HIVES, DAMN HIVES, AND THE INTERNET

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In late 2010, a loosely knit group of internet denizens who call themselves Anonymous launched cyber attacks against Amazon, MasterCard, PayPal, Visa, and PostFinance using a tactic known as "distributed denial of service," or DDOS, overwhelming the attacked sites' servers and rendering them inaccessible for several hours. The companies became targets because they had, in response to political pressure, either stopped hosting or frozen donations to the whistleblower website WikiLeaks, which was then in the midst of releasing a huge number of classified U.S. diplomatic cables to the public. Anonymous had evolved out of chatrooms on the website 4chan.org, and first gained attention in 2008 staging pranks on the Church of Scientology. Since then, the group has launched attacks on the government websites of countries including Australia and Iran, white supremacist radio host Hal Turner, the Koch brothers, and alleged sexual predator Chris Forcand (it was actually Anonymous, in a *To Catch A Predator*-like trap, that led to the arrest of Forcand in the first place). Since the pro-WikiLeaks operation, Anonymous has also launched attacks in support of the protests in Egypt, Tunisia, and Wisconsin (Grigoriadis). Generally, but not exclusively, Anonymous targets organizations that it perceives as suppressors of free speech and freedom of expression, or who seek to influence others through dishonesty.

Though individual members (or people who claim to be members) have come forward and been interviewed by the press, Anonymous remains largely faceless. An estimated fifty thousand people took part in the WikiLeaks operation, enlisted not only through chatrooms on 4chan and IRC, but also through the group's website and Twitter account (Grigoriadis). Anonymous' slogan ("We do not forgive. We do not forget. We are legion") and their penchant for wearing Guy Fawkes masks in public underlines their desire to remain, well, anonymous. Lacking definitive sources or informative press releases, characterizations by the media and social commentators run the gamut: from activists, civil disobedients, and allies against oppression at one end to vigilantes, vandals, and immature adolescents throwing a collective temper tantrum at the other. These characterizations probably reveal as much about the commenters as they do about Anonymous.

Often, the question of whether a group is aligned with devils or angels must wait for some historical consensus. Civil rights protestors and activists, investigated in the 1960s by the FBI as criminal organizations, have been vindicated as heroes by the passage of time. Inversely, the Ku Klux Klan, self-appointed guardians of the white Christian Southern way of life and accepted by the early twentieth-century power structure, has been condemned as a white supremacy group that used fear and violence to terrorize black citizenry. Groups organize and gain influence over a period of

months or years, and as they evolve, so do our analyses of them (though of course, we interact with these organizations in real-time). But Anonymous exists and acts amid a unique and often brutal Internet culture that is evolving at a speed to which we—as both participants and observers—have yet to adapt. As the Internet and its various subcultures spill out into the real world, they take on a force borne of networking ability that has not been seen before.

Though Anonymous's actions are often illegal and some of its members have been arrested, in a network that is fifty thousand strong and scattered across the globe, individual participants—like a school of fish in which each individual feels safe because it's surrounded by others—can operate with relative impunity or fear of the law, and (collectively speaking) with a disconcerting amount of power. As British author Alan Moore asked, "Who watches the Watchmen?" How we characterize such groups will, in large part, define how we react to them, and as social trends and events develop at ever-increasing speeds, we need to feel assured that groups will use their power in a moral, benevolent way. What do we have to fear from Anonymous? If it makes decisions based on morality, then we can make some predictive assumptions about its behavior. But is morality an appropriate standard to apply to a group like Anonymous?

Morality can be surprisingly slippery. It is generally simplified as "a code of conduct that applies to all who can understand it and can govern their behavior by it," and is assumed to be beneficial (if not downright essential) to individuals and society as a whole (Stanford). Moral codes feel "mandatory and universal" to the point that the thought of violating them often feels impossible (even in hypothetical situations), but despite their universal appearance, which suggests some basis in evolution, moral codes vary widely from culture to culture (Pinker 56). Yet morals are often oddly inexplicable, both to the people who follow them and to outside observers.

Consider, for example, the Trolley Problem, devised by philosophers Philippa Foot and Judith Jarvis Thomson. A runaway trolley is hurtling towards five men, and only you can save them. You can pull a lever that will throw a switch and divert the trolley onto a spur, killing only one man who happens to be there. Or you can hurl a fat man off a bridge, landing on the tracks and stopping the trolley, killing the fat man but saving five people. With either option, the math is the same. So why do people generally find the first option easy to answer (yes, divert the trolley), and feel morally conflicted about the second (don't kill the fat man) (Pinker 35)? Were morality simply logic and rules, there would be no disparity between the two options. Irrational functions like emotions and a sense of justice have somehow become deeply entangled in our moral brains.

Today, as scientists join generations of philosophers and religious thinkers, using twenty-first-century tools like fMRIs and large-scale survey studies to discover why morals have such a hold on our psyches, we are beginning to discover just how complicated our moral reasoning can be. When asked to explain why certain actions are moral or immoral, many people struggle to articulate a reason. Moral reactions can

be among the strongest that we have as a species, and yet we can barely explain the reasons behind them. It turns out that moral decisions—in particular, moral dilemmas—engage several different areas of the brain, including emotional and rational centers, logic as well as instinct (Pinker 35). A challenge for social scientists has been addressing how a moral sense can be "universal and [yet] variable at the same time" (Pinker 37).

Psychologist Jonathan Haidt, though not explaining the evolutionary source of morality, describes some of the underlying patterns and universal themes that underpin our culturally variable morals. He outlines five foundational categories: harm/care, fairness/reciprocity, in-group/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity (999). One of the reasons morals can seem so different, Haidt argues, is that different cultures prioritize the five themes differently; Asian cultures, for example, value obedience to authority and loyalty to the group more highly than Americans, who tend to emphasize fairness and reciprocity. Haidt describes morals not in terms of moral reasoning, but as moral intuition. People start at the moral conclusion and work backwards, a "post-hoc process in which we search for evidence to support our initial intuitive reaction" (998). Morals also serve a utilitarian social function, bringing groups together. Morality "binds and builds; it constrains individuals and ties them to each other" (1000). A common context helps members of the same culture, even if they don't know each other, to predict each other's behavior and establish a baseline of trustworthiness. For example, on the assumption of trustworthiness, creative writing groups—often comprised of relative strangers—share personal pieces with each other on the assumption that other group members won't steal their creative product. Any member caught doing so would be asked to leave the group. Morality, in this sense, has a coercive effect. The reward of being a moral person is that you are a trusted and included member; people who violate a group's moral codes are untrustworthy and no longer welcome (Haidt 1000).

The standards of morality Haidt offers help us to better understand Anonymous. They value fairness highly, believe that everyone has the right to personal expression, do not respect authority at all, and act mostly (if not exclusively) in support of their moral intuitions. Perhaps they arrive at a moral conclusion to justify their actions, rather than the other way around, but this tactic is common in moral reasoning. It's possible that those who argue that Anonymous is nothing but a bunch of internet vandals do not understand the value system in which their actions make moral sense.

Admittedly, Anonymous' immediate social context complicates and possibly undermines their claim on morality. The website that spawned Anonymous, 4chan.org, is a notorious gathering place of "trolls," or internet users who delight in upsetting unsuspecting people in any number of ways, for no other reason other than "lulz" (a bastardization of LOLs, or LOL, internet speak for "laughing out loud"—they do it because it's funny). 4chan, for example, went after Jessi Slaughter, an 11-year-old girl who attracted their attention after posting a YouTube video (in response

to another Internet dispute unrelated to 4chan) saying, among other things, "This is to all you fucking haters, okay? Guess what—you guys are bitches…I don't give a fuck. I'm happy with my life, okay? If you can't realize that and stop hating, I'll pop a Glock in your mouth and make a brain slushie."[1] 4chan users decided to call her bluff, and taunted and insulted her on her YouTube vlog, MySpace, Facebook, and email. Some 4chan users tracked down her real name, home phone number, and address, and made numerous prank phone calls as well as (according to the family) death threats and accusations of child abuse which ended up being investigated by the local police department. Obnoxious and foul-mouthed Jessi Slaughter may be, but it's hard to imagine any justification to gang up on an 11-year-old in such a coordinated way and expect her to be able to cope with it, and hard to characterize 4chan's users as anything other than bullies in this particular situation.

4chan has a sense of humor, as well. Lolcats (pictures of cats with funny captions, now mostly found on icanhazcheeseburger.com) have their roots in 4chan. They overwhelmed an internet contest in a bid to send Justin Bieber on a concert tour to North Korea and invented the "Rickroll" (in which you click on a link only to discover that it takes you to the YouTube video for Rick Astley's song "Never Gonna Give You Up") (Grigoriadis).

Such antics sometimes spill over into Anonymous. It was Anonymous who overwhelmed YouTube with porn uploads one day, and allegedly wallpapered an epilepsy support discussion forum with loud, strobing advertisements (noise and flashing lights being known to cause seizures) (Courtney; Poulson). Anonymous also flooded and prompted the shutdown of several hip-hop websites and a California teenager's website for his No-Cussing Club (Potter). Anonymous's recent activities may be morally motivated, but the culture in which it exists (and it is hardly a stretch to assume some overlap between the people who defended WikiLeaks and those who attacked Jessi Slaughter) is often frivolous, certainly questionable, and sometimes downright predatory. "Lulz" and internet Darwinism do not exactly foster the requisite environment (mutual support and beneficence, social conformity, establishment of trust) for group morality to function healthily.

Is the Internet a better, safer place because of the Anonymous? The group is trying, in its own selective, capricious way, to take on the role of Internet Cop, Guardians of Freedom. Clearly, Anonymous is not nearly as concerned with its own morals or conduct as it is with making sure other groups act in compliance with behavior it deems to be honorable and humiliating groups which deviate from its standards. This puts Anonymous more comfortably in the company of fictional anti-heroes such as Batman, Rorschach (of *Watchmen*), and Wolverine of *X-Men*. But guardians of morals cannot be automatically assumed to have morals themselves, not in the same way that civil rights groups in the 1960s lobbied for the rights of citizens while also adhering to their own internal moral standards. And groups like Anonymous cannot be assumed to function like groups with a more defined structure, either.

Studies of morality frequently examine an individual, an overall culture, or an organized group of people. But Anonymous prides itself on its leaderlessness and facelessness. The idea that anonymity can breed trusting relationships between its members contradicts Haidt's hypothesis that one of the functions of morals is to have a coercive effect on the behavior of group members, including those who adhere to the standards and ostracizing those who don't. And although the group can effectively punish outsiders, Anonymous has no way of policing its own membership, excluding those who don't adhere to its moral code, or coercing its members into behaving. With no leaders, Anonymous goes where the whims of the hive mind will it to go. If members of a community are bound together by their common individual morals, members of a hive mind are bound by something else altogether. Groups with no authority figure or hierarchy must rely on the authority of each individual member to create something that reflects the collective whole of the group. Anonymous is a different sort of group to which the traditional assessment of group dynamics—to say nothing of morality—is challenging to apply.

The formal study of group dynamics began in the eighteenth century, but has fascinated our ancestors for many millennia (Chant). How do ants make a colony, or bees make a hive, or corals form reefs? What happens to higher reasoning when individuals join a mob? Leonardo da Vinci dissected cadaver brains looking for the place where the human soul resided. Charles Darwin explained the collective weight that random, singular genetic mutations can have. In the modern world, how do videos go viral? How does Google rank its search results? How does order emerge from disorder?

Western philosophy has historically viewed the loss of individuality, the surrender of one's autonomy, as threatening and dystopian. One thinks of the Bacchantes ripping Orpheus to pieces in collective madness; or the many senseless riots that have caused incalculable damage in cities all over the world. Friedrich Nietzsche said, "Madness is rare in individuals—but in groups, parties, nations, and ages it is the rule," (90). There are times when the surrender of individuality is a goal, such as in certain religions; the practice like the Sufi dhikr, and other forms of religious ecstasy, which are believed to bring the practitioner closer to God. But the assumption is that moral individuals tend to become immoral in aggregate, and generally, complicated social action (of the sort that Anonymous engages in) is not what people envision crowds doing. The line between the madness of crowds and the wisdom behind collective action is only beginning to be understood.

As scientists study crowds they discover that crowds have an odd sort of intelligence. For example, when trying to guess how many jellybeans are in a jar, no one person will be right—but when all the guesses are averaged together, it turns out that the group is almost exactly correct, within a jellybean or two. This has been documented over and over again, with a variety of different problems, including economic issues of supply and demand (Surowiecki 4). And the larger the crowd, the

more correct the answer is likely to be, the more likely that the noise of individual stupidity can somehow coalesce into a signal of collective wisdom.

James Surowiecki, in his book *The Wisdom of Crowds*, outlines four qualities that a crowd must have before it can be considered "wise": diversity of opinion, independence of individuals, decentralization of authority, and aggregated decision-making. Individuals in Anonymous can trawl the entire internet for information, making their own decision about whether to participate in any given operation. No one individual's opinion holds more weight than anyone else's, and whether or not an operation is a success depends directly on how many people participate. It's hard to imagine a purer distillation of opinion.

So Anonymous may be a "wise crowd." Though it is difficult (perhaps impossible) to predict what organizations will attract Anonymous' ire, there is a deliberative process involved—both when the group is deciding on targets, and when individual members of the group decide whether they are going to participate. It is hard to know how long an idea bounces around in the community—probably not more than a day or so, online attention spans being what they are—but at some point, the "What if…" and "We should…" has to become "We are going to…" with a precise date, time, and plan of deployment. Given the aggregative aspect of Anonymous' decisions and actions, though, how much do individual members allow their assumptions about whether or not others will participate in an action influence their decision?

Professors of philosophy Sara Rachel Chant and Zachary Ernst (University of Missouri) examine the "state of equilibrium" in a group, when individual intentions reach a tipping point and become collective action (Chant 96). When individuals in a group are reasonably certain that other actors will show up and also cooperate in the effort—like moving a large piece of furniture, for example, or cleaning a neighborhood park—they are more likely to commit to a project. Reasonable certainty about the "intentions and behaviors" of other individuals in a group can, at least in part, explain whether an individual member commits to an activity or not.

So though Anonymous cannot breed trust-based morality between individual members, if individuals can make reasonable extrapolations about the intentions of Anonymous as a whole, then they do not have to trust other individuals—they can trust in the collective weight of Anonymous. As politically motivated actions outnumber actions waged against 11-year-olds, Anonymous gains a reputation as a particular sort of organization, and an organization that carries through with its intentions. Thus, as the group ages and evolves, new members will self-select to reinforce the morality they perceive Anonymous to have—and in the process, will make Anonymous a more moral organization, unintentionally shaping it in their own image. In the greater, wider, wiser crowd that is the Internet, everyone has a vote in the ultimate identity of Anonymous, whether they are part of it or not.

NOTE

1. http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/jessi-slaughter

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