MORAL FOUNDATIONS THEORY

I teamed up with a friend from my years at the University of Chicago, Craig Joseph, who had also worked with Shweder. Craig's research examined virtue concepts among Muslims in Egypt and the United States.

We borrowed the idea of "modularity" from the cognitive anthropologists Dan Sperber and Lawrence Hirschfeld.[30] Modules are like little switches in the brains of all animals. They are switched on by patterns that were important for survival in a particular ecological niche, and when they detect that pattern, they send out a signal that (eventually) changes the animal's behavior in a way that is (usually) adaptive. For example, many animals react with fear the very first time they see a snake because their brains include neural circuits that function as snake detectors.[31] As Sperber and Hirschfeld put it:

> An evolved cognitive module—for instance a snake detector, a face-recognition device . . . is an adaptation to a range of phenomena that presented problems or opportunities in the ancestral environment of the species. Its function is to process a given type of stimuli or inputs—for instance snakes [or] human faces.

This was a perfect description of what universal moral "taste receptors" would look like. They would be adaptations to long-standing threats and opportunities in social life. They would draw people's attention to certain kinds of events (such as cruelty or disrespect), and trigger instant intuitive reactions, perhaps even specific emotions (such as sympathy or anger).

This approach was just what we needed to account for cultural learning and variation. Sperber and Hirschfeld distinguished between the *original* triggers of a module and its *current* triggers.[32] The original triggers are the set of objects for which the module was designed[33] (that is, the set of all snakes is the original trigger for a snake-detector module). The current triggers are all the things in the world that happen to trigger it (including real snakes, as well as toy snakes, curved sticks, and thick ropes, any of which might give you a scare if you see them in the grass). Modules make mistakes, and many animals have evolved tricks to exploit the mistakes of other animals. For example, the hover fly has evolved yellow and black stripes, making it look like a wasp, which triggers the wasp-avoidance module in some birds that would otherwise enjoy eating hover flies.

Cultural variation in morality can be explained in part by noting that cultures can shrink or expand the current triggers of any module. For example, in the past fifty years people in many Western societies have come to feel compassion in response to many more kinds of animal suffering, and they've come to feel disgust in response to many fewer kinds of sexual activity. The current triggers can change in a single generation, even though it would take many generations for genetic evolution to alter the design of the module and its original triggers.

Furthermore, within any given culture, many moral controversies turn out to involve competing ways to link a behavior to a moral module. Should parents and teachers be allowed to spank children for disobedience? On the left side of the political spectrum, spanking typically triggers judgments of cruelty and oppression. On the right, it is sometimes linked to judgments about proper enforcement of rules, particularly rules about respect for parents and teachers. So even if we all share the same small set of cognitive modules, we can hook actions up to modules in so many ways that we can build conflicting moral matrices on the same small set of foundations.