

When Haidt says “intuitions come first, reasoning second,” he makes the argument that in our moral judgments and decision making, our intuition, or gut feeling, has primacy over our moral reasoning. This means our natural emotions about moral dilemmas will have the most influence on our moral decision-making, and our faculty of reasoning must serve these natural emotions/gut feelings, as a rider helps to guide an elephant, or as a lawyer serves a client. Haidt believes that our intuitions are based on a much older part of the brain than where our logical reasoning takes place, and thinks that intuition, the much older and more automatic guide for moral decision making, calls most of the shots.

Much research has been done to show the effects of morally “dumbfounding” a person (rendering a person unable to reason why they have a certain moral stance on a subject). An example can be seen in Haidt’s “harmless taboo” study, where he told people a story about incest, and the people often came up with a moral position they could not justify. One subject, when asked why he believed incest was wrong, said “there’s just no way I could change my mind but I just don’t know how to...show what I’m feeling” (Haidt, 47). Haidt takes this to be an example of the boss intuition taking up a moral stance for itself, while its lawyer reason simply couldn’t find a way to justify it—but in spite of this, the subject’s intuition about the incest story was not swayed. There was another study by Haidt in which people were hypnotized into feeling a flash of disgust upon hearing a certain word. They were then told six moral stories with/without their words, and “subjects judges each of the six stories to be more disgusting and morally wrong when their word was embedded in the story” (Haidt, 62). This study seems to show, as the other did, that intuition has much influence over our moral judgements, while reason has little control.

The previously mentioned study was altered afterwards by Haidt, and showed some surprising results about the relationship between intuition and reason. The subjects were given a story about “Dan”, containing their trigger words, in which Dan did nothing wrong whatsoever. Most subjects reasoned that Dan did nothing wrong, but around 1/3 of them, under the influence of their negative intuitions to their trigger words, condemned Dan. They even came up with nonsense justifications about their judgments. This study seems to show clearly that our intuitions will often cause us to take a stance on something, and the lawyer, reason, does its best to justify his client’s actions, not always to the greatest effect.

Saying that intuition, not reason, holds the reins in our morality, is quite different from the claims made by more modern rationalists like Kohlberg, and even the ancient thinkers such as Aristotle. Rationalists believe that reason, not intuition, was the chief source of our morality. Aristotle believed that reason can and should be used to control our emotions, in an attempt to avoid extremes and achieve “the mean”, and so achieve virtuousness or morality. Both of these viewpoints give primacy to reason in our moral lives. On the other hand, while Haidt doesn’t think of reason as a slave to the passions (as Hume did), he does think that our faculty of reason serves, and was developed to serve, the emotions, not the other way around. If our intuitions are an elephant, and our reasoning is the rider precariously sitting on top, Haidt might say rationalists and Aristotelians have it all wrong: they are trying to place the elephant on the rider’s back.