



Aaron Brown

Politics and Morality

Time for a liberal morality in a conservative wrapper?

A couple of months ago, I read *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion* by Jonathan Haidt (978-0307377906). The book got attention mainly for its claim that political liberals recognize only two and a half of the six foundations of morality: protection from harm and freedom from oppression, plus justice in the sense of equality, while political conservatives recognize those plus justice in the sense of just desserts, and three more: loyalty, respect for authority, and sanctity.

What immediately struck me is there is an obvious reason for this division. The history of the world prior to 1789 is dominated by horror stories inspired by the conservative moral principles. Loyalty to groups often led to killing or oppression of outsiders, and the circle of insiders always seemed to shrink until everyone was an outsider. The authorities that demanded respect could be reactionary, barbaric, and corrupt. Witch hunts and pogroms were common to find impure, immoral, blaspheming, or otherwise

... and as long as TRUTH, JUSTICE - both in the sense of JUST DESSERTS as well as EQUALITY - FREEDOM FROM OPPRESSION as well as doing what you want without ignoring LOYALTY, SANCTITY, RESPECT FOR AUTHORITY and the right to PROTECTION FROM HARM exist, I CAPTAIN RIGHTEOUS will uphold them ... in return for a glass of water...



offensive people, and subject them to terrible deaths.

On the other hand, before the modern era, it's harder to think of really bad things done by groups who were trying to protect or free people. You might come up with examples, but they are rare and debatable.

The split on justice reinforces the point.

Liberals like equality of outcome. "Why is that man a slave and that man a master?" is a clearly positive question, whatever moral compass you use. Conservatives also like to be sure people get the rewards and punishments they have earned. Retribution has often been a terrible scourge that has led to cycles of horrific violence.

The Age of Reason

The Enlightenment, or the Age of Reason, took place in Europe and the future USA from about 1690 to 1789. During that century it was easy for thinkers to conclude freedom, equality, and taking care of the poor and weak were the great goals of society, as the revolutionary French slogan "liberté, égalité, fraternité" attests. The French Revolution is also where we get the modern political connotations of 'left' and 'right.'

The other moral foundations, justice in the sense of just desserts, loyalty, respect for authority, and sanctity, were important, no doubt, with important benefits, but also very dangerous. Moreover, they were usually applied incorrectly.

- The formal justice system was obviously unfair.
- Loyalty was to narrow groups, and based on irrelevant criteria.
- Respect was accorded to undeserving authorities.

- Sanctity had been exaggerated into superstition.

These moral foundations needed to be redesigned rationally, with built-in limits to prevent abuse. Unfortunately, that means they are no longer moral foundations but flexible principles of social engineering.

The French Revolution soon turned into the Reign of Terror, which in turn gave way to a brutal militaristic Emperor and decades of weak governments, despotism, revolution, and pointless wars. Sadly, this was neither the last nor the worst disaster from well-intentioned attempts to free society from traditional oppressions. That dubious honor belongs to events in the 20th century, with the horrors visited on the world by Communist and Fascist totalitarian superstates.

The attempts of sincere socialists to reduce the power the dangerous moral foundations have over society boomerang. The forbidden foundations snap back as tyrants use their power for evil.

- Just desserts: In less than four years, the Angkor courts of justice found cause to execute between a fifth and a third of all Cambodians.
- Loyalty: Stalin murdered the internationalists who held true to the Marxist theory of worldwide socialism (not to mention Jews and lots of other people) and made loyalty appeals from Rodina Mat, the Mother Homeland.
- Respect for authority: Mao raised it to heights undreamed of by his predecessor Emperors.
- Sanctity: Hitler favored sanctity metaphors, which may not have been metaphors, to urge extermination of filthy undermensch who would pollute Aryan purity.

Of course, socialist dreams do not always lead to abomination. Sometimes programs to make society more caring, equal, and free succeed. At other times they fail less spectacularly. Failed reform may cause a weak government to collapse, often followed by anarchy or a military takeover. In many countries in the 1970s, and many more today, socialism led to stagnant economies and unpayable debts.

Risk and reward

Stated this way, the liberal attempt to rely on only two and a half of the six moral foundations seems far riskier than it's worth. But you get the opposite impression if you consider the cumulative effect over the last three centuries from these efforts. Recent books like Matt Ridley's *The Rational Optimist*, Steven Pinker's *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, and Paul Seabright's *The Company of Strangers* make clear the tremendous progress the human race has made as a result of Enlightenment ideas: progress in science, justice, comfort, safety, freedom, education, and culture.

There are many types of liberals and conserv-

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atives, and many people who do not fit neatly into either category. But here is a good working definition for the purposes of this essay. A liberal is someone whose main fear is backsliding or just stagnating in progress toward an enlightened society. A conservative is someone whose main fear is the damage done by failed government efforts to accelerate progress toward an enlightened society.

Most liberal policies have superficial appeal. If there are unemployed people and useful work to be done, it's a win-win for the government to hire them to do the work. If people are paying extortionate rents and enduring mistreatment to live in overcrowded, unhealthy, dangerous slums, let's bulldoze the neighborhood and build clean, healthy housing and rent it at fair prices. If people are poor and oppressed, free them and give them the resources they need to prosper. If inefficient industries are polluting the environment and mistreating workers, let's discourage them with taxes and use the revenue to subsidize exciting new green and worker-friendly industries.

F. A. Hayek in *The Road to Serfdom* explained one problem. Things are always far more com-

plicated than they appear in simple descriptions of liberal policies. However complex the legislation, however much is spent on implementation, however honest and competent the administrators are, it is impossible to aggregate the detailed local information necessary to do these things right. On top of this, the legislation is often flawed, people skimp on implementation, and administrators may be dishonest or incompetent. The frustration when policies fail often leads to invention of enemies (who may be called reactionaries, speculators, fifth columnists, or other names) and the invocation of the forbidden moral foundation

group loyalty to punish the imaginary enemies and pile on oppressive 'emergency' legislation.

That doesn't mean liberal policies always fail, but it does mean results are unpredictable and hard to measure and also that good and bad effects will spill over to all aspects of society and play out over long periods of time. This leads to frustration at the slow progress and unpleasant side-effects. Even if policies are more successful than average in the long run, there will be periods of reversals and embarrassments.

The government might react by shutting some programs down and modifying others, proceeding by slow trial and error to get eventually to a good result. But that seldom happens. Instead, the government may be voted out or overthrown, or the failed policies may create constituencies that keep them alive. The worst result is the government blames saboteurs and enacts repressive laws to force its failed policies to work. The well-intentioned originators of policies are forced out of power and replaced by increasingly brutal apparatchiks who, in turn, enlist increasingly nasty secret police.

Another problem

Jonathan Haidt gives a different explanation, which also has some validity. The moral foundations that liberals want to replace with safer, rational versions represent essential social glue.

- Retribution has led to cycles of terrible violence, but we need strong and fair rule of law, and tolerance of unequal outcomes if they are arrived at fairly.
- Loyalty can lead people to do terrible things, but it remains an essential virtue.
- Respect for authority impedes progress, but no respect for authority results in chaos.

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- Preserving sanctity is the motivation for many acts of civility without which we are uncivilized.

Forcing liberal reforms without respect for these principles causes harm to organic society. It can be like aggressive surgery that leads to the famous line, “The operation was successful but the patient died.”

The picture drawn above might be called rational liberals and conservatives. There are also ignorant people in both camps: liberals unaware of the terrible problems their policies have often caused, and conservatives unaware of the tremendous gains civilization owes to liberal reforms. Another group is aware of these things, but don't think they're so bad. Some people blame all failures of liberal policy on evil opponents, or claim the policies were not really liberal in the first place, or even that “Hitler wasn't so bad.” Some conservatives claim the world was a better place in the past, maybe even, “slavery had its advantages.”

Other people are opportunists who have no political views. Instead, they support policies in their immediate narrow self-interest. Politicians – at least, those successful at the national level – have to appeal to so many groups with

inconsistent views and goals that they cannot articulate rational positions. For this reason, it's a mistake to identify 'liberal' and 'conservative' with 'Democrat' and 'Republican,' or even with any specific set of policies. Practical politics is too complicated to correspond to simple moral imperatives.

Elephants and riders

Most of Jonathan Haidt's book describes psychological research done by himself and others that paints an intriguing picture of moral reasoning. In his metaphor, the conscious brain

is like a rider of an elephant representing the unconscious brain. Most of the time the rider is a lawyer, explaining and justifying what the elephant is doing; although, like a lawyer, it might sometimes exert a faint influence on its client. People form moral judgments instantly and unconsciously, then their conscious minds find reasons to justify them. If the reasons are refuted, the unconscious judgment – and the action it dictates – does not change.

It's not surprising that the conscious mind is not trusted to have much influence on actions. It strains the limit of computer capability to distinguish a cat from a dog, something your unconscious brain does effortlessly and continuously, along with a tremendous number of processing and control functions. But your conscious brain is hopelessly inferior to a computer in doing arithmetic, remembering things, or any other basic intellectual task. So, unconscious brain > computer > conscious brain. You can see why you are wired to keep your conscious brain away from all the important decisions, like whether your heart should beat, and processing, like extracting useful information from raw sensory data.

We like to think our conscious brain is there to make the high-level, long-term, rational

decisions that pure instinct cannot handle. But research allows very little scope for conscious control of action. It would seem that the real purpose of our conscious brain is to explain our behavior to other people in ways that make them less likely to kill us. There are hints that conscious thought can influence certain long-term behaviors, at least a little bit, but the large bulk of evidence is for unconscious control.

One objection people sometimes make to this claim is that some behavior is clearly based on conscious rational thought, like reading an airport departures board and figuring out which gate to go to. The hidden assumption here is that the unconscious brain does not know how to read or reason. In fact, the unconscious brain has access to the same reading capabilities as the conscious brain, and it forms judgments based on written material much faster. Do not think of it as an unintelligent animal brain; its IQ is far higher than that of your conscious brain. One way to observe its power is to see what happens when wiring defects bring its powers into areas usually left to conscious thought in what were formerly called 'idiot savants' but are now supposed to be called 'people with savant syndrome.'

Why morality matters

The point is that your conscious reasons for your political opinions are the ones invented by your lawyer, or, better, your publicity agent. Reasoning from them is not likely to lead to a useful outcome. Consider the thought experiment of being transported back to Germany at the beginning of the Nazi era. Assume you are converted to a solid middle-class German moderate, not a Jew or a communist or fascist. Your unconscious brain would immediately set about deciding who to trust, like, pay attention to, or follow, based on ancient criteria set by evolution. You may like to think you would be a dissident fighting Nazism to the bitter end, but that's very unlikely. We know, because not many people in that situation did that. And if you did take that road, it would likely be for the same reasons some Germans did it – that is, for reasons that made sense in the social context of the time, not for 21st century reasons. And, finally, if you somehow did hold on to your 2013 behaviors despite total immersion

into a different place and time, you would be irrelevant, someone who couldn't understand what was going on around him. I have no idea what reasons your conscious brain would give for your behavior, but I'm pretty confident about predicting your (or my) behavior.

On top of this, your conscious brain has neither the facts nor the processing power to make useful political judgments. Consider the simplest major issue in US politics. The Social Security Old Age system basically takes 10 percent of everyone's wage income, then pays them after age 65 40 percent of their average lifetime salary. There are complications: numbers are adjusted for inflation, there is a cap on the wage both for taxing and for averaging, the fraction of average wage paid in retirement is higher for low-wage workers and lower for high-wage workers, there are other partially bundled programs like survivor and disability and Medicare, and lots of other details. But at heart this is a simple system and its solvency depends on the amount paid in versus the amount paid out. For example, if the average person works for four times as many years as she is retired, and the fund can invest at the same rate as amounts are adjusted for cost of living, the program will be in balance.

Of course, I just threw out the 'four times' based on my simplified accounting. To do the real math requires sorting through all the program details and making assumptions about (from the Social Security Trustee's Report) "future birth rates, death rates, immigration, marriage and divorce rates, retirement-age patterns, ... termination rates, employment rates, productivity gains, wage increases, inflation, and many other demographic, economic, and program-specific factors." While this sounds complicated, all these things are far more predictable than healthcare costs, effects of military spending, influence of capital punishment, economics of fiscal policy, or anything else that affects other major political issues.

Now consider just the changes in estimates of the program's unfunded liability from year to year in the Trustee's report. Note that this is far smaller than the uncertainty about the solvency of Social Security Old Age payments. These are projections by the same people using the same methodology,

the only thing that changes are the data inputs, and you wouldn't expect any single year's demographic or economic data to have a material impact on the long-term solvency of the program.

The report predicted that in 2011, program tax revenues would exceed payments by 9.8 percent. In fact, tax revenues were 8.0 percent short. An analysis of changes like this makes it clear that nobody knows whether the program will demand crippling tax rates and draconian benefit cuts in the near future, or if it can run along more or less as it has for the indefinite future. People who base political opinions on

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rational analyses of data are building without foundation. And we looked at only the simplest major political issue, the one most amenable to rational analysis.

Therefore, meaningful political positions have to be based on moral judgments. For example, we could invoke the moral foundation of care and declare that the social security tax every year should be adjusted to meet promised benefits (possibly with some smoothing). Now we are saying in advance how we will deal with an uncertain future, and advocating a sustainable program. Another possibility is based on equality: every year shortfalls will be covered by raising taxes on the highest earners and reducing benefits for the wealthiest retired people. Just desserts would suggest instead paying retirees a fair return (perhaps fixed, perhaps market-based) on their payroll contributions. Of course, there are other plans, and we could craft something to appeal to multiple principles. I submit there is no rational way to weigh the principles; it comes down to what you believe in, not your actuarial judgment. Unfortunately, what we have is an overpromised program that does not specify in

advance who will bear any losses that may arise in the future, and therefore is not defensible under any of the moral foundations.

All together now

If you are among the rationalists, I think you have to concede that both rational liberals and rational conservatives have points. We do want to make the world a better place for everyone; we want to reduce poverty, oppression, and undeserved inequality. Even if we consider only self-interest, we all gain from a pleasant and prosperous world. But we'd like to improve things

effectively, and without destroying civilization. Liberals judge that the gains from pressing our goals aggressively outweigh the risks; conservatives make the opposite judgment. But neither one has much objective support for their views, at least not much that could convince someone from the other side.

Moreover, I think both flavors of rationalist have more in common with each other than either does with people who join them on the left or the right, but for different reasons. For one thing, it's easy to compromise. We eliminate the most unsuccessful liberal programs that cause the most harm to conservative moral foundations, and push gently forward the most successful liberal programs that cause the least harm. This is pretty nearly the opposite of most proposals that are labeled 'bipartisan' today, because they are not true compromises but divisions of spoils among opportunists, divisions that both sides scheme to overturn even before agreement is reached.

Another point of agreement is that advancing liberal ideals without force – that is, not through the government – is an unalloyed good. All

rationalists like freedom, equality, and charity; they just disagree about how much the government can advance those things without risking tyranny. Another unalloyed good is reducing the size and power of government without danger to freedom, equality, or charity. No rationalists like use of force; liberals are just more willing than conservatives to believe force will not be necessary, and that if force is necessary it can be applied surgically to produce the desired result with minimal violence.

Finally, rationalists of both stripes give some credit to the other side. Rational liberals recognize all six moral foundations need some amount of respect; rational conservatives rec-

are abused and costs are spiraling to budget-busting levels, while in the relatively free parts of the economy customer service has improved to unprecedented levels and costs are falling rapidly. The non-rational liberal answer – more government regulation to fix the problems, finger pointing at storybook villains, and suppression of conservative moral foundations – is the familiar path to socialist disaster. That doesn't mean deregulate everything tomorrow, but solutions should be to simplify, decentralize, and experiment rather than the reverse.

The use of force has risen to levels completely unjustified by rational threats. The number of non-violent offenders in prison and the draco-

Respect for civil rights and rule of law has decayed. Complexity of government has exploded, as has the size of indirect government sectors like lobbyists, tax accountants, and lawyers who maneuver through government rules. More and more people are dependent on the government every year.

The anomalous thing is that these giant steps toward totalitarianism are happening at a time when everything outside the government is going great. Other socialist rampages were touched off by intolerable social conditions. But we are seeing the fastest improvement in standard of living in human history, with more people in the world leaving poverty every year than could have been imagined even a short time ago. The world as a whole is enjoying unprecedented peace and prosperity. There has never been a better time to beat swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks.

The problems we do have are global and require cooperation, innovation, and enthusiasm rather than anything that can be legislated or obtained by force. And we have the information and communication tools to support the effort, for the first time in history.

Another anomaly is both major political parties contributed to the attack on Enlightenment virtues, and the worst ideas had bipartisan consensus.

I believe there is a time to use organized force to fight oppression, to aid the needy, and to redress unjustified inequality. I know this causes damage to the other moral foundations, but that damage is sometimes necessary for progress, and progress can be well worth the sacrifices. The injuries inflicted heal; we find new things to be loyal to, new authorities to respect, new understandings of appropriate law, and different ideas of sanctity. It takes some time, but we can build healthy civilizations with six firm moral foundations around a liberal core.

However, I think the current time is one for moral healing. Turn down the violence and reduce the spending. Simplify and deregulate. Return to the Bill of Rights and the rule of law. Attack oppression, inequality, and need through voluntary means, not with guns. The world is pretty good; all we have to do is not ruin it.

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ognize that two and a half of the foundations lead to progress while the other three and a half, necessary for civilization as they may be, often impede progress. Even the liberals most besotted by progress – the ones who think we're on the cusp of a golden age or are a hair's breadth ahead of disaster – have to admit there are times when liberal values are being pushed too hard and fast. Even the conservatives most suspicious of progress, the ones who think we've already spent nearly all our social capital and that most proposed advances are opportunistic scams, know there are times when liberal values are ignored to everyone's detriment. Someone who always or never supports liberal ideas is not a rationalist.

A time for...

Personally, I think we're at a time when almost all rationalists should tend toward conservative opinions. The areas of the economy most controlled by the government – healthcare, banking, and education – are all in clear crisis; customers

nian penalties for newly invented crimes like 'hate' and carrying four ounces of liquid onto an airplane are appalling. We have routine use of torture, detention without charge, and assassination, including of American citizens and without judicial review. The number of domestic armed government employees, and the deadliness of those arms, is greater than ever before – even as crime and violence occur at the lowest levels in history. We are fighting two wars and discussing a third, without having been attacked by any reasonable standard.

Our fiscal situation has gone from impossible to absurd. No level of taxation can possibly pay for all the promises the government has made, yet it cannot even agree to slow the rate of increase in spending, or to produce honest accounts. All its energy is devoted to avoiding what it calls 'the fiscal cliff,' otherwise known as cutting the spending it implemented as 'targeted' and 'temporary' four years ago. Our monetary policy is to use central bank assets to buy government debt.