

Moral Empathy Gaps and the American Culture War

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Abstract

Our inability to feel what others feel makes it difficult to understand how they think. Because moral intuitions organize political attitudes, *moral empathy gaps* can exacerbate political conflict (and other kinds of conflict as well) by contributing to the perception that people who do not share our moral opinions are unintelligent and/or have malevolent intentions.

Keywords

affect, culture war, empathy gap, ideology, morality, politics

Imagine that your neighbor, unbeknownst to you, has a terrible dog phobia. You have noticed that he becomes anxious whenever your dog is near, but having spent your life with dogs as pets, you have no way to appreciate his emotional reaction. He refuses to let anyone in his family come near your house, and has asked you to split the cost of a formidable fence between your properties. The last straw comes when he lashes out at you as you approach his house to discuss the fence, your miniature poodle on a leash by your side. You scuttle home and tell your spouse, “The guy is a moron. Does he really think Muffin could break her leash and attack him? I’ll be damned if I am going to help that bastard pay for his spite fence!”

We believe this anecdote captures an underappreciated dynamic of many political conflicts. Because you do not feel your neighbor’s visceral fear of dogs, you cannot understand his thoughts or behavior. To you, his fear of a leashed poodle seems stupid and irrational, and his desire to build a fence can only be explained by his disdain for you (and your little dog too). Analogously, we argue that our insensitivity to moral intuitions that differ from our own can create *moral empathy gaps* that fuel partisan conflict by obscuring the logic and intentions of those who oppose us in political debates.

Our analysis flows from two key premises of moral intuitionism:

1. *Morality is something we feel before we think.* A decade ago, Haidt (2001) argued eloquently that most moral evaluations result from “gut” level reactions more akin to aesthetic preferences than reasoned inferences. Moral reasoning, in this

view, is most typically a kind of post hoc justification initiated by social requirements to explain or defend our intuitive moral reactions to others.

2. *Different people feel morality differently.* Humans construct moral systems from a basic set of innate intuitions that serve to regulate social behavior—intuitions about who can be harmed and why, and what it means to be fair, loyal, respectful and pure (Graham, Haidt, & Nosek, 2009). Through a complicated combination of biology, culture, and personal experience, these moral sensitivities are modulated up and down in different people and groups. Individuals vary in what troubles and inspires them, and about what types of transgressions and whose well-being they care about most strongly.

From this intuitionist perspective, political ideologies, attitudes and policy preferences are organized by, and provide intellectual justification for, particular patterns of gut moral reactions. A wealth of data, including the responses of over 100,000 visitors to www.yourmorals.org (developed with Jonathan Haidt, Jesse Graham, and Ravi Iyer), have shown that political liberals (in the USA particularly) rate considerations of harm and fairness as more important moral factors than ingroup loyalty, respect for authority, or spiritual purity. Political conservatives, in contrast, rely about equally on all five moral foundations (caring slightly less than liberals about harm and fairness, but substantially more about ingroup, authority, and purity). The American “culture war” makes perfect sense when viewed as constructed upon these differing moral sensitivities

(Koleva, Graham, Ditto, Haidt, & Iyer, 2011). Conservatives, for example, feel particularly offended by perceived violations of purity (e.g., gay sexual relations) and group loyalty (e.g., flag-burning) and thus favor policies that restrict (or even punish) these moral infractions. Liberals feel particular empathy toward victims and vulnerable groups, and this sensitivity underlies attitudes favoring protection (and often redress) for these individuals (e.g., hate crime laws). Just as our dog phobic wants a physical barrier to protect whom he most loves from what he most fears, political partisans favor legal barriers to protect sacralized people, symbols and institutions from the moral threats they feel most intensely.

Importantly, political attitudes are also shaped by what people *do not* feel. Liberals seldom favor flag burning, but simply feel little enthusiasm for criminalizing it because they lack conservatives' visceral distaste toward this particular act of "desecration." Conservatives rarely celebrate prejudice and poverty, they are just less impelled than liberals to trade other values (e.g., freedom from government intrusion) to combat these social ills because they do not "feel victims' pain" with a liberal's intensity. Pockets of dampened moral sensitivity may be a key aspect of libertarian ideology as well; we have found that self-identified libertarians strongly value personal liberty, but otherwise show a distinct pattern of moral and emotional dispassion and social detachment (Iyer, Koleva, Graham, Ditto, & Haidt, 2011). It may be easier to let the market pick life's winners the less you suffer vicariously with the losers.

Recognizing the affective underpinnings of political attitudes suggests that a key dynamic underlying political conflict may be our inability to simulate other people's feelings. Baron-Cohen (1995) coined the term "mind-blindness" to describe the inability (most evident in individuals with autism spectrum disorder) to appreciate other people's beliefs and intentions. But misperceptions of mind are pervasive (Waytz, Gray, Epley, & Wegner, 2010), and both minds and mindreading involve more than just cold cognition. Indeed, the failure to apprehend another's moral mind may be less aptly characterized as a cognitive failure (like an inability to imagine another's visual perspective) than an affective one—an inability to simulate, and therefore appreciate, the visceral responses that motivate another person's moral concerns.

Research confirms that people have particular difficulty predicting the preferences and behavior of people whose affective states differ from their own (Van Boven & Loewenstein, 2005). Intuitive responses are reflexive and automatic, and thus it is difficult to turn off one's own and simulate someone else's. This can create "gaps" in our ability to empathize with moral reactions that differ from our own—both difficulties appreciating when others feel things that we do not ("cold-to-hot" empathy gaps) and difficulties appreciating when others do not feel things that we do ("hot-to-cold" empathy gaps).

A possible consequence of this "gut-blindness" is a tendency to attribute partisan attitude differences, not to differing moral sensitivities, but to more accessible social-cognitive constructs such as intellectual deficiency or malevolent intention (issues of competence and warmth, respectively; Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2006).

Liberals, for example, do not feel conservative's visceral discomfort with "nontraditional" sexuality (a cold-to-hot gap), and so may instead interpret opposition to same-sex marriage as evidence of ignorance, homophobic prejudice, or both. Conservatives may have similar difficulty recognizing that not everyone shares their reflexive sense of American exceptionalism (a hot-to-cold gap), and this could explain why they often see squeamishness about U.S. military intervention as evidence of liberal soft-headedness or even an active desire to "blame America first."

Our analysis fits well with the mirror image animosities that are so evident in contemporary America's hyper-partisan political culture, but moral empathy gaps should also influence warmth and competence judgments beyond the political context—whenever two people or groups have differing moral intuitions. Important issues for future research are whether different patterns of warmth and competence perceptions result from different kinds of empathy gaps (e.g., hot-to-cold versus cold-to-hot), and whether such gaps can also promote more violent forms of political conflict by leading individuals to perceive political adversaries as less deserving of moral rights (Waytz et al., 2010).

When people exasperated from a heated political argument exclaim that their opponents "just don't get it," moral intuitions are almost always the ineffable "it" the opponents don't "get." Unfortunately, "getting" our political opponents is no simple feat when the gap to be crossed is a matter of intuition rather than information. The intuitive origins of political partisanship make civil discourse challenging because affective differences are difficult to identify and verbalize, and thus are readily misinterpreted as evidence of our opponent's illogic or ill intention. But just as an appreciation of the intensity of your imaginary neighbor's phobia would cast a more charitable light on his actions, a hard-won empathy for the moral intuitions of our political adversaries could lead to more benign (and perhaps more productive) interpretations of their character, motivations, and policy preferences.

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