

The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion.

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Tragic, Utopian, and Realistic Visions of Human Nature

Identifying the moral values that make up the beliefs of liberals and conservatives perhaps helps attenuate our natural propensity to demonize those in the other party as evil. Through understanding comes tolerance. At least that's what the idealized liberal circuits in my brain tell me. In reality, I strongly suspect that the two-party system evolved as it did over the centuries because of the natural tendency to emphasize these equally important but often irreconcilable moral values.

Recall from chapter 8 the research by behavior geneticists on identical twins separated at birth and raised in different environments that found that about 40 percent of the variance in their religious attitudes was accounted for by their genes. These same studies also showed that about 40 percent of the variance in their political attitudes is due to inheritance.<sup>17</sup> Of course, just like genes do not code for particular religious faiths, we don't inherit political party affiliation directly. Instead, genes code for temperament and people tend to sort themselves into the left and right clusters of moral values based on their personality preferences, with liberals emphasizing the harm/care and fairness/reciprocity values and conservatives underscoring the in-group/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity values. This would explain why people are so predictable in their beliefs on such a wide range of issues that are seemingly unconnected – why someone who believes that the government should stay out of the private bedroom nevertheless believes that the government should be deeply involved in private business; why someone who believes that taxes should be lowered nevertheless wants to spend heavily on military, police, and the judicial system.

In his book *A Conflict of Visions*, economist Thomas Sowell argued that these two clusters of moral values are intimately linked to the vision one holds about human nature, either as constrained (conservative) or unconstrained (liberal). He called these the constrained vision and the unconstrained vision. Sowell showed that controversies over a number of seemingly unrelated social issues such as taxes, welfare, Social Security, health care, criminal justice, and war repeatedly reveal a consistent ideological dividing line along these two conflicting visions. 'If human options are not inherently constrained, then the presence of such repugnant and disastrous phenomena virtually cries out for explanation – and for solutions. But if the limitations and passions of man himself are at the heart of these painful phenomena, then what requires explanation are the ways in which they have been avoided or minimized.'

Which of these natures you believe is true will largely shape which solutions to social ills you think will be most effective. 'In the unconstrained vision, there are no intractable reasons for social evils and therefore no reason why they cannot be solved, with sufficient moral commitment. But in the constrained vision, whatever artifices or strategies restrain or ameliorate inherent human evils will themselves have costs, some in the form of other social ills created by these civilizing institutions, so that all that is possible is a prudent trade-off.'

It's not that conservatives think we're evil and liberals believe we're good. 'Implicit in the unconstrained vision is the notion that the potential is very different from the actual, and that means exist to improve

human nature toward its potential, or that such means can be evolved or discovered, so that man will do the right thing for the right reason, rather than for ulterior psychic or economic rewards,' Sowell elaborated. 'Man is, in short, "perfectible' – meaning continually improvable rather than capable of actually reaching absolute perfection.'

In his masterpiece analysis of human nature, *The Blank Slate*, Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker relabeled these two visions the Tragic Vision and the Utopian Vision, and reconfigures them slightly:

The Utopian Vision seeks to articulate social goals and devise policies that target them directly: economic inequality is attacked in a war on poverty, pollution by environmental regulations, racial imbalances by preferences, carcinogens by bans on food additives. The Tragic Vision points to the self-interested motives of the people who would implement these policies – namely, the expansion of their bureaucratic fiefdoms – and to their ineptitude at anticipating the myriad consequences, especially when the social goals are pitted against millions of people pursuing their own interests.

The distinct left-right divide consistently cleaves the (respectively) Utopian Vision and Tragic Vision along numerous specific contests, such as the size of the government (big versus small), the amount of taxation (high versus low), trade (fair versus free), health care (universal versus individual), environment (protect it versus leave it alone), crime (caused by social injustice versus caused by criminal minds), the constitution (judicial activism for social justice versus strict constructionism for original intent), and many others.

Personally I agree with Sowell and Pinker that the unconstrained vision is utopian, which in its original Greek means 'no place.' An unconstrained utopian vision of human nature largely accepts the blank-slate model and believes that custom, law, and traditional institutions are sources of inequality and injustice and should therefore be heavily regulated and constantly modified from the top down; it holds that society can be engineered through government programs to release the natural unselfishness and altruism within people; it deems physical and intellectual differences largely to be the result of unjust and unfair social systems that can be reengineered through social planning, and therefore people can be shuffled across socioeconomic classes that were artificially created through unfair and unjust political, economic, and social systems inherited from history. I believe that this version of human nature exists in literally no place.

Although some liberals embrace just such a vision of human nature, I strongly suspect that when pushed on specific issues most liberals realize that human behavior is constrained to a certain degree – especially those educated in the biological and evolutionary sciences who are aware of the research in behavior genetics. Therefore, the debate turns on degrees of constraint. Rather than there being two distinct and unambiguous categories of constrained and unconstrained (or tragic and utopian) visions of human nature, I think there is just one vision with a sliding scale. Let's call this the Realistic Vision.

If you believe that human nature is partly constrained in all respects – morally, physically, and intellectually – then you hold a Realistic Vision of human nature. In keeping with the research from behavioral genetics and evolutionary psychology, let's put a number on that constraint at 40 to 50 percent. In the Realistic Vision, human nature is relatively constrained by our biology and evolutionary history, and therefore social and political systems must be structured around these realities,

accentuating the positive and attenuating the negative aspects of our natures. A Realistic Vision rejects the blank-slate model that people are so malleable and responsive to social programs that governments can engineer their lives into a great society of its design, and instead believes that family, custom, law, and traditional institutions are the best sources for social harmony. The Realistic Vision recognizes the need for strict moral education through parents, family, friends, and community members because people have a dual nature of being selfish and selfless, competitive and cooperative, greedy and generous, and so we need rules and guidelines and encouragement to do the right thing. The Realistic Vision acknowledges that people vary widely both physically and intellectually – in large part because of natural inherited differences – and therefore will rise (or fall) to their natural levels. Therefore governmental redistribution programs are not only unfair to those from whom the wealth is confiscated and redistributed, but the allocation of the wealth to those who did not earn it cannot and will not work to equalize these natural inequalities.

I think most moderates on both the Left and the Right embrace a Realistic Vision of human nature. They should, as should the extremists on both ends, because the evidence from psychology, anthropology, economics, and especially evolutionary theory and its application to all three of these sciences supports it. There are at least a dozen lines of evidence that converge to this conclusion.

1. Clear and quantitative physical differences among people in size, strength, speed, agility, coordination, and other physical attributes translate into some being more successful than others; at least half of these differences are inherited.
2. Clear and quantitative intellectual differences among people in memory, problem-solving ability, cognitive speed, mathematical talent, spatial reasoning, verbal skills, emotional intelligence, and other mental attributes translate into some being more successful than others; at least half of these differences are inherited.
3. Evidence from behavioral genetics and twin studies indicate that 40 to 50 percent of the variance among people in temperament, personality, and many political, economic, and social preferences are accounted for by genetics.
4. Failed communist and socialist experiments around the world throughout the twentieth century revealed that top-down draconian controls over economic and political systems do not work.
5. Failed communes and utopian community experiments tried at various places throughout the world over the past 150 years demonstrated that people by nature do not adhere to the Marxian principle 'from each according to his ability, to each according to his need.'
6. Family ties are powerful and the connectedness between blood relatives is deep. Communities who have tried to break up the family and have children raised by others provide counterevidence to the claim that 'it takes a village' to raise a child. The continued practice of nepotism further reinforces the practice that 'blood is thicker than water.'
7. The principle of reciprocal altruism – I'll scratch your back if you'll scratch mine – is universal; people do not by nature give generously unless they receive something in return, even if what they receive is only social status.

8. The principle of moralistic punishment – I'll punish you if you do not scratch my back after I have scratched yours – is universal; people do not long tolerate free riders who continually take but almost never give.

9. Hierarchical social structures are almost universal. Egalitarianism works (barely) only among tiny bands of hunter-gatherers in resource-poor environments where there is next to no private property. When a precious game animal is hunted, extensive rituals and religious ceremonies are required to ensure equal sharing of the food.

10. Aggression, violence, and dominance are almost universal, particularly among young males seeking resources, women, and especially status. Status seeking in particular explains many heretofore unexplained phenomena, such as high risk taking, costly gifts, excessive generosity beyond one's means, and especially attention seeking.

11. Within-group amity and between-group enmity are almost universal. The rule of thumb is to trust in-group members until they prove to be distrustful, and to distrust out-group members until they prove to be trustful.

12. The desire of people to trade with one another is almost universal – not for the selfless benefit of others or the society, but for the selfish benefit of one's own kin and kind; it is an unintended consequence that trade establishes trust between strangers and lowers between-group enmity, as well as produces greater wealth for both trading partners and groups.

The founders of our republic established our system of government as they did based on this Realistic Vision of human nature. The tension between individual liberty and social cohesiveness can never be resolved to everyone's satisfaction, and so the moral pendulum swings left and right, and politics is played mostly between the two forty-yard lines of the political playing field. This tension between freedom and security, in fact, would explain why third parties have such a difficult time finding a toehold on the political rock face of America, and typically crater after an election or cower in the shadows of two behemoths that have come to define the left-right system. In Europe, where third, fourth, and even fifth parties receive substantial support at the polls, they are, in fact, barely distinguishable from the parties on either side of them, and political scientists find that they can easily classify them as largely emphasizing either liberal or conservative values. Haidt's data on the differing foundational values of American liberals and conservatives, in fact, extend to all countries that have been tested, and the chart lines from country to country are virtually indistinguishable from one another.

I believe that the Realistic Vision of human nature is what James Madison was thinking of when he penned his famous dictum in 'Federalist Paper Number 51': 'If men were angels, no government would be necessary. If angels were to govern men, neither external nor internal controls on government would be necessary.' Abraham Lincoln also had something like the Realistic Vision in mind when he wrote in his first inaugural address in March 1861, on the eve of the bloodiest conflict in our nation's history: 'Though passion may have strained, it must not break our bonds of affection. The mystic chords of memory, stretching from every battlefield and patriot grave to every living heart and hearthstone all

over this broad land, will yet swell the chorus of the Union, when again touched, as surely they will be, by the better angels of our nature.'

Haidt concludes from this and similar research findings that we have moral emotions that evolved to help us survive and reproduce. In the Paleolithic environment of our ancestors, incest led to the very real problem of genetic mutations from close inbreeding. Of course, no one before our generation understood the underlying genetic reasons for the incest taboo, but evolution endowed us with moral emotions for avoiding close sexual relations with our kin and kind through the natural selection against those who practiced it extensively. Haidt proposes that the foundations of our sense of right and wrong rest within five innate and universally available psychological systems.<sup>13</sup>

1. Harm/care, related to our long evolution as mammals with attachment systems and an ability to feel (and dislike) the pain of others. We have evolved a deep sense of empathy and sympathy for others as we imagine ourselves in their position and what a situation would feel like if it were to happen to us. This foundation underlies such moral virtues as kindness, gentleness, and nurturance.

2. Fairness/reciprocity, related to the evolutionary process of reciprocal altruism, in which 'I'll scratch your back if you'll scratch mine.' This eventually evolved into genuine feelings of right and wrong over fair and unfair exchanges – a foundation that leads to such political ideals of justice, rights, and autonomy for individuals.

3. In-group/loyalty, related to our long history as a tribal species able to form shifting coalitions. We evolved the propensity to form within-group amity for our fellow tribesmen and between-group enmity for anyone in another group. This foundation creates within a tribe a 'band-of-brothers' effect and underlies such virtues as patriotism and self-sacrifice for the group.

4. Authority/respect, shaped by our long primate history of hierarchical social interactions. We evolved a natural tendency to defer to authority, show deference to leaders and experts, and follow the rules and dictates given by those above us in social rank. This foundation underlies such virtues as leadership and followership, including esteem for legitimate authority and respect for traditions.

5. Purity/sanctity, shaped by the psychology of disgust and contamination. We evolved emotions to direct us toward the clean and away from the dirty. This foundation underlies religious notions of striving to live in a less carnal and more elevated and noble way, and it emphasizes the belief that the body is a temple that can be desecrated by immoral activities and contaminants.

Over the years Haidt and his University of Virginia colleague Jesse Graham have surveyed the moral opinions of more than 118,000 people from over a dozen different countries and regions around the world, and they have found this consistent difference between liberals and conservatives: Liberals are higher than conservatives on 1 and 2 (harm/care and fairness/reciprocity), but lower than conservatives on 3, 4, and 5 (in-group/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity). Conservatives are roughly equal on all five dimensions: lower than liberals on 1 and 2 but higher on 3, 4, and 5. (Take the survey yourself at <http://www.yourmorals.org>.) The breakdown can be seen in figure 11.

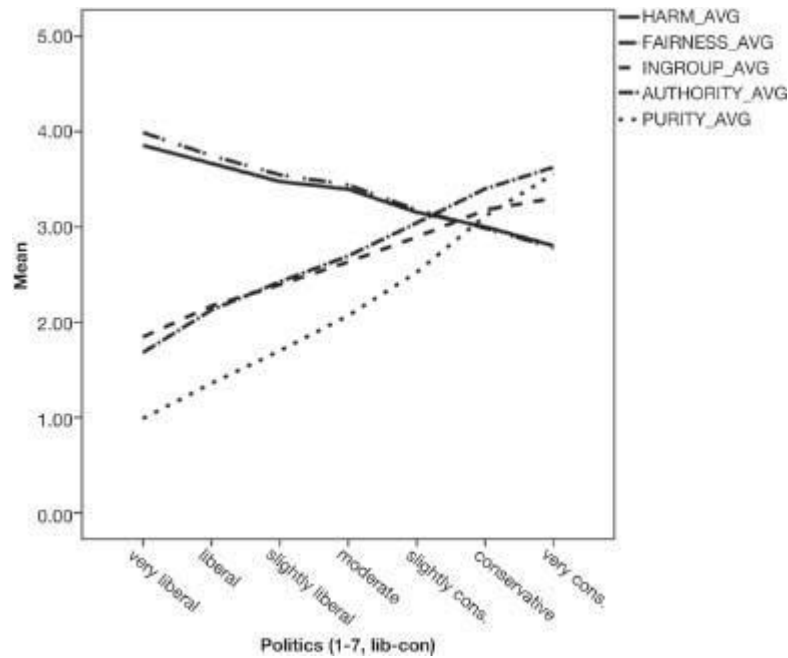


Figure 11. The Five Moral Foundations

Based on surveys of the moral opinions of 118,240 people from more than a dozen countries conducted by Jonathan Haidt and Jesse Graham of the University of Virginia, there is a consistent difference between liberals and conservatives in which liberals score higher than conservatives on moral foundations numbers 1 and 2 (harm/care and fairness/reciprocity), but score lower than conservatives on moral foundations numbers 3, 4, and 5 (in-group/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity). Conservatives are roughly equal on all five dimensions, lower than liberals on 1 and 2 but higher on 3, 4, and 5. The graph is of responses to five subscales of the Moral Foundations Questionnaire. Graph courtesy of Jonathan Haidt. Survey available at [www.yourmorals.org](http://www.yourmorals.org).