

**Thrasymachus's Blush:**  
The Science and Politics of Motivated Reasoning and 'Principled Rhetoric'

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*“Thrasymachus conceded all these points, but not in the easygoing way I have just described. He had to be dragged every step of the way, sweating profusely, as you might expect in summer. This was the occasion when I saw something I had never seen before—Thrasymachus blushing.”* Plato, *Republic* 350d

For almost two millennia, philosophers were typically also the best social scientists of their day. For these thinkers, their descriptive psychology was designed from the beginning to serve as a logical base for their moral psychology, which served, in turn, to underwrite their ethical theory, and on to their political theory. And moving in the other direction, the descriptive psychology had to be compatible with, and preferably entailed by their epistemology and, in turn, their metaphysics and ontology. In short, these were often systematic thinkers whose work spanned the practical, the scientific, and the philosophical. Hobbes, for example, develops his psychology of the fear of violent death in the context of claiming that its burden makes anarchy intolerable and its universality makes sovereignty possible (Neblo, 2007).

The rise of modern social science has created a necessary, and in many ways salutary, division of labor between philosophers and social scientists, driven primarily by the need for specialization in the face of technical advances. In addition, there has been an increasing sense that the different fields properly deal with fundamentally different phenomena. More specifically, since Max Weber, the distinction between intellectual inquiry regarding facts and values has loomed more salient. This is not to say that the two have proceeded in pristine isolation from each other. Many social scientists aspire to be practically relevant and regard their research as having important implications for normative theory and practice – “giving hands and feet to morality” in the words of one (Lasswell, 1941). Similarly, many philosophers question the sharpness of the divide, or at least believe that their conceptual apparatus should help nudge the social scientific research agenda, just like the normative category of “disease” guides medical research without compromising its scientific status.

And yet, because the division of labor has only intensified, the ability to manage good integration of normative philosophy and social science has become fraught with dead ends and positively harmful missteps in translation and transposition. In response, some social scientists fully embrace the fact-value dichotomy and disclaim any competence in the translation, leaving that job to whomever might want to run with their findings. Others, however, make a go at explicitly building the bridge, perhaps relying on colleagues in other fields or attempts to read work out of their domain of professional expertise.

Perhaps the most interesting and important contemporary example of such an attempt at mutual influence and integration is Jonathan Haidt's ambitious research agenda on moral psychology. Haidt's research purports to show that so-called "rationalist" moral and political theories rest on untenable empirical premises. His work has been published in the best general science and psychology journals, he has written a best-selling book, given three TED talks, and taken to the pages of the *New York Times* to advance the potentially revolutionary implications of his research for our moral and political self-understanding (and hence practices). His ideas have been discussed and deployed in a wide range of fields including psychology, philosophy, political science, communications, anthropology, sociology, among others.

In the present paper, however, we aim to show that his work stands as a remarkable case study of how the translation process between philosophy and social science can go fundamentally awry. In the end, his empirical results are either incoherent with the purposes to which he wishes to put them, or they are better interpreted as supporting and elucidating certain rationalist theories, rather than undermining them. The point, however, is not merely to correct some of the mistakes for their own sake (though there is certainly merit in doing so). Rather, we show that the way the translation process goes wrong in this case exemplifies a recurring theme

in such attempts, one rooted in the disciplinary divide over facts and values. So, in this light, we sketch an *inferentialist* model of judgment, arguing that it can help to overcome the difficulties in translating between the normative and social scientific domains.

## **I. Reason, Realism, & Normative Judgment**

Plato's Thrasymachus is the first great "realist" in the history of western political thought. He famously defines justice as the advantage of the stronger. Less famously, though just as importantly, he goes on to argue that as an empirical matter, the rhetoric of reason and justice actually tends to further the interests of the powerful. Versions of Thrasymachus's claims have morphed and echoed down through the history of political thought, all the way to contemporary discussions about the efficacy of public reason and rational deliberation. Empirical research on motivated reasoning appears to support such pessimism by demonstrating the ways in which people's desires and ideological commitments affect the way that they present, assimilate, and process arguments and information. Recent influential research has radicalized these results, arguing that such motivational "noise" is so predominant as to leave notions of public reason unmoored in practice. For example, Jonathan Haidt argues that reason evolved as a tool of rhetoric rather than the other way around, and that its original character is destiny when it comes to applications in modern politics. Indeed, he goes so far to call his theory "Glauconian," after Thrasymachus's ally in the dialectical jousting with Socrates: "In fact, I'll praise Glaucon for the rest of the book as the guy who got it right" (Haidt, 2013: 86).

In the *Republic* though, Thrasymachus, the cynical sophist, blushes when Socrates unmasks his arguments as cynical and sophistic. This detail is curious and striking. As Allan Bloom has noted, "The apparently shameless Thrasymachus, willing to say anything, is revealed

in all his vanity, for he blushes” (Bloom, 1968: 336). Such reactions make little sense, though, on the reason-as-rationalization account, in either its ancient sophistic or modern scientific varieties. Indeed contemporary empirical research also supports the existence of cross-cutting forces that hem in and alter our tendencies to behave as cynical sophists – a kind of photonegative of motivated reasoning that we might term ‘principled rhetoric.’ In addition to the evolutionary traits that Haidt discusses (which we agree are well established), our common ancestry has made it so that very few of us – namely sociopaths – are immune to shame and able to behave as cynical sophists through and through. We are disposed to track and respond to reasons in ways that are not purely strategic (Tomasello, 2009). It turns out that even Thrasymachus is what we might call a “theoretical” not a congenital sociopath: whatever his professed views about justice, power, and the sophist’s vocation, he blushes and feels the force of accountability to good reasoning.

Haidt’s social intuitionist model (SIM) posits a pivotal role for the automatic process of intuition in making normative judgments. When one encounters a situation that elicits a moral judgment, the immediate reaction is a gut feeling that manifests in a quick evaluation. This immediate, intuitive reaction is an analogue and close cousin of, for example, human disgust reactions (Haidt, 1993). For Haidt, the slower, more deliberative process of reasoning plays only an ancillary role as a *consequence* of intuition and judgment rather than its source. Reasoning in the SIM is typically just ex post rationalization in justifying one’s own positions, and an attempt to win other people to one’s position by any means, not on the basis of “good” or “better” reasons, whatever, if anything, those might be. In the model, the primary causal effects of reasoning are social; reasons may shape the intuitions of *others*. The capacity for reason to tutor one’s own intuitions and judgments is accorded a much lesser role, although some provisions are

made for variation across individuals and situations, and for this capacity to be cultivated and marginally strengthened with practice. Haidt explicitly calls reasons the “junior partner” to intuition (e.g., Haidt 2010).

The SIM is based on a considerable body of experimental research, and it dovetails neatly with many of the other empirical regularities and theories that comprise modern psychology, such as the dual-process model of cognition (Kahneman, 2011) and motivated reasoning (Kunda, 1990). The evidence that forms the core of Haidt’s argument for the SIM is exemplified by the reactions of experimental subjects to stylized stories that invite moral judgments. Perhaps the most famous story involves a brother and sister who, while traveling together, decide to have sex. The two use several forms of birth control, never tell anyone their secret, never have sex again, and find the experience to have deepened their relationship; the point of these stipulated details is to eliminate the chance that their action caused harm. When this sort of story is presented to experimental subjects, the experimenters often observe what they call *moral dumbfounding*, the “stubborn and puzzled maintenance of a moral judgment without supporting reasons” (Haidt, Bjorklund, and Murphy, 2000, 6). For example, a subject might say that it is not OK for the brother and sister to have sex, not for any identifiable reasons (in the face of various stipulations and follow up questions by the investigators), but because “it’s just wrong.”

In presentations of the SIM, Haidt frequently casts the model as a response to and critique of the “rationalist” model of moral judgment of Lawrence Kohlberg. Beginning in the 1960s, Kohlberg was at the vanguard of the cognitive revolution in psychology. His chief contribution is a cognitive-developmental, stage model of moral reasoning (Kohlberg, 1969). The stages refer to the increasingly sophisticated lines of reasoning that children use as they mature. Kohlberg’s model posits that those reasons manifest directly in evaluations. Emotions and social interaction

are also accorded (ancillary) roles. The principal difference between Kohlberg's stage model and Haidt's SIM model is the direction of the causal arrow between judgment and reasoning: Kohlberg takes reasons to affect judgment, and Haidt takes judgment to affect (post hoc) reasoning. In Haidt's words, Kohlberg posits reason as the "senior partner" to intuition (e.g., Haidt 2010).<sup>1</sup>

The thrust of Haidt's critique is that Kohlberg's model cannot account for moral dumbfounding. If Kohlberg were right, the moral judgments that people offer when they hear this story would have to have been caused by reasons. But Haidt reports that very frequently, subjects cannot identify the reasons why they judge some actions to be "just wrong."

Interestingly, Haidt and his colleagues also offer an account of how Kohlberg could have been so wrong. Kohlberg based his theory on a series of experiments in which children were presented with moral dilemmas and asked a series of questions. Perhaps the most famous dilemma involves Heinz, who, unable to afford a potentially life-saving drug, must decide whether to break into a pharmacy to steal it for his dying wife. Follow up queries featured hypothetical questions of right and wrong, e.g., "What if Heinz didn't love his wife? Would it still be OK for him to steal the drug?" According to Haidt, Kohlberg perceives the behaviors he observed his subjects engage in as a process of cognition that is "conscious and used ordinary moral language" (Kohlberg, Levine, and Hower, 1983: 69, as cited in Haidt, 2001). But elsewhere, Haidt and his coauthors allege that this perception is mistakenly predicated on an odd sort of data, generated by a strange process:

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the role of emotion in deliberative theory generally, see Neblo (2003). For a more concrete discussion of a systemic conception of deliberation, see Lazer et. al. (2011) and Neblo (2005). For applications of these ideas to the case of race politics, see Neblo (2009a,b). On the empirical relationship between reasons, emotions, and speaker attributes in persuasion, see Neblo et. al. (2012).

“Kohlberg may have concluded that moral judgment was based on moral reasoning because the dilemmas he used, such as Heinz, had very salient fodder for post hoc “reasoning-why.” In his dilemmas there were always questions of rights and harm (cf. Kohlberg, 1969). Had he used a broader sample of moral judgment tasks he might have come up with a different theory, one that gave greater prominence to moral emotions and the “seeing-that” of moral intuitions. (The tendency for psychologists to confuse a psychological phenomenon with the way they have chosen to study the phenomenon was called “the psychologist’s fallacy” by William James, 1890/1950.)” (Haidt, Bjorklund, and Murphy, 2000, 11).

The underlying assumptions here are that Haidt’s stories have more verisimilitude than Kohlberg’s dilemmas, and that the process of moral dumbfounding is less strange than questioning via hypotheticals.

Building on the framework of the SIM, Haidt has articulated a moral foundations theory (MFT) of intuitive ethics (Haidt and Joseph 2004, Haidt and Graham 2007, Haidt 2012). According to the MFT, people base their moral judgments on intuitive reactions that cluster into several foundations, which include care (roughly utilitarian beneficence), fairness (roughly notions of right), in-group loyalty, hierarchical authority, and notions of “purity” (failures of which elicit disgust reactions). There is variation in the degree to which different individuals identify these foundations as important, and that variation correlates highly with well-understood categories from politics (i.e., liberal/conservative) and religion (i.e., believing/atheist).

Based on the SIM and the MFT, Haidt appears to encourage us to collapse descriptive ethics and normative ethics – i.e., how, as an empirical matter, we in fact *do* tend to make judgments with how, as a normative matter, we *should* make those judgments. If (1) moral judgments are primarily caused by intuitions, (2) intuitions are analogous to disgust reactions, and (3) different people are affected by different subsets of those moral intuitions, then differences in moral judgments cannot be resolved by saying that one side is right and the other is wrong. For example, the act of denying the moral judgment “homosexuality is immoral” is



similar to denying that having a disgust reaction to eating insects is reasonable. Thus, political foes do not properly have access to claims of moral superiority. Instead, they merely have different tastes (Haidt actually uses an analogy to taste buds), different intuitive reactions to eliciting situations. So it would appear that Haidt embraces a particularly strong version of moral non-cognitivism. Reason plays a negligible role in forming our moral judgments, and only gets deployed to figure out effective ways to bring others around to our pre-existing views. Reason is merely a rhetorical tool to convince others by any means available, and justice becomes the right of the stronger in wielding those and other more avowedly manipulative tools.

And yet, at other points, Haidt deploys his empirical findings and theoretical apparatus for highly prescriptive purposes, arguing that his findings encourage a kind of *moral leveling* in which we should respect our political opponents and attend to differing moral, whatever their contents. His account of moral foundations almost sounds like an updated and socialized version of early twentieth century ethical intuitionism (e.g., G. E. Moore) in which humans have a cognitive faculty that directly perceives non-natural value properties. Regardless of which horn of the apparent dilemma Haidt is inclined to grasp, we will argue that the dilemma is a false dilemma, resting on a mistaken interpretation of his model.

## **II. Where Intuitions Come From and What We Do with Them**

We do not intend to critique the SIM or MFT as theories in their own right, so much as to critique the interpretation and implications that Haidt claims for them. As mentioned above, Haidt explicitly pits himself against Kohlberg (Haidt, 2001), with the key controversy being whether reason or intuition ought to be considered the “junior” partner to the other (e.g., Haidt, 2010). We argue that this is a false dichotomy and a positively confusing way of organizing

concepts that follows from mistaking a vaguely defined notion of frequency with causal weight and critical standards.

First, as we alluded to above, Haidt's argument assumes that the SIM is superior to Kohlberg's stage theory in large part because the evidence of moral dumbfounding is elicited by more realistic situations than the evidence of the stage theory. This claim is, to put it mildly, debatable. It is hard to see why, for example, a story about a brother and sister who have sex without any chance of the events coming to light or causing harmful consequences is more realistic than a story about a man who steals medicine to save his wife.

Unlike the Heinz dilemma, the incest scenario is maximally artificial in that it requires a God's eye point of view to avoid contradicting the stipulations in the scenario: if no one ever found out about the events, how did I come to be in a position to judge them? Similarly no real human judge could ever be sure that no power or exploitation was involved, that no social or psychological harm could ensue, etc. I can easily imagine myself as a friend or acquaintance trying to know what to do with such information, as a juror judging a specific case that is being prosecuted, or a legislator trying to decide whether to legalize incest on libertarian grounds. But all of these roles mean that I would be judging without the stipulations that block the standard sort of reasons that folks might invoke. What Haidt calls dumbfounding seems like understandable resistance to accepting what respondents see as implausible stipulations and a completely abstract notion of the position from which they are rendering their (lab) judgment.

Haidt argues that the artificiality of the Heinz dilemma is a problem for Kohlberg but the artificiality of the incest story becomes an even bigger problem for Haidt. At least, it is not clear that a model of moral judgment should give more weight to reactions to one type story rather

than the other. An ideal model should be able to account for both. Ironically, Haidt and his colleagues seem to accuse Kohlberg of exactly the mistake they make.

The second and more insidious of Haidt's mistakes is to equate "frequency" with causal and conceptual importance. It is open question as to whether Haidt's lab experiments really test frequency (or even employ a well defined concept of it) for purposes of externally valid inferences. But even if we were to grant that they did, the significance of such a finding for his critique of "rationalist" theories of morals and politics is not at all clear.

Many broadly rationalist theories make of point of arguing that explicit reasoning is a relatively rare and specialized process. Habermas (1996), for example, argues that for most questions we rely on relatively settled background assumptions and learned behavioral patterns to coordinate our actions and furnish appropriate social judgments. For Habermas, we rely on the *lifeworld* – much of which can be readily glossed as "social intuition" – to manage the great bulk of mundane interactions. It is only when such interactions break down that we have to thematize the implicit social rules and values that undergird our intuitions, subjecting them to explicit reflection and scrutiny. So for Habermas, at least, Haidt's findings about "frequency" is actually something to be expected (indeed, that is functionally necessary) under his "rationalist" model.

But perhaps more importantly, it is not clear that Haidt has even conceptualized reason in a helpful way, nor identified operational tests that could be interpreted as establishing his claims. Although the SIM mixes together both reason and intuition, Haidt often says that reason must be the junior partner (e.g., Haidt, 2010). His argument for the primacy of intuition is based on how often we observe intuition cause actions, relative to how rarely we observe reason cause actions. The equivalence between frequency and causal importance is too quick. Intuition and reason often work on different time scales, and it is not clear why a single causal instance in which

reason shapes intuition ought to be accorded the same degree of importance as each instance in which that intuition causes a moral judgment.

Consider an analogy to a ship's captain and helmsman. In a ship, the captain orders the helmsman to lay in a course, say once every few hours (time scale 1). Assuming the helmsman obeys her orders (and assuming the ship is a classic sailing ship; i.e., not fully computerized), she will not simply punch in a few numbers. Instead, she will keep vigil over her heading every now and then, monitoring changes that have occurred based on her previous actions and her environment, and issuing course corrections. Suppose that she does so every couple of minutes (time scale 2). Her only action of interest is to direct the rudder, which we can basically treat as a plank attached to the ship and stuck in the water. Water flows around and pushes against the rudder. If it were not attached to the ship, its behavior would be chaotic. But good ship design securely fastens the rudder to the ship. Small changes in the vortices of the water shift the rudder around. Very small changes in the water are corrected by the very small actions of the rudder, at a very small time scale, say every few seconds (time scale 3). We can continue this story for many smaller time scales, down to the level of quantum mechanics or even string theory.

However, if we are most concerned about why the ship ends up where it does, we face an identification problem. We can tell causal stories about the captain, or about the helmsman, or even at some more fine-grained level. But, at least in navigation, when we tell such causal stories, we seldom descend past time scale 2. Although actions at smaller time scales are perfectly causal, these actions are simply not very informative about why the ship moves as it does. Normative questions, such as, "Where should the ship go?" or "What is the best way to get there?" have even less interesting or meaningful answers at small time scales. If our principle concern is normative, then focusing on small time scales is necessary only insofar as action

therein constrains our abilities to get where we want to go. But by that reasoning, it is then not clear whether it is even worth talking about the helmsman as opposed to the captain.

When Haidt argues that reason should be viewed as the junior partner to intuition because the latter causes moral judgments much more often than the former, he is ignoring the idea that a little bit of tutelage can go a long way. At a short time scale, intuition seems to be the senior partner, just as the helmsman seems to be more causally efficacious than the captain. But at a longer time scale, intuition recedes in importance, and the relatively rarer, but more influential role of reason seems to be where more of the interesting action is. For example, if many of our intuitive judgments rooted in the lifeworld were once the subject of explicit debate and contestation, there is a sense in which they can inherit a rational genealogy from the indirect, long-term effects of that debate. So it is not even clear how we should parse the direct and indirect effects of reason versus intuition, especially over time. On this account, neither reason nor intuition is always the junior partner. Each is junior and senior, depending on the frame of reference.

### **III. From Descriptive to Normative Ethics & Politics**

We have argued that Haidt's claim about reason being decisively junior to intuition is 1) not well conceptualized, 2) not well supported empirically, and 3) that even if it were well conceptualized and well supported, that prominent rationalist theories can and do accommodate versions of the idea quite consistently – i.e., it would not count decisively against rationalism in the way Haidt claims. This, however, is a relatively benign mistake compared to the problematic way in which Haidt moves between descriptive and normative claims about ethics and politics. When Haidt distills prescriptions from his (mistaken) interpretation of moral dumbfounding, the

result is to recommend *moral leveling*: different moral intuitions should be accorded equal weight and respect, without regard to the different lines of reasoning that they may summarize, or how they may have come to exist in the first place.

Returning to the analogy of the ship, a major reason that we do not tend to focus on small time scales when we are talking about navigation is that by doing so, we risk encouraging the inference that actions at the higher time scales are not really actions at all. In our story, the captain's decisions are heavily mediated; they do not directly cause the ship to go anywhere. To the extent that we operate on the principle that more direct causal relationships at smaller time scales are more important than indirect causal relationships at larger time scales, we might decide to forego paying attention to the captain. If the captain is not doing anything, then we could not say whether it would be better to go to one destination or another, or to take one route or another. From the perspective of the helmsman, there are no good grounds on which to prefer one destination from another.

Rejecting a meaningful role for the captain is the analogue of the moral leveling that Haidt engages in when he moves too quickly between descriptive and normative accounts of moral and political phenomena. According to Haidt, we ought to reject the notion that some of moral foundations are more important than others because, from the quick, intuitive perspective, all of them look the same. But this leaves out the possibility that infrequent causal actions at larger time scales, like those of reasoning, are meaningful, despite their relative “rarity” such as it is. If we had an alternative theory as to why some moral foundations end up being more important than others at larger time scales, we would also have a good basis for rejecting the general principle of moral leveling that Haidt encourages.

To see an example of the sort of mistake that Haidt encourages us to make, consider what often happens when one teaches the famous Monty Hall problem to a student. In this problem, there are three doors. Behind one of the doors, there is a new car; behind the other two, goats. The decision maker first selects one of the doors. Monty then opens one of the other two doors, revealing a goat. Finally, the decision maker chooses whether or not to switch doors. Counterintuitively, the rules of probability suggest that the decision maker should always switch. As many educators know, when one teaches this problem, students often continue to dispute the switching principle, even after following along and agreeing with each step of the relatively complex reasoning process. This outcome bears a striking similarity to moral dumbfounding. Yet, the educator believes that there remains an important sense in which the switching principle is correct, even if, in a statistical sense, many students might disagree. That is, the educator rejects the analogue of moral leveling in this case. But why?

The key assumption that leads the educator to believe that she is correct, despite opposition from her students, is that with enough time and communication the students will eventually agree that they were mistaken. And, crucially, they will do so because they are committed to various other premises and beliefs that constrain what one can coherently maintain, even if few people recognize such constraint immediately. Indeed, there is the possibility that everyone could be wrong (initially) about something eventually revealed to be incoherent.

This sort of assumption is missing from Haidt's model, and so, therefore, is the ability to be wrong in a meaningful sense. In Haidt's model, an argument can be more or less persuasive in the descriptive (i.e., statistical) sense of garnering support or changing more individuals' minds. The process involves trading one intuition for another. But there is no account for why one intuition should be stronger than another, beyond the mere fact that it is, empirically. Similarly

our attempts to persuade are either effective or ineffective, but there is no way to distinguish between persuasion for good reasons versus bad reasons, or for that matter, between persuasion per se and manipulation. Intuitions and emotions in his model are fundamental, and, although they may be influenced by other people's rationalizations, such influence is a bare, contingent fact.

Thus, when Haidt argues that we should abandon rationalist theories of normative ethics and politics, his potential grounds for doing so are all rather unattractive. First, he could admit that he fully conflates descriptive and normative ethics and politics, in which case he is merely exhorting us to switch without any grounds for thinking that we should (beyond his intuitions). But to do so would forego the recommendation of moral leveling for any reasons; if we ended up agreeing with him, it would be because he was excellent at rhetoric, not actually right.

Second, he could embrace a revamped theory of ethical intuitionism (updating, e.g., G. E. Moore), which widely fell out of favor because of its anti-naturalism and its inability to account for persistent moral disagreement. In some ways this would be the most interesting option for Haidt, since his lab experiments grounded in evolutionary theory appear to provide an attractive way to reconnect such theories to naturalism, and his theory of the five (or six) moral foundations can provide an account of persistent (if constrained) disagreement. But Haidt shows few signs of wanting to embrace moral realism of this sort, and doing so would be more difficult than it appears, since the evolutionary elements of Haidt's theory still do not provide a way to jump from natural (i.e., descriptive) processes of how we make value judgments to actual values (i.e., normative) phenomena.

Though not made explicit, the line that Haidt most often seems to take is a second-order appeal to either liberal respect and toleration (i.e., respect and rights) or social utility (i.e., *ca*). At



various points Haidt suggests that a recognition of varying moral foundations and our emotional, social intuitionist behavior patterns is a useful technology for best promoting beneficial outcomes (e.g., when he invokes Samantha Powers). This may be true (indeed, we believe that it is very likely to be true), but seems to concede that our substantive normative theory could still be a rationalist one like utilitarianism.

At other points, he argues that, for example, liberals in politics should not be so dismissive of conservatives because the latter are actually more attuned to all five moral foundations, rather than just care and fairness and that such commitments are deeply important to them (e.g., Haidt, 2012, *inter alia*). Here he seems to suggest that such descriptive diversity in political values deserves our respect, which is quite plausible, but highly ironic. Such a rationale is close to the one – dismissed and even mocked by Haidt – that Rawls uses to defend his theory of justice. For Rawls, respect and fairness undergird a theory that protects our rights, at least in private life, to make judgments that place great value on in-group loyalty (say, to our co-religious or co-ethnics in affiliation), to submit to hierarchical authority (e.g., to the Catholic magisterium or in a traditional male-lead household), or to avoid those we regard as violating purity and sanctity (e.g., homosexual couples).

Thus Haidt's own ambiguity about the status of his argument ends up being a consequential mistake for both science (at least in terms of interpretation, and the conceptual set up for future inquiry) and for the way that it purports to constrain/delimit plausible moral and political theories, and especially the interaction between the two: how the normative categories (e.g., like moral foundations) get operationalized and interpreted, and their significance for normative inquiry.

#### **IV. An Inferentialist Model of Judgment**

We still find ourselves in search of a theory of judgment that can accomplish three tasks. First, this theory ought to explain the empirical evidence offered by Haidt as well as that offered by Kohlberg. As such, it ought to subsume both Haidt's SIM and Kohlberg's stage theory. Second, the enriched theory should feature a key role for time scale. Practically speaking, we want a theory that looks like Haidt's theory at small time scales and looks like Kohlberg's at larger time scales. But most importantly, this theory ought to provide a road map that can be used to weigh foundations and avoid moral leveling, or at least to know it can be avoided. That is, the theory ought to provide a more convincing bridge between descriptive and normative ethics and politics, and thus explain how we can avoid moral leveling in a *principled* fashion.

Robert Brandom (1994) constructs an inferentialist model that can be extended to incorporate both the social intuitionist model (SIM) of Haidt and the rationalist stage model of Kohlberg. Brandom identifies the process of giving and asking for reasons as the empirical basis for conjuring principled justifications for normative claims from mere rationalizations of judgments. Not coincidentally, social reasoning is a linchpin of both Haidt's model and Kohlberg's model. Combining the work of Brandom, Kohlberg, and Haidt, we elaborate an inferentialist model of judgment that features an account of the social emergence of culturally meaningful normative principles via interactive reasoning (time scale 1), and an account of split-second judgments via intuitions (time scale 2). Transitions between time scales are accomplished by viewing intuitions and reasons each in terms of the other. Intuitions can be interpreted as encoded reasons as in the on-line model of memory and judgment (Hastie and Park 1986; Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1989). Reasons can be interpreted as coherent and self-stable bodies of intuitions accrued in an evolutionary process of interactive reasoning (cf., Bowles and Gintis 2011). Neither reason nor intuition can be said to exist without the other.

Brandom casts giving and asking for reasons as elements of a game, in which players track each other's behavior through a process of *deontic scorekeeping*. Essentially, a player's score is just a summary statistic to keep track of when they engage in incoherent, hypocritical behavior. In the game, making a claim has the dual consequences of (1) entitling one to assert any statement that is an inferential consequence of that claim, and (2) prohibiting one from asserting any statement that is incompatible with that claim. Just what counts as an inferential consequence or an incompatible statement is defined by bootstrapping the rules of the game. For example, a player could hypothetically claim that a rule of elementary logic is invalid. But in so doing, that player would back herself into a corner, wherein she would inevitably be forced to rely on the socially articulated consequences of that rule to justify other claims she might want to make. Ultimately, she would have to drop her original claim and agree to live by the logical rule.

Brandom's key move is the bootstrap, in which the simple rules of deontic scorekeeping explode into a universe of inferential consequences. Although Brandom formalized the bootstrap, it is implicitly prefigured in Kohlberg's stage model. In Kohlberg's model, the social act of reason giving is the primary means of development from one stage of moral reasoning to another (Kohlberg 1969). His model isolates the deontic element of Brandom's game of giving and asking for reasons, in which, once another player has noted an inconsistency, the player responsible for the inconsistency must reason her way through it to a more coherent inference, where coherence is itself socially defined. Taken at the time scale of cognitive development, this process explains how Kohlberg can "commit the naturalistic fallacy and get away with it" (Kohlberg 1971). Kohlberg's model shows how meaningful moral principles can emerge from empirical social practice, just as Brandom's model shows how logic principles can emerge from deontic scorekeeping.

Brandom's bootstrap is also a key component in Habermas' conception of the *lifeworld* and the processes of its destruction and creation. The lifeworld is the shared, common understanding of what is valid and/or good; it is the sum total of what is taken for granted in a conversation. When a piece of the lifeworld is thematized, for example by becoming the subject of an argument, it ceases to be taken for granted, and thus ceases to be a part of the lifeworld. When people argue in good faith, they attempt to warrant their judgments and actions by relying on the remaining totality of the lifeworld. Over very large time scales, new pieces of the lifeworld come into being through many acts of communication. The simultaneous destruction and creation the lifeworld is essentially another manifestation of Brandom's bootstrap.

But the bootstrap is not cheap. A common criticism of Brandom's model is to question its empirical value: how could a human being possibly keep the explosive multiplicity of inferences that his model identifies? Habermas (1996), and even Kohlberg to some extent (1969), explicitly admit that the great bulk of our everyday normative judgments do and even must occur via social intuition. That is the whole point of the theory of the lifeworld, and our limited ability to problematize ever larger swaths of it. Deliberation, discourse, and explicit moral reasoning are quite specifically exceptional.

We take Haidt's model to be a psychological theory of the lifeworld. Humans do not track each inference in the game of giving and asking for reasons, just as they do not constantly trace all lines of arguments down to foundations. Instead, humans track summaries of these inferences, encoded as automatic intuitions and emotions. A similar process is at work in the on-line model of memory and judgment (Hastie and Park 1986; Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1989). Haidt's model shows how judgments can be issued quickly and cheaply. The SIM even identifies how the larger processes of interactive reasoning and lifeworld formation can enter back into our

intuitive processes, as the model includes a role for others' people's reasoning to affect one's own intuitions.

Because the inferentialist model subsumes Haidt's model at small time scales and Kohlberg's at larger time scales, it can also explain their empirical findings. But then a reasonable response to this model would be that it is too complicated, that Haidt's simpler model (without his mistaken interpretations) is in some sense enough. In rejoinder, we can point to two sorts of things that the inferentialist model does that Haidt's model does not. First, the inferentialist model helps to make sense of an emerging body of experimental evidence that cannot easily be accounted for by the SIM. One set of experiments tests how actions and judgments change when people are forced to pause before acting or judging. For example, Rand, Greene, and Nowak (2013) find that when people are forced to wait as little as ten seconds before deciding how to act in a collective action game, they tend to donate less to the collective good, an action which is consonant with utilitarianism. Paxton, Ungar, and Greene (2012) observe that when people are forced to wait for several minutes before rendering judgments in the incest dilemma, they tend to be more permissive, which is also utilitarian. Haidt's model does not offer a good reason why different intuitions ought to crop up differently at different time scales, but the inferentialist model does. And Sklar et. al. (2012) show that people can read and do arithmetic nonconsciously, which suggests that Haidt's partitioning of reason and intuition does not have the force against the rationalist notion of persuasion that he would like to claim for it.

The second and more important advantage of the inferentialist model over Haidt's model is that it avoids moral leveling. Ironically, the element that is missing from the SIM is the ability to be wrong in a normatively meaningful sense. In Brandom, Kohlberg, and Habermas, "being

wrong” is the practical equivalent of eventually coming to agree with an interlocutor that one has made a mistake and to retract it, typically after much communication. Haidt (2003) admits that persuasion happens, but glosses it as activating new moral intuitions for the most part. Left Doing so begs the question of how we construe “persuasion” (and whether, in funny turn, the way he uses it is a case of “persuasive definition” since it assumes that “rational” is not well defined or causally efficacious). The inferentialist model not only provides a way to be wrong, it turns being wrong into the fundamental building block of what it can mean to be right. In so doing, we can stake a claim that one moral intuition is better than another, and thereby escape the torpor of moral leveling.

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