OUTRAGED

WHY WE FIGHT ABOUT MORALITY AND POLITICS AND HOW TO FIND COMMON GROUND

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Introduction

Swerve: The Power of Harm

People today are divided. We are filled with outrage. We fight about morality and politics at the polls, on social media, and at the dinner table. These clashes destroy friendships and threaten our democracy. Although some people are happy to be angry, most of us want less outrage and more understanding. This book is for everyone who wants to better understand the "other side" and the hidden psychology behind moral conflicts.

Deep in our minds, every fight about morality comes down to one thing: competing perceptions of harm. We get outraged at people when they deny our assumptions about what causes suffering and when they reject our views of victimhood. In politics and everyday life, we get angry when people disagree about who is "really" harmed in a situation. Competing perceptions of victimhood fuel conflict in the media, at work, and in road rage—like the night when someone threatened to kill me.

I was sixteen and had just gotten my driver's license, speeding through suburbia in my maroon Pontiac Grand Am—nickname Fireball—while my friends gossiped and blasted 1990s hip-hop. The rain had just stopped, and the roads were slick. We were late to the movie.

We raced around the corner, and I could see the lights of the theater way up ahead. I accelerated. Suddenly someone in the back shouted over the din; we were about to blow by the shortcut to the theater. It was a left turn, and we were in the right-hand lane, so I swerved across

the road. I didn't see the brand-new Mercedes in my blind spot until I had completely cut him off.

Our tires squealed on the wet asphalt as we both spun and braked. Our cars sat in the middle of a deserted intersection, steaming in the night. There were no witnesses to my reckless driving or what happened next. I turned off the music and opened my window to apologize. The other driver got out of his car and slammed his door shut. He was in his twenties, wearing a track jacket and a thick silver chain. His eyes were dark with rage. He pointed straight at me and said, "I'm going to fucking kill you."

I panicked and stomped on the gas. Everything in the car was dead quiet; no one could believe what was happening, and no one knew what to do. The other driver got back into his car and roared after us. Within moments, he was riding my back bumper. My brain was blank, filled with nothing but fear.

Without thinking, I blindly took random turns through empty parking lots until we ended up behind a big-box store. On one side the loading docks loomed above us, and on the other side a steep hill rose. We were trapped in a dark canyon.

He weaved back and forth behind us, corralling us into the corner. He parked right behind me to cut off any escape. My friends and I felt like trapped animals. The guy got out of the car, shouted, "You're dead," and came toward us. One friend in the back seat shouted, "Lock the door!" It probably saved my life. I clicked the lock, and a second later he was hauling on the door handle, shouting, "I'm going to kick the fucking shit out of you."

I opened my window a bit to apologize again. He slipped his hand in through the narrow opening, grabbed my collar, and shook me. Then he reached down deeper, trying to unlock the door. I smacked his hand away while continuing to apologize, a mess of instincts—the raw animal drive of self-preservation and the human intuition that I had to talk with him to somehow defuse his anger.

Then the clearest thinking of my friends—the one who reminded me to lock the door—held up a cell phone (still uncommon in the late 1990s) she had borrowed from her mom that night. "Stop or I'll call the cops!" He kept shaking and slapping me for a few more moments,

then paused and said something crazy. Filled with righteous outrage, he spat, "Call the cops—I'll tell them what you did."

It didn't make any sense. *I* was the one fearing for my life. *I* was the teenager trapped in the car. He was literally assaulting me and threatening to kill me, but he thought that the law would be on *his* side. How could he be the one outraged, convinced that *he* was in the moral right?

THE ROOTS OF RIGHTEOUS INDIGNATION

I couldn't stop thinking about the events of that night. In the shower, while trying to fall asleep, while waiting in line, I was plagued by the memory of it. I would see the emptiness of that loading dock under the glare of headlights, remember the feeling of panic and helplessness and then the relief when he finally walked away from my window, got into his car, and sped off into the night.

Eventually, the memories of terror faded, but I couldn't forget his indignation. How could he be so emphatic that I was wrong and he was right, when he was the one threatening me? How could he be angry at me when I should be furious with him? He was the villain, and I was the victim.

I remained confused for a long time, but the events of that night began to make sense once I started a PhD in social psychology at Harvard, studying how our minds make sense of right and wrong. I am now a professor of psychology and neuroscience at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where I direct the Deepest Beliefs Lab and the Center for the Science of Moral Understanding. My job is to make sense of moral disagreement and find ways to help people in conflict understand each other. After more than a decade of research and over a hundred published papers, I finally have enough distance from that night to see how he could be so outraged.

The other driver was morally righteous because *he* felt victimized. He felt as if he had been harmed. He had come within a razor's edge of being injured by my reckless driving.

From my perspective, I was the one being harmed, but from his perspective he was the one in harm's way. Because each of us felt endan-

gered by the other, we both felt that we were morally right and the other person was morally wrong.

Harm explains more than road rage. It also explains why society is so angry today, with everyone arguing about who is truly a victim, and who is most vulnerable to suffering.

OUTRAGED POLITICS

People today are most obviously outraged when it comes to politics. Liberals and conservatives shout at each other at school board meetings, at political rallies, and on social media. Pro-choicers and pro-lifers call each other "monsters" and "murderers," and debates about immigration, racial inequality, and censorship focus less on policy and more on who is acting like a Nazi. Even friends and families demonize each other when it comes to moral differences. One 2021 study found that one in seven Americans ended a friendship because of arguments over COVID.[1]

Moral outrage also poisons our government. Since the 1940s, the Brookings Institution has been tracking legislative action on political issues and found that our government has acted on fewer and fewer of these issues over time. In the 1940s, Congress was gridlocked by disagreement on 30 percent of issues of public concern—like transportation, agriculture, and education—but today lawmakers are gridlocked on 75 percent of important issues.[2] Gridlock has many causes, ranging from the introduction of the filibuster to more competitive elections where legislators feel pressured to satisfy their voter base. But one critical reason is that many members of Congress are outraged at the idea of compromising with the "evil" people on the other side of the political divide.

Liberals and conservatives have always had different visions about how best to help the country, but today we often see the other side as lacking a basic moral compass. During the 2016 presidential campaign, the Democratic candidate, Hillary Clinton, described Trump supporters as a "basket of deplorables" full of racist, sexist, homophobic, and otherwise bigoted people.[3] On the right, the popular conservative commentator Matt Walsh called the Democratic Party "an abjectly evil institution" and said that Democrats' views on abortion

made them "in favor of infanticide."[4] Work from my lab finds that it's not just politicians and pundits who endorse this cynicism: many everyday people believe that people on the other side view murder, embezzlement, and even child pornography as acceptable.[5]

But even though people on the other side can act in ways that seem immoral, the vast majority of people have a basic moral sense, and it's the same no matter whom you vote for. We all have the same moral mind, one wired to care about protecting ourselves, our loved ones, and society's most vulnerable. Everyone's heart aches when confronted with the suffering of something vulnerable, like an injured puppy whimpering in fright. Everyone gets outraged when someone victimizes someone innocent, like an angry stepfather abusing his terrified stepdaughter. No matter which bumper stickers we have on our cars, where we live, or how we were raised, all human morality is driven by the same concern: harm.

THE MASTER KEY TO MORALITY

Questions of morality can be complex. For thousands of years, philosophers from Aristotle to Rawls have been arguing about the right way to act and the best way to structure society, with no clear winner in sight. Likewise, there are no easy answers when it comes to which policies are best for our cities, states, and countries. Every political choice involves complex trade-offs, whose consequences are often revealed only decades later.

Although objective questions of morality are complex, here we explore a different area—our moral psychology. We put aside questions of how we *should* make moral judgments to examine how people *do* make moral judgments. This book is *descriptive* and not *normative,* exploring how our minds make sense of morality. Of course, these two ideas of "do" and "should" can intertwine, but here we focus on the scientific question of how our moral minds work. How do people decide whether something is immoral?

When we look at our moral psychology, the picture is surprisingly simple. Deep down, we all have the same moral cognition. We all have a harm-based moral mind. Harm is the master key that unlocks understanding across the messiness of human moral judgment.

Experiments consistently reveal that our moral judgments are driven by our perceptions of harm. We condemn acts based on how much they seem to victimize someone vulnerable.[6] Acts that seem completely harmless, like walking on the beach, are judged as morally permissible. Acts that seem moderately harmful, like embezzling from a big company, are judged moderately immoral. And acts that seem very harmful, like intentionally maiming a child, seem extremely immoral. Importantly, even acts that philosophers might call harmless—from breaking promises to the dead to participating in bizarre sex acts—are judged wrong based on how much they give us the feeling that someone is being victimized.

A moral master key of harm means that if you want to know how much someone morally condemns an act, ask them how much they view it as harmful. But unlike a physical key that everyone can see, harm is a matter of perception, and this perception may not always reflect reality. Of course, some acts (like murder) seem more obviously harmful than others (like double-parking), but reasonable people often disagree about the harmfulness of an act, like whether using drugs is a harmless personal choice or something that destroys societies.

Our perceptions of harm are grounded in how we were raised and our assumptions about how the world works, and these differing assumptions give rise to differing moral judgments. If you were raised in a culture that believes in witchcraft, like rural Uganda, then you might see harm—and therefore immorality—in performing a magic ritual intended to make a neighbor sick. The Aztecs believed that their god Huitzilopochtli required human blood to wage war against the darkness every night, allowing the sun to rise again in the morning. When the conquistadors arrived, they were horrified at these ritual sacrifices, but the Aztecs believed that they were necessary to prevent the far greater harm caused by an extinguished sun.

People today all condemn ritualistic human sacrifice, but progressives and conservatives have different perceptions of harm, and this explains many moral divides. With immigration, progressives focus on the suffering of innocent children fleeing war, while conservatives highlight victims murdered by drug smugglers. With abortion, progressives see the harm suffered by women lacking access to medical care, while conservatives see the harm suffered by fetuses.

The idea that harm is a kind of moral master key goes beyond understanding political division; it helps us make sense of all moral disagreements. The driver of that Mercedes-Benz and I were not political opponents, as far as I know. As young guys from the same Canadian city, we likely agreed on most political issues, but that night we were bitterly divided by morality, each of us convinced that we were the righteous victims of harm.

Recognizing the power of harm in morality helps us understand moral disagreements and those we disagree with. When confronted with someone with different views, ask yourself, "What harm are they seeing?"

In the upcoming chapters, we will see how conflicting perceptions of harm underlie modern clashes about morality and politics. We will also see how our worries about harm are as old as humanity—even older in fact. Our ancient hominid ancestors lived their short lives terrified of harm, of being eaten by predators or being beaten by other hominids. Even as *Homo sapiens* emerged, we remained easy pickings for hungry tigers and jealous neighbors, cementing our preoccupation with threats.

Today we are safe from being eaten, and safer from being beaten, but we still cannot shake our feelings of fear, like when we scroll through social media. Rather than worrying about obvious physical harm from predators, we fret over more subjective harms like the threat of political rivals gaining power or the wrong court decisions. The ambiguity over what is truly harmful to modern humans in our modern world creates ample space for disagreement and outrage. Take guns, for example. Some believe that handguns obviously hurt families, and others believe that handguns obviously protect families, and these different perceptions drive political division.

The argument of this book is simple: *We have a harm-based moral mind. Our evolutionary past makes us worry about harm, but people today disagree about which threats are most important or most real, creating moral outrage and political disagreement.* All people have the same human nature grounded in worries about ancient threats, and all people are concerned about the looming harm of modern threats. But while someone on the left might emphasize the threats of growing inequality between rich and poor, systemic racism, and the destruc-

**Our evolutionary past makes us all worry about harm,
but today we disagree about which threats are most real,
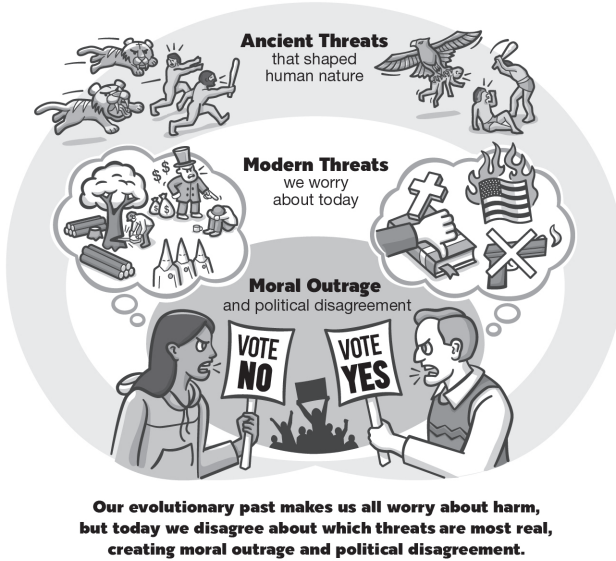creating moral outrage and political disagreement.**

Figure I.1: We have a harm-based moral mind.

tion of the environment, someone on the right might emphasize the threats of banning firearms, restricting religious freedoms, and destroying sacred national symbols.

The key point is that perceptions of harm on both sides are *sincere,* even if they don't immediately make sense to you. It is tempting to dismiss someone's feelings of threat as misguided or exaggerated, but studies show that our moral convictions are underlain by genuinely perceived harms. Once you empathize with people's perceptions of harm—often by learning about their experiences of suffering—you can better understand people on the other side.

A BOOK TO BETTER UNDERSTAND OURSELVES AND OUR DIFFERENCES

In the coming pages, we will dive into our harm-based minds, exploring why harm is important in morality, how exactly perceptions of harm shape our modern moral world, and how to use the idea of harm to better bridge divides. Our discussions will be grounded in science, especially moral psychology and anthropology, but I'll take care to

illustrate key points by using personal anecdotes because—as we'll see—stories can resonate more than raw statistics. By the end of this book, you will better understand your own moral mind and be better able to navigate moral differences.

I have seen firsthand how learning about the power of harm in our moral minds can foster "moral understanding," even in situations where understanding is rare. I have taught college students to have more meaningful conversations with their friends and family about contentious issues. I have taught faith leaders to turn down the dial on political conflict in their congregations as they navigate fights over affirmative action, pandemics, immigration, gender, and sexuality. Learning about the science and practice of our harm-based morality will help you become less outraged when people make different moral judgments.

This book covers three big ideas. First, we explore *why* harm drives our moral minds. We will delve deep into our evolutionary past, where potential harm was everywhere. Even though many modern humans live in safety, we are hardwired to perceive threats. Millions of years of being hunted have made us preoccupied with danger, but without saber-toothed cats to fear, we fret about elections, arguments in group texts, and decisions at PTA meetings.

Second, we will explore *how* harm fuels morality. We will see how harm underlies moral judgments about different kinds of acts, and how it drives disagreements between liberals and conservatives. Appreciating the power of harm in morality explains many quirks in human behavior, like why it's rare to think of victims as evil, or of villains as suffering. We will also examine why harms to ourselves seem more obvious than harms to other people, and why social media fuels the competition for victimhood.

Third, we will explore the *practical takeaways* of our harm-based mind—what can we do to better manage moral conflict? We will see how sharing stories about experiences of suffering can make people more willing to interact across moral divides and how affirming people's feelings of threat can reduce the temperature of moral outrage and bring people closer together.

The three parts of this book—"Human Nature," "Our Moral

Mind," and "Bridging Moral Divides"—focus on harms of the past, the harms we see in the present, and how the idea of harm can provide a better future. Each of these three sections is preceded by a myth, a popular but mistaken idea that prevents us from appreciating our harm-based moral minds. The next few pages provide a bird's-eye overview of these sections and the chapters within each.

PART 1: HUMAN NATURE

MYTH 1: THE MYTH OF HUMAN NATURE: WE EVOLVED AS APEX PREDATORS

Many assume that humans—and our ancestors—are apex predators, aggressive primates who are more likely to kill than be killed. Modern humans are undoubtedly the masters of the natural world and the top of the food chain. But for most of history, as our minds were slowly evolving into what they are now, we were less predators and more prey. Chapter 2 explores how our ancestors were not the bloodthirsty "killer apes" that many believe them to be, but instead frightened creatures worried about being killed and eaten. These ancestral concerns about victimization shape our modern lives.

To protect themselves from predation, our ancestors banded together into groups and developed our trademark adaptation: big brains suited to social environments. But, as chapter 3 shows, living in groups posed a significant problem: we could be harmed by other people. To reduce the threat of this aggression, humankind developed a sense of morality and feelings of moral outrage. This moral sense allowed us to cooperate, paving the way for modern society, and allowed us to moralize many different values; but at its core our moral minds are grounded in avoiding harm.

Today society is safer than ever—in part because of our moral concern—but we remain vigilant for danger. Chapter 4 reveals that this increasing safety, when paired with our innate drive to detect harms, shifts the goalposts for what counts as "harmful." What once seemed innocuous decades ago, like rough-and-tumble games, can now seem traumatic.[7] This "creep" of harm is why we seem to coddle today's children, but it also drives moral progress as we continue to press for more protections. But even if modern society is safer than

ever, one modern invention—social media—supercharges our perceptions of danger, helping to fuel online moral panics.

PART 2: OUR MORAL MIND
MYTH 2: THE MYTH OF THE MORAL MIND: THERE ARE HARMLESS WRONGS

One popular theory from moral psychology separates concerns about harm from other moral concerns, arguing for the existence of "harmless wrongs"—acts that people condemn despite seeming to harm no one, like breaking promises to the dead. Harmless wrongs seem to argue against a harm-based moral mind, but we will see how the idea of harmless wrongs is a myth. Chapter 5 charts the arc of the field of moral psychology and our changing understanding of the moral mind, first beginning with how children make sense of right and wrong, before examining how one sect of Brahmin Indians challenged Western-centric notions of morality. We then see how moral psychology mistakenly leaped from the idea of moral diversity across cultures—which is obviously true—to the idea that our moral minds are divided into separate little rooms.

Chapter 6 explains a new harm-based theory of moral judgment, grounded in a new understanding of harm. While past theories considered harm a matter of reasoning, it is better understood as an intuitive perception, something that we just feel in our gut. Studies show that feelings of harm are the master key of morality: all people judge acts as wrong based on how harmful they feel, explaining how even so-called harmless wrongs can be condemned based on harm. This finding provides a new understanding of morality and provides a powerful lingua franca to connect with others across divides.

Even if we all share a harm-based mind, people clearly disagree about morality. Chapter 7 reveals the roots of this disagreement: different people see different things as especially vulnerable to harm. Much of political disagreement between the left and the right can be explained by different perceptions of four clusters of entities: the Powerful, the Environment, the Divine, and the Othered. Zooming out from perceptions of specific groups, liberals tend to divide the world into two camps—the vulnerable oppressed versus the invul-

nerable oppressors—while conservatives see everyone as similarly susceptible to victimization. These differences in assumptions about vulnerability help explain many moral differences, especially reactions to social justice movements.

Chapter 8 explores how the judgments of everyone—whether you lean liberal or conservative—are lopsided when it comes to assigning blame. We all seek to simplify messy moral situations, seeing one side as 100 percent the righteous victim and the other side as 100 percent the blameworthy villain. Once we label someone the "true" victim, they seem totally innocent, and their victimizer seems cold and callous. This black-and-white distribution of victimhood is called moral typecasting, and it is why victims escape blame and why no one worries about the suffering of villains.

Even if we often disagree on questions of vulnerability and blame, chapter 9 shows that everyone agrees on the most obvious victim: themselves. Because we are best acquainted with our own suffering, our own victimhood seems more obvious than the victimhood of others. Luckily, most people do not walk around feeling like victims all the time, but once people start competing for victimhood, we almost always put ourselves first. Competitive victimhood can entrench and inflame conflicts, both around the world and in our everyday lives.

PART 3: BRIDGING MORAL DIVIDES

MYTH 3: THE MYTH OF BRIDGING DIVIDES: FACTS BEST BRIDGE DIVIDES

Ever since the Enlightenment, facts have reigned supreme. What is true is what is supported by facts. This explains why most people think the best way to bridge divides is to share facts with each other. Sadly, the power of facts to increase respect within moral debates is a myth. Flinging statistics at each other does not foster understanding when it comes to morality, because one person's facts are another person's lies, especially in politics.

Chapter 10 reveals how sharing personal experiences of harm—not facts—helps create common ground. Discussing the feelings of threat that drive your moral judgments makes you seem both more human and more rational, because everyone understands the desire to avoid suffering. Of course, it's not always easy to be vulnerable with someone

you're arguing with, and so chapter 11 explores important wisdom about how to encourage opening up in conversations that make us want to shut down.

AN INITIAL STUMBLING BLOCK

These widely held myths about human nature, the moral mind, and bridging moral divides all stand in the way of truly understanding our minds and each other. But there's one more faulty preconception that is especially tenacious today. It's the idea that we shouldn't even attempt to make sense of the other side. When we are locked in a battle of us versus them, merely trying to understand "them" can feel like betrayal. In Chapter 1, we explore this feeling and the culture war that seems to rage around us.

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