may identify further moral foundations (see Haidt, 2014, pp. 169–176).

follows that it is in culture that we should seek salvation. The author suggests influencing the environment and social space in such a way that they enable the generation of emotional reactions that cannot serve as the basis for manicheism, thinking in terms of irremovable divisions, and aggression towards other communities.

III

The book is written in an excellent style, combining scholarly erudition with a more relaxed and literary approach to the discussed topics. From a substantive point of view, an undeniable advantage of the work is that it is based on research findings drawn from various fields of science, starting from philosophy, passing through cultural anthropology and sociology, and ending with evolutionary and experimental psychology. It is worth emphasising that despite the multitude of approaches and methods used, the structure of the work is coherent and convincing, and the reasoning is clear.

Another advantage is the fact that, at many points, the book challenges widely shared intuitions and beliefs regarding moral behaviour or the role of emotions and reflection in making moral judgments. This is what is expected from groundbreaking works, which set new directions for research and challenge existing dogmas of both common sense and science.

In the review, I would like to comment on three issues that seem insufficiently analysed: (1) the question of the status of moral judgment, (2) the issue of the assumed vision of the mind and its relationship to emotions, and (3) the political consequences of the proposed theory of morality.

1.

At the beginning of the text, the author distinguishes between moral law and moral convention, emphasising that people generally possess an intuitive understanding of the difference between these two phenomena. In the subsequent parts of the text, the issue of moral judgments is addressed, that is, moral evaluations that people apply to the actions of others or certain situations. However, nowhere in the text is it clearly explained what the difference is between moral law and moral judgment. Therefore, it is not clear whether – in the author's opinion – moral judgment should be identified with moral law or rather with moral convention. The author mentions that the main topic of his research is the psychology of morality. However, it seems that by dealing with moral judgment, he does not address morality as a whole, but only a part of it, as there are strong reasons not to equate moral judgment with morality itself.

Identifying moral judgment with moral law and, thus, reducing morality as a whole to moral evaluations carried out by people prevents the examination of the cultural elements of morality, that influence the structure of moral judgments

as significantly as biologically encoded moral foundations. The author repeatedly emphasises the fact that culture significantly influences the expression of moral foundations. This influence seems to always have a normative character because legislators or reformers, organizing social rules in a way that allows them to influence the expression of moral foundations, will always be forced to use normative premises. By indicating how society *should* function or on what moral foundations it *should* be based, they will make certain moral decisions. If so, it is impossible to reduce morality to moral judgment. Of course, every legislator makes a certain moral judgment (e.g., about how moral judgments of other people should look), but the moral judgment concerning how people should make moral judgments themselves must be grounded in moral principles (moral law) that are not the result of moral judgments of people, whose moral judgment is to be defined only in legislative or reformative practice. Haidt seems to recognise the need for such moral principles because only they can help organise social life in a way that avoids tribalism, divisive politics, and social inequity. It seems that the author is aware that the theory of moral foundations alone does not provide tools to carry out this kind of social reform and that the realisation of this task requires the existence (or postulation) of more general rules, not reducible to particular moral judgments.

If, indeed, moral judgment is not identical to moral law, then perhaps some of the positions in moral theory that the author criticises can be defended. For example, perhaps the considerations of thinkers such as Plato or Kant are not aimed at explaining how people actually make moral judgments or how they should make such judgments, but rather concern what the general moral law is or should be. It seems that one can investigate the nature of moral law without engaging in a discussion about the nature of moral judgment.

2.

The author repeatedly addresses the issue of the relationship between emotions and the mind. The basic message of this book is that emotions influence moral judgments to a much greater extent than the mind. This claim seems to be strongly rooted in the dualism of mind and emotions. It is a contemporary echo of the classical dualism of soul and body, pioneered by Descartes. In attempting to determine the relationship between the mind and emotions, the author refers to the views of David Hume, arguing that he was correct in saying that the mind is subservient to emotions. Applying this observation to the problem of moral judgment, the author states that reasoning arises *post hoc*, usually as a justification, explanation, or negation of an emotionally prompted reaction that directly imposes itself on us and generates a certain moral judgment. In the process of forming a moral judgment, the mind does not play a significant role but serves the emotions.

It seems that such a strong dichotomy between mind and emotions is inappropriate. Antonio Damasio, in his book *Looking for Spinoza* (2005), argues that the strong separation of these two cognitive spheres is artificial. He presents

a theory according to which the mind is much more closely related to the body (including its emotional reactions), and the body is much more closely related to the mind than it might initially seem. Damasio distinguishes emotions from feelings, describing the former as unconscious reactions of the body to external stimuli, and the latter as conscious emotions. The theory of feelings (including moral feelings) allows for bridging the gap between irrational emotions and the mind. Both the mind and emotions cannot exist independently of each other and maintain their functions that are attributed to them. On the one hand, the mind cannot exist without the body (without emotions) because only the receptivity of the body can fill it with content and provide it with an ontological foundation; the mind is existentially dependent on the existence of the brain. On the other hand, the mind „performs practical and useful tasks for the body: it controls the execution of automatic reactions in relation to the appropriate goal, predicts and plans new reactions, creates various circumstances and objects beneficial for the survival of the body” (Damasio, 2005, p. 185) The mental level also allows for the integration of sensory representations from different senses (e.g., vision with hearing). Moreover, the existence of consciousness, which is a specific feature or function of the mind, is a necessary condition for enabling the human organism to properly (i.e., autonomously) survive. It seems that even temporary loss of consciousness negatively affects the abilities of the human organism to self-preserve and places the individual in a state of strict dependence. Consciousness also provides orientation. Thanks to consciousness, it is possible to identify that particular emotional reactions relate to „a single organism whose self-preservation needs are the basic cause of most currently represented events [e.g., emotions]” (Damasio, 2005, p. 187). Summarising the above considerations about the role of the mind, mental representations allow for easy management of information, which is not possible from the level of the body alone generating emotional reactions. Furthermore, the body requires the activity of the mind for proper functioning.

Taking these considerations into account and utilising what the author wrote on this subject in the discussed publication, it can be said that it was not Hume, but Jefferson, who was right when he claimed that both the mind and emotions play a significant (mutually irreducible) role in moral behaviour. To justify this claim, however, it must be assumed that the fact that emotional reaction precedes the cognitive reaction does not imply at all that the mind is a servant of emotions. Of course, it can be, for example, when it provides justification for the emotional primary reaction, independently of the rationality of such justification. However, as Damasio's analyses suggest, emotional reactions would remain blind if they were not controlled by some kind of mental activity. It can therefore be concluded that there are at least two types of moral judgments: immediate, primary moral judgments, which are generated at the emotional level (they do not have propositional character but are rather attitudes, body reactions to stimuli), and higher-order moral judgments, based on conscious emotional reaction, that is, feelings (in the sense indicated by Damasio). It seems that judgments of the second kind necessarily always contain some mental component, for example, through the fact that the organism must relate to its own emotions in order to make a judgment based on them, i.e., it must

recognise them as its own and place them within a broader spectrum of its own preferences or needs. However, this kind of relating is not purely emotional and is not subordinate to any other emotional reaction. The author himself points out the possibility (although he does not develop this topic further) of distancing oneself from the primary emotional reaction and issuing a moral judgment taking into account both the emotional reaction and cognitive operations (Haidt, 2014, p. 106). The mind is therefore not a slave to emotions (although it happens to be obedient to them). Both the mind and emotions are capable of cooperating in the process of generating moral judgments and making decisions.

3.

It is worth noting some political consequences of the observations made in the book. In many chapters, the author considers how psychological reflections on the nature of moral judgment relate to social and political practice. Special attention is devoted to the debate between liberalism (political left³) and conservatism (political right), interpreting both political ideologies through the lens of moral foundation theory. Based on the analyses in the book, it follows that conservatives usually base their judgments on all six moral foundations (care, fairness, loyalty, authority, sanctity, and liberty), while liberals typically rely only on three of them (care, fairness, and liberty). Based on these observations, an attempt can be made to explain why the political right fares so well in contemporary times and why it resonates so strongly with people's consciousness, despite seeming to be an ideology unsuited to the character of modern Western or Global North societies (see Fukuyama, 1996).

It seems that the enduring popularity of conservatism stems, among other things, from the fact that it is based on moral foundations which liberalism does not consider at all, namely, sanctity, authority, and loyalty. The success of conservatives relies on the development of those aspects of society which previous actions of liberals, based on a narrow set of moral foundations, were unable to take into account. Based on these observations, one might attempt to partially explain the rise in popularity of the political right in recent years worldwide (e.g., in the USA, Brazil, Poland, France, Austria, the UK, and Hungary). It appears that the greatest mistake of liberals was not underestimating or overlooking the moral foundations of the political right (i.e., sanctity, authority, and loyalty), but rather their direct criticism and rejection of them as potentially dangerous foundations capable of producing authoritarian rule and fostering a society hostile to other cultures. Liberals believed that a social order could be built solely on care, fairness, and liberty. This belief proved to be not only ineffective but also dangerous in its consequences. Any attempts to apply political

³ To simplify the argument, I identify liberalism with leftist views. Same does Haidt, bearing in mind the fact that in American reality liberalism is usually identified with left-wing thinking; unlike Europe, where left stands in opposition to liberalism and conservatism (right).

rules based on these three „liberal” moral foundations, outside the western cultural sphere, almost always encountered resistance from the local population and, as a consequence, led to the destabilisation of the region. Haidt's considerations in this regard seem very helpful in understanding current social and political changes and the nature of right-wing and left-wing thinking. Most importantly, these analyses provide liberals with the tools to rethink the right and understand it not only from an ideological perspective, but also from the perspective of the moral foundations on which it is based, which have been completely ignored by the liberal worldview.

IV

In summary, Jonathan Haidt's book is a multifaceted, erudite analysis of the nature of moral judgments. In my opinion, its greatest strength lies in its attempt to challenge the conventional way of looking at morality and human nature. Although, as I pointed out in the review, not all of Haidt's analytical points have been fully realised, and therefore demand further research and thought, I believe that the discussed publication achieves its main intentions, namely, it makes it so after reading it the reader is no longer able to evaluate human behaviour and political practices in the same way; this especially applies to the political right, which has been given much attention in Haidt's publication. *The Righteous Mind* is a publication that is the result of determination and personal courage. Regardless of one's scientific or political preferences, it is hard not to be captivated by its charm and intellectual persuasion.

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