

Moral Tribes and Moral Concerns in Public Policy

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Introduction

In a May 2017 speech clarifying the federal government’s criminal justice policies, then US Attorney General Jeff Sessions called tough sentencing laws “the right and moral thing to do” (Sands 2017). This quote is memorable because the sentiment underlying it—the desire to do what’s right—presumably pertains to many other public policies. Most Americans undoubtedly expect the government to choose to do what’s right in every domain in which it acts, not just the criminal justice realm. Yet, while we all want the nation to do what’s right in theory; in practice, it is often oh-so-hard to figure out what that is.

Moral Tribes is a book that seeks to explain why the goal stated above is so difficult to achieve. It argues that our nation is a nation of moral tribes and that different tribes often disagree about moral matters, as different groups often have distinct views of what is rightful. This is the central problem of modern life according to the text. In the words of the author, “different tribes see the world through different moral lenses” (Greene 2013, p. 68).

The Nation as a Collection of Moral Tribes

Just what are these moral “tribes”? By moral tribes, Greene (2013) means that the nation can be divided into subgroups of people where each unit contains members that share a particular bond, and that the group affiliation is also commonly characterized by a sharing of the same moral views. In the societies that one often thinks about when the term “tribe” is invoked by anthropologists, the bond often takes the form of a kinship bond where all group members trace their lineage back to a common ancestor, like the tribes in the Bible; or a linguistic bond and common history, as is the case for the Native American tribes that the Pilgrims encountered upon their arrival in the “new” world. In contemporary US society, which is the temporal focus of the text, “tribes”

might be groups of people whose members share the same ethnicity, or groups that are identified by their religion. The form of “tribe” that the text is most concerned with, however, is the political camps that Americans break themselves into: progressives and social conservatives, for example. The phenomenon of interest is the groups that we are a part of that involve a common moral code.¹

Like much of evolutionary psychology, *Moral Tribes* registers no surprise that humans exist in groups whose members have shared moral norms. Scholars such as Greene and Jonathan Haidt argue that morality evolved precisely so that human beings could function in groups. Their argument is that morality is an evolutionary adaptation that allows man to cooperate with other persons in order to solve a “me versus us” problem, which then allows humans to form societies that give them a survival advantage over other species. It is humans’ ability to put aside the self-centered elements of our nature so that we can rove the earth in a group rather than in isolation that has allowed humans to thrive, i.e., to continue to spread our genes and to propagate throughout time (as the text frames the concept of thriving). Greene explains: “...maintaining cooperation is our greatest challenge. Morality is the human brain’s answer to this challenge” (Greene 2013, p. 59).

Yet the catch, according to *Moral Tribes*, is that the morality that allows humans to cooperate with other members of their group is a device that isn’t particularly suited to helping man solve the problem that human beings face today, which the author calls a “Tragedy of Commonsense Morality” problem. The essence of this new problem is that the morality that allows human beings to overcome their me-first propensities so that they can operate in a group was designed for settings in which groups competed against other groups. In contemporary society the problem humans face is how to thrive in and live peacefully in communities in which many groups live alongside each other. Such is the characteristic of the nation state, and of a globally interdependent world. Hence the morality which evolved to solve a “me versus us” problem becomes the source of an “us versus them” problem. The author says “Each tribe has its own version of moral common sense,” and he adds that the moral beliefs are so ingrained that they’re woven into the fabric of everyday life for the members of each group. The result is that we get a society with “incompatible visions of what a moral society should be” (Greene 2013, p.4).

The text proffers that the solution to the problem that humankind faces today is to first recognize that many of our nation's conflicts are ones that essentially require moral judgment in instances in which different groups are likely to hold different moral views about the matter under consideration, and then to devise a system for transcending our differences. The book proposes something called deep pragmatism as a possible solution. Deep pragmatism (DP) would be used to maximize happiness across the nation as a whole in an impartial way. Despite the importance of DP to the author, this essay does not focus on it as I do not find it to be the most interesting issue addressed by the text.²

Why Care? Social Problems as Moral Problems

Why is this book worth reading in my view? It's because all societal problems are arguably moral problems. And, any economist who is committed to policy-oriented work has to grapple with this fact.

Greene actually opens his book by discussing three economic issues in chapter one: health care, macroeconomic recessions and income inequality, but the author possibly has undersold and understated the degree to which economic policies involve moral considerations. While the text proceeds to focus on policy debates surrounding social policies and environmental policies in latter chapters, for example climate change, the death penalty, and abortion, its discussion of moral tribes seems relevant to virtually all economic policy. Even policies that do not seem to involve moral considerations at first glance typically involve some kind of moral concerns. Reflecting upon public policy in light of Greene's arguments uncovers a veil that allows one to see that, for many citizens, even seemingly innocuous topics may raise questions about moral matters.

In the economics discipline however, more often than not we act as if the merits of a policy proposal turn on matters of efficiency or on what the effects of the policy will be. Taking Greene's example of health care to illustrate my point, an economist analyzing health care reform would likely note that in a situation in which many people lack access to medical care, expanding access to health insurance can be economically beneficial from a macroeconomic perspective because of the health-human capital connection; or, that reforms can sometimes reduce inefficiencies in the health sector, for example those associated with

administrative costs that stem from insurers trying to cherry pick clients when there is not universal or broad-based coverage (Reid 2009, Cutler 1994, for example).

Yet, as Greene (2013) noted, some Americans find federal efforts to expand access to health care deeply suspicious for moral reasons. They view attempts to move toward more universal coverage as amounting to an instance in which the government taking away a person's "freedom" and because it represents a collective solution to a problem instead of holding individuals personally responsible for their own plight. It is these moral dimensions of health care reform that matter to them.

For a different example, and one addressing a more seemingly mundane policy setting, we might consider the work of policy-oriented economists who study food assistance. Studies of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) often examine its relationship to the likelihood of experiencing food insecurity, and some estimates suggest that the program may reduce food insecurity by 30% (Ratcliffe, McKernan and Zhang 2011). A policy recommendation to expand the program would not be unfathomable under such circumstances, nor would a recommendation to reauthorize the program when it comes up for renewal. Viewing the proposal through a moral lens however, some members of the general public may express concerns about whether the program violates fairness-cheating norms that they hold dear by giving someone something the latter did not earn.³

As final food for thought, consider the practice of providing access to the carpool lane for solo drivers for a fee, or the city of Philadelphia's decision to allow a private company to change the name of a subway stop from a moniker that honored a former governor to the company's name, or the practice of selling viaticals.⁴ The first two seem like reasonable ways for cash-strapped local governments to raise revenue if we view them from an economic-budgetary perspective. However, the philosopher Michael Sandel would argue that neither is purely economic (Sandel 2013). Sandel says that if we scratch below the surface we'll see that the first involves questions of fairness because not all drivers who value their time will be able to afford to pay a surcharge to access the fast lane; and, for the second example, because a subway stop is part of a public transportation system and therefore normally would be thought of as a civic good (something that belongs to everyone), while allowing a company to "buy" naming rights to the stop changes the character of the

good to make it akin to a private good (meaning that the policymaker has implicitly made a value judgment about how a public good should be viewed). Relatedly, for viaticals, an economist might initially suggest that how the industry operates is a purely regulatory matter—that is to say a question of making sure the insurance market operates in a transparent fashion. However, Sandel argues that allowing third parties to buy and sell life insurance on other humans, particularly when profits come from hoping the insured party dies early, sends the wrong message about how human life should be valued. More forcefully, Sandel (2013) would argue it commodifies life and death and degrades the value of a human life in the process.

These examples demonstrate how many of the policy topics that economics and other public policy scholars deal with can have moral undertones. This seems important for economists who care about policy to recognize. Why? The fact that solutions to societal problems often involve moral considerations is likely to be what the general public is going to be focused on if we take Greene's argument that we abide in moral tribes seriously. It therefore seems remiss for economists to fail to recognize such.

Research in psychology other than Greene's book offers a glimpse of some of the different moral considerations that matter to different groups, making it possible to be specific about the types of moral considerations that are likely to be relevant to the public. For example, Haidt (2012) would argue that it will include concerns about fairness and cheating, liberty and oppression, showing empathy and avoiding harm, holding proper reverence for that which is sacred, and respect for authority.⁵ Frameworks like Haidt's give economists a way to think about how policy proposals might get viewed and evaluated by the public once they are made.

So what if the general public cares about morality? Is there any evidence to make us think that this would really matter for the policy-making process? A skeptic might counter that policymakers will just focus on what we economists say about a particular policy's effectiveness and its efficiency implications, and just ignore any concerns that the public has about the moral implications of the policy. If this were accurate, there would be no reason for a policy-oriented economist to attempt to be more cognizant of the moral implications of any policy proposal he or she seeks to make.

In a representative democracy, it is hard to imagine that the public's views will have no sway over policy however. With a government "of the people, by the people, for the people," citizens' views presumably have some influence on what happens. Additionally, two pieces of empirical evidence suggest that citizens' concerns about morality probably do have some bearing on policymaking today. First, the nation has seen a large increase in the number of religious advocacy organizations in recent years, from fewer than 40 in 1970 to over 200 today (Pew Foundation 2012).⁶ The existence of numerous organizations advocating on behalf of their religious views suggests that moral considerations are being discussed in policy circuits, as legislators dine with lobbyists for example. Because many people get their morality from their religion, we can assume the religious lobbying reflects somebody's moral values!⁷

The rising importance of framing in policy discussions provides another piece of evidence that the general public's concerns about morality likely have an influence on policymaking. Renee Irwin (2017) and other scholars have documented the rising importance of "framing" in policy discussions. Framing occurs when policymakers attempt to embed a policy in a particular narrative in order to shape the way the public responds to it and thinks about it. Framing opens a window for moral considerations to sneak through because it creates an opportunity for savvy policymakers to push citizens' moral buttons by using certain language when discussing a policy proposal. Both Irwin (2017) and Lakoff (2002) have noted that economic issues and economic policy recommendations can be framed in such ways.⁸ Accordingly, it seems prudent for economists to think about the way the existence of moral tribes might matter for determining what policy decisions will be made.

Why is *Moral Tribes* a good book for an economist to read? While economists who do policy work tend to make proclamations about whether a particular policy change should or should not be made based on criteria such as what its effects will be or whether it will improve the efficiency of the economy's operation, after drawing on an extensive body of research by moral psychologists and neural scientists, Greene's book clearly serves to suggest that the public may not view policy this way. The policy aficionados among us may want to recognize such because doing so may allow us to be more effective. First, it implies that a policy-oriented economist can benefit from thinking about how his or

her policy recommendations might be received from a moral perspective. Second, it might help said economist be proactive in anticipating criticism that one's policy recommendations may face from the voting public.

A thoughtful economist could consider laying out some of the different moral concerns that may be salient to voters with respect to the economic problem she is working on and the policy recommendations she plans to make.⁹ If people are "hard wired" to care about morality, then we need to acknowledge and respect that.

What of the Sacred?

The interesting parts of the book notwithstanding, not all in the book is praiseworthy. While the text's argument that morality matters for the public's perception of policy is likely to be of interest to readers, many readers are likely to find the argument that morality is an adaptation that evolved for evolutionary purposes disturbing, as this view cannot avoid trivializing religion by reducing it to something less sacred than many believe it to be.

Conclusion

Moral Tribes is not the most exciting book a person will ever read, but it is an important one because it calls attention to the fact that many policy debates are inherently debates about morality. This point seems important for economists to recognize because it is likely that even policies that economists don't normally think of as moral-laden can tap concerns that some moral tribes are likely to have. This implies that economists who seek to inform policy need to be aware of the moral implications of their policy recommendations, and that it might pay to even address the moral considerations surrounding their work directly. The text therefore offers an important lesson for applied economists and policy scholars. While economists don't normally think about policy proposals this way, Greene's book is helpful in that it calls upon us to realize that perhaps we should. Christian economists may be well poised to lead the way. Moreover, by explaining Americans' differences and helping readers to understand them, the text also may help people be better Good Samaritans.

As a discipline, economics has worked hard since the enlightenment era in pursuit of the goal of becoming an objective science that distances itself from discussions of morality, but we may have strayed too far from the types of discussions our disciplinary ancestors like Adam Smith and other great political economy minds were willing to have. The economy does not operate in a vacuum.

Endnotes

1. Hence, the book would not be interested in the fact that Americans sometimes form groups around sports teams, such as the New England Patriots or the Pittsburgh Steelers, nor is the author concerned with affinity groups like basketball lovers versus hockey fans.
2. The author (Joshua Greene) would probably disagree with me since the argument that societies can use deep pragmatism as a way to surmount the challenges they face is one of the main arguments of the text. As it is not possible to address every theme that a book includes in a short essay, my essay is focused on other issues raised in the text.
3. Here I draw on Haidt's description of the six moral values that people hold dear and how they think about each moral principle (Haidt 2012).
4. These three examples come from Michael Sandel's *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets*. The viatical industry is a market for life insurance policies in which the policies of people with terminal illnesses are bought by a third party. From an economic standpoint, this transaction gives the ill patient cash up front that he or she could use as he/she pleases, while allowing the investor to gamble on whether the ill patient might die early enough for the policy's payout to give the third party a tidy profit (relative to the amount he or she paid the sick person).
5. Haidt (2012) characterizes these as the range of moral values (or "foundations" as he calls them) that Americans care about, but he notes that different subgroups of society attach different weights to each of these moral "taste receptors," with progressives focusing primarily on two of the six moral foundations, and conservatives tending to be concerned about all six.
6. The Pew data cover religious advocacy organizations operating at the Federal level only. Accordingly, these data may underestimate

the degree to which religious values are being brought to bear on policy discussions.

7. A rise in lobbying is clearly consistent with the hypothesis that moral considerations are finding their way into the conversations that policymakers are having, and although the data do not permit one to distinguish between lobbying for policies that are specifically related to religious liberty versus other policies, one imagines that when a religious lobby has the ear of a policymaker, the group will use the opportunity to raise concerns about any concerns their constituents have (not just those pertaining narrowly to religious freedom).
8. While Irwin (2017) does not focus directly on morality, several of the examples that she uses to make her points about the phrases and words that are used to frame policy discussions about inequality, represent examples of language can be argued to be directed at citizens' moral views if one applies a Lakoff-style analysis to the Irwin examples.
9. This idea can be compared to the way the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) approaches its yearly deficit reduction volume. In order to be consistent with the agency's non-partisan mission, the agency lays out the economic pros and cons associated with the elimination of any programs that are mentioned in the document, without taking any particular stance about what the correct route to take is. For economists, I envision something like a "policy viewed from different moral lenses or different moral angles" thought exercise that lays out different ways a policy might be viewed from a moral standpoint without necessarily saying which moral view should take precedence. To be clear, I am not suggesting that economists should take a particular moral stance when making policy recommendations, i.e., "you must do ___ because it's morally right." I am arguing it might pay to be mindful of the fact that the general public is likely to be interested in morality as we do our work. My argument may also extend to the way we train students. If we can get young people to learn how to talk about moral differences in a respectful way, perhaps we can reduce the borders between moral tribes.

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