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Jonathan Haidt Decodes the Tribal Psychology of Politics

Yana Paskova for The Chronicle Review

Jonathan Haidt (left), a psychologist who studies moral choices, has visited Occupy Wall Street in New York several times. "Liberals need to be shaken," he says. They "misunderstand conservatives far more than the other way around."

By Marc Parry | JANUARY 29, 2012

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Jonathan Haidt is occupying Wall Street. Sort of. It's a damp and bone-chilling January night in lower Manhattan's Zuccotti Park. The 48-year-old psychologist, tall and youthful-looking despite his silvered hair, is lecturing the occupiers about how conservatives would view their ideas.

"Conservatives believe in equality before the law," he tells the young activists, who are here in the "canyons of wealth" to talk people power over vegan stew. "They just don't care about equality of outcome."

Explaining conservatism at a left-wing occupation? The moment tells you a lot about the evolution of Jonathan Haidt, moral psychologist, happiness guru, and liberal scold.

Haidt (pronounced like "height") made his name arguing that intuition, not reason, drives moral judgments. People are more like lawyers building a case for their gut feelings than judges reasoning toward truth. He later theorized a series of

innate moral foundations that evolution etched into our brains like the taste buds on our tongues—psychological bases that underlie both the individual-protecting qualities that liberals value, like care and fairness, as well as the group-binding virtues favored by conservatives, like loyalty and authority.

"He, over the last decade or so, has substantially changed how people think about moral psychology," says Paul Bloom, a psychologist at Yale University.

Now Haidt wants to change how people think about the culture wars. He first plunged into political research out of frustration with John Kerry's failure to connect with voters in 2004. A partisan liberal, the University of Virginia professor hoped a better grasp of moral psychology could help Democrats sharpen their knives. But a funny thing happened. Haidt, now a visiting professor at New York University, emerged as a centrist who believes that "conservatives have a more accurate understanding of human nature than do liberals."

In March, Haidt will publish *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (Pantheon). By laying out the science of morality—how it binds people into "groupish righteousness" and blinds them to their own biases—he hopes to drain some vitriol from public debate and enable conversations across ideological divides.

Practically speaking, that often means needling liberals while explaining conservatives and religious people, and treading a fine line between provocation and treason. Haidt works in a field so left-wing that, when he once polled roughly 1,000 colleagues at a social-psychology conference, 80 to 90 percent classified themselves as liberal. Only three people identified as conservative. So hanging out in his lab can jar you at first. You'll be listening to his team talk shop over boar burgers and organic ketchup in Greenwich Village, and then you think—*Wait, did Haidt just praise Sarah Palin?*

Indeed. "She's right," he says, that "it's not left-right so much as it is the big powerful interests who control everything versus the little people." And *National Review*? "The most important thing I read" to get new ideas. And Glenn Beck? "A demonizer," says Haidt, but one who has "a great sense of humor, so I enjoy listening to him."

Meanwhile, though Haidt still supports President Obama, he chides Democrats for a moral vision that alienates many working-class, rural, and religious voters. Though he's an atheist, he lambasts the liberal scientists of New Atheism for focusing on what religious people believe rather than how religion binds them into communities. And he rakes his own social-psychology colleagues over the coals for being "a tribal moral community that actively discourages conservatives from entering" and for making the field's nonliberal members feel like closeted homosexuals. (See related article, Page B8.)

"Liberals need to be shaken," Haidt tells me. They "simply misunderstand conservatives far more than the other way around."

But even as Haidt shakes liberals, some thinkers argue that many of his own beliefs don't withstand scrutiny. Haidt's intuitionism overlooks the crucial role reasoning plays in our daily lives, says Bloom. Haidt's map of innate moral values risks putting "a smiley face on authoritarianism," says John T. Jost, a political psychologist at NYU. Haidt's "relentlessly self-deceived" understanding of faith makes it seem as if God and revelation were somehow peripheral issues in religion, fumes Sam Harris, one of "the Four Horsemen ″of New Atheism and author of *The End of Faith.*

"This is rather like saying that uncontrolled cell growth is a peripheral issue in cancer biology," Harris e-mails me. "Haidt's analysis of cancer could go something like this: 'Sure, uncontrolled cell growth is a big concern, but there's so much more to cancer! There's chemotherapy and diagnostic imaging and hospice

care and drug design. There are all the changes for good and ill that happen in families when someone gets diagnosed with a terminal illness. ... ' Yes, there are all these things, but what makes cancer *cancer*?"

Other questions: What made Haidt go from a religion-loathing liberal to a faith-respecting centrist? And as the 2012 election approaches, will anybody listen?

Researchers have found that conservatives tend to be more sensitive to threats and liberals more open to new experiences. By biology and biography, Haidt seemed destined for the liberal tribe. He grew up in suburban New York as a secular Jew whose mother worshiped FDR. He attended Yale in an era when President Ronald Reagan was routinely mocked on campus. He relishes new adventures like interviewing Hindu priests and laypeople in India, a project that stripped away his hostility to faith and exposed him to a broader palate of moral concerns, such as community and divinity.

His previous book, *The Happiness Hypothesis*, trekked through centuries of philosophy and science in a quest for the secret to well-being. (Bottom line: relationships. Also helpful for Haidt: naps. He snoozes each afternoon on a futon in his office.)

Haidt majored in philosophy at Yale, hoping it would help him "figure out the meaning of life." It didn't. The field felt "dry and boring" and divorced from the concerns of real human beings. But he loved the psychology classes he'd taken, so he chose to pursue that path in graduate school at the University of Pennsylvania. He had a vague plan to study humor.

But one week after arriving in Philadelphia, Haidt fell into a conversation about moral thinking with his soon-to-be adviser, Jonathan Baron, and found the topic he has studied ever since. Haidt would become widely known for staking out a

new way of looking at some very old questions: How do people make moral judgments? Does reason dominate, or intuition?

In 1739 the philosopher David Hume wrote that "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." Hume disagreed with philosophers who aspired to reason their way to moral truth without examining human nature. An honest inquiry, he argued, reveals that reason is biased and weak while intuition propels our moral lives.

Haidt and his colleagues brought Hume into the laboratory by investigating how people react to harmless but disgusting stories that pit reason against intuition.

One tale featured a brother and sister named Julie and Mark who decide to make love while on vacation in France. She's on the pill; he uses a condom. The experience brings them closer. But they decide not to do it again. Was it OK?

Most people immediately condemn the siblings and then search for explanations. The dangers of inbreeding. Emotional damage. But when the experimenter points out that no harm befalls Mark and Julie, subjects typically resort to an answer like, "I don't know, I can't explain it, I just know it's wrong."

Haidt called the phenomenon "moral dumbfounding." He viewed it as a challenge to the "rationalist approach" that prevailed in moral psychology, a field heavily influenced by the ideas of Lawrence Kohlberg. Kohlbergian psychologists measured moral development as a series of increasingly sophisticated ways of reasoning about justice. A famous Kohlbergian task, for example, is the "Heinz dilemma": Should Heinz steal a drug to save his dying wife?

In 2001, Haidt chambered a bullet at rationalism in a classic paper that tied together moral dumbfounding, philosophy, and recent psychology findings on human judgment, while also bringing in anthropology and primatology. His

conclusion: "Most of the action in moral psychology" is in our automatic intuitions. "People do indeed reason, but that reasoning is done primarily to prepare for social interaction, not to search for truth."

This was no small claim: We're deluded about how we derive right from wrong. Largely thanks to Haidt, a neglected field "all of a sudden exploded," says David A. Pizarro, associate professor of psychology at Cornell. He wrote a critique with Bloom, who admires Haidt but has continued to disagree with him on this point in the decade since. The problem, Bloom tells me, is that social psychologists overlook the tons of moral reasoning that people do in daily life. Morality fascinates, and not in some unconscious way. They read advice columns. Visit priests. Argue.

"You don't necessarily see this in the lab," Bloom says. "You bring in subjects. You throw them some weird dilemma. You see how they respond. And you say, 'Aha! We're not finding any reasoning here.' But then you look at how people figure out who to vote for, or whether or not to get an abortion, or how much to give to charity. And you see people do reason."

The proof? Moral progress. Sexism, slavery, racism—we now believe these are wrong. This is "the most interesting and important aspect of humanity," says Bloom. And it can't be explained if you think of morality as "a reflex."

Other scholars, like the psychologist Drew Westen and the linguist George Lakoff, have described how political arguments must "feel" right before voters can embrace them. Haidt expands on their ideas with a new theory about moral content. His work explores how different political cuisines appeal to the innate "taste buds" of our moral minds—and, by extension, why liberals fail to understand the "intuitive appeal" of many Republican ideas.

Haidt grounds his conclusions in data from a Web site, YourMorals.org, that is the psychology version of a viral YouTube video. Some 250,000 people have filled out surveys on the site, rating statements like "I think it's morally wrong that rich children inherit a lot of money while poor children inherit nothing."

It's with that research in mind that Haidt made two visits to Occupy Wall Street. How does the left-wing uprising, and its Tea Party counterpart, jibe with his ideas about moral intuitionism in politics? On that January evening, he's back in Zuccotti Park to learn more, leading a gaggle of Ph.D. students and watching with fascination as moral conflict unfolds live.

The big business of the night's General Assembly meeting is crafting a vision statement for the group. Several people "facilitate," but no one leads. The way to make yourself heard above the din is "the people's mic," a system whereby one person speaks and the crowd amplifies the words by repetition.

A row over internal charges of racism and sexism dogs the meeting from the start.

One facilitator explains efforts to improve the grievance process. As he tries to move on, a stone-faced man in a black ski cap steps forward and flips on his own people's mic.

"Mic check!" he shouts.

Mic check!

"I would like to say..."

I would like to say!

"That this does not feel..."

That this does not feel!

"Like a safe space."

Like a safe space!

Throughout the evening, Haidt circulates in the park, listening respectfully as he probes the occupiers' motivations. He falls into conversation with Hillary Moore, an artist, and Danny Valdes, a teacher. How do they feel about capitalism?

"When it's out of control, it's a nightmare—and I think that's where we are," says Moore. She adds, "Things with no regulations are for gangsters. This is a gangster economy."

Moore is talking about empathy in public policy when another confrontation flares up nearby.

"Because you want to be a little brat!" a lady screams. "Park Slope is not a working group."

"Democracy's ugly, man," says Valdes. "It's messy."

What strikes Haidt is *how* messy. When people get down to debating the manifesto, the document does not name any specific goals. One speaker reports her group could not even agree on a section about nonviolence, since "there are a diversity of tactics within the movement."

"Stunning," says Haidt. "Consensus wins over nonviolence."

To Haidt, the evolution of morality can help make sense of modern political tribes like this one. And in that evolution, the big question is this: How did people come together to build cooperative societies beyond kinship?

Morality is the glue, he answers. Humans are 90-percent chimp, but also 10-percent bee—evolved to bind together for the good of the hive. A big part of Haidt's moral narrative is faith. He lays out the case that religion is an

evolutionary adaptation for binding people into groups and enabling those units to better compete against other groups. Through faith, humans developed the "psychology of sacredness," the notion that "some people, objects, days, words, values, and ideas are special, set apart, untouchable, and pure." If people revere the same sacred objects, he writes, they can trust one another and cooperate toward larger goals. But morality also blinds them to arguments from beyond their group.

How much of moral thinking is innate? Haidt sees morality as a "social construction" that varies by time and place. We all live in a "web of shared meanings and values" that become our moral matrix, he writes, and these matrices form what Haidt, quoting the science-fiction writer William Gibson, likens to "a consensual hallucination." But all humans graft their moralities on psychological systems that evolved to serve various needs, like caring for families and punishing cheaters. Building on ideas from the anthropologist Richard Shweder, Haidt and his colleagues synthesize anthropology, evolutionary theory, and psychology to propose six innate moral foundations: care/harm, fairness/cheating, liberty/oppression, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation.

The theory frustrates some. Patricia S. Churchland, a philosopher and neuroscientist, has called it a nice list with no basis in biology. Jost, the NYU psychologist, feels Haidt makes a weak case for defining morality so broadly. Philosophers have long considered whether it's "morally good to favor members of your own group, to obey authority, or to enforce standards of purity," Jost says. "And they have come largely to the conclusion that these things don't have the same moral standing as being fair to people and trying to minimize harm." Following leaders can lead to horrific consequences, he notes.

Haidt acknowledges that the same beelike qualities that foster altruism can also enable genocide. But as a psychologist, not a philosopher, he generally sees his job as describing moral judgments, not advising what is right and wrong for individuals.

And the six moral foundations are central to how Haidt explains politics. The moral mind, to him, resembles an audio equalizer with a series of slider switches that represent different parts of the moral spectrum. All political movements base appeals on different settings of the foundations—and the culture wars arise from what they choose to emphasize. Liberals jack up care, followed by fairness and liberty. They rarely value loyalty and authority. Conservatives dial up all six.

For Occupy Wall Street, fairness seems to be the chief concern—as it appears to be for the Tea Party. Occupy's version opposes rich people taking money through cheating and exploitation. The Tea Party's restores karma by punishing laziness and cheating, Haidt has written, "and they see liberalism and liberal government as an assault on that project." But, as tonight's meeting shows, the right owns an advantage in creating effective groups: Far-left activists dial down "authority" to zero.

That's a mild critique, but Haidt gets tougher in memoranda he has sent to liberal politicians and think tanks. He writes that politics, like religion, binds people together "to pursue moral ideals and defend sacred values." The value that liberals revere is defending the oppressed. But their devotion to victims blinds them to other concerns. They alienate with "a thin and tolerant morality that gives most Americans vertigo." And they often commit "sacrilege," making it easy for opponents "to mobilize moralistic outrage." For example, they trounce authority by backing abortion without parental consent.

Another example Haidt uses to underscore the tribal psychology of political sacredness is the 1960s research of the liberal sociologist Daniel Patrick Moynihan, a Harvard professor and public-policy expert. In a famous report to President Johnson, Moynihan used the phrase "tangle of pathology" to describe the black family, arguing that some of its problems stemmed from high rates of out-of-wedlock birth, not just from racism. That made Moynihan a pariah; other Harvard professors wouldn't let their kids play with his. As Haidt tells the story, Moynihan committed "the cardinal sin": "blaming the victim, where the victim is one of your sacralized victim groups." He points out that sociologists are now gingerly saying, "He was right."

So far Haidt hasn't had much luck interesting political types in his ideas. He reached out to Democratic politicians in his home state of Virginia, like Mark Warner and Tom Perriello, as well as to the Center for American Progress, a liberal research group tightly wired to the White House. But folks in Washington strike Haidt as too fixated on dodging daily bullets to think about the long-term future of liberalism. The few political people who gave him any time seemed more interested in tapping behavioral science for fund raising, or simply too busy to engage with his ideas.

I get a taste of what Haidt means when I try to drum up a response to his memos from Anna Greenberg, daughter of the Bill Clinton adviser Stanley B. Greenberg and senior vice president of the Democratic polling firm he founded, Greenberg Quinlan Rosner. The first thing Greenberg tells me is that she regrets agreeing to the interview, since "it's a lot of stuff" and "I didn't get to look at a lot of it."

But then she articulates a big challenge of applying academic research in politics. The ideas can be interesting—and some of Haidt's seem to make a lot of sense, she says. But how do you use them? Tell Democrats to adopt more-conservative views?

"Things that he is calling moral frameworks actually have real policy positions that people have to take that may be at odds" with Democrats' core values, Greenberg says.

In *The Righteous Mind,* Haidt attributes his own ideological shift to an intellectual awakening. He came to appreciate the right's insights about social cohesion after reading *Conservatism*, an anthology edited by the historian Jerry Z. Muller. But he also credits another factor: the end of George W. Bush's presidency. Haidt hated Bush. He couldn't shift his views until that animosity disappeared—until he was no longer an angry partisan fighting another team "for the survival of the world."

In other words, his intuition ruled.

Bumper stickers capture conservative, liberal, and libertarian beliefs. Jonathan Haidt believes that the moral foundation of each view is etched into our brains.

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