

Six Rules for Modern Herders

Excerpted from *Moral Tribes* by Joshua Greene

Rule No. 1. In the face of moral controversy, consult, but do not trust, your moral instincts

Your moral intuitions are fantastic cognitive gizmos, honed by millions of years of biological evolution, thousands of years of cultural evolution, and years of personal experience. In your personal life, you should trust your moral instincts and be wary of your manual mode, which is all too adept at figuring out how to put Me ahead of Us. But in the face of moral controversy, when it's Us versus Them, it's time to shift into manual mode. When our emotional moral compasses point in opposite directions, they can't both be right.

Rule No. 2. Rights are not for making arguments; they're for ending arguments

We have no non-question-begging way of figuring out who has which rights and which rights outweigh others. We love rights (and duties, rights' frumpy older sister), because they are handy rationalization devices, presenting our subjective feelings as perceptions of abstract moral objects. Whether or not such objects exist, there's little point in arguing about them. We can use "rights" as shields, protecting the moral progress we've made. And we can use "rights" as rhetorical weapons, when the time for rational argument has passed. But we should do this sparingly. And when we do, we should know what we're doing: When we appeal to rights, we're not making an argument; we're declaring that the argument is over.

Rule No. 3. Focus on the facts, and make others do the same

For deep pragmatists, one can't know whether a proposal is good or bad without knowing how it's supposed to work and what its effects are likely to be. Nevertheless, most of us readily pass judgment on policies—from environmental regulations to healthcare systems—that we barely understand. Public moral debate should be a lot wonkier. We should force ourselves, and one another, to know not only which policies we favor or oppose, but how these policies are supposed to work. We should provide—and demand—evidence about what works and what doesn't. And when we don't know how things work, in theory or in practice, we should emulate the wisdom of Socrates and acknowledge our ignorance.

Rule No. 4. Beware of biased fairness

There are different ways of being fair, and we tend to favor, often unconsciously, the version of fairness that suits us best. Because biased fairness is a kind of fairness, it's hard to see that it's biased, especially in ourselves. We do this as individuals, and we do this as loyal members of our respective tribes. Sometimes we make personal sacrifices to further the biased fairness of our tribes—a kind of biased selflessness.

Rule No. 5. Use common currency

We can argue about rights and justice forever, but we are bound together by two more basic things. First, we are bound together by the ups and downs of the human experience. We all want to be happy. None of us wants to suffer. Second, we all understand the Golden Rule and the ideal of impartiality behind it. Put these two ideas together and we have a common currency, a system for making principled compromises. We can agree, over the objections of our tribal instincts, to do whatever works best, whatever makes us happiest overall. To figure out what works best, we need a common currency of value, but we also need a common currency of fact. There are many sources of knowledge, but the most widely trusted, by far, is science, and for good reason. Science is not infallible, and people readily reject scientific knowledge when it contradicts their tribal beliefs. Nevertheless, nearly everyone appeals to scientific evidence when it suits them. (Would creationists not jump for joy if, tomorrow, credible scientists were to announce that the earth is, in fact, just a few thousand years old?) No other source of knowledge has this distinction. In our tribal quarters, and in our hearts, we may believe whatever we like, But on the new pastures, truth should be determined using the common currency of observable evidence.

Rule No. 6. Give

As individuals, we don't get to make the rules by which we live. But each of us makes some important, life-and-death decisions. By making small sacrifices, we in the affluent world have the power to dramatically improve the lives of others. As creatures wired for tribal life, our sympathies for distant "statistical" strangers are weak. And yet few of us can honestly say that our most luxurious luxuries are more important than saving someone's life, or giving someone without access to healthcare or education a brighter future. We can delude ourselves about the facts, denying that our donations really help. Or, if we're more philosophically ambitious, we can rationalize our self-serving choices. But the honest response, the enlightened response, is to acknowledge the harsh reality of our habits and do our best to change them, knowing that a partially successful honest effort is better than a fully successful denial.