

THE BIG IDEAS

The Moral Mind

& The Righteous Mind.

How to Win an Argument

Carnegie says...

Moral Foundation Theory

Care, Fairness, Loyalty, Authority, Sanctity, Liberty.

A Yin and Two Yangs

Liberalism, Libertarianism, Social Conservatism.

Let's Try to Work It Out

We're all stuck here for a while.

The Righteous Mind

Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion

BY JONATHAN HAIDT · VINTAGE © 2013 · 528 PAGES

“People who devote their lives to studying something often come to believe that the object of their fascination is the key to understanding everything. Books have been published in recent years on the transformative role in human history played by cooking, mothering, war . . . even salt. This is one of those books. I study moral psychology, and I’m going to make the case that morality is the extraordinary human capacity that made civilization possible. I don’t mean to imply that cooking, mothering, war, and salt were not also necessary, but in this book I’m going to take you on a tour of human nature and history from the perspective of moral psychology.

By the end of the tour, I hope to have given you a new way to think about two of the most important, vexing, and divisive topics in human life: politics and religion. Etiquette books tell us not to discuss these topics in polite company, but I say go ahead. Politics and religion are both expressions of our underlying moral psychology, and an understanding of that psychology can help to bring people together. My goal in this book is to drain some of the heat, anger, and divisiveness out of these topics and replace them with awe, wonder, and curiosity. We are downright lucky that we evolved this complex moral psychology that allowed our species to burst out of the forests and savannas and into the delights, comforts, and extraordinary peacefulness of modern societies in just a few thousand years. My hope is that this book will make conversations about morality, politics, and religion more common, more civil, and more fun, even in mixed company. My hope is that it will help us get along.”

~ Jonathan Haidt from *The Righteous Mind*

*“I have striven not to laugh
at human actions, not to
weep at them, not to hate
them, but to understand
them.”*

~ Baruch Spinoza

I’m a big fan of Jonathan Haidt. Professor Haidt is the Thomas Cooley Professor of Ethical Leadership at New York University’s Stern School of Business. He obtained his PhD in social psychology from the University of Pennsylvania in 1992 and taught at the University of Virginia for sixteen years. He’s one of the world’s leading researchers/thinkers on the science of moral and political psychology.

I read his first book [The Happiness Hypothesis: Finding Modern Truth in Ancient Wisdom](#) over a decade ago. I’ve had *this* book for YEARS and finally decided to read it during a micro-sabbatical in which I decided to sit down and basically spend a WEEK hanging out with him.

(One reason why I decided to read it now? The upcoming 2024 U.S. Presidential election is weeks away as I type this. It felt like a good time to learn more about how one of the world’s leading moral and political psychologists thinks about political polarization!)

I read this book along with his more recent books [The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas Are Setting Up a Generation for Failure](#) and [The Anxious Generation: How the Great Rewiring of Childhood Is Causing an Epidemic of Mental Illness](#).

"Understanding the simple fact that morality differs around the world, and even within societies, is the first step toward understanding your righteous mind. The next step is to understand where these many moralities came from in the first place."

~ Jonathan Haidt

"The first principle of moral psychology is Intuition comes first, strategic reasoning second."

~ Jonathan Haidt

"Our moral thinking is much more like a politician searching for votes than a scientist searching for truth."

~ Jonathan Haidt

I've created over 700 Philosopher's Notes. In fact, if my math is correct, this is Note #713. And... I'm pretty sure this is going to be at least tied for first as THE most difficult book to distill into a six-page Note as the themes Jonathan explores are too nuanced to neatly pack into a quick Note.

But... That's why you pay me the big bucks (hah), so I'll do my best to share some of my favorite ideas. I hope to inspire you to explore these ideas further by getting the book ([here](#)) and striving to help create more civility in our discussions about politics and religion. Let's get to work!

P.S. The intellectual rigor with which Jonathan writes reminds me of two of my other favorite writers: [Yuval Noah Harari](#) and [Jordan Peterson](#). The depth and breadth of their thinking cultivated over DECADES of diligent study is as inspiring as the wisdom they share.

(Check out our Notes on Harari's [Sapiens](#), [Homo Deus](#), and [21 Lessons for the 21st Century](#) along with our Notes on Peterson's [12 Rules for Life](#) and [Beyond Order](#).)

P.P.S. If you haven't watched the Netflix documentary called [The Social Dilemma](#) yet, I HIGHLY recommend you check it. Jonathan is in it. His wisdom (and warmth) is incredibly moving.

THE RIGHTEOUS (AND MORAL) MIND

"I could have titled this book *The Moral Mind* to convey the sense that the human mind is designed to 'do' morality, just as it's designed to do language, sexuality, music, and many other things described in popular books reporting the latest scientific findings. But I chose the title *The Righteous Mind* to convey the sense that human nature is not just intrinsically moral, it's also intrinsically moralistic, critical, and judgmental.

The word *righteous* comes from the old Norse word *rettvis* and the old English word *rihtwis*, both of which mean 'just, upright, virtuous.' ...

The linkage of righteousness and judgmentalism is captured in some modern definitions of *righteous*, such as 'arising from an outraged sense of justice, morality, or fair play.' The link also appears in the term *self-righteous*, which means 'convinced of one's own righteousness, especially in contrast with the actions of others; narrowly moralistic and intolerant.' I want to show you that an obsession with righteousness (leading inevitably to self-righteousness) is the normal human condition. It is a feature of our evolutionary design, not a bug or error that crept into our minds that would otherwise be objective and rational.

Our righteous minds made it possible for human beings—but no other animals—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. Some degree of conflict among groups may be necessary for the health and development of any society. When I was a teenager I wished for world peace, but now I yearn for a world in which competing ideologies are kept in balance, systems of accountability keep us all from getting away with too much, and fewer people believe that righteous ends justify violent means. Not a very romantic wish, but one that we might actually achieve."

The Moral Mind.

Aka... *The Righteous Mind.*

One of the central themes of the book is the fact that our sense of morality (and righteousness!) is an adaptive, net positive FEATURE of being human, not a bug.

We just need to do the hard work to get more skilled at communicating across different moral (and political) camps.

The book has three parts. In Part I, Jonathan tells us that "Intuitions Come First, Strategic Reasoning Second." In Part II, he tells us that "There's More to Morality than Harm and Fairness." In Part III, he tells us that "Morality Binds and Blinds."

"It felt good to be released from partisan anger. And once I was no longer angry, I was no longer committed to reaching the conclusion that righteous anger demands: we are right, they are wrong. I was able to explore new moral matrices, each one supported by its own intellectual traditions. It felt like a kind of awakening."

~ Jonathan Haidt

"The process of converting pluribus (diverse people) into unum (a nation) is a miracle that occurs in every successful nation on Earth. Nations decline or divide when they stop performing this miracle."

~ Jonathan Haidt

"Everyone cares about fairness, but there are two major kinds. On the left, fairness often implies equality, but on the right it means proportionality—people would be rewarded in proportion to what they contribute, even if that guarantees unequal outcomes."

~ Jonathan Haidt

Let's start by talking about what I know you REALLY want...

HOW TO WIN AN ARGUMENT

"If you want to change people's minds, you've got to talk to their elephants. You've got to ... elicit new intuitions, not new rationales."

Dale Carnegie was one of the greatest elephant-whisperers of all time. In his classic book, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, Carnegie repeatedly urged readers to avoid direct confrontations. Instead he advised people to 'begin in a friendly way,' to 'smile,' to 'be a good listener,' and to 'never say *you're wrong*.' The persuader's goal should be to convey respect, warmth, and an openness to dialogue before stating one's own case. Carnegie was urging readers to use ... the social persuasion link, to prepare the ground before attempting to use ... the reasoned persuasion link.

From my description of Carnegie so far, you might think his techniques are superficial and manipulative, appropriate only for salespeople. But Carnegie was in fact a brilliant moral psychologist who grasped one of the deepest truths about conflict. He used a quotation from Henry Ford to express it: 'If there is any one secret of success it lies in the ability to get the other person's point of view and see things from their angle as well as your own.'

It's such an obvious point yet few of us apply it in moral and political arguments because our righteous minds so readily shift into combat mode. The rider and the elephant work together so smoothly to fend off attacks and lob rhetorical grenades of our own. The performance may impress our friends and show allies that we are committed members of the team, but no matter how good our logic, it's not going to change the minds of our opponents if they are in combat mode too. If you really want to change someone's mind on a moral or political matter, you'll need to see things from that person's angle as well as your own. And if you do truly see it the other person's way—deeply and intuitively—you might even find your own mind opening in response. Empathy is an antidote to righteousness, although it's very difficult to empathize across a moral divide."

That's from chapter #2 called "The Intuitive Dog and Its Rational Tail" (sub-section: "How to Win an Argument") in which Jonathan walks us through the first rule of moral psychology: "Intuitions come first, strategic reasoning second."

The metaphor he uses in this book is the same one he uses in *The Happiness Hypothesis*: the RIDER (conscious reasoning) on an ELEPHANT ("the other 99 percent of mental processes").

The short story? We all want to believe that we and everyone around us are rational. Here's the thing to remember... WE'RE NOT. We're driven by a VERY LARGE and POWERFUL "elephant" of near-instant, intuitive judgments that we rationalize on an ad hoc basis. Get the book for the deep dive on the scientific evidence Jonathan leans on to prove his point.

He tells us that we'd be wise to remember the wisdom from [Dale Carnegie](#) ("one of the greatest elephant-whisperers of all-time") and his elephant-training field guide: [How to Win Friends and Influence People](#). As Jonathan says: "If you want to change someone's mind about a moral or political issue, talk to the elephant first."

How? Show you care. Be warm. Be open to their ideas. Or, as [Stephen Covey](#), another all-time great elephant-whisperer once said: "Seek first to understand, then to be understood."

In fact, that's Habit#5 of his [7 Habits of Highly Effective People](#). Covey tells us that first, we need to "Be Proactive" (rather than reactive), then we need to "Begin with the End in Mind" then we need to "Put First Things First" and "Think Win/Win" then we "Seek First to Understand" then we look for ways to "Synergize," then we need to remember to "Sharpen the Saw" as we strive to stay Energized and Effective.

"I began by analyzing lists of virtues from around the world. Virtues are social constructions. The virtues taught to children in a warrior culture are different from those taught in a farming culture or a modern industrialized culture. There's always some overlap among lists, but even then there are different shades of meaning. Buddha, Christ, and Muhammad all talked about compassion, but in rather different ways. Nonetheless, when you see that some version of kindness, fairness, and loyalty is valued in most cultures, you start wondering if there might be some low-level pan-human social receptors (analogous to taste receptors) that make it particularly easy for people to notice some kinds of social events rather than others."

~ Jonathan Haidt

Note: That's a GREAT frame to use in our next morally-charged chat.

If you feel so inspired, you may want to consider starting by committing to staying "responsible" and trying to discipline yourself to not get so triggered. Then, think about your ideal outcome from the chat (perhaps: improving your own thinking and deepening your connection while practicing your philosophy with wisdom, discipline, courage, and love?). Then, focus on what's truly important, not all the rabbit holes of nonsense down which a moralistic chat can tend to go. Then find ways for BOTH of you to win as you TRULY try to understand the other person's perspective and look for ways to "synergize" such that you can make a $1 + 1 = 3$ out of your different perspectives. And, don't forget to train your recovery after your interaction. :)

Note: It's a LOT easier for me to *type* that out than practice it. Perfect. Let's do that. TODAY.

P.S. Remember: **EMPATHY** is an antidote for RIGHTEOUSNESS!

MORAL FOUNDATION THEORY

"I defined innateness as 'organized in advance of experience,' like the first draft of a book that gets revised as individuals grow up within diverse cultures. This definition allowed me to propose that the moral foundations are innate. Particular rules and virtues vary across cultures, so you'll get fooled if you look for universality in the finished books. You won't find a single paragraph that exists in identical form in every human culture. But if you look for links between evolutionary theory and anthropological observations, you can take some educated guesses about what was in the universal first draft of human nature. I tried to make (and justify) five such guesses."

That's from a chapter in Part II called: "The Moral Foundations of Politics."

The five guesses that Jonathan believes are "innate" to our moral nature and that form the basis for his "Moral Foundation Theory"?

- *"The Care/harm foundation evolved in response to the adaptive challenge of caring for vulnerable children. It makes us sensitive to signs of suffering and need; it makes us despise cruelty and want to care for those who are suffering."*
- *The Fairness/cheating foundation evolved in response to the adaptive challenge of reaping the rewards of cooperation without getting exploited. It makes us sensitive to indications that another person is likely to be a good (or bad) partner for collaboration and reciprocal altruism. It makes us want to shun or punish cheaters.*
- *The Loyalty/betrayal foundation evolved in response to the adaptive challenge of forming and maintaining coalitions. It makes us sensitive to signs that another person is (or is not) a team player. It makes us trust and reward such people, and it makes us want to hurt, ostracize, or even kill those who betray us or our group.*
- *The Authority/subversion foundation evolved in response to the adaptive challenge of forging relationships that will benefit us within social hierarchies. It makes us sensitive to signs of rank or status, and to signs that other people are (or are not) behaving properly, given their position.*
- *The Sanctity/degradation foundation evolved initially in response to the adaptive challenge of the omnivore's dilemma, and then to the broader challenge of living in a world of pathogens and parasites. It includes the behavioral immune system, which can make us wary of a diverse array of symbolic objects and threats. It makes it possible for people to invest in objects with irrational and extreme values—both positive and negative—which are important for binding groups together."*

Later in the book, after further research, he added a sixth foundation:

"When I began writing The Happiness Hypothesis, I believed that happiness came from within, as Buddha and the Stoic philosophers said thousands of years ago. You'll never make the world conform to your wishes, so focus on changing yourself and your desires. But by the time I finished writing, I had changed my mind: Happiness comes from between. It comes from getting the right relationships between yourself and others, yourself and your work, and yourself and something larger than yourself."

~ Jonathan Haidt

"Morality binds and blinds. It binds us to the ideological teams that fight each other as though the fate of the world depended on our side winning each battle. It blinds us to the fact that each team is composed of good people who have something important to say."

~ Jonathan Haidt

- *"We added the Liberty/oppression foundation, which makes people notice and resent any sign of attempted domination. It triggers an urge to band together to resist or overthrow bullies and tyrants. This foundation supports the egalitarianism and antiauthoritarianism of the left, as well as the don't-tread-on-me and give-me-liberty antigovernment anger of libertarians and some conservatives."*

After articulating each of those six foundations of our innate morality (while establishing the thinking behind how he arrived at his conclusions, of course), Jonathan shines a light on how our major political parties in the U.S. approaches each of those foundations (while, again, backing ALL of his statements up with remarkable data).

Later in the book, he highlights the strengths of each perspective. Let's talk about that now.

P.S. Here's a powerful definition and a fascinating historical fact: *"Here's a simple definition of ideology: 'A set of beliefs about the proper order of society and how it can be achieved.' And here's the most basic of all ideological questions: Preserve the present order, or change it? At the French Assembly of 1789, the delegates who favored preservation sat on the right side of the chamber, while those who favored change sat on the left. The terms right and left have stood for conservatives and liberalism ever since."*

A YIN AND TWO YANGS

"In Chinese philosophy, yin and yang refer to any pair of contrasting or seemingly opposed forces that are in fact complementary and interdependent. Night and day are not enemies, nor are hot and cold, summer and winter, male and female. We need both, often in a shifting or alternating balance. John Stuart Mill said that liberals and conservatives are like this: 'A party of social order or stability, and a party of progress or reform, are both necessary elements of a healthy state of political life.'

The philosopher Bertrand Russell saw this same dynamic at work throughout Western intellectual history: 'From 600 BC to the present day, philosophers have been divided into those who wished to tighten social bonds and those who wished to relax them.' Russell then explained why both sides are partially right, using terms that are about as close a match to moral capital as I could ever hope to find:

It is clear that each party to this dispute—as to all that persist through long periods of time—is partly right and partly wrong. 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 an individualism and personal independence that makes cooperation impossible."

That's from a chapter in Part III called: "Can We All Disagree More Constructively?" The subsection from which that passage is taken is called: "A Yin and Two Yangs."

Jonathan walks us through his thoughts on some of the current debates in American society—highlighting the partial truths embodied by the major political parties: "Yin: Liberal Wisdom," "Yang #1: Libertarian Wisdom," and "Yang #2: Social Conservative Wisdom."

Before I give you the super-quick highlight reel, I want to emphasize the INCREDIBLE IMPORTANCE of having the Wisdom to KNOW that each of our perspectives is pretty much ALWAYS partially right AND partially wrong. When we have the wise humility to recognize that, we can practice our elephant-whispering skills by connecting with people via our shared truths and truly trying to understand their perspectives, recognizing their validity and owning the fact that NO ONE is, as Ken Wilber says, smart enough to be either 100% right OR 100% wrong!

"If you want to understand another group, follow the sacredness. As a first step, think about the six moral foundations, and try to figure out which one or two are carrying the most weight in a particular controversy. And if you really want to open your mind, open your heart first. If you can have at least one friendly interaction with a member of the 'other' group, you'll find it far easier to listen to what they're saying, and maybe even see a controversial issue in a new light. You may not agree, but you'll probably shift from Manichaean disagreement to a more respectful and constructive yin-yang disagreement."

~ Jonathan Haidt

The HYPER-abridged highlight reel of awesome for each perspective? Liberals get it right when they encourage *some* regulation of corporations but can tend to go too far and become antibusiness which isn't helpful as (per libertarians!) free markets can be nearly "miraculous." Social conservatives get it right in many ways including the fact that they embrace the most moral foundations—liberals tend to focus on Care/Liberty/Fairness while discounting Loyalty/Authority/Sanctity while Libertarians are ALL (!) about Liberty (and Fairness).

Of course, get the book (and go to chapter #12!) for more on what I consider Professor's Haidt's brilliant "centrist" philosophy—integrating the best of ALL perspectives. And, learn more about his current thinking on [his website](#) and his [Substack: After Babel](#). For now, remember your elephant-whispering skills... Have empathy and try to find the partial truth in other people's opinions WHILE remembering the partiality of YOUR perspective!

LET'S TRY TO WORK IT OUT

"This book explained why people are divided by politics and religion. The answer is not, as Manichaeans would have it, because some people are good and others are evil. Instead, the explanation is that our minds were designed for group righteousness. We are deeply intuitive creatures whose gut feelings drive our strategic reasoning. This makes it difficult—but not impossible—to connect with those who live in other matrices, which are often built on different configurations of the available moral foundations.

So the next time you find yourself seated beside someone from another matrix, give it a try. Don't just jump right in. Don't bring up morality until you've found a few points of commonality or in some other way established a bit of trust. And when you do bring up issues of morality, try to start with some praise, or with a sincere expression of interest. We're all stuck here for a while, so let's try to work it out."

Those are the final words of the book.

In *The Coddling of the American Mind*, one of the three "Great Untruths" Haidt and his co-author speak to is "*The Untruth of Us Versus Them*" which tells us that "*Life is a battle between good people and evil people.*"

They counter that UNTRUTH with wisdom from Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. In his book *The Gulag Archipelago*, he tells us: "*If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being.*"

Here's to doing the Heroic work to live with more Wisdom, Discipline, Love, and Courage as we honor our differences while seeing our common humanity so we're in the best position to help change the world—one person at a time, starting with you and me and all of us TOGETHER Today!

B

Brian Johnson,
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About the Author of This Note

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Brian Johnson is the Co-Founder + CEO of Heroic Public Benefit Corporation and the author of *Areté: Activate Your Heroic Potential*. He's 50% Philosopher and 50% CEO and 101% committed to helping create a world in which 51% of humanity is flourishing by the year 2051. Learn more at [heroic.us](#).

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