

Moral Foundations in Politics

Dr. Jonathan Haidt and his colleagues have come up with a system for talking about our morals that shifts us away from the moral/immoral dichotomy and replaces it with the idea of a moral matrix.

Looking at morality in terms of a matrix helps us to:

- Accept that different positions are not necessarily immoral.
- Recognize how competing positions can be “differently moral.”
- Understand our own morals.
- Appreciate the tension between some of these foundations, which explains why it is sometimes difficult to decide which path is most right for you.

The six criteria that apply across all cultures are:

Care/harm: Whether it causes pain to others

Related virtues/ideas: kindness, gentleness, and nurturance

Listen for: references to negative impacts on people, planet, or beings

Fairness/cheating: Whether it is fair/proportional

Related virtues/ideas: justice, rights, and autonomy

Listen for: fair, cheat, liar, justice, entitlement, criticism of “winners”

Loyalty/betrayal: whether it is in line with the needs of our group

Related virtues/ideas: patriotism and self-sacrifice for the group

Listen for: us, them, labels, anything referencing the other

Authority/subversion: whether it supports or undermines the status quo

Related virtues/ideas: leadership/followership; deference to legitimate authority; respect for traditions.

Listen for: police, military, science, experts, rule of law, constitution

Sanctity/degradation: whether it reflects our groups’ beliefs about what is taboo

Related virtues/ideas: purity, sanctity, the body is a temple

Listen for: wrong, disgusting, not right, immoral

Liberty/oppression: whether it supports freedom from tyranny

Related virtues/ideas: hatred of bullies and dominators; personal freedom

Listen for: taxation, rights, freedom, amendments

Foundation:	Care/ harm	Fairness/ cheating	Loyalty/ betrayal	Authority/ subversion	Sanctity/ degradation
Adaptive challenge	Protect and care for children	Reap benefits of two-way partnerships	Form cohesive coalitions	Forge beneficial relationships within hierarchies	Avoid communicable diseases
Original triggers	Suffering, distress, or neediness expressed by one's child	Cheating, cooperation, deception	Threat or challenge to group	Signs of high and low rank	Waste products, diseased people
Current triggers	Baby seals, cute cartoon characters	Marital fidelity, broken vending machines	Sports teams, nations	Bosses, respected professionals	Immigration, deviant sexuality
Character-istic emotions	Compassion for victim; anger at perpetrator	anger, gratitude, guilt	Group pride, rage at traitors	Respect, fear	Disgust
Relevant virtues	Caring, kindness	Fairness, justice, trustworthiness	Loyalty, patriotism, self-sacrifice	Obedience, deference	Temperance, chastity, piety, cleanliness

Table 1. The original five foundations of intuitive ethics. (Adapted from Haidt, 2012).

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¹ Published in 2012 [Moral Foundations Theory: The Pragmatic Validity of Moral Pluralism](#)
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