



The Science of Righteousness

Evolution helps to explain why parties are so tribal and politics so divisive

Which of these two narratives most closely matches your political perspective?

Once upon a time people lived in societies that were unequal and oppressive, where the rich got richer and the poor got exploited. Chattel slavery, child labor, economic inequality, racism, sexism and discriminations of all types abounded until the liberal tradition of fairness, justice, care and equality brought about a free and fair society. And now conservatives want to turn back the clock in the name of greed and God.

Once upon a time people lived in societies that embraced values and tradition, where people took personal responsibility, worked hard, enjoyed the fruits of their labor and through charity helped those in need. Marriage, family, faith, honor, loyalty, sanctity, and respect for authority and the rule of law brought about a free and fair society. But then liberals came along and destroyed everything in the name of “progress” and utopian social engineering.

Although we may quibble over the details, political science research shows that the great majority of people fall on a left-right spectrum with these two grand narratives as bookends. And the story we tell about ourselves reflects the ancient tradition of “once upon a time things were bad, and now they’re good thanks to our party” or “once upon a time things were good, but now they’re bad

thanks to the other party.” So consistent are we in our beliefs that if you hew to the first narrative, I predict you read the *New York Times*, listen to progressive talk radio, watch CNN, are pro-choice and anti-gun, adhere to separation of church and state, are in favor of universal health care, and vote for measures to redistribute wealth and tax the rich. If you lean toward the second narrative, I predict you read the *Wall Street Journal*, listen to conservative talk radio, watch Fox News, are pro-life and anti-gun control, believe America is a Christian nation that should not ban religious expressions in the public sphere, are against universal health care, and vote against measures to redistribute wealth and tax the rich.

Why are we so predictable and tribal in our politics? In his remarkably enlightening book, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (Pantheon, 2012), University of Virginia psychologist Jonathan Haidt argues that to both liberals and conservatives, members of the other party are not just wrong; they are righteously wrong—morally suspect and even dangerous. “Our righteous minds made it possible for human beings,” Haidt argues, “to produce large cooperative groups, tribes, and nations without the glue of kinship. But at the same time, our righteous minds guarantee that our cooperative groups will always be cursed by moralistic strife.” Thus, he shows, morality binds us together into cohesive groups but blinds us to the ideas and motives of those in other groups.

The evolutionary Rubicon that our species crossed hundreds of thousands of years ago that led to the moral hive mind was a result of “shared intentionality,” which is “the ability to share mental representations of tasks that two or more of [our ancestors] were pursuing together. For example, while foraging, one person pulls down a branch while the other plucks the fruit, and they both share the meal.” Chimps tend not to display this behavior, Haidt says, but “when early humans began to share intentions, their ability to hunt, gather, raise children, and raid their neighbors increased exponentially. Everyone on the team now had a mental representation of the task, knew that his or her partners shared the same representation, knew when a partner had acted in a way that impeded success or that hogged the spoils, and reacted negatively to such violations.” Examples of modern political violations include Democrat John Kerry being accused of being a “flip-flopper” for changing his mind and Republican Mitt Romney declaring himself “severely conservative” when it was suggested he was wishy-washy in his party affiliation.

Our dual moral nature leads Haidt to conclude that we need both liberals and conservatives in competition to reach a livable middle ground. As philosopher John Stuart Mill noted a century and a half ago: “A party of order or stability, and a party of progress or reform, are both necessary elements of a healthy state of political life.” ■

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