

A multiple-constituency approach to ethics in cartography

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Abstract:

The cartographers I know wish to be good people. We wish to do right, to behave morally and ethically. But agreement on what that means, a simple rubric to work towards that broad goal across the field, has been elusive. Why is that?

My central argument here is that we have focused on morality as a thing in itself, rather than as a quality embedded in the institutional and personal relationships we are party to. We make moral arguments that rely on claims of universality rather than on the ways our individual ongoing practices intersect with the moralities carried by the groups we serve and/or are part of. While it may seem to strengthen an argument by aligning it with claimed universal values, in this case it does not, as morality gains its power in aligning activity within groups, and when we face conflicting moral claims from different groups we are part of, the resolution of that conflict must be grounded in the social facts of that conflict, not just reliance on the universal claims each group makes.

The growing field of moral psychology has in the last couple decades engaged in experimentally tested research on the basis and structure of moral judgment. Jonathan Haidt's book *The Righteous Mind* (2012) makes the case that most moral judgment is fast and pre-rational, while moral *reasoning* is largely a matter of justifying those quick judgments *post hoc*. Haidt's experiments demonstrate that in the old debate between Platonic models of morality grounded in reason, and Hume's argument that morality stems from human passions, Hume wins. We may codify morality, but in the process we are usually cataloguing more than generating it.

In exploring the non-rational basis for moral judgment, and wondering about its universal presence as a feature of our species, Haidt focuses on morality's roots in group formation, alignment, and reinforcement. He argues that we acquire our moral sense as members of groups, and that the foundational "switches" that undergird human morality (he identifies six; competing models come up with different formulations) trigger what he calls "groupish" (rather than individualistic) behavior.

The field of cartography, at least in the English-speaking world, began seriously addressing moral and ethical issues in the early 1990s, and I would argue that the rhetorical tone of the discussion slid down a runaway in those few years and has guided our discourse ever since. In the fall of 1990, *Cartographic Perspectives* published a roundtable discussion by representatives of commercial, government, and academic cartography, who focused largely on issues ethical issues within the profession: respecting copyright, diligence in map accuracy, and adherence to standards (McHaffie et al. 1990). The next summer, J.B. Harley's essay "Can There Be a Cartographic Ethics?" (1991) responded to this roundtable by pointing to the moral imperative of considering cartography's place in the wider world. The same year, Mark Monomonier's *How to Lie With Maps* (1991) was published, exploring the ways the supposedly objective language of maps can be used to stretch the truth and manipulate opinion, and did so from the calmer viewpoint of the roundtable discussion. The next year, Denis Wood's book *The Power of Maps* (1992) took the question of maps as tools of social and political power and oppression as his central ethical, using a contentious tone, and that direction has been a central point of moral and ethical issues ever since.

My experience at NACIS conferences since 2000 is of a series of talks that bend towards the personal and impassioned. Examples that come to my mind include further arguments by Wood and John Krygier (2006) pointing to maps as rhetorical propositions rather than documents of fact; Steven Holloway's "Right Map Making" (2007) that advocates for our bodily presence in our mapped geography "in order for a future to be possible;" elin o'Hara slavick's *Bomb After Bomb* (2007), which implicates cartographic technology in the technology of bombing; and a presentation on work by the Holocaust Geographies Collaborative (Knowles 2014), arguing that victims of mass murder should be treated as individuals and not statistical points. In each case, there was a rhetorical attempt to "break through" a kind of wall of convention that cartography represented and was held to be complicit in, to shake cartographers awake to the consequences of their actions and their complicity in morally problematic aspects of the wider world. Thirty years later, we continue to hear these calls to action in the name of diversity and inclusion issues within the field, and in cartography's complicity in social injustice, environmental degradation, violence, and political oppression.

The reason I am foregrounding the tenor of these various arguments is that I don't think that the tone is separable from the nature of moral questions. Haidt argues that moral passion, the visceral desire to be aligned with rightness and push

back against wrongness, is a fundamental social trait and that it tends to operate as a driver of action in social groups. So what we see in the calmer, more removed discussions are discussions *about* ethics and morality, and in the more impassioned calls for action, we see ethics and morality *actually in action* within the social group.

In all of those early approaches to ethics, we can see on one hand people providing anecdotal examples of moral dilemmas and codes from their direct experience—examples that are grounded in specific social contexts. But they also call upon things like universal rights, basic human decency, and the idea of rule of law, to ground their wider arguments. This is nearly universal in how we frame moral arguments: while the application is local, the grounding is held to come from a wider principle or often a sacred source. Haidt sidesteps this question entirely, in defining the "source" of morality as being organic to the species.

The question I've been mulling over for decades now is how to find a bridge between these larger moral, and the local, often petty day-to-day lives we live as cartographers. As a well-respected fellow cartographer said to me *sotto voce* after one of the NACIS presentations on our moral peril, "So what?" How does this argument, this urgent call, actually *apply*, in a functional way? How does it actually fit with my life? I want to propose that by focusing on moral issues as matters of social connection, by clearly laying out those connections and clarifying what moral and other obligations those connections ask of us, we can more clearly see how our moral universe as cartographers is as much a matter of negotiation as it is of strong principle.

We all have multiple groups or constituencies for whom we make maps. In a recent talk for NACIS, "Who am I making this map for?" (Case, 2020), I proposed six broad constituencies: (1) end users—map readers, (2) paying clientele (including potentially our own organization as bill-payer), (3) the broader production team that we are part of, (4) cartography as a field, and specifically as a set of graphic traditions we feed from and in turn feed into, (5) the wider world and its moral and ethical concerns, and (6) ourselves, with our own individual consciences and needs.

I have found this formulation clarifying when it comes to those broader calls to moral cartography that have been present for my whole professional career. In particular, they offer a way to separate and compare claims of universal moral value and other constituents' claims of moral primacy. In general, each constituency either claims that primacy at one time or another or has had it claimed for them. Their rhetorical frames for that claim varies from overt pressure (e.g. "you are our employee, so what we say goes"), to practical urgency (as with many environmental and social justice issues), to calls to our humane conscience. I believe this perspective can help us see our proper role not as blind servant of any one moral constituency, but as a kind of negotiator amongst multiple competitors for our adherence.

Thinking in terms of constituencies can also help clarify the actual functional group(s) that hold any power. Who specifically has the ultimate power to decide what goes on the map? Is that power based on personal judgment or is it embedded in stated policies, regulations or statutes? What is the practical power balance between institutional hierarchy and the broader user base or general public? Who will ever see this map? Whose judgment over its quality matters most? When restated this way, the social context of a moral or ethical issue may become clearer, and the path towards its resolution (or unresolvability) may in turn become clearer.

Accusations of moral relativism, whataboutism, and convenient dodging of a morally urgent question may seem to be inherent in this approach, but I don't believe these traps are anything like automatic. What this formulation should help avoid is vague positing of moral standards without attaching them to a particular source. If anything, it forces us to face the responsibilities we carry individually and as part of functional groups, and asks constituents to be clear about their moral stance, instead of gesturing to a universal standard that "all right-thinking people" believe. It makes ownership of moral claims harder to avoid.

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