

Haidt explains his theory on the relationship between intuition and reason in moral decision making in the same way other philosophers always have: through metaphor. Take Plato, for instance. Plato and Haidt both use metaphors in which reason is a rider, reason is in a position to “hold the reins”, if you will. But, for Plato, reason is the charioteer of two horses that represent the other elements that factor into decision making. Reason has control. Haidt’s rider sits atop an elephant with much less control, if any, over the intuition (elephant). For Haidt, reason is a guide rather than a rider. Reason supplies its input for particular decision, when push comes to shove, the elephant will do what it wants.

Haidt’s metaphor supports his claim that, when making decisions, we follow our intuitions first and rationalize our choices later. His research and discussion mirrors that theory as well. Haidt’s “disgust and disrespect” studies provide insight into why humans are quick to make judgements. By presenting a situation in which a social norm is violated, but no one is harmed, humans will initially, default to a reaction of disgust; scrunched face, closed mouth, the occasional protruding tongue) (Haidt 2). Only then, after reacting, do they begin to justify or rationalize the situation, Haidt argues, react upon the conviction or gut feeling they have, and justify after. In some cases, Haidt’s test subjects experienced what is called dumbfounding: They made a definitive decision based upon a gut feeling or intuition, but then could not defend their position when challenged. (Haidt 3)

The elephant rules, Haidt claims. (Haidt 3) In some ways, the social intuitionist model that Haidt references directly contrasts the models of philosophers and psychologists before him. For Plato and Aristotle, reason rules. Humans are set apart as animals because we are rational beings – ancient theories supported the position of reason as being in control. Aristotle’s conception of virtue is dependent upon our ability to rationalize our emotions. By moving away from the empiricist, nativist and, to a certain degree, rationalist conflict, Haidt opens the door for a discussion of the importance of our gut feelings, our intuition. When the elephant leans, the elephant leans. Perhaps even reason has no reins to control that.