

Dumbfounded: A more excellent way

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [October 30, 2007](#) issue

In my mind, reductionism translates as “nothing buttery.” Belief in God, for example, is seen as “nothing but” the result of certain neuron firings in the brain. Altruism, formerly seen as spiritual or religious at root, becomes “nothing but” an expression of “the selfish gene.” Free will is reduced from spiritual and moral agency to neural determinism.

Now the reach of genetic research has reached to moral systems based on the way people who are “disgusted” and “dumbfounded” are wired. Nicholas Wade’s excellent piece on the subject is headlined: “Is ‘Do Unto Others’ Written into Our Genes?” (*New York Times*, September 18). Featured scientist Jonathan Haidt of the University of Missouri cautiously responds, “In large part, ‘yes.’”

Haidt, author of *The Happiness Hypothesis*, studied “people’s reactions to situations like that of a hungry family that cooked and ate its pet dog after it had become roadkill.” He explored “the phenomenon of moral dumbfounding—*when people feel strongly that something is wrong but cannot explain why* [emphasis mine].” In Haidt’s view, moral dumbfounding occurs when “moral judgment fails to come up with a convincing explanation for what moral intuition [which is also in our genes, he thinks] has decided.”

Wade writes that Haidt believes “religion has played an important role in human evolution by strengthening and extending the cohesion provided by the moral systems.” “If we didn’t have religious minds we would not have stepped through the transition to groupishness,” says Haidt. “We’d still be just small bands roving around.” For instance, some roving ancestors of humans may have come across a road-killed pet, watched a family roast and eat it, and thought something was wrong about that, but what? As Haidt says : “I first found divinity in disgust.”

Envision these humans stammering, “Did you see what I saw? Let’s get together to make sense of things.” Community and religion follow.

Of course, Haidt finds that those genetically predetermined to be liberal were disgusted and dumbfounded by other things than were those predetermined to be conservative.

Application? Dear readers: you all know that most congregations and denominations are split down the middle and at war among themselves over two issues: abortion and homosexuality. Both sides make huge moral issues of both, and both react in disgust at the other's approaches. It's dumbfounding.

On abortion: there are good philosophical reasons to oppose abortion. The theological case is weaker, and as for the biblical, there is no case. (Read Garry Wills's convincing new *Head and Heart: American Christianities*.) Antiabortion advocates, however, are disgusted over abortion and dumbfounded that anyone can see it otherwise. Pro-choice people are disgusted when mothers cannot be the main determiners of the abortion issue, and dumbfounded that their opponents don't see it that way.

On homosexuality, admit it: there are several passages in the Bible opposing homosexual acts, so the antis have one scriptural base. Yet listen in and you'll find that they have converged on this issue because they are disgusted about described homosexual acts.

In the brave new world of genetic determinism, we might get new angles of vision on these two issues. We might transcend the tongues of genetic determinism, quote 1 Corinthians 12: "But I will show you a more excellent way," and go on to live with what the 13th chapter is about: love. Or am I forgetting that love is also determined? If so, I am dumbfounded.