THE RIGHTEOUS MIND

WHY GOOD PEOPLE ARE DIVIDED BY POLITICS AND RELIGION

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"A landmark contribution to humanity's understanding of itself."
—*The New York Times Book Review*

Once upon a time, the vast majority of human persons suffered in societies and social institutions that were unjust, unhealthy, repressive, and oppressive. These traditional societies were reprehensible because of their deep-rooted inequality, exploitation, and irrational traditionalism. . . . But the noble human aspiration for autonomy, equality, and prosperity struggled mightily against the forces of misery and oppression, and eventually succeeded in establishing modern, liberal, democratic, capitalist, welfare societies. While modern social conditions hold the potential to maximize the individual freedom and pleasure of all, there is much work to be done to dismantle the powerful vestiges of inequality, exploitation, and repression. This struggle for the good society in which individuals are equal and free to pursue their self-defined happiness is the one mission truly worth dedicating one's life to achieving.[28]

This narrative may not mesh perfectly with the moral matrices of the left in European countries (where, for example, there is more distrust of capitalism). Nonetheless, its general plotline should be recognizable to leftists everywhere. It's a heroic liberation narrative. Authority, hierarchy, power, and tradition are the chains that must be broken to free the "noble aspirations" of the victims.

Smith wrote this narrative before Moral Foundations Theory existed, but you can see that the narrative derives its moral force primarily from the Care/harm foundation (concern for the suffering of victims) and the Liberty/oppression foundation (a celebration of liberty as freedom *from* oppression, as well as freedom *to* pursue self-defined happiness). In this narrative, Fairness is political equality (which is part of opposing oppression); there are only oblique hints of Fairness

THE GRAND NARRATIVES OF LIBERALISM AND CONSERVATISM

In the book *Moral, Believing Animals*, the sociologist Christian Smith writes about the moral matrices within which human life takes place.[27] He agrees with Durkheim that every social order has at its core something sacred, and he shows how stories, particularly "grand narratives," identify and reinforce the sacred core of each matrix. Smith is a master at extracting these grand narratives and condensing them into single paragraphs. Each narrative, he says, identifies a beginning ("once upon a time"), a middle (in which a threat or challenge arises), and an end (in which a resolution is achieved). Each narrative is designed to orient listeners morally—to draw their attention to a set of virtues and vices, or good and evil forces—and to impart lessons about what must be done now to protect, recover, or attain the sacred core of the vision.

One such narrative, which Smith calls the "liberal progress narrative," organizes much of the moral matrix of the American academic left. It goes like this:

as proportionality.²⁹ Authority is mentioned only as an evil, and there is no mention of Loyalty or Sanctity.

Contrast that narrative to one for modern conservatism. The clinical psychologist Drew Westen is another master of narrative analysis, and in his book *The Political Brain* he extracts the master narrative that was implicit, and sometimes explicit, in the major speeches of Ronald Reagan.

Reagan defeated Democrat Jimmy Carter in 1980, a time when Americans were being held hostage in Iran, the inflation rate was over 10 percent, and America's cities, industries, and self-confidence were declining. The Reagan narrative goes like this:

> Once upon a time, America was a shining beacon. Then liberals came along and erected an enormous federal bureaucracy that handcuffed the invisible hand of the free market. They subverted our traditional American values and opposed God and faith at every step of the way. . . . Instead of requiring that people work for a living, they siphoned money from hardworking Americans and gave it to Cadillac-driving drug addicts and welfare queens. Instead of punishing criminals, they tried to "understand" them. Instead of worrying about the victims of crime, they worried about the rights of criminals. . . . Instead of adhering to traditional American values of family, fidelity, and personal responsibility, they preached promiscuity, premarital sex, and the gay lifestyle . . . and they encouraged a feminist agenda that undermined traditional family roles. . . . Instead of projecting strength to those who would do evil around the world, they cut military budgets, disrespected our soldiers in uniform, burned our flag, and chose negotiation and multilateralism. . . . Then Americans decided

to take their country back from those who sought to undermine it.³⁰

This narrative would have to be edited for use in other countries and eras, where what is being "conserved" differs from the American case. Nonetheless, its general plotline and moral breadth should be recognizable to conservatives everywhere. This too is a heroic narrative, but it's a heroism of *defense*. It's less suited to being turned into a major motion picture. Rather than the visually striking image of crowds storming the Bastille and freeing the prisoners, this narrative looks more like a family reclaiming its home from termites and then repairing the joists.

The Reagan narrative is also visibly conservative in that it relies for its moral force on at least five of the six moral foundations. There's only a hint of Care (for the victims of crime), but there are very clear references to Liberty (as freedom *from* government constraint), Fairness (as proportionality: taking money from those who work hard and giving it to welfare queens), Loyalty (soldiers and the flag), Authority (subversion of the family and of traditions), and Sanctity (replacing God with the celebration of promiscuity).

The two narratives are as opposed as could be. Can partisans even *understand* the story told by the other side? The obstacles to empathy are not symmetrical. If the left builds its moral matrices on a smaller number of moral foundations, then there is no foundation used by the left that is not also used by the right. Even though conservatives score slightly lower on measures of empathy³¹ and may therefore be less moved by a story about suffering and oppression, they can still recognize that it is awful to be kept in chains. And even though many conservatives opposed some of the great liberations of the twentieth century—of women, sweatshop work-

ers, African Americans, and gay people—they have applauded others, such as the liberation of Eastern Europe from communist oppression.

But when liberals try to understand the Reagan narrative, they have a harder time. When I speak to liberal audiences about the three "binding" foundations—Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity—I find that many in the audience don't just fail to resonate; they actively reject these concerns as immoral. Loyalty to a group shrinks the moral circle; it is the basis of racism and exclusion, they say. Authority is oppression. Sanctity is religious mumbo-jumbo whose only function is to suppress female sexuality and justify homophobia.

In a study I did with Jesse Graham and Brian Nosek, we tested how well liberals and conservatives could understand each other. We asked more than two thousand American visitors to fill out the Moral Foundations Questionnaire. One-third of the time they were asked to fill it out normally, answering as themselves. One-third of the time they were asked to fill it out as they think a "typical liberal" would respond. One-third of the time they were asked to fill it out as a "typical conservative" would respond. This design allowed us to examine the stereotypes that each side held about the other. More important, it allowed us to assess how accurate they were by comparing people's expectations about "typical" partisans to the actual responses from partisans on the left and the right.[32] Who was best able to pretend to be the other?

The results were clear and consistent. Moderates and conservatives were most accurate in their predictions, whether they were pretending to be liberals or conservatives. Liberals were the least accurate, especially those who described themselves as "very liberal." The biggest errors in the whole study came when liberals answered the Care and Fairness questions while pretending to be conservatives. When faced with ques-

tions such as "One of the worst things a person could do is hurt a defenseless animal" or "Justice is the most important requirement for a society," liberals assumed that conservatives would disagree. If you have a moral matrix built primarily on intuitions about care and fairness (as equality), and you listen to the Reagan narrative, what else could you think? Reagan seems completely unconcerned about the welfare of drug addicts, poor people, and gay people. He's more interested in fighting wars and telling people how to run their sex lives.

If you don't see that Reagan is pursuing positive values of Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity, you almost have to conclude that Republicans see no positive value in Care and Fairness. You might even go as far as Michael Feingold, a theater critic for the liberal newspaper the *Village Voice*, when he wrote:

> Republicans don't believe in the imagination, partly because so few of them have one, but mostly because it gets in the way of their chosen work, which is to destroy the human race and the planet. Human beings, who have imaginations, can see a recipe for disaster in the making; Republicans, whose goal in life is to profit from disaster and who don't give a hoot about human beings, either can't or won't. Which is why I personally think they should be exterminated before they cause any more harm.[33]

One of the many ironies in this quotation is that it shows the inability of a theater critic—who skillfully enters fantastical imaginary worlds for a living—to imagine that Republicans act within a moral matrix that differs from his own. Morality binds and blinds.