If you’ve ever argued about politics with someone holding very different views, you surely know that Hume was right: “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.”

In his fascinating, important, and exasperating new book, The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion, Jonathan Haidt explores the root of those passions. A social psychologist at the University of Virginia and once a professed liberal Democrat, Haidt is dismayed by the rightward shift of the country’s political center of gravity over the last 30 years. Seeking to understand it, he looks for answers in the different characters of liberals and conservatives and proposes a new, or at any rate newly formulated, theory of our moral and political judgments, which he calls moral foundations theory.

As we all know and often forget, humans are not purely rational. Or, to put it another way, there’s more to rationality than is dreamed of in our everyday philosophies. We have a long, complex evolutionary history, which has left us with a tangled, multilayered psyche and many more motives than we are usually conscious of. With the help of research by a couple of generations of psychologists, anthropologists, and behavioral economists, Haidt has excavated these psychic structures. But before entering on a detailed description, Haidt pauses to emphasize the first principle of any adequate moral psychology: “Intuitions come first, strategic
Experiments repeatedly show—to oversimplify only a little—that we all believe what we want, regardless of reasons. Changing one’s views in response to an opponent’s arguments is about as rare as an honest member of Congress. (Cases of both are known, but only a few.) Arguments are largely instrumental; they are meant for attack or defense. Most of the time, we argue like lawyers rather than philosophers.

Where, then, do our moral judgments come from? According to moral foundations theory, morality begins as a set of evolution-derived intuitions, which each child then learns to apply within his or her culture. Haidt suggests six dimensions or categories or foundations, into which nearly all our intuitions fall: 1) help those in need and minimize suffering everywhere (the care/harm foundation); 2) reward people according to what they contribute (fairness/cheating); 3) advance the fortunes of your group (loyalty/betrayal); 4) defer to legitimate superiors and protect subordinates (authority/subversion); 5) resist domination by illegitimate authority (liberty/oppression); 6) respect your group’s totems and taboos (sanctity/degradation).

By Haidt’s reckoning, liberals focus too narrowly on the first foundation and on a special version of the second. Compassion is the supreme liberal virtue, supplemented by egalitarianism, which relies on a view of contributing that emphasizes effort rather than output. Because it is individuals who suffer and need, liberalism is individualistic.

Conservatives, by contrast, have a more balanced moral matrix, resting more equally on the six foundations. Derived from questionnaires and psychology-lab experiments, Haidt’s main conclusion is overwhelmingly plausible: conservatives are less attuned to individual freedom and fulfillment, more sensitive to and concerned about the cohesiveness and stability of groups. They are instinctive Durkheimsians, agreeing with the great French sociologist that every society is unified by sacred, unchallengeable beliefs and that “to free man from all social pressures is to abandon and demoralize him.” Even before “social capital” became a social-scientific buzzword, conservatives understood that communities were fragile and required continual shoring up, sometimes at the expense of individual welfare. “If you are trying to change an organization or a society and you do not consider the effects of your changes on moral capital, you’re asking for trouble,” Haidt explains. “This, I believe, is the fundamental blind spot of the left.” Where liberals see individuals in need, conservatives see social structures at risk.

Experiments repeatedly show that we all believe what we want, regardless of reasons.

“Republicans understand moral psychology. Democrats don’t,” Haidt announces in italics:

[Republicans] trigger the full range of intuitions described by Moral Foundations Theory. Like Democrats, they can talk about innocent victims (of harmful Democratic policies) and about fairness (particularly the unfairness of taking tax money from hardworking and prudent people to support cheaters, slackers, and irresponsible fools). But Republicans since Nixon have had a near-monopoly on appeals to loyalty (particularly patriotism and military virtues) and authority (including respect for parents, teachers, elders, and the police, as well as for traditions). And after they embraced Christian conservatives during Ronald Reagan’s 1980 campaign and became the party of “family values,” Republicans inherited a powerful network of Christian ideas about sanctity and sexuality that allowed them to portray Democrats as the party of Sodom and Gomorrah.

“Set against the rising crime and chaos of the 1960s and 1970s, this five-foundation morality”—this passage arrives before Haidt introduces the sixth foundation—“had wide appeal, even to many Democrats.”
Some of this has been said before (e.g., by George Lakoff), though not so systematically or with so large a background of experimental data and evolutionary theory. What should we make of it? What is true and valuable, in the first place, is the reminder that every utterance is the tip of an iceberg, merely the surface layer of a deep linguistic (Wittgenstein) or psychic (Freud) substrate. To understand someone, even for conversational purposes—much less persuade him or her—takes a lot of patient, skillful work. Of course every non-autistic adult recognizes this to some degree, but most of us, most of the time, to an inadequate degree.

So, for example, an opinion about immigration or the Affordable Care Act may have little to do with that issue or that law and much more to do with the speaker’s feeling about his or her interlocutor, or about which group or tribe is associated with those who hold the opinion. In that case, facts and reasoning about policy will only get the discussants so far. They must either go deeper, baring their fundamental commitments and identifications to each other, or else save their breath.

How, then, do minds ever change? They rarely do, it appears:

> Whether you end up on the right or the left of the political spectrum turns out to be just as heritable as most other traits: genetics explains between a third and a half of the variability among people on their political attitudes. Being raised in a liberal or conservative household accounts for much less.

Presumably political campaigns, discussions with friends and coworkers, television programs, books and articles, and even one’s education, account for still less.

Are society-wide misunderstanding and mistrust inevitable? Haidt’s practical recommendations for avoiding them are not robust. “I believe that psychologists must work with political scientists to identify changes that will indirectly undermine Manichaeism,” he writes. That should at least attract some foundation funding for psychologists and political scientists. Beyond that, he can only suggest that if congressional families all lived in Washington, D.C. and their children played sports together, Congress might be less polarized.

For secular rationalists (i.e., most politically active liberals and leftists), all this is discouraging. But we get no sympathy from Haidt, who scours the “rationalist delusion”: the idea that “reasoning is our most noble attribute,” which usually goes along with “a claim that the rational caste (philosophers or scientists) should have more power” as well as “a utopian program for raising more rational children.” We had better reconcile ourselves to religion, Haidt advises—he deprecates the New Atheism—and if possible, even join one. Lack of belief is no problem: “it is religious belongingness that matters for [social capital],” he approvingly quotes from a scholarly study, “not religious believing.”

According to Haidt, conservatives rightly value stable communities; liberals are blinded by the needs of individuals.

Truth or falsity is beside the point for Haidt; the social benefits of religion are too great to allow for quibbling.
on that score. Religions “help groups to cohere, solve free rider problems, and win the competition for group-level survival”; and they make individuals “less selfish and more loving.” Gods and religions are “tools that let people bind themselves together,” or, in the language of evolutionary psychology, “group-level adaptations for producing cohesiveness and trust.” The data strongly suggest, Haidt claims, that religious people are happier, more generous, more productive, and better behaved than the non-religious.

At the very least, unbelievers should keep their skepticism to themselves:

Asking people to give up all forms of sacralized belonging and live in a world of purely ‘rational’ beliefs might be like asking people to give up the Earth and live in colonies orbiting the moon. It can be done, but it would take a great deal of careful engineering, and even after ten generations, the descendants of those colonists might find themselves with inchoate longings for gravity and greenery.

Like the serpent in Eden, reason promises a brave new world but can only bring homelessness and exile.

• • •

The Righteous Mind is an easy book for a defensive liberal rationalist to ridicule. Haidt clearly knows a thing or two about moral psychology and political rhetoric, but apparently very little about current affairs or political economy. For one thing, the recent political polarization he laments is of a peculiar sort: there is only one pole. Since the Republican capture of Congress in 1994, and even before, the Republican side has been characterized by relentless, take-no-prisoners partisanship; the Democratic side by disunity, vacillation, surrender. This is the fundamental fact of recent American political history, and Haidt shows no awareness of it.

For another thing, though some of their electoral success may well result from the fact that “Republicans understand moral psychology. Democrats don’t,” it’s also true—a regrettably partisan point, but it must be made—that Republicans cheat a lot. The Nixon campaign attempted to forestall a peace agreement in Vietnam in October 1968 that, had it succeeded, might have won Hubert Humphrey the election. The Reagan campaign allegedly attempted to delay the release of 52 American hostages held at the U.S. Embassy in Tehran until Jimmy Carter had left office. A Republican Supreme Court awarded the presidency to George W. Bush in 2000. The Swift Boat campaign against John Kerry in 2004, financed by Republican donors, was based on lies, while the CBS 60 Minutes report alleging Bush’s evasion of National Guard duty was substantially true, despite a firestorm of successful Republican denial. The dirty tricks of Republican operatives such as Lee Atwater and Karl Rove are too numerous to catalogue. Currently Republicans across the country are busy with voter-suppression efforts under the deceitful pretense of combating vote fraud. No doubt the Democrats are hardly political innocents, but compared with the Republicans, they are hapless pikers. Yet, oddly, the Republicans’ godly supporters do not object to this ungodly behavior.

There are also deeper, less obvious objections to Haidt’s critique of liberal hyper-rationalism. Minds sometimes change; the voice of reason, though small and quiet, as Freud pointed out, does eventually get a hearing. Mightn’t it be fruitful to ask how this can happen rather than assuming, as Haidt does, that it hardly ever will? Mightn’t there be some material conditions in which rationality is not invincibly more difficult
than unthinking allegiance, and in which cooperative inquiry seems as natural as strategic reasoning?

Strategic reasoning is, as Haidt emphasizes, a mechanism of inter-group competition, and competition is premised on insecurity. Universal radical insecurity—the inevitable and intended result of “flexible labor markets” and “minimal government”—is not conducive to imaginative receptivity or disinterested reflection. Upton Sinclair famously observed that it is all but impossible to get a man to understand something when his salary depends on his not understanding it. The same goes for his tax breaks, regulatory exemptions, government contracts, and other matters on which a man’s survival, or his accustomed lifestyle, may depend. When the middle class is shrinking and more and more are living in poverty, most people will hunker down, not open up. Some degree of competition, insecurity, and inequality will probably always be necessary. But the price of our present degree of those things is a lessened ability to reason together about difficult matters.

Democrats are hardly political innocents, but compared with the Republicans, they are hapless pikers.

Another, equally pervasive condition of contemporary life handicaps collective rationality. Tellingly, nearly all the data Haidt refers to seem to be derived from brief interactions: lab experiments, interviews, questionnaires. There is rarely any occasion for prolonged reflection and relaxed discursiveness in these circumstances, any more than there is on radio and TV talk shows, where the average response is only seconds long and thoughtful pauses are disparaged by producers as “dead air.” Newspaper opinion pieces rarely exceed 700 words. Naturally readers and listeners fall back on preset attitudes and received opinions.

Moreover, we are all increasingly stimulated. The sheer volume of commercial messages, entertainment, and social media makes some compensation necessary, so we double down on our inner stabilizers, otherwise known as prejudices. Deep experiences of any kind—grappling with art or philosophy, having one’s mind changed about politics, or simply possessing one’s soul—require a modicum of silence, slowness, and solitude. For most Americans, that modicum is vanishing.

Liberals (or anyone) challenged by Haidt’s pessimism about social rationality will want to look into a new book by the maverick sociologist and cultural historian Richard Sennett. Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation is less ambitious than The Righteous Mind, but also less breezily in-the-reader’s-face and more elegantly written. Throughout his career Sennett has chosen ample subjects—craftsmanship, respect, public space, built environments—and addressed them essayistically, with a varying mix of fieldwork, social theory, literary and historical erudition, and idiosyncratic reflection. Together is the second work in a planned trilogy on “the skills of everyday experience,” this volume on “responsiveness to others, such as listening skills in conversation, and [collaboration] at work and in the community.”

Sennett is a non-doctrinaire liberal, not much interested in electoral politics or ideology. But he has a keen eye and ear for the textures and timbres of contemporary life and a historically informed sense of how they came to be the way they are. In Together he traces the forms of working-class sociality from the nineteenth century to the present, including labor parties, workshops, settlement houses, and the Catholic Worker movement. At the center of labor history is the problem of what Haidt calls “group cohesiveness”: viz, what
experiences, demands, or relationships might turn a class into a community? Sympathetically but critically, Sennett canvasses the attempts by Robert Owen, the German Social Democrats, Jane Addams, Dorothy Day, Saul Alinsky, and others to answer that question.

Nowadays the achievement of working-class community seems to him even less possible than formerly. “The new forms of capitalism emphasize short-term labor and institutional fragmentation; the effect of this economic system has been that workers cannot sustain supportive relations with one another.” Activists who would base protest and resistance on group values, as Haidt counsels, are stymied, Sennett points out, by the difficulty of “strengthen[ing] communities whose economic heart is weak.” Community, like rationality, has its material prerequisites, which are currently being eroded on a large scale.

• • •

For secular liberals, the message of these two books, especially Haidt’s, is a sobering one: achieving large-scale trust, comity, and mutual aid is hard—very hard. Though it has sometimes been done in the past, secular liberals are barred from using the old methods. We want bonds, we want limits, we want authority, but we don’t want illusions. The will of God, the infallibility of scripture, and the divine rights of husbands and fathers seem to us illusions. Even “my country right or wrong” is an illusion if it means, as it frequently does in the mouths of false patriots, “my country can do no wrong.” We can’t accept these illusions, and we can’t ask others to accept them—even if it will make them better behaved—though of course we must live with, and compromise with, people who think otherwise.

But we also owe it to conservatives—and to ourselves—to devise ways of promoting stability and solidarity that don’t rely on illusions. Here liberals have indeed failed, though the three centuries since the Enlightenment are hardly a great deal of time in which to resolve the immemorial tensions between reason and instinct, individual and group. Perhaps the best we can do for now is to point out—patiently, persistently, and with as much love for our equally stubborn fellow citizens as we can muster—that some social arrangements make it harder to hear one another.
But if you sit back a moment and (forgive me, rationally) consider this assertion, you may surprise yourself by concluding it is plain nonsense—and it doesn’t get any less nonsensical when you follow it up with "...which each child then larns to apply...".

— posted 10/11/2012 at 04:21 by Ted Schrey Montreal

untitled

"larns" stands for "learns".

— posted 10/11/2012 at 04:27 by Ted Schrey Montreal

humans

I take it to be a truism to state humans are rational.

I also assume it obvious that all human aspects—including rationality—are au fond features of the individual.

I flatter myself into believing democracies are particularly unique in that they praise, protect and promote the notion of humans as being first and foremost i-n-d-i-v-i-d-u-a-l-s.

And I am particularly fond of the idea that only scoundrels hide behind or within groups, organizations, tribes etc.

— posted 10/11/2012 at 04:37 by Ted Schrey Montreal

And what is the role of the media and vested interests?

The "rightward" shift: how much of it is causes by the "right" media, such as Murdoch. See here:

http://krohde.wordpress.com/article/on-the-way-to-fascism-climate-change-xk923be3gp4-138/

— posted 10/11/2012 at 04:38 by Klaus Rohde

Haidt needs a mirror

I see his little essays here and there, and I agree fully that reason begins with intuitions or assumptions, but provided such assumptions are themselves subject to empirical—-you know, the world out there, where there are knowable things—validation, this is fine.

The problem, as Reagan pointed out, is with people who "know" things that aren’t so.

"Liberals" are NOT compassionate. They do NOT consistently implement actually useful policies. Take the War on Poverty. It destroyed the nuclear family among those least able to afford, and after 40 years and $16 trillion in spending, the poor are not substantially better off. In point of fact, black families saw steady increases in their incomes throughout the fifties and sixties UNTIL the War on Poverty caused a massive backslide. In my view, the very existence of black ghettos in this country is a relic of idiotic attempts to help them that backfired.

You do not get to claim you are compassionate if you don’t care about and examine the effects of your policies. You don’t. You are, in fact, a narcissist, which is an apt label for most leftists.

Haidt spills a lot of words on abstractions, when what he needs to do is figure out the connections of public policy and actual outcomes. Of course, he’s an academic: in itself that makes him stupid.

— posted 10/11/2012 at 12:54 by Barry Cooper
7 | Foundations of Moral Rhetoric

Everyone dismayed by the right wing is probably also dismayed by the fecklessness of liberal and democratic rhetoric. This fecklessness no doubt has a lot to do with the problems liberals have with grasping the complete range of “moral foundations.” Democrats have produced a long line of well-intentioned candidates who can’t communicate. But that’s a rhetorical problem, not a moral problem. If we read between the lines of Haidt’s thesis we find he is not talking about moral foundations at all -- he is talking mostly about the foundations of social cohesion (or, "social harmony", for fans of irony). People are different, and they have to live together. Some people live according to a moral compass, and under its influence they seek moral improvement. Some people live according to moral constraint. Naturally, the latter fear the consequences of disrupting the existing social order. Each type of person responds to very real social and political dangers. The problem of liberals/progressives is that their morality overrides their concerns with social cohesion. Because of that they practice political rhetoric poorly and they leave the people they should be leading to become the prey of opportunists and hucksters. Their inability to discipline their moral impulses (and the self-regard that inevitably follows) triggered the loss of discipline we now see in the "conservative" movement. When liberals lost the art of rhetoric, they loosened the constraints on the wingnuts.

@Barry: The moral golden age you’ve been fooled into believing never existed. This is the golden age of the nuclear family -- right now. This is as good as it has ever been. The reason is that liberals insisted on moral reform against the continual objections of conservatives who were wedded to an illusory past designed specifically to protect us from the knowledge of how Darwinian our society used to be, and still could be again -- under the influence of the free market, for example, which pollutes the minds and bodies of children, unchallenged, every day on the television and in supermarkets.

How people can look at the policies of the right and not see naked social darwinism is a tribute to our marvelous and, occasionally, blessed capacity for self-delusion.

— posted 10/11/2012 at 14:36 by Jon

8 | Potential for Pedagogy

Haight’s insight, emotion first then "reason," accords with my analogy of the Puppet Theatre, we all dance to the tunes of the current norms and mores Above (and to our own psychic undercurrents Below). Logic classes focus on “fallacy-avoidance” but never look at the hidden forces making a pro-con talk show nothing but ping-pong combat.

— posted 10/11/2012 at 15:06 by Infovoyeur

9 | Illusions

There is no moral foundation innate to human nature to secure a moral identity, thus the difficulty with ending illusion is that we spend most of our lives creating an illusion about ourselves. And always default to the view of ourselves we wish to believe rather than the more honest, self-critical reality.

http://www.energon.org.uk

— posted 10/11/2012 at 15:15 by robert landbeck

10 | Scialabba, a secular liberal rationalist, gives us an interpretation of political history and seems to think it is a "fact":

"For one thing, the recent political polarization he laments is of a peculiar sort: there is only one pole. Since the Republican capture of Congress in 1994, and even before, the Republican side has been characterized by relentless, take-no-prisoners partisanship; the Democratic side by disunity, vacillation, surrender. This is the fundamental fact of recent American political history, and Haidt shows no awareness of it."
How can you, have a polarization while claiming there is only one pole? A "peculiar" sort indeed. Ah, well... what can you do when those rascally religious and irrational Republicans won't play by the rules and "cheat a lot." They also lie or so I have heard.

— posted 10/11/2012 at 15:16 by bftucker

**11 | Proving Haidt's thesis in trying to debunk it**

One can hardly ask for a nicer illustration of the fact that our reasoning serves our prejudices and biases than George Scialabba’s critique of Haidt’s thesis. The list of Republican wrongdoings (which includes an "alleged" one!) can be matched point by point by commensurate Democratic ones. Scialabba’s failure to come up with such a list is most plausibly explained by his partisanship for the Democratic/liberal cause, and so illustrates Haidt’s thesis in the process of attempting to debunk it!

— posted 10/11/2012 at 15:55 by BMerker

**12 | BMerker: having read the article to completion, I see no point at which Scialabba attempts to debunk Haidt. What he does do is point out that even if Haidt is correct, there are factors other than evolved psychological traits at work and that we may still use reason to reach conclusions that our knee-jerk responses don’t comport with.**

Now then, please give us your list of commensurate Democratic wrongdoings. For instance, show us the coordinated, large-scale campaign of race-based disenfranchisement the Democrats are engaged in.

Barry Cooper: Sure, you might be right about the Great Society. Or maybe wage stagnation among blacks follows the stagnation EVERYONE has experienced now that our neoliberal gods have shipped all the manufacturing jobs overseas. Which is more likely?

— posted 10/11/2012 at 16:26 by Nathan

**13 | Lefties are driven by individualism?!?**

"Because it is individuals who suffer and need, liberalism is individualistic."

In the world outside the US, individualism is the cornerstone of conservatives. Thatcher: "There is no such thing as society." Baffling.

— posted 10/11/2012 at 22:42 by frank

**14 | How do you define "moral"?**

Following Schopenhauer, morality must be based on compassion. So who is more compassionate, the Democrats or Republicans in the US, the Social Democrats or Christian Democrats in Europe, or the Liberals or Labour in Australia? See here:


— posted 10/12/2012 at 01:05 by Klaus Rohde

**15 | Where is Amorality?**

Given politics and business are saturated with sociopaths, these works fall short by not addressing the effects of this destructive third rail in our culture.

— posted 10/12/2012 at 01:51 by JP Lanham
16 | My Way or the Highway

That is the problem with moral foundation #4: That it too easily becomes a rigid test of allegiance to principles, and whose principles is the question. That way leads to Torquemada and the Inquisition.

— posted 10/12/2012 at 02:50 by Yosemite Semite

17 | Nonsense triumphant

The longer and harder Haidt pushes this thesis, the more absurd it becomes. Anyone can or should be able to understand that caring and fairness are at the heart of morality. Loyalty, duty to obey authorities, and respect for "sanctity" are not moral principles at all. Do I even have to say that the Nuremberg defendants all argued that they were only respecting authority and following orders? Loyalty is not even amoral, it is positively immoral: if the cause is just, you should support it out of justice, not loyalty; if it is unjust, an appeal to your loyalty is morally corrosive. So what Haidt calls liberal morality is all of morality; what he calls conservative morality is not a more capacious morality, but the attempt to undermine morality.

Why would anyone define morality immorally? Check out the history of the world from the earliest annals until 30 seconds ago: it is an uninterrupted record of evil, invariably called good by the perpetrators.

Genuine conservatives are not captured by Haidt's simplistic schema, but yahoo conservatives are: they have to define morality so that somehow it becomes moral to redistribute wealth from the poor to the rich, to invade foreign countries at will, to deny health care to those who can't afford to buy insurance, and to foster a paranoid world view where somehow rich white Christian men are uniquely persecuted.

How did Haidt go so wrong? He went and asked people what they THOUGHT morality should entail, and he counted every opinion as equal to every other. Well, try asking a drug dealer what legality should be, or a creationist what science should be, or someone who is tone-deaf what music should be. You can't put these things up to a vote. If you are doing social science, you have to know what you are doing the social science OF. What if he had done his poll in Germany in the 1930s? He would have learned that it is highly moral to cleanse the community of impure elements. He would have found exemplary group solidarity in the Juden-frei villages. He would have found the individual subordinated to the good of the state. What I'm saying is so obvious that the wonder at the heart of the wonder is how Haidt and his supporters can miss it.

— posted 10/12/2012 at 05:22 by Stephen Kennamer

18 | Great Comment

Thank you, Stephen Kennamer. Exactly so.

— posted 10/12/2012 at 05:46 by OhPlease

19 | Missing the forest...

Whatever the 'moral foundations' of the individuals who form any given group be it a nation, a band of hunters or a group of musicians, all human history shows that individuals/cabals arise out of the group who dominate. At times this leadership is benevolent and the needs of the majority are paramount but power corrupts and for most of human history this power has been absolute and vicious. (A quick reading of the highlights of human cruelty to human over the past few thousand years should cure most of an illusion that we are deeply 'good' and 'moral' animals..). The path of history has generally been towards a more 'liberal' outcome...the majority unite (often behind charismatic individuals, usually with flaws but often before the deep corruption of power has set in) and demand rights. The history of voting in England is a great example of the rag taggle of individuals with a diverse set of 'evolved moral foundations', incrementally but surely, demanding and eventually receiving universal suffrage.

The lack of rhetoric (and good policy) in the current US Democratic party is pitiful but I guess at least in
good part attributable to their absolute compliance to the needs of their backers. The money in the US system forces its participants to be compromised at their very core.

Finally, that Haidt parades silly studies about happiness, behavior and religion implies that he is, as is horribly common in this age, a shallow commentator. Any study on happiness or behavior has to be self-reported. End of story.

— posted 10/12/2012 at 12:31 by Aaron Whitby

20 | Haidt the innumerate.

It is unfortunate that Haidt's silly book is still getting the level of attention it is.

His claim about conservatives versus liberals is backed by experiment only to this extent:

Conservatives do in fact value kindness; as few conservatives are in favor of stomping kittens as liberals are. Some liberals do not believe this.

But stomping kittens is never a political question - because nobody's in favor of it. Haidt's research also shows that conservatives value kindness less than other conflicting values, so when there is some reason to be unkind, conservatives will be.

Therefore in the political arena, assuming that conservatives do not value kindness will predict their behavior at least 99% of the time. Thus the error consists of an economy of explanation - and is therefore predictable from Haidt's own research.

— posted 10/12/2012 at 19:01 by Paul Anderson

21 | Democrat wrongdoing? Not possible!

In case Nathan (comment #12) is still following these comments, and has trouble coming up with a lists of Democrat wrongdoing, I refer him to the Wikipedia item entitled "List of Federal Political Scandals in the United States" as a good place to begin. Since for practical reasons of pending lawsuits and an apparent reluctance of Eric Holder's Department of Justice to prosecute "its own", that list is a bit thin on the most recent administration, so I add the following "search words" as further help: Michael Bennet/Jim Messina/Andrew Romanoff, Rod Blagojevich, Kent Conrad, Christopher Dodd/Angelo Mozilo, Alexi Giannoulias/Nick Giannis, Jesse Jackson Jr., William J. Jefferson, Alan Mollohan, Tim Murray/Mike McLaughlin, John Murtha, David Paterson, Charles Rangel, Laura Richardson, Arlen Specter/Joe Sestak, Maxine Waters.

Finally: If US elections were free of voter fraud the charge that efforts to improve the security of voter identification amount to efforts at "race-based disenfranchisement" would gain in credibility.

— posted 10/12/2012 at 20:31 by BMerker

22 | Nuclear Family is a Conservative Fantasy

In response to Barry Cooper (@6):

The Liberals didn't kill the Nuclear Family. In societies around the world (including America) the Traditional Family includes an extended network (grandparents, aunts & uncles, and cousins, etc.).

For some reason Conservatives have invested a lot in a mythology that states that the natural state for humans is to live in small "Nuclear" units, but the Nuclear Family has never been the norm. For a brief time (Post-WWII, i.e. the period of Liberal policies, such as the GI Bill, and government incentives for house ownership), there was a boom in Non-Traditional ("Nuclear") Families. Now we are retreating to the norm.
23 | Ditto. Stephen Kennamer nails it.
— posted 10/12/2012 at 22:12 by kass

24 | Fantastic Review
Thank you for this great article. I really enjoyed it.
— posted 10/12/2012 at 23:57 by EMN

25 | Are you people smoking crack?
What is the Ideal Type for someone living in poverty in this country? The Usual Suspect? A single mother. She got pregnant in high school because she was irresponsible, then was too ignorant to get a good job, and of course the father ran away. Black kids have a one in ten chance of growing up in a two parent family, and the evidence is UNAMBIGUOUS that absent gross abuse ALL kids do better with two parents. If you want to talk mythology, it is the idea that you can reliably bring up socially useful and responsible children in conditions of emotional and physical poverty.

The War on Poverty has been a failure. We spent an enormous amount of money, and accomplished next to nothing, for the simple and obvious reason that we were handing out money and not supporting personal initiative and responsibility.

This is the way it works. This is not wishful thinking. This is not a rejection of compassion. Compassion is wanting for others empowerment, not dependency.

Leftists--I only grant the use of the word Liberal to conservatives, since this is the proper use of the word--have a philosophy which is only RHETORICALLY about helping people, and in reality consists largely in the empowerment of parasites in the bureaucratic class, and the systemic undermining of the urge for self betterment among those unfortunate enough to get addicted to their snake oil.

You mention social darwinism. I repeat: the economic conditions of EVERYONE were getting better from the end of the Second World War to the advent of your "help". All boats were rising. Poor people were stating businesses--restaurants, groceries, car repair shops--using the economic freedom our system grants. All that changed when the incentive system shifted from work to dependency.

You are to blame. You are not even remotely compassionate. This whole Haidt system is based upon systematic misunderstandings. It essentializes people based upon empirically inaccurate conceptions of what they do and value.

— posted 10/13/2012 at 01:46 by Barry Cooper

26 | econ
This is an odd review. Supposing that it correctly summarises Haidt’s position as asserting that morality is a 6 dimensional space, that Dems only address a couple of dimensions whereas Repubs spread their attention more evenly, this seems to imply no obvious predictions about the details of contemporary behavior in Washington. Thus, rehearsing such behavior seems irrelevant as a criticism.

More likely, Haidt is proposing a model with which to explain aggregate behavior. He offers what he thinks are some constitutive principles defining generative mechanisms for moral intuition. He may also hold the view that a constituency which addresses more of these rather than less may be more persuasive in promulgating its cause.

So far nothing especially controversial except perhaps the model itself - but certainly not the political data that Scialabba adduces. Haidt’s position surely is neutral with respect to all of that.

The likelihood is that what we think of as reason and morality are in fact suites of blind, collaborating
processes each of which contributes something to what we perceive to be a whole. In other words there is no such thing, empirically, as reason and morality viewed as unities. Rather there are degrees and varieties of these things, which depend on the existence and collaboration of many different cognitive processes. Haidt may not assert such things but he is clearly in this general camp.

— posted 10/13/2012 at 05:04 by RK

I just love the way that Scialabba and posters here think they can just dismiss Haidt’s argument about the limits of rational debate with conspiracy theories and biased unevidenced conclusions.

You have provided a better example of exactly what Haidt is talking about than he could ever have made up!

— posted 10/14/2012 at 02:59 by David Watford

Imagine our inevitable future stable state where after some selection process a limited number of children grow to be productive adults.

The conservative ethic calls on us to have more children and select the winners en route to adulthood, more like selection of the fittest. What to do with those sorted out is a worrisome problem for conservatives with a conscience. The liberal ethic would call for birthing fewer and accepting them as they are. Humanity suffers then in the long run. That is the fundamental conflict of the two ethics.

— posted 10/15/2012 at 01:31 by Jim The Diver

Aren’t we as a whole a pretty centrist bunch?

Repub vs. Democrat does not equate to Conserv vs. Liberal.

We all know this. Why do we continually confound the two?

Comment #26. RK gets it.

We should dedicate MUCH more time to understanding the relationship between morality and our choices in the contemporary voter’s booth... Or we could continue to heap feces at one another!

— posted 10/15/2012 at 02:07 by ML

The Central Paradox of Conservatism

It seems to me that this article begins simply by stating Haidt’s overall thesis and then criticizes it by pointing out the central paradox of conservatism -- that the free market is not very conservative.

Reading other things by Haidt, he argues that liberataritans are psychologically closer to liberals because they, too, are tone deaf to the values of group loyalty, authority, and sanctity. But they are politically allied with conservatives because both share a view of justice as karma (i.e., people who have misfortunes brought them on themselves) and the free market as the perfect dispenser of karma.

The problem is that, whatever the free market’s merits as a dispenser of karma, it is no respecter of social
cohesion, authority, tradition, or the sacred. In fact, let us face it, the free market has a marked tendency to undermine all these things.

— posted 10/15/2012 at 19:00 by Essayist-Lawyer

### 31 | ...and Further

@Essayist-Lawyer: to take that a bit further... it's tempting to say that the free market panders to the worst elements of human nature (re: JP Lanham's sociopath comment above), but I think it more likely to say it only unveils the truth. To wit, an accurate picture of a person can't be drawn without taking into account how that person behaves when no one is looking...

— posted 10/15/2012 at 22:33 by Howie

### 32 | Query

A college fraternity could pass the test of criteria 2-6.

As a writer, I say: look at the text. It's the first criterion that makes morality.

And since when is a democratically elected government "illegitimate"? Or does it have to be painted "illegitimate" by bogus questions about birth certificates?

— posted 10/16/2012 at 15:36 by Rain,adustbowlstory

Name

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