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## BOOK REVIEW

### ***The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion.* By Jonathan Haidt, New York: Pantheon Books, 2012, 448 pp.**

Without intending to be dogmatic, I believe this is a book every sociologist should read. The principles of communication presented here are sound and based on very well controlled experimental research. Haidt is attempting to explain clearly and succinctly why more than ever our society is having such a difficult time just discussing the options when it comes to political and social issues. In the U.S., special interest groups and Congress cannot come to a common ground even to begin evaluating long term options. There is not an issue today (racial, gender, poverty, abortion, free speech, and countless others) that can be broached without an immediate intense argument ensuing. Why is it more difficult than ever to agree on even a starting point for discussion on any of these topics? After reading this book it becomes so clear why we cannot even agree to disagree. I cannot fathom how any social scientist, economist, or political scientist could ever begin to discuss the above complicated social issues without first becoming familiar with the concepts presented in this ground-breaking book.

The simple premise for the main concept presented is this: Humans have at least five or six major intuitional paradigms that are possible when discussing moral issues. Individuals will then construct their paths for moral thinking by subconsciously choosing several of these concepts and evaluating their moral judgements based on those concepts chosen. So if there are at least six possible criteria, then one individual may be accustomed to using maybe two of these concepts while another may employ all six. If the normal concepts the two individuals employ are different, they would encounter difficulty agreeing on even a starting point for further discussion. The problem is, of course, that when discussing morality we may not realize our counterpart may be using a completely different set of criteria or filters as the basis for his or her judgments, and all these social problems we face are rooted in moral dilemmas.

What is especially appealing in this work is that the author backs up his assertions with numerous research studies that appear to prove his points conclusively. Each research study cited is constructed using the precise scientific method of the social sciences. A perfect graphic example of his findings are from the field of politics. Why is there such a disparity in viewpoints between Republicans and Democrats, or conservatives and liberals? Haidt explains it very simply and clearly. Each group uses a different world view to navigate through complex social issues. Each worldview is complete in its own right and each view has observable evidence from the real world to back up that particular position. The question becomes which set of evidence one chooses intuitively to back up his or her viewpoint.

Study after study demonstrates that the liberal and Democratic Party segment of the US population uses primarily two factors in gauging what is moral. First they question whether an

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act is caring or harmful to the members of a society. Second they question whether the act is fair to all involved and whether any members are somehow being cheated of their rights. This group would say, "Morality in politics and governance should be based on these two issues only, clear and simple." However, the conservative and Republican Party position would say, "Yes, those two factors are important but are not the only issues to be considered. There are at least three other considerations to be made besides just the two (Caring and Fairness)." They would pose three other questions. Are we being loyal to or are we betraying our shared societal heritage? Next, since we need structure for a society to function well, are we respecting authority or are we unduly undermining the functional/structural system that allows us to have order in community? Finally, are there concerns in our society that we should hold sacred along with ideas and beliefs that we should hold inviolate? In other words, should we value coherence and solidarity enough to insist that there are sacred or basic standards that a society must hold? Loyalty, authority, and sanctity must be included along with caring and fairness when evaluating moral judgements.

The problem, of course, is that in discussion, one person uses only two criteria (the Liberal Position) in his equation of what is right while the other respondent uses five criteria in her equation. Often these criteria are held intuitively and subconsciously by the individuals, and may never be articulated audibly. Though it is clear that all five criteria cited are valid determinants of moral judgement, not all five might be considered of equal strength in the final analysis. Though we will never be able to insist that all observers use the identical determinants, we can at least insist that all respect or acknowledge the other party's position. And here is the problem: respect for all positions is not being accorded. Furthermore, it could be added that closed-mindedness has always been a symptom of laziness.

Haidt's logic obliges the reader to concur. He has not arbitrarily taken a staunch stance when embarking on his research project. In fact, he admits when beginning the project that he was a liberal agnostic and had to accept reluctantly that other researchers had a valid claim worth acknowledging. Is there not a place in society for respect for authority, loyalty to heritage, and sanctity of shared values? If we can agree that moral judgement is too complicated to be confined to only two principle rules, we have narrowed the cause for non-communication, and can now move on to the question of which of these criteria are worthy of being included or excluded from consideration in a particular social dilemma.

The author's research also makes the case for another assertion. Morality can bind but also blind simultaneously. Studies show that when groups compete, the more cohesive group will usually be superior in completion. Morality is a means of binding the group and is a necessity and not to be considered an enemy of liberalism. At the same time, morality, when not reigned in, can blind a group because excessive cohesion can stifle freedom, individuality and creativity. So where is the balance? It would seem that, given that morality is necessary for

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a society to exist, the question is not “should there be a community morality” but rather “how extensive must that moral code be for the good of a society.”

The other area so well explained in this text is the issue of religion and its place in a society. It is refreshing to find a confirmed agnostic admit the practical function of religion in society as Haidt does here. He argues along the lines expounded by the pioneer in the study of religion in society, Emile Durkheim, more than a century ago. Religion, even secular religion, tends to bind a society to function more smoothly. Haidt contends that many scientists come down too harshly on the traditions in religion, the supernatural aspect of religion, and the focus on non-material elements of religion, rather than on the positive and uplifting features. He quotes confirmed atheists such as Richard Dawkins who admits that every known culture has some versions of “ritual and religion.” He then uses that affirmation to conclude that religion is necessary in any society or it would not be so ubiquitous. The sacred is important. Secular, atheistic, autocratic governmental systems incorporate a sense of secular religion with their sacred rituals, symbols (such as flags), and heroes which celebrate their heritages. The sacred is important even in secular settings. Haidt confirms that moral, religious systems are interlocking sets of values, virtues, and norms that work together to suppress or self-regulate self-interest and make cooperative societies possible. Without religion, a large society may never be able to bind itself together as a team to tackle large imposing projects and dangers.

Along with his appeal for more empathic dialogue, Haidt produces sufficient evidence supporting the fact that morality has much more to do with intuition than reason and logic. In fact, this assertion is the most powerful paradigm found in this book. From Plato to postmodernity, philosophers have posited that ethics and morality are mainly dependent on logic and reasoning. There is now sufficient evidence to demonstrate that intuition, both innately driven and socially driven, provides the foundation for an individual’s moral interpretations. Years will probably pass before academia begins using this new paradigm as the standard. This is a major innovation in the study of ethics that will have an effect on future work in morality studies. We will await further work in the field.

In summary, *The Righteous Mind* asserts that one cannot discuss political or religious issues without first pausing and identifying from what set of values the other party will be coming, and then making an attempt to understand those basic valuations. The author, though a psychologist, writes as a sociologist employing meticulous research and well-designed experiments to substantiate his assertions. I highly recommend this book to all social scientists.

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