The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion, by Jonathan Haidt, 2012
(Synopsis by Ronn Smith, 2019)

Rationale for the Book

Haidt is a social psychologist who has researched human morality for several decades. In this book, described by the New York Times Book Review as “a landmark contribution to humanity’s understanding of itself,” he presents both a theoretical framework and a practical guide for thinking about morality. NPR boldly stated the book “may well change how you think and talk about politics, religion, and human nature.” Haidt offers a new perspective on two of the most important and divisive topics in human life: politics and religion. He claims both are expressions of our underlying moral psychology.

Haidt laments a mostly 21st century phenomenon: the collapse of political cooperation across party lines. He attributes this in part to our failure to understand why we are so easily divided into hostile groups, each one certain of its own righteousness. He argues that human nature is not only intrinsically moral, but moralistic (critical or judgmental). Humans are also predisposed to thrive in a group environment, which necessitates boundaries and makes inter-group conflict inevitable. By understanding why we are different, he says we can avoid wholesale blaming and instead manage the conflict so it doesn’t destroy us.

Intuitions Come First, Strategic Reasoning Second

Haidt was influenced by the Scottish skeptic David Hume who said, “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.” Haidt has conducted extensive research on human responses to a variety of hypothetical moral dilemmas that do not lend themselves to rational solutions. In his book he surmises that people will generate “reasons” for harshly judging harmless moral taboos. If the reasons are proven flawed, they retain their original judgment nonetheless, often seeking alternative rationalizations for what they “feel deep down” to be morally wrong. In short, we invent rationally appealing arguments to make sense of our strong feelings.

To support his position, Haidt cites people’s typically rapid response to moral questions. This indicates that we form moral judgments through an automatic process that relies on emotion and intuition rather than the more controlled and deliberate process of conscious reasoning. As further support, he cites other research which shows that losing emotional areas of the brain interferes with moral competence. He agrees with contemporary biologist E. O. Wilson that rationalists have invented clever justifications for moral intuitions best explained by evolution. We may regard human rights as a fundamental truth or principle, when it is really an extension of the feeling of sympathy for others, derived through natural selection.

Haidt offers the metaphor of an elephant and its rider. The elephant generally overpowers the rider, going where it pleases. Meanwhile the rider pretends to be in control by confirming the elephant’s chosen direction after the fact. In this analogy, the elephant represents a person’s emotional or intuitive self, and the rider represents the rational self. The elephant is in charge.

Haidt acknowledges it is still possible for the rider to occasionally nudge the elephant in a different direction. Human judgments can be altered by social influence or persuasion. Normally, we don't need reason to justify our own moral judgments, but to persuade others to adopt them. Even that can force us to think more systematically and critically, knowing we are accountable to someone else. By reciprocity, we may override our own intuition by willingly exposing ourselves to the rational arguments of others and reaching a different moral conclusion. Moral truth is emergent in social interaction and even in private reflection, given sufficient time, an open mind, and new intuitions triggered by the reasoning process. Intellectual and ideological diversity can actually strengthen the role of reason and improve upon the outcome. But Haidt warns that this transformation will not happen if social interactions are hostile.

Science is committed to the process of changing one's mind through exchanging ideas, challenging conventional wisdom, and examining new evidence. Politics and religion, on the other hand, generally rest on a foundation of feelings. In the latter context, thought is more often confirmatory than exploratory. For this reason, while scientific theories tend to converge, political and religious beliefs naturally diverge. This divergence is reinforced by confirmation bias, whereby we seek evidence to confirm our intuitive judgment, but avoid or disregard any evidence that contradicts it. As an iterative process, this selective approach to truth results in an ideological migration to extremes. Left to its own devices, the social order becomes progressively polarized.

There is More to Morality than Harm and Fairness

Haidt re-examines the very foundation of human morality and our concept of right and wrong. Charles Darwin argued persuasively that the evolution of higher primates selected on individuals with deep-seated empathy, first for immediate family, then for relatives in general, then for one's clan or tribe. This increased the chances that one's genes would reproduce. But gene selection fails to explain individuals who empathize or identify with complete strangers or entire classes of people. Ultimately, Darwin characterized our moral sense as "a highly complex sentiment, having its first origin in the social instincts, largely guided by the approbation of our fellow men, ruled by reason, self-interest, and in later times by deep religious feelings, confirmed by instruction and habit."

Haidt cites research suggesting a hierarchy of moral themes clustered around the vertically tiered ethics of autonomy, community, and divinity. At the base is the ethic of autonomy, a rule-based, universal moral system that may suffice to govern and protect a society of autonomous individuals. But a socio-centric morality, geared to relationships and the welfare of the group, needs the ethic of community. At the apex of this hierarchy, the ethic of divinity calls for cultivation of one's nobler self and abnegation of selfish desires. Examples of this ethic include condemnation of crass consumerism, trivialized sexuality, and spiritual emptiness. Unfortunately, by itself the ethic of divinity sometimes disregards compassion, egalitarianism, and basic human rights.

The particular blend of moral themes adopted by a given group establishes a framework for the values and behavior of that group. Haidt calls this the "moral matrix," defined as "an illusion or hallucination so vivid and complete as to offer an emotionally compelling world view, easily justified by observable

evidence and nearly impregnable to attack by arguments from outsiders." Liberals, for instance, typically operate in a different moral matrix than conservatives. He says the claim by many liberals that they are unselfish while conservatives are selfish, is a false dichotomy. He cites his own experience of not being able to imagine other moralities beyond liberalism, until he tried to fit into a different moral matrix. Doing research in India, he discovered radically different but equally cherished values and protocols that emphasize collective welfare. He found the experience broadened his perspective, helping him escape from partisan anger and the need to be right. He now thinks of liberal and conservative policies as "manifestations of deeply conflicting but equally heartfelt visions of the good society."

Haidt claims that multiple layers of morality reflect the possibilities of seeing the same things as others but conceiving of them differently. Only a few of these possibilities are activated during childhood, which makes us more sensitive to certain ethical violations against either the individual, or the community, or divinity. He calls this moral pluralism, meaning no one is right or wrong; we simply draw upon different sources for our version of moral truth.

Moral matrices can both help and hinder social progress. They bind people together in tight groups, but blind them to the coherence (or even the existence) of alternate matrices. People are divided on moral issues because their common evolutionary heritage is augmented by their particular culture and childhood socialization. To Haidt, morality is a cultural construction like cuisine, built on the same basic moral instincts just as food preferences are founded on taste receptors. In both cases we observe a wide variety of outcomes. Unfortunately, culinary diversity is more easily accepted than moral diversity.

Haidt developed Moral Foundations Theory to classify moral instincts and explain the variety of moral matrices that can result. Utilitarianism, championed by John Stuart Mill, depicts moral behavior as those acts which deliver the greatest good to the greatest number of people. It appeals to our rational selves (the rider) but fails to arouse our emotional selves (the elephant). Haidt calls it "one-receptor morality." His original theory defines five receptors (and there may be more) that resemble multiple dipoles.

1. Care vs. harm
2. Fairness vs. cheating
3. Loyalty vs. betrayal
4. Authority vs. subversion
5. Sanctity vs. degradation

Utilitarianism is founded on care vs. harm. All of these receptors relate to "groupish" behavior. Haidt points out that we are descendants of successful tribalists, not individualists. He regards these foundational receptors as innate or instinctive, and traces each one to either biological evolution or gene-cultural coevolution. As in the food analogy, our moral preferences reflect some mixture of these receptors that depends on our genetic makeup, our environment, and our life experiences.

Haidt illustrates his theory by examining both ends of the political spectrum (admitting there are exceptions). Liberals and conservatives tend to differ in both the emphases and interpretation of moral foundations. Haidt's research suggests liberals respond more from the care/harm and fairness/cheating foundations, while conservatives respond to all five. Liberals tend to interpret fairness as "equality"

while conservatives see it as "proportionality." This explains the perennial policy debate over how to distribute a nation's wealth. Liberals sympathize with the powerless or the vulnerable, and therefore push for even distribution. Conservatives display a more parochial sympathy, identifying with their own group and pushing for reward distribution proportional to effort or merit. Responding to the loyalty foundation, the left tends toward universalism while the right tends toward nationalism. The left sees authority as coercive power while the right sees it as the means for maintaining order, justice, and tradition. The response of conservatives to issues of abortions, gay rights, and chastity is founded on sanctity, whereas the sanctity foundation prompts liberals to venerate individual conscience, nature and the environment. Whatever its form, sacredness helps bind individuals into moral communities by rendering some things "noble, pure, and elevated" while their opposites are "base, polluted, and degraded."

Haidt states that liberals generally tend to be open to new ideas and experiences, something traceable to brain chemistry and genetic makeup. If true, this would diminish the roles that loyalty, authority, and sanctity play in their morality. Conversely, conservatives resist new ideas, guarding boundaries and traditions against any threat of change.

Morality Binds and Blinds

Haidt admits that most of moral psychology stems from enlightened self-interest or strategic altruism, whereby we exhibit unselfish behavior to satisfy the deeper needs of self. But he says we are also groupish, meaning we occasionally transcend our own interests altogether in favor of collective interests. We are 90% chimpanzees (selfish) and 10% bees (groupish). Haidt has found that group loyalty is a stronger predictor of people's policy preferences than self-interest. He attributes this to evolutionary selection on multiple levels: genes, cells, organisms, and societies. Through evolution, each level involves competition and selection on qualities that promote success at that level. He identifies group selection and adaptation as an important contributor to righteous minds. For millennia, intra-group selection pressure rewarded the ability to learn and conform to social norms. At the same time, it punished nonconformists, thereby reducing their genetic viability. Meanwhile, inter-group competition exerted selection pressure that rewarded the most cohesive groups. So the coevolution of tribal minds and tribal cultures prepared humans for peaceful intra-group coexistence as well as for inter-group war. Haidt hastens to add that group selection does not require violence; groups also compete based on how efficiently they cooperate and reproduce.

In the final analysis, multi-level selection has made humans "selfish primates who long to be a part of something larger and nobler than themselves." The lower form of morality binds people to their fellow citizens; eliciting a moral response that ultimately serves an enlightened self-interest. The less common, higher form of morality binds people to society as a whole and serves only the collective interest. In this state, individual psychic needs are subsumed to the needs of a social group, often leading to the mystical experience of oneness with the whole.

Haidt brings these insights to bear on the concept of leadership, whether in government, corporations, churches or other nonprofits. "Transactional" leaders can appeal to self-interests (pay, promotion,

awards, etc.), but the more effective “transformational” leaders appeal to our groupish nature (pride, loyalty, enthusiasm, even sacrifice). They foster teamwork and group competition rather than individual competition. As a cornerstone of American democracy, multiple competing groups help to prevent tyranny. Haidt points out that a nation of isolated individuals starved for meaning is more vulnerable to smooth-talking autocrats.

Haidt discusses religion as an adaptive institution that mirrors politics in its reliance upon a moral matrix of group loyalty, deference to authority, and appeals to sanctity. Durkheim characterized religion as a “unified system of beliefs and practices that unites members into a single moral community.” Haidt says “religions exist primarily for people to achieve together what they cannot achieve on their own.” Gods are tools that let people bind themselves together as a functioning community. His research indicates that to promote unselfish behavior, religious *belonging* matters more than religious *believing*. Political and social groups can accomplish the same thing. Either case poses the temptation to move from behaving right to *being* right. Alluding to righteousness, Haidt quotes Rappaport. “To invest social conventions with sanctity is to hide their arbitrariness in a cloak of seeming necessity.” Moreover, anything that binds people together into a moral matrix that glorifies the in-group and demonizes another group can lead to moralistic atrocities.

Haidt believes there is a “grand narrative” that identifies and reinforces the sacred core of each moral matrix. The human mind is a story processor, not a logic processor. Even though these narratives may be “post hoc fabrications,” they are saturated with morality and strongly influence people’s behavior. In the liberal narrative, authority, hierarchy, power and tradition are chains that must be broken to free the “noble aspirations” of the victims. In the conservative narrative, traditional American values must be defended against the threat of big government redistributing hard-earned wealth to freeloaders.

Haidt distinguishes between the often-confused notions of orthodoxy and conservatism. Orthodoxy is the view that “there exists a transcendent moral order, externally ordained, to which society should conform.” True conservatism, on the other hand, critiques liberal arguments based on the enlightened grounds of the search for human happiness and the use of reason. The conservative regards humans as inherently imperfect, needing constraints and accountability to behave well. These constraints appear in the form of laws, religious and political institutions, traditions and nations. Reason is flawed and prone to overconfidence. Institutions are necessary to preserve social order. In the liberal view, people are inherently good, and flourish when constraints and divisions are removed. Still, even the liberal legend Bertrand Russell said, “Social cohesion is a necessity, and mankind has never yet succeeded in enforcing cohesion by merely rational arguments. Every community is exposed to two opposite dangers: ossification through too much discipline and reverence for tradition, on the one hand; on the other hand, dissolution, or subjection to foreign conquest, through the growth of individualism and personal independence that makes cooperation impossible.”

In Haidt’s opinion a community that values self-expression over conformity and tolerance over loyalty may attract outsiders more readily, but a community that values conformity and loyalty is more apt to endure. He considers the left’s attempt to change society without considering the effects on its interlocking sets of values, virtues, norms, identities and institutions to be a “fundamental blind spot.”

He says, “Liberalism, which has done much to bring about freedom and equal opportunity, is not sufficient as a governing philosophy.” It tends to overreach, to change too quickly. Conversely, conservatives are oblivious to certain classes of victims, and slow to see the need for change.

Haidt turns to John Stuart Mill for some resolution. “A party of stability and order, and a party of progress and reform, are both necessary elements of a healthy state of political life.” Anything that binds people together into dense networks of trust can potentially make people less selfish and more apt to extend their generosity beyond group boundaries. But they must follow the Chinese metaphor of yin and yang (complementary forces) rather than the monotheistic metaphor of war (opposing forces). The war metaphor seems to apply to contemporary American politics, where the 1990’s witnessed the decay in friendships and social contracts across party lines. Congress went from generally collegial relationships to gang-like behavior that worsened in the early 21st century under the pressures of fiscal and cultural crises. Technology has aggravated this trend by isolating American citizens from real interaction and affording them the luxury of entertaining only ideas that confirm their bias. Haidt concludes, “Morality binds and blinds. It binds us into ideological teams that fight each other as though the fate of the world depended on our side winning the battle. It blinds us to the fact that each team is comprised of good people who have something important to say.”

Possible Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the elephant and rider metaphor and Haidt's assertion that Republicans speak more directly to the elephant while Democrats speak more directly to the rider.
2. Respond to Haidt's claim that conservatives have a broader moral foundation and therefore, more ways for politicians to connect with them.
3. How plausible is gene-culture coevolution and multi-level selection?
4. Evaluate the need for both a party of stability and order and a party of progress and reform. Is this the political analog of natural selection, which balances the rates of gene replication and mutation to maintain species viability?
5. Haidt says erasing boundaries that divide us is a vision of heaven for liberals, but conservatives believe it would quickly descend into hell. Discuss the paradox of the vital role of groups, which necessitates exclusion of outsiders.
6. Can close-knit groups bridge across boundaries? Under what conditions might such groups serve as laboratories in which to perfect social interaction so it will carry over into the outside world?