Evolutionary Moral Psychology and Roman History

This paper expands on cross-disciplinary applications of psychology to Roman society (e.g. Fagan 2011), and utilizes evolutionary moral psychology to broadly explore two key moments of Rome's history–its domination of the Mediterranean, and consequent transition from republic to empire.

Recent research in moral psychology posits the existence of six moral receptors, or cognitive-emotional modules, that humans evolved to enable cooperative and competitive societies (Haidt 2012). Each relates to a broad dichotomy of moral evaluation: 1. care/harm (concern for vulnerable members of one's group, and outrage at seeing them harmed), 2. fairness/cheating (concerning reciprocal altruism, justice and rights, but also proportionality between rights, benefits and duties), 3. loyalty/betrayal (motivating patriotism and self-sacrifice for the group and hatred of traitors), 4. authority/subversion (inducing respect for authority and tradition and enabling meaningful hierarchies), 5. sanctity/degradation (religious feelings rooted in disgust of contamination but also including the desire for moral elevation), and 6. liberty/oppression (resentful reaction to abused authority and restricted freedom). See the summary here: http://moralfoundations.org.

These modules evolved as essential for group cohesion, survival and competition, but their original triggers are to be distinguished from current ones – to illustrate, animals often have panic responses when seeing a snake for the first time, but this can be triggered by a piece of rope. (See Haidt (2012). Crucial to the Roman context is the notion that "cultures can shrink or expand the current triggers of any module." I contend that there is a startling link between Rome's unique cultural interface with these

modules/receptors, and its success both in dominating the Mediterranean basin, and then transitioning to the imperial system.

The last five of the six moral foundations resonate strongly in Roman culture, and help comprise the particularity of what has recently been described as a Roman "national character" (Macmullen 2011, cf. Ando's (2015) use of cognitive linguistics to "map fundamental structures of thought specific to particularized linguistic and discursive systems"). The theory reinvigorates the debate regarding Roman expansion over the Mediterranean vis-à-vis the works of Badian (1968), Harris (1979) and, most recently Eckstein (2006) – the latter convincingly posits the structure of interstate relations as responsible for Roman militarism, but weakly accounts for Rome's competitive edge (vaguely attributing it to manpower mobilization and cultural inclusiveness). This gap is filled nicely by moral foundations theory, as Roman culture could have interacted with these modules more efficiently than its competitors, and in doing so could also have facilitated cultural assimilation, both in the republic and empire, by presenting them in a particularly attractive way. To cite examples: fairness/cheating ties into the intense and particular Roman concept of *fides* (Heinze 1929), loyalty and betrayal features more prominently and differently in Roman historical narratives, (e.g. in Livy, the proscription narratives in Dio and Appian, etc.), than they do in Hellenic ones, authority/subversion involves the particular Roman concept of *auctoritas*, untranslatable into Greek (Heinze 1925, Galinsky 1998), sanctity and degradation relate to the Roman fixation on ritual (which had positive effects on group cohesion and motivation regardless of the legitimacy of belief), and liberty/oppression, is again, very prominent in Roman narratives (the failure of Caesar's dictatorship is a textbook example of disregarding this

trigger). In particular, it is interesting to notice cultural and political idiosyncrasies that manage the authority/subversion and liberty/domination dichotomies – see, e.g. Nicolet (1976) (on "geometric proportionality,") Flaig (1995) (on the idiosyncratic and authoritarian structure of Roman assemblies) and Béranger (1948) and Wallace-Hadrill (1982) (on the ritual of political *recusatio*). Moreover, manipulation of these modules highlights, in a striking way, the success of Augustan leadership and "propaganda" in the transition to the *principate* (see, e.g. their resonance themes in Livy's presentistic narrative, the themes in Augustan art, the *Res Gestae*, etc.).

In sum, this theory finds striking confirmations in and applications to the Roman world in pivotal moments of western civilization.

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