

WHY CAN'T WE ALL JUST GET ALONG?

Chris Berg on a book that might explain our ideological divides.



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Few recent social science books have arrived with as much acclaim as Jonathan Haidt's *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*. The book has been repeatedly reviewed and referenced in opinion pieces around the world.

This is not surprising. The debate it has sparked is lively in large part because of the controversy about one of its more striking conclusions: that conservatives appreciate the arguments of progressives better than progressives appreciate the arguments of conservatives. In Haidt's words, 'Republicans understand moral psychology. Democrats don't.'

This claim seems partisan and cheap, but Haidt is not a polemicist. He is a serious academic. He is a professor of psychology at the University of Virginia, and a selfidentified member of the left. When Barack Obama won the Democratic nomination in 2008, Haidt was 'thrilled'.



Haidt begins *The Righteous Mind* with an old question in moral philosophy. Which governs human thought and action more-reason and the rational mind, or emotion and passion? Reviewing the last few decades' worth of psychological research and experimentation, Haidt firmly falls down on the side of David Hume, when he wrote that 'reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them.' People engage their faculties of reason only after they make their decisions; they do not reason in search of truth, but in support of their emotional reactions.

Hume's Enlightenment colleagues taught us to worship reason above all else. This elevation of reason-'one of the most long-lived delusions in Western history'-has had a perverse effect. As Haidt writes, the 'rationalist delusion' is not merely about how we think: 'it's also a claim that the rational caste (philosophers or scientists) should have more power'.

The centrepiece of the book is an investigation into the moral foundations of political belief. Using a large collection of interview and experimental evidence, Haidt formulates six separate 'passions' which we instinctively draw upon to come to conclusions about everything from the existence of God to the rights of unions.

The first foundation is 'care/harm' -the drive to compassion for others. Haidt cites progressive campaigns like humane eating and third world hunger as archetypal causes that rest on the care/harm foundation, and conservative causes like the 'wounded warrior' project for veterans' support.

Then there is 'fairness/cheating.' Conservatives and progressives both feel fairness and cheating keenly. The Occupy Wall Street crowd emphasised the fair redistribution of wealth, and the Tea Party protested the unfair redistribution of hard-earned money.

Another shared foundation is 'liberty/oppression'-where advocates of human rights on the left and individual rights on the right deploy similar arguments for slightly different ends. Classical liberals make much of the distinction between positive freedom and negative freedom. But Haidt urges us to recognise, among that complex philosophical argument, the shared emphasis on freedom.

These three foundations are shared by progressives and conservatives alike. How the two ideologies differ is explained by the fact that conservatives have a further three foundations which progressives do not share.

Conservatives also have strong emphasis on the 'loyalty/betrayal' foundation-an instinct for the importance of group membership and the associated negative belief that one can be disloyal to the group. Another key ideal is 'authority/subversion', which focus on acts of obedience and disobedience, rebellion or respect. For conservatives, authority is the difference between Hobbesian brutishness and civilisation.

The final foundation, held by conservatives but not progressives, is 'sanctity/degradation'-a sense that some values or institutions should be seen as untouchable. This is most obvious in religious

debates-take, for instance, questions about the sanctity of marriage-but has its secular manifestation in concerns about the flag and other 'sacred' objects.

All of these foundations have to be balanced. But, in the battle of ideas, Haidt argues that conservatives have a distinct advantage-'the obstacles to [ideological] empathy are not symmetrical'. Progressives 'have a three-foundation morality, whereas conservatives use all six.'

Conservatives tend to understand progressive arguments because they recognise shared moral foundations. Progressives tend not to understand conservative arguments because they do not share the same concern for group loyalty, sanctity or authority. They do not feel group betrayal as sensitively, and they often see sentiments about sanctity and authority as obstacles in the way of other goals.

There are, of course, a large number of ideological permutations we could draw from these six foundations. Haidt is hampered by the fact that most social science research on political philosophy to date has assumed there is a simple left-right axis where all ideologies fall. There are varieties of left-wing thought that are heavy on sanctity, like environmentalism and new age philosophy.

The most obvious gap in *The Religious Mind* is libertarianism and classical liberalism. Libertarians are usually classed with the right, but on Haidt's schema many libertarians would seem to have more in common with the left. None of group loyalty, sanctity or authority are obviously part of the moral framework held by most libertarians.

So why don't libertarians vote with progressives? That is, why don't libertarians support the Australian Labor Party or the Democrats? As Haidt points out, libertarians have an extreme emphasis on the 'liberty/ oppression' foundation-almost to the exclusion of all other foundations. And that aligns them much closer with conservatives, who, through the interaction of their six foundations, see liberty as far more about preventing government interference than do progressives. Conservatives see the welfare state as destroying a group's moral fibre. Libertarians see the welfare state as destroying an individual's liberty. Despite their many differences, the conservative-libertarian alliance is fairly assured.

Obviously, that conservatives utilise six moral ideals while progressives and libertarians utilise three tells us little about the validity of each of their positions. But it does have great explanatory power. And it allows us to answer the question raised in Haidt's subtitle. Why do good people disagree about politics? Because their disagreement stems from entirely different worldviews. Though to a progressive conservatives might seem like 'bad' people who are driven by greed or envy or ignorance, the reality is that their differing opinions can be much more easily explained. Conservatives and progressives simply have innate and entrenched differences in moral philosophy, which causes them to view the world in totally different ways. It's a lesson many participants in public debate could benefit from learning.