

Politics and Personhood

Each of us has a sense of personal identity: your sense of who you are as a person. Central to that personal identity is a moral sense, a sense of what is right and wrong, what justifies our actions. That moral sense, like all that we believe and understand, is physical, built into the neural circuitry of our brains. If that changes, if the circuitry characterizing our moral sense changes, it changes our personhood. That is, it changes the kind of people we are: what we think is right and how we act.

We have seen that all politics is moral, since political policies are assumed to be right, not wrong or irrelevant. Our political divisions come down to moral divisions, characterized in our brains by very different brain circuitry. We've seen that the major moral divisions in our politics derive from two opposed models of the family: a progressive (nurturant parent) morality and a conservative (strict father) morality. That is no accident, since your family life has a profound effect on how you understand yourself as a person.

The effect of family life is complex, and peers have an effect as well. One result of that is biconceptualism. Biconceptuals have both kinds of moral circuitry in their brain, mutually inhibiting each other and applying to different issues, person by person. There is no “middle,” no morally based political ideology common to all moderates.

Regardless of whether you are progressive, conservative, or biconceptual, though, your morality—your sense of what a person should be and do—is deeply connected to the way your brain triggers emotions and determines whether you feel good or bad in certain situations and about certain ideas. It is worth understanding why.

The Science behind Empathy and Morality

One of the great discoveries of neuroscience is the mirror neuron system.