Left and Right, Right and Wrong:
The Politics of Morality

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AUTHOR PROLOGUE: I reviewed Jonathan Haidt's (2012) book The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion for Science. The review was published last month and can be accessed here: http://www.sciencemag.org/content/337/6094/525.summary. Because of strict word limits and other formatting policies of the magazine, it was necessary to excise a good deal of material that may help to flesh out some of my points. Thus, in the spirit of furthering constructive dialogue concerning the politics of morality, I am sharing the full-length version here.

Jonathan Haidt is as ubiquitous as a social psychologist can be. When he is not giving TED talks or Op-Eds or book-signings, he shows up at the American Enterprise Institute or on Bill Moyers' PBS program; he is either warning the Dalai Lama about the evils of socialism or taking a ribbing from Stephen Colbert. Haidt is an energetic, self-confident, charismatic speaker. He is a gifted storyteller, weaving together personal and historical anecdotes, biological metaphors, and even spiritual aphorisms. Haidt is at his crackling best in illuminating the work of other investigators, especially those who compare animal and human behavior, such as Richard Dawkins, Frans de Waal, Antonio Damasio, and Michael Tomasello.

The Righteous Mind is composed of three parts that are not as compatible or scientifically settled as Haidt's ingenious prose makes it seem. Part I revisits the intriguing arguments of an earlier, influential paper in which he argued that moral reasoning is nothing but post hoc rationalizing of gut-level intuitions. Part II introduces an evolutionarily inspired framework that specifies 5 (or perhaps 6) "moral foundations" and applies this framework to an analysis of liberal-conservative differences in moral judgments. In Part III Haidt speculates that patriotism, religiosity, and "hive psychology" in humans evolved rapidly through group-level selection: "we are 90 percent chimp and 10 percent bee" (p. 273). Without question, Haidt is correct that cooperation within social groups has been one of the great secrets of human survival and adaptation. What the implications of this insight are for judgments about morality and politics, however, are open to debate.

Haidt approaches his subject matter like a cultural anthropologist rather than an experimental psychologist, a choice he explains this way: "In psychology, our goal is descriptive. We want to discover how the moral mind actually works, not how it ought to work, and that can't be done by reasoning, math, or logic. It can be done only by observation, and observation is usually keener when informed by empathy" (p. 120). Haidt accomplishes a great deal of empathy for conservatives, whose contempt for liberals, he writes, is "overflowing with moral content," such as this explanation that a conservative gave for why someone would vote for a Democrat: "You've had 5 kids from 3 different men and you need the welfare check" (p. 171). Haidt insists that Tea Party supporters are moved by deeply *moral* concerns when they refer to their neighbors as "losers" and ask: "How many of you people want *to pay for your neighbors'*

mortgage that has an extra bathroom and can't pay their bills?" (p. 180). Conservative efforts to dismantle the social safety net are cast as "moral" because of their adherence to fairness as proportionality, which Haidt sometimes calls "karma." Less empathy is on display for liberals, whom he castigates not only for making jokes about President George W. Bush but for being "too focused on helping victims and fighting for the rights of the oppressed" (p. 158), that is, "trying to help a subset of bees . . . even if doing so damages the hive" (p. 313).

Along the way, Haidt spurns as ideologically biased earlier psychological attempts by Lawrence Kohlberg, Elliot Turiel, and others to develop rational, objective standards for moral development (or progress). "It was inevitable," writes Haidt, that their research would "support worldviews that were secular, questioning, and egalitarian" (p. 9). But by redefining morality in subjective, culturally relative terms, Haidt does not correct the alleged error in research on developmental psychology so much as supplant it with his own worldview. The net result is that Haidt's purely subjectivist approach erases any distinction between being moral and being *moralistic* and risks replacing what he perceives as a liberal bias in the psychological study of moral behavior with a conservative one.

How does he get there? An extremely prominent, longstanding theory of human reasoning holds that there are two cognitive systems. One is quick, intuitive, low-effort, and association-based (often called System 1). The other is slow, deliberate, high-effort, and logical (System 2; e.g., see Kahneman, 2011). In Haidt's rather extreme view, System 2 is really just a bullshitter—a dissembler, a post hoc rationalizer. He asserts that human beings make for lousy scientists and logicians but excellent lawyers and press secretaries (people who consider only one side of an issue and will defend it to the end). Haidt then proceeds to make a virtue of necessity: Because humans are so emotionally driven and so bad at thinking rationally about morality, it must be that morality itself *is and can only be* based on gut-level (often emotional) intuitions. Haidt discounts the possibility that, as Bazerman (2011) put it, "System 2, our more deliberative thought processes, can be used to dampen the negative effects of our intuitive judgments." Indeed, recent research shows that reappraising situations so that their emotional intensity is diminished frees people up to abandon their gut-level intuitions and engage in more deliberative moral reasoning (e.g., Feinberg, Willer, Antonenko, & John, 2012).

After arguing in Part I that "moral reasoning" is nothing more than a post hoc rationalization of intuitive, emotional reactions (p. 50), Haidt risks logical contradiction in Part II when he argues that liberals *should* really embrace conservative moral intuitions about the importance of obeying authority, being loyal to the ingroup, and enforcing purity standards. After all, these intuitions are widely shared across time and place and must be the product of evolutionary adaptation, writes Haidt. If one were to accept the basic post hoc rationalization premise of Part I and the Part II findings about differences in the moral judgments of liberals and conservatives, a more parsimonious (and empirically supportable) conjunction would be this: For a variety of psychological reasons, conservatives do more rationalizing of gut-level, intuitive reactions (at least when it comes to personal behavior, such as sexuality), and this is what makes them more moralistic (i.e., judgmental) than liberals. It does not, however, make

them more *moral* in any meaningful sense of the word, nor does it provide a legitimate basis for criticizing liberal moral judgment the way Haidt goes on to do.

Haidt argues that the liberal moral code is deficient, because it is not based on all 5 (or 6) of his "moral foundations." The liberal, Haidt maintains, is like the idiot restaurateur who thought he could make a complete cuisine out of just one taste, however sweet. This illustrates the biggest flaw in Haidt's book, namely that he swings back and forth between an allegedly value-neutral sense of "moral," which refers to anything that an individual or a group *believes* is moral and serves to suppress selfishness, and a more prescriptive sense that he uses mainly to jab liberals. Ultimately, Haidt's own rhetorical choices render his claim to being unbiased unconvincing. If descriptive morality is based on whatever people believe, then it would seem that both liberals and conservatives would have equal claim to it. Does it really make sense, philosophically or psychologically or politically, to even try to keep score, let alone to assert that "more is better" when it comes to moral judgment?

Haidt relies on data shown in Figure 1 to support his critical evaluation of liberal "narrowness." When people are asked about the extent to which it is good to be "a team player," bad to "hurt a defenseless animal," and so on, liberals are more concerned than conservatives about achieving fairness and avoiding harm, whereas conservatives are more concerned than liberals about obeying authority, favoring the ingroup, and enforcing norms of sanctity. These results are misleadingly characterized as suggesting that liberal morality is a partial subset of conservative morality—indeed, he calls liberals "moral monists." A more parsimonious conclusion, which is clear upon inspection of the graph, is that liberal judgments are more *differentiated* than conservative judgments. Indeed, if respondents were to agree modestly with every question (exhibiting what survey researchers refer to as an "acquiescence bias"), their scores on the Moral Foundations Questionnaire would look like the "Very conservative" respondents whom Haidt admires for their balanced diet.

How does Haidt know that conservative respondents simply didn't care about his questionnaire or haven't thought deeply enough about his questions to consider possible trade-offs between, say, treating people fairly and obeying authority, whereas liberals have? It is possible that liberals who go to Haidt's website are doing (or perhaps have already done) more "System 2" moral reasoning, in comparison with conservatives. This, in turn, could explain why they—like most (but not all) of the best philosophical minds over the last two millennia of Western civilization—prioritize values of "justice, rights, and welfare" (Turiel, 2006) over obedience to authority, ingroup loyalty, and the enforcement of purity standards—all three of which have produced disastrous consequences on many historical occasions (see Kelman & Hamilton, 1989; Milgram, 1974).

Haidt draws sparingly on the details of contemporary research in social and political psychology, usually as a foil for his ostensibly above-the-fray approach. Consider this passage:

> I began by summarizing the standard explanations that psychologists had offered for decades: Conservatives are conservative because they were raised by overly

> strict parents, or because they are inordinately afraid of change, novelty, and complexity, or because they suffer from existential fears and therefore cling to a simple worldview with no shades of gray. These approaches all had one feature in common: they used psychology to explain away conservatism. They made it unnecessary for liberals to take conservative ideas seriously because these ideas are caused by bad childhoods or ugly personality traits. I suggested a very different approach: start by assuming that conservatives are just as sincere as liberals, and then use Moral Foundations Theory to understand the moral matrices of both sides. (pp. 166-167)

This paragraph illustrates both the slipperiness of Haidt's prose and the extent to which key issues are unresolved by his theory. First, there is a great deal of empirical evidence indicating that conservatives are in fact less open to change, novelty, and complexity and are more likely to perceive the world as a dangerous place than liberals (Carney et al., 2008; Gerber et al., 2010; Jost et al., 2003). Rather than attempting to grapple with these findings, which are uncomfortable for his view of political ideology, Haidt characterizes them with argumentative language ("overly," "inordinately," "suffer," "cling," "bad childhoods," and "ugly personality traits") to suggest that these claims have to be false because they sound so . . . *pejorative*. Second, he claims that past researchers have "used psychology to explain away conservatism," as if there is no difference between explaining something and explaining it *away*. Third, Haidt switches at the last moment from discussing the origins and characteristics of liberals and conservatives to the issue of sincerity, as if it were impossible to *sincerely* believe something that is rooted in childhood or other psychological experiences. Psychological scientists recognize that questions about the social, cognitive, and motivational underpinnings of a belief system are distinct from questions about its validity (and whether it should be taken "seriously," which is not a scientific question at all).

Haidt's book is creative, interesting, and provocative. For the most part, he does what he does very well. Haidt is an able scholar, a creative thinker, and a beautiful writer. The book shines a new light on moral psychology and presents a bold, confrontational message. From a scientific perspective, however, I worry that his theory raises more questions than it answers. Why do some individuals feel that it is morally good (or necessary) to obey authority, favor the ingroup, and maintain purity, whereas others are skeptical? (Perhaps parenting style *is* relevant after all.) Why do some people think that it is morally acceptable to judge or even mistreat others such as gay or lesbian couples or, only a generation ago, interracial couples because they dislike or feel disgusted by them, whereas others do not? Why does the present generation "care about violence toward many more classes of victims today than [their] grandparents did in their time" (p. 134)? Haidt dismisses the possibility that this aspect of liberalism, which prizes universal over parochial considerations (the justice principle of *impartiality*), is in fact a tremendous cultural achievement—a shared victory over the limitations of our more primitive ancestral legacy. In this spirit, he spurns the John Lennon song, "Imagine":

> Imagine if there were no countries, and no religion too. If we could just erase the borders and boundaries that divide us, then the world would 'be as one.' It's a

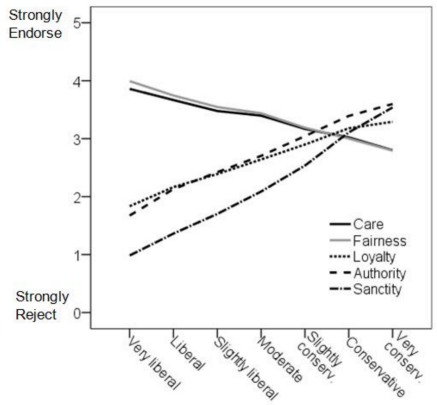
> vision of heaven for liberals, but conservatives believe it would quickly descend into hell. I think conservatives are on to something. (p. 311)

Throughout the book Haidt mocks the liberal vision of a tolerant, pluralistic, civil society, but, ironically, this is precisely where he wants to end up, quoting Isaiah Berlin with evident approval at the end of his book: "I came to the conclusion that there is a plurality of ideals, as there is a plurality of cultures and of temperaments" (p. 320).

Before drawing sweeping and profound conclusions about the moral psychology of the left and right, Haidt needs to address an even more basic question about his theory: What are the specific, empirically falsifiable criteria for designating something as an evolutionarily grounded "moral foundation"? Haidt sets the bar pretty low—anything that suppresses individual selfishness in favor of group interests. By this definition, the decision to plunder (and perhaps even murder) members of another tribe would count as a "moral" adaptation. Recent research suggests that personality characteristics such as Machiavellianism, authoritarianism, social dominance, and prejudice are positively associated with the moral valuation of ingroup, authority, and purity themes (Arvan, 2011, 2012; Federico, Weber, Ergun, & Hunt, 2012; Kugler & Jost, 2012; Park & Isherwood, 2011). If these are to be ushered into the ever-broadening tent of "group morality," one wonders what it would take to be refused admission.

I see no compelling reason to assume that morality *is*—let alone *should* be—whatever comes first, easiest, or even most forcefully to mind (because of our evolutionary heritage or otherwise). In many situations behaving morally may require us to do what is difficult, perhaps even "unnatural" in some sense. Or, as John Stuart Mill put it, "Nature cannot be a proper model for us to imitate. Either it is right that we should kill because nature kills; torture because nature tortures; ruin and devastate because nature does the like; or we ought not to consider what nature does, but what it is good to do."

***Figure 1*:** Conservative moral intuitions are undifferentiated, relative to liberal moral intuitions (From p. 163)



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