

## Chapter 12 from *The Righteous Mind* by Jonathan Haidt Can't We All Disagree More Constructively?

“Politics ain’t beanbag,” said a Chicago humorist in 1895;<sup>1</sup> it’s not a game for children. Ever since then the saying has been used to justify the rough-and-tumble nastiness of American politics. Rationalists might dream of a utopian state where policy is made by panels of unbiased experts, but in the real world there seems to be no alternative to a political process in which parties compete to win votes and money. That competition always involves trickery and demagoguery, as politicians play fast and loose with the truth, using their inner press secretaries to portray themselves in the best possible light and their opponents as fools who would lead the country to ruin.

And yet, does it have to be this nasty? A lot of Americans have noticed things getting worse. The country now seems polarized and embattled to the point of dysfunction. They are right. Up until a few years ago, there were some political scientists who claimed that the so-called culture war was limited to Washington, and that Americans had not in fact become more polarized in their attitudes toward most policy issues.<sup>2</sup> But in the last twelve years Americans have begun to move further apart. There’s been a decline in the number of people calling themselves centrists or moderates (from 40 percent in 2000 down to 36 percent in 2011), a rise in the number of conservatives (from 38 percent to 41 percent), and a rise in the number of liberals (from 19 percent to 21 percent).

*3 FIGURE 12.1. Civility now. These posters were created by Jeff Gates, a graphic designer for the Chamomile Tea Party, drawing on American posters from the World War II era. (See [www.chamomileteaparty.com](http://www.chamomileteaparty.com). Used with permission.) (photo credit 12.1)*

But this slight spreading out of the electorate is nothing compared to what’s happened in Washington, the media, and the political class more broadly. Things changed in the 1990s, beginning with new rules and new behaviors in Congress.<sup>4</sup> Friendships and social contacts across party lines were discouraged. Once the human connections were weakened, it became easier to treat members of the other party as the permanent enemy rather than as fellow members of an elite club. Candidates began to spend more time and money on “oppo” (opposition research), in which staff members or paid consultants dig up dirt on opponents (sometimes illegally) and then shovel it to the media. As one elder congressman recently put it, “This is not a collegial body any more. It is more like gang behavior. Members walk into the chamber full of hatred.”<sup>5</sup>

This shift to a more righteous and tribal mentality was bad enough in the 1990s, a time of peace, prosperity, and balanced budgets. But nowadays, when the fiscal and political

situations are so much worse, many Americans feel that they're on a ship that's sinking, and the crew is too busy fighting with each other to bother plugging the leaks.

In the summer of 2011, the stakes were raised. The failure of the two parties to agree on a routine bill to raise the debt ceiling, and their failure to agree on a "grand bargain" to reduce the long-term deficit, led a bond rating agency to downgrade America's credit rating. The downgrade sent stock markets plummeting around the globe and increased the prospects for a "double dip" recession at home—which would be a disaster for the many developing nations that export to America. America's hyperpartisanship is now a threat to the world.

What's going on here? In chapter 8, I portrayed the American culture war as a battle between a three-foundation morality and a six-foundation morality. But what leads people to adopt either of these moralities in the first place? Psychologists have discovered a lot about the psychological origins of partisanship. Morality binds and blinds, and to understand the mess we're in, we've got to understand why some people bind themselves to the liberal team, some to the conservative team, some to other teams or to no team at all.

#### A NOTE ABOUT POLITICAL DIVERSITY

I'm going to focus on what is known about the psychology of liberals and conservatives—the two end points of a one-dimensional scale. Many people resist and resent attempts to reduce ideology to a single dimension. Indeed, one of the great strengths of Moral Foundations Theory is that it gives you six dimensions, allowing for millions of possible combinations of settings. People don't come in just two types. Unfortunately, most research on political psychology has used the left-right dimension with American samples, so in many cases that's all we have to go on. But I should also note that this one dimension is still quite useful. Most people in the United States and in Europe can place themselves somewhere along it (even if most people are somewhat near the middle).<sup>6</sup> And it is the principal axis of the American culture war and of congressional voting,<sup>7</sup> so even if relatively few people fit perfectly into the extreme types I'm going to describe, understanding the psychology of liberalism and conservatism is vital for understanding a problem that threatens the entire world.

#### FROM GENES TO MORAL MATRICES

Here's a simple definition of ideology: "A set of beliefs about the proper order of society and how it can be achieved."<sup>8</sup> 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 conservatism and liberalism ever since.

Political theorists since Marx had long assumed that people chose ideologies to further their self-interest. The rich and powerful want to preserve and conserve; the peasants and workers want to change things (or at least they would if their consciousness could be raised and they could see their self-interest properly, said the Marxists). But even though social class may once have been a good predictor of ideology, that link has been largely broken in modern times, when the rich go both ways (industrialists mostly right, tech billionaires mostly left) and so do the poor (rural poor mostly right, urban poor mostly left). And when political scientists looked into it, they found that self-interest does a remarkably poor job of predicting political attitudes.<sup>9</sup>

So for most of the late twentieth century, political scientists embraced blank-slate theories in which people soaked up the ideology of their parents or the TV programs they watched.<sup>10</sup> Some political scientists even said that most people were so confused about political issues that they had no real ideology at all.<sup>11</sup>

But then came the studies of twins. In the 1980s, when scientists began analyzing large databases that allowed them to compare identical twins (who share all of their genes, plus, usually, their prenatal and childhood environments) to same-sex fraternal twins (who share half of their genes, plus their prenatal and childhood environments), they found that the identical twins were more similar on just about everything.<sup>12</sup> And what's more, identical twins reared in separate households (because of adoption) usually turn out to be very similar, whereas unrelated children reared together (because of adoption) rarely turn out similar to each other, or to their adoptive parents; they tend to be more similar to their genetic parents. Genes contribute, somehow, to just about every aspect of our personalities.<sup>13</sup>

We're not just talking about IQ, mental illness, and basic personality traits such as shyness. We're talking about the degree to which you like jazz, spicy foods, and abstract art; your likelihood of getting a divorce or dying in a car crash; your degree of religiosity, and your political orientation as an adult. Whether you end up on the right or the left of the political spectrum turns out to be just as heritable as most other traits: genetics explains between a third and a half of the variability among people on their political attitudes.<sup>14</sup> Being raised in a liberal or conservative household accounts for much less. How can that be?

How can there be a genetic basis for attitudes about nuclear power, progressive taxation, and foreign aid when these issues only emerged in the last century or two?

And how can there be a genetic basis for ideology when people sometimes change their political parties as adults?

To answer these questions it helps to return to the definition of innate that I gave in chapter 7. Innate does not mean unmalleable; it means organized in advance of experience. The genes guide the construction of the brain in the uterus, but that's only the first draft, so to speak. The draft gets revised by childhood experiences. To understand the origins of ideology you have to take a developmental perspective, starting with the genes and ending with an adult voting for a particular candidate or joining a political protest. There are three major steps in the process.

### *Step 1: Genes Make Brains*

After analyzing the DNA of 13,000 Australians, scientists recently found several genes that differed between liberals and conservatives.<sup>15</sup> Most of them related to neurotransmitter functioning, particularly glutamate and serotonin, both of which are involved in the brain's response to threat and fear. This finding fits well with many studies showing that conservatives react more strongly than liberals to signs of danger, including the threat of germs and contamination, and even low-level threats such as sudden blasts of white noise.<sup>16</sup> Other studies have implicated genes related to receptors for the neurotransmitter dopamine, which has long been tied to sensation-seeking and openness to experience, which are among the best-established correlates of liberalism.<sup>17</sup> As the Renaissance writer Michel de Montaigne said: "The only things I find rewarding ... are variety and the enjoyment of diversity."<sup>18</sup>

Even though the effects of any single gene are tiny, these findings are important because they illustrate one sort of pathway from genes to politics: the genes (collectively) give some people brains that are more (or less) reactive to threats, and that produce less (or more) pleasure when exposed to novelty, change, and new experiences.<sup>19</sup> These are two of the main personality factors that have consistently been found to distinguish liberals and conservatives. A major review paper by political psychologist John Jost found a few other traits, but nearly all of them are conceptually related to threat sensitivity (e.g., conservatives react more strongly to reminders of death) or openness to experience (e.g., liberals have less need for order, structure, and closure).<sup>20</sup>

### *Step 2: Traits Guide Children Along Different Paths*

Where do our personalities come from? To answer that question, we need to distinguish among three different levels of personality, according to a useful theory from psychologist Dan McAdams.<sup>21</sup> The lowest level of our personalities, which he calls "dispositional traits," are the sorts of broad dimensions of personality that show

themselves in many different situations and are fairly consistent from childhood through old age. These are traits such as threat sensitivity, novelty seeking, extraversion, and conscientiousness. These traits are not mental modules that some people have and others lack; they're more like adjustments to dials on brain systems that everyone has.

Let's imagine a pair of fraternal twins, a brother and sister raised together in the same home. During their nine months together in their mother's womb, the brother's genes were busy constructing a brain that was a bit higher than average in its sensitivity to threats, a bit lower than average in its tendency to feel pleasure when exposed to radically new experiences. The sister's genes were busy making a brain with the opposite settings.

The two siblings grow up in the same house and attend the same schools, but they gradually create different worlds for themselves. Even in nursery school, their behavior causes adults to treat them differently. One study found that women who called themselves liberals as adults had been rated by their nursery school teachers as having traits consistent with threat insensitivity and novelty-seeking.<sup>22</sup> Future liberals were described as being more curious, verbal, and self-reliant, but also more assertive and aggressive, less obedient and neat. So if we could observe our fraternal twins in their first years of schooling, we'd find teachers responding differently to them. Some teachers might be drawn to the creative but rebellious little girl; others would crack down on her as an unruly brat, while praising her brother as a model student.

But dispositional traits are just the lowest of the three levels, according to McAdams. The second level is our "characteristic adaptations." These are traits that emerge as we grow. They are called adaptations because people develop them in response to the specific environments and challenges that they happen to face. For example, let's follow our twins into adolescence, and let's suppose they attend a fairly strict and well-ordered school. The brother fits in well, but the sister engages in constant battles with the teachers. She becomes angry and socially disengaged. These are now parts of her personality—her characteristic adaptations—but they would not have developed had she gone to a more progressive and less structured school.

By the time they reach high school and begin to take an interest in politics, the two siblings have chosen different activities (the sister joins the debate team in part for the opportunity to travel; the brother gets more involved with his family's church) and amassed different friends (the sister joins the goths; the brother joins the jocks). The sister chooses to go to college in New York City, where she majors in Latin American studies and finds her calling as an advocate for the children of illegal immigrants. Because her social circle is entirely composed of liberals, she is enmeshed in a moral

matrix based primarily on the Care/harm foundation. In 2008, she is electrified by Barack Obama's concern for the poor and his promise of change.

The brother, in contrast, has no interest in moving far away to a big, dirty, and threatening city. He chooses to stay close to family and friends by attending the local branch of the state university. He earns a degree in business and then works for a local bank, gradually rising to a high position. He becomes a pillar of his church and his community, the sort of person that Putnam and Campbell praised for generating large amounts of social capital.<sup>23</sup> The moral matrices that surround him are based on all six foundations. There is occasional talk in church sermons of helping victims of oppression, but the most common moral themes in his life are personal responsibility (based on the Fairness foundation—not being a free rider or a burden on others) and loyalty to the many groups and teams to which he belongs. He resonates to John McCain's campaign slogan, "Country First."

Things didn't have to work out this way. On the day they were born, the sister was not predestined to vote for Obama; the brother was not guaranteed to become a Republican. But their different sets of genes gave them different first drafts of their minds, which led them down different paths, through different life experiences, and into different moral subcultures. By the time they reach adulthood they have become very different people whose one point of political agreement is that they must not talk about politics when the sister comes home for the holidays.

### *Step 3: People Construct Life Narratives*

The human mind is a story processor, not a logic processor. Everyone loves a good story; every culture bathes its children in stories. Among the most important stories we know are stories about ourselves, and these "life narratives" are McAdams's third level of personality. McAdams's greatest contribution to psychology has been his insistence that psychologists connect their quantitative data (about the two lower levels, which we assess with questionnaires and reaction-time measures) to a more qualitative understanding of the narratives people create to make sense of their lives. These narratives are not necessarily true stories—they are simplified and selective reconstructions of the past, often connected to an idealized vision of the future. But even though life narratives are to some degree post hoc fabrications, they still influence people's behavior, relationships, and mental health.<sup>24</sup>

Life narratives are saturated with morality. In one study, McAdams used Moral Foundations Theory to analyze narratives he collected from liberal and conservative Christians. He found the same patterns in these stories that my colleagues and I had found using questionnaires at [YourMorals.org](http://YourMorals.org):

When asked to account for the development of their own religious faith and moral beliefs, conservatives underscored deep feelings about respect for authority, allegiance to one's group, and purity of the self, whereas liberals emphasized their deep feelings regarding human suffering and social fairness.<sup>25</sup>

Life narratives provide a bridge between a developing adolescent self and an adult political identity. Here, for example, is how Keith Richards describes a turning point in his life in his recent autobiography. Richards, the famously sensation-seeking and nonconforming lead guitarist of the Rolling Stones, was once a marginally well-behaved member of his school choir. The choir won competitions with other schools, so the choir master got Richards and his friends excused from many classes so that they could travel to ever larger choral events. But when the boys reached puberty and their voices changed, the choir master dumped them. They were then informed that they would have to repeat a full year in school to make up for their missed classes, and the choir master didn't lift a finger to defend them.

It was a "kick in the guts," Richards says. It transformed him in ways with obvious political ramifications: *The moment that happened, Spike, Terry and I, we became terrorists. I was so mad, I had a burning desire for revenge. I had reason then to bring down this country and everything it stood for. I spent the next three years trying to fuck them up. If you want to breed a rebel, that's the way to do it.... It still hasn't gone out, the fire. That's when I started to look at the world in a different way, not their way anymore. That's when I realized that there's bigger bullies than just bullies. There's them, the authorities. And a slow-burning fuse was lit.*<sup>26</sup>

Richards may have been predisposed by his personality to become a liberal, but his politics were not predestined. Had his teachers treated him differently—or had he simply interpreted events differently when creating early drafts of his narrative—he could have ended up in a more conventional job surrounded by conservative colleagues and sharing their moral matrix. But once Richards came to understand himself as a crusader against abusive authority, there was no way he was ever going to vote for the British Conservative Party. His own life narrative just fit too well with the stories that all parties on the left tell in one form or another.

#### THE GRAND NARRATIVES OF LIBERALISM AND CONSERVATISM

In the book *Moral, Believing Animals*, the sociologist Christian Smith writes about the moral matrices within which human life takes place.<sup>27</sup> He agrees with Durkheim that every social order has at its core something sacred, and he shows how stories, particularly "grand narratives," identify and reinforce the sacred core of each matrix. Smith is a master at extracting these grand narratives and condensing them into single

paragraphs. Each narrative, he says, identifies a beginning (“once upon a time”), a middle (in which a threat or challenge arises), and an end (in which a resolution is achieved). Each narrative is designed to orient listeners morally—to draw their attention to a set of virtues and vices, or good and evil forces—and to impart lessons about what must be done now to protect, recover, or attain the sacred core of the vision.

One such narrative, which Smith calls the “liberal progress narrative,” organizes much of the moral matrix of the American academic left. It goes like this: *Once upon a time, the vast majority of human persons suffered in societies and social institutions that were unjust, unhealthy, repressive, and oppressive. These traditional societies were reprehensible because of their deep-rooted inequality, exploitation, and irrational traditionalism.... But the noble human aspiration for autonomy, equality, and prosperity struggled mightily against the forces of misery and oppression, and eventually succeeded in establishing modern, liberal, democratic, capitalist, welfare societies. While modern social conditions hold the potential to maximize the individual freedom and pleasure of all, there is much work to be done to dismantle the powerful vestiges of inequality, exploitation, and repression. This struggle for the good society in which individuals are equal and free to pursue their self-defined happiness is the one mission truly worth dedicating one’s life to achieving.*<sup>28</sup>

This narrative may not mesh perfectly with the moral matrices of the left in European countries (where, for example, there is more distrust of capitalism). Nonetheless, its general plotline should be recognizable to leftists everywhere. It’s a heroic liberation narrative. Authority, hierarchy, power, and tradition are the chains that must be broken to free the “noble aspirations” of the victims.

Smith wrote this narrative before Moral Foundations Theory existed, but you can see that the narrative derives its moral force primarily from the Care/harm foundation (concern for the suffering of victims) and the Liberty/oppression foundation (a celebration of liberty as freedom from oppression, as well as freedom to pursue self-defined happiness). In this narrative, Fairness is political equality (which is part of opposing oppression); there are only oblique hints of Fairness as proportionality.<sup>29</sup> Authority is mentioned only as an evil, and there is no mention of Loyalty or Sanctity.

Contrast that narrative to one for modern conservatism. The clinical psychologist Drew Westen is another master of narrative analysis, and in his book *The Political Brain* he extracts the master narrative that was implicit, and sometimes explicit, in the major speeches of Ronald Reagan.



Reagan defeated Democrat Jimmy Carter in 1980, a time when Americans were being held hostage in Iran, the inflation rate was over 10 percent, and America's cities, industries, and self-confidence were declining. The Reagan narrative goes like this: *Once upon a time, America was a shining beacon. Then liberals came along and erected an enormous federal bureaucracy that handcuffed the invisible hand of the free market. They subverted our traditional American values and opposed God and faith at every step of the way.... Instead of requiring that people work for a living, they siphoned money from hardworking Americans and gave it to Cadillac-driving drug addicts and welfare queens. Instead of punishing criminals, they tried to "understand" them. Instead of worrying about the victims of crime, they worried about the rights of criminals.... Instead of adhering to traditional American values of family, fidelity, and personal responsibility, they preached promiscuity, premarital sex, and the gay lifestyle ... and they encouraged a feminist agenda that undermined traditional family roles.... Instead of projecting strength to those who would do evil around the world, they cut military budgets, disrespected our soldiers in uniform, burned our flag, and chose negotiation and multilateralism.... Then Americans decided to take their country back from those who sought to undermine it.*<sup>30</sup>

This narrative would have to be edited for use in other countries and eras, where what is being "conserved" differs from the American case. Nonetheless, its general plotline and moral breadth should be recognizable to conservatives everywhere. This too is a heroic narrative, but it's a heroism of defense. It's less suited to being turned into a major motion picture. Rather than the visually striking image of crowds storming the Bastille and freeing the prisoners, this narrative looks more like a family reclaiming its home from termites and then repairing the joists.

The Reagan narrative is also visibly conservative in that it relies for its moral force on at least five of the six moral foundations. There's only a hint of Care (for the victims of crime), but there are very clear references to Liberty (as freedom from government constraint), Fairness (as proportionality: taking money from those who work hard and giving it to welfare queens), Loyalty (soldiers and the flag), Authority (subversion of the family and of traditions), and Sanctity (replacing God with the celebration of promiscuity).

The two narratives are as opposed as could be. Can partisans even understand the story told by the other side? The obstacles to empathy are not symmetrical. If the left builds its moral matrices on a smaller number of moral foundations, then there is no foundation used by the left that is not also used by the right. Even though conservatives score slightly lower on measures of empathy<sup>31</sup> and may therefore be less moved by a story about suffering and oppression, they can still recognize that it is awful to be kept

in chains. And even though many conservatives opposed some of the great liberations of the twentieth century—of women, sweatshop workers, African Americans, and gay people—they have applauded others, such as the liberation of Eastern Europe from communist oppression.

But when liberals try to understand the Reagan narrative, they have a harder time. When I speak to liberal audiences about the three “binding” foundations—Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity—I find that many in the audience don’t just fail to resonate; they actively reject these concerns as immoral. Loyalty to a group shrinks the moral circle; it is the basis of racism and exclusion, they say. Authority is oppression. Sanctity is religious mumbo-jumbo whose only function is to suppress female sexuality and justify homophobia.

In a study I did with Jesse Graham and Brian Nosek, we tested how well liberals and conservatives could understand each other. We asked more than two thousand American visitors to fill out the Moral Foundations Questionnaire. One-third of the time they were asked to fill it out normally, answering as themselves. One-third of the time they were asked to fill it out as they think a “typical liberal” would respond. One-third of the time they were asked to fill it out as a “typical conservative” would respond. This design allowed us to examine the stereotypes that each side held about the other. More important, it allowed us to assess how accurate they were by comparing people’s expectations about “typical” partisans to the actual responses from partisans on the left and the right.<sup>32</sup> Who was best able to pretend to be the other?

The results were clear and consistent. Moderates and conservatives were most accurate in their predictions, whether they were pretending to be liberals or conservatives. Liberals were the least accurate, especially those who described themselves as “very liberal.” The biggest errors in the whole study came when liberals answered the Care and Fairness questions while pretending to be conservatives. When faced with questions such as “One of the worst things a person could do is hurt a defenseless animal” or “Justice is the most important requirement for a society,” liberals assumed that conservatives would disagree. If you have a moral matrix built primarily on intuitions about care and fairness (as equality), and you listen to the Reagan narrative, what else could you think? Reagan seems completely unconcerned about the welfare of drug addicts, poor people, and gay people. He’s more interested in fighting wars and telling people how to run their sex lives.

If you don’t see that Reagan is pursuing positive values of Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity, you almost have to conclude that Republicans see no positive value in Care and Fairness. You might even go as far as Michael Feingold, a theater critic for the liberal

newspaper the Village Voice, when he wrote: *Republicans don't believe in the imagination, partly because so few of them have one, but mostly because it gets in the way of their chosen work, which is to destroy the human race and the planet. Human beings, who have imaginations, can see a recipe for disaster in the making; Republicans, whose goal in life is to profit from disaster and who don't give a hoot about human beings, either can't or won't. Which is why I personally think they should be exterminated before they cause any more harm.*<sup>33</sup>

One of the many ironies in this quotation is that it shows the inability of a theater critic—who skillfully enters fantastical imaginary worlds for a living—to imagine that Republicans act within a moral matrix that differs from his own. Morality binds and blinds.

#### THE LEFT'S BLIND SPOT: MORAL CAPITAL

My own intellectual life narrative has had two turning points. In chapter 5 I recounted the first one, in India, in which my mind opened to the existence of the broader moralities described by Richard Shweder (i.e., the ethics of community and divinity). But from that turning point in 1993 through the election of Barack Obama in 2008, I was still a partisan liberal. I wanted my team (the Democrats) to beat the other team (the Republicans). In fact, I first began to study politics precisely because I was so frustrated by John Kerry's ineffectual campaign for the presidency. I was convinced that American liberals simply did not “get” the morals and motives of their conservative countrymen, and I wanted to use my research on moral psychology to help liberals win.

To learn about political psychology, I decided to teach a graduate seminar on the topic in the spring of 2005. Knowing that I'd be teaching this new class, I was on the lookout for good readings. So when I was visiting friends in New York a month after the Kerry defeat, I went to a used-book store to browse its political science section. As I scanned the shelves, one book jumped out at me—a thick brown book with one word on its spine: Conservatism. It was a volume of readings edited by the historian Jerry Muller. I started reading Muller's introduction while standing in the aisle, but by the third page I had to sit down on the floor. I didn't realize it until years later, but Muller's essay was my second turning point.

Muller began by distinguishing conservatism from orthodoxy. Orthodoxy is the view that there exists a “transcendent moral order, to which we ought to try to conform the ways of society.”<sup>34</sup> Christians who look to the Bible as a guide for legislation, like Muslims who want to live under sharia, are examples of orthodoxy. They want their society to match an externally ordained moral order, so they advocate change, sometimes radical

change. This can put them at odds with true conservatives, who see radical change as dangerous.

Muller next distinguished conservatism from the counter-Enlightenment. It is true that most resistance to the Enlightenment can be said to have been conservative, by definition (i.e., clerics and aristocrats were trying to conserve the old order). But modern conservatism, Muller asserts, finds its origins within the main currents of Enlightenment thinking, when men such as David Hume and Edmund Burke tried to develop a reasoned, pragmatic, and essentially utilitarian critique of the Enlightenment project. Here's the line that quite literally floored me: *What makes social and political arguments conservative as opposed to orthodox is that the critique of liberal or progressive arguments takes place on the enlightened grounds of the search for human happiness based on the use of reason.*<sup>35</sup>

As a lifelong liberal, I had assumed that conservatism = orthodoxy = religion = faith = rejection of science. It followed, therefore, that as an atheist and a scientist, I was obligated to be a liberal. But Muller asserted that modern conservatism is really about creating the best possible society, the one that brings about the greatest happiness given local circumstances. Could it be? Was there a kind of conservatism that could compete against liberalism in the court of social science? Might conservatives have a better formula for how to create a healthy, happy society?

I kept reading. Muller went through a series of claims about human nature and institutions, which he said are the core beliefs of conservatism. Conservatives believe that people are inherently imperfect and are prone to act badly when all constraints and accountability are removed (yes, I thought; see Glaucon, Tetlock, and Ariely in chapter 4). Our reasoning is flawed and prone to overconfidence, so it's dangerous to construct theories based on pure reason, unconstrained by intuition and historical experience (yes; see Hume in chapter 2 and Baron-Cohen on systemizing in chapter 6). Institutions emerge gradually as social facts, which we then respect and even sacralize, but if we strip these institutions of authority and treat them as arbitrary contrivances that exist only for our benefit, we render them less effective. We then expose ourselves to increased anomie and social disorder (yes; see Durkheim in chapters 8 and 11).

Based on my own research, I had no choice but to agree with these conservative claims. As I continued to read the writings of conservative intellectuals, from Edmund Burke in the eighteenth century through Friedrich Hayek and Thomas Sowell in the twentieth, I began to see that they had attained a crucial insight into the sociology of morality that I had never encountered before. They understood the importance of what I'll call moral

capital. (Please note that I am praising conservative intellectuals, not the Republican Party.)<sup>36</sup>

The term social capital swept through the social sciences in the 1990s, jumping into the broader public vocabulary after Robert Putnam's 2000 book *Bowling Alone*.<sup>37</sup> Capital, in economics, refers to the resources that allow a person or firm to produce goods or services. There's financial capital (money in the bank), physical capital (such as a wrench or a factory), and human capital (such as a well-trained sales force). When everything else is equal, a firm with more of any kind of capital will outcompete a firm with less.

Social capital refers to a kind of capital that economists had largely overlooked: the social ties among individuals and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from those ties.<sup>38</sup> When everything else is equal, a firm with more social capital will outcompete its less cohesive and less internally trusting competitors (which makes sense given that human beings were shaped by multilevel selection to be contingent cooperators). In fact, discussions of social capital sometimes use the example of ultra-Orthodox Jewish diamond merchants, which I mentioned in the previous chapter.<sup>39</sup> This tightly knit ethnic group has been able to create the most efficient market because their transaction and monitoring costs are so low—there's less overhead on every deal. And their costs are so low because they trust each other. If a rival market were to open up across town composed of ethnically and religiously diverse merchants, they'd have to spend a lot more money on lawyers and security guards, given how easy it is to commit fraud or theft when sending diamonds out for inspection by other merchants. Like the nonreligious communes studied by Richard Sosis, they'd have a much harder time getting individuals to follow the moral norms of the community.<sup>40</sup>

Everyone loves social capital. Whether you're left, right, or center, who could fail to see the value of being able to trust and rely upon others? But now let's broaden our focus beyond firms trying to produce goods and let's think about a school, a commune, a corporation, or even a whole nation that wants to improve moral behavior. Let's set aside problems of moral diversity and just specify the goal as increasing the "output" of prosocial behaviors and decreasing the "output" of antisocial behaviors, however the group defines those terms. To achieve almost any moral vision, you'd probably want high levels of social capital. (It's hard to imagine how anomie and distrust could be beneficial.) But will linking people together into healthy, trusting relationships be enough to improve the ethical profile of the group?

If you believe that people are inherently good, and that they flourish when constraints and divisions are removed, then yes, that may be sufficient. But conservatives generally take a very different view of human nature. They believe that people need external

structures or constraints in order to behave well, cooperate, and thrive. These external constraints include laws, institutions, customs, traditions, nations, and religions. People who hold this “constrained”<sup>41</sup> view are therefore very concerned about the health and integrity of these “outside-the-mind” coordination devices. Without them, they believe, people will begin to cheat and behave selfishly. Without them, social capital will rapidly decay.

If you are a member of a WEIRD society, your eyes tend to fall on individual objects such as people, and you don’t automatically see the relationships among them. Having a concept such as social capital is helpful because it forces you to see the relationships within which those people are embedded, and which make those people more productive. I propose that we take this approach one step further. To understand the miracle of moral communities that grow beyond the bounds of kinship we must look not just at people, and not just at the relationships among people, but at the complete environment within which those relationships are embedded, and which makes those people more virtuous (however they themselves define that term). It takes a great deal of outside-the-mind stuff to support a moral community.

For example, on a small island or in a small town, you typically don’t need to lock your bicycle, but in a big city in the same country, if you only lock the bike frame, your wheels may get stolen. Being small, isolated, or morally homogeneous are examples of environmental conditions that increase the moral capital of a community. That doesn’t mean that small islands and small towns are better places to live overall—the diversity and crowding of big cities makes them more creative and interesting places for many people—but that’s the trade-off. (Whether you’d trade away some moral capital to gain some diversity and creativity will depend in part on your brain’s settings on traits such as openness to experience and threat sensitivity, and this is part of the reason why cities are usually so much more liberal than the countryside.)

Looking at a bunch of outside-the-mind factors and at how well they mesh with inside-the-mind moral psychology brings us right back to the definition of moral systems that I gave in the last chapter. In fact, we can define moral capital as the resources that sustain a moral community.<sup>42</sup> More specifically, moral capital refers *to the degree to which a community possesses interlocking sets of values, virtues, norms, practices, identities, institutions, and technologies that mesh well with evolved psychological mechanisms and thereby enable the community to suppress or regulate selfishness and make cooperation possible.*

To see moral capital in action, let’s do a thought experiment using the nineteenth-century communes studied by Richard Sosis. Let’s assume that every commune was

started by a group of twenty-five adults who knew, liked, and trusted one another. In other words, let's assume that every commune started with a high and equal quantity of social capital on day one. What factors enabled some communes to maintain their social capital and generate high levels of prosocial behavior for decades while others degenerated into discord and distrust within the first year?

In the last chapter, I said that belief in gods and costly religious rituals turned out to be crucial ingredients of success. But let's put religion aside and look at other kinds of outside-the-mind stuff. Let's assume that each commune started off with a clear list of values and virtues that it printed on posters and displayed throughout the commune. A commune that valued self-expression over conformity and that prized the virtue of tolerance over the virtue of loyalty might be more attractive to outsiders, and this could indeed be an advantage in recruiting new members, but it would have lower moral capital than a commune that valued conformity and loyalty. The stricter commune would be better able to suppress or regulate selfishness, and would therefore be more likely to endure.

Moral communities are fragile things, hard to build and easy to destroy. When we think about very large communities such as nations, the challenge is extraordinary and the threat of moral entropy is intense. There is not a big margin for error; many nations are failures as moral communities, particularly corrupt nations where dictators and elites run the country for their own benefit. If you don't value moral capital, then you won't foster values, virtues, norms, practices, identities, institutions, and technologies that increase it.

Let me state clearly that moral capital is not always an unalloyed good. Moral capital leads automatically to the suppression of free riders, but it does not lead automatically to other forms of fairness such as equality of opportunity. And while high moral capital helps a community to function efficiently, the community can use that efficiency to inflict harm on other communities. High moral capital can be obtained within a cult or a fascist nation, as long as most people truly accept the prevailing moral matrix.

Nonetheless, if you are trying to change an organization or a society and you do not consider the effects of your changes on moral capital, you're asking for trouble. This, I believe, is the fundamental blind spot of the left. It explains why liberal reforms so often backfire,<sup>43</sup> and why communist revolutions usually end up in despotism. It is the reason I believe that liberalism—which has done so much to bring about freedom and equal opportunity—is not sufficient as a governing philosophy. It tends to overreach, change too many things too quickly, and reduce the stock of moral capital inadvertently. Conversely, while conservatives do a better job of preserving moral capital, they often

fail to notice certain classes of victims, fail to limit the predations of certain powerful interests, and fail to see the need to change or update institutions as times change. 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 order or stability, and a party of progress or reform, are both necessary elements of a healthy state of political life.”<sup>44</sup>

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.”<sup>45</sup> 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.*<sup>46</sup>

I’m going to take a risk and apply Mill’s and Russell’s insights to some current debates in American society. It’s a risk because partisan readers may be able to accept my claims about yin and yang in the abstract, but not when I start saying that the “other side” has something useful to say about specific controversial issues. I’m willing to run this risk, however, because I want to show that public policy might really be improved by drawing on insights from all sides. I’ll use the framework of Durkheimian utilitarianism that I developed at the end of chapter 11. That is, I’m going to evaluate each issue based on how well the ideology in question can advance the overall good of a society (that’s the utilitarian part), but I’m going to adopt a view of humankind as being Homo duplex (or 90 percent chimp, 10 percent bee), which means that we humans need access to healthy hives in order to flourish (that’s the Durkheimian part).

Rather than just contrasting the left and the right, I’m going to divide the opponents of the left into two groups—the social conservatives (such as the religious right) and the libertarians (sometimes called “classical liberals” because of their love of free markets). These are two groups we’ve studied a lot at YourMorals.org, and we find that they have



very different personalities and moralities. In what follows I'll say briefly why I think that liberals are justified on two major points. I'll then say where I think libertarians and social conservatives are justified, on two counterpoints.

#### YIN: LIBERAL WISDOM

The left builds its moral matrix on three of the six foundations, but it rests most firmly and consistently on the Care foundation.<sup>47</sup> We might illustrate it as in figure 12.2, where the thickness of each line corresponds to the importance of each foundation.

Liberals are often suspicious of appeals to loyalty, authority, and sanctity, although they don't reject these intuitions in all cases (think of the sanctification of nature), so I drew those lines as thin, but still existing. Liberals have many specific values, but I think it's helpful, for each group, to identify its most sacred value—the “third rail” that will get you electrocuted if you touch it. For American liberals since the 1960s, I believe that the most sacred value is caring for victims of oppression. Anyone who blames such victims for their own problems or who displays or merely excuses prejudice against sacralized victim groups can expect a vehement tribal response.<sup>48</sup>

Our findings at YourMorals.org match up with philosophical and popular definitions of liberalism that emphasize care for the vulnerable, opposition to hierarchy and oppression, and an interest in changing laws, traditions, and institutions to solve social problems.<sup>49</sup> The liberal radio host Garrison Keillor captured the spirit and self-image of the modern American left when he wrote: *I am a liberal, and liberalism is the politics of kindness. Liberals stand for tolerance, magnanimity, community spirit, the defense of the weak against the powerful, love of learning, freedom of belief, art and poetry, city life, the very things that make America worth dying for.*<sup>50</sup>

I'm not sure how many Americans have sacrificed their lives for kindness and poetry, but I believe this moral matrix leads liberals to make two points consistently, points that I believe are essential for the health of a society.

#### *Point #1: Governments Can and Should Restrain Corporate Superorganisms*

I loved the movie *Avatar*, but it contained the most foolish evolutionary thinking I've ever seen. I found it easier to believe that islands could float in the sky than to believe that all creatures could live in harmony, willingly lying down to let others eat them. There was one futuristic element that I found quite believable, however. The movie depicts Earth a few centuries from now as a planet run by corporations that have turned national governments into their lackeys. *FIGURE 12.2. The moral matrix of American liberals.*

In chapter 9 I talked about major transitions in the evolution of life. I described the process by which superorganisms emerge, dominate their preferred niches, change their ecosystems, and push their competitors to the margins or to extinction. In chapter 10 I showed that corporations are superorganisms. They're not like superorganisms; they are actual superorganisms. So, if the past is any guide, corporations will grow ever more powerful as they evolve, and as they change the legal and political systems of their host countries to become ever more hospitable. The only force left on Earth that can stand up to the largest corporations are national governments, some of which still maintain the power to tax, regulate, and divide corporations into smaller pieces when they get too powerful.

Economists speak of “externalities”—the costs (or benefits) incurred by third parties who did not agree to the transaction causing the cost (or benefit). For example, if a farmer begins using a new kind of fertilizer that increases his yield but causes more damaging runoff into nearby rivers, he keeps the profit but the costs of his decision are borne by others. If a factory farm finds a faster way to fatten up cattle but thereby causes the animals to suffer more digestive problems and broken bones, it keeps the profit and the animals pay the cost. Corporations are obligated to maximize profit for shareholders, and that means looking for any and all opportunities to lower costs, including passing on costs on to others (when legal) in the form of externalities.

I am not anticorporate, I am simply a Glauconian. When corporations operate in full view of the public, with a free press that is willing and able to report on the externalities being foisted on the public, they are likely to behave well, as most corporations do. But many corporations operate with a high degree of secrecy and public invisibility (for example, America's giant food processors and factory farms).<sup>51</sup> And many corporations have the ability to “capture” or otherwise influence the politicians and federal agencies whose job it is to regulate them (especially now that the U.S. Supreme Court has given corporations and unions the “right” to make unlimited donations to political causes).<sup>52</sup> When corporations are given the ring of Gyges, we can expect catastrophic results (for the ecosystem, the banking system, public health, etc.).

I think liberals are right that a major function of government is to stand up for the public interest against corporations and their tendency to distort markets and impose externalities on others, particularly on those least able to stand up for themselves in court (such as the poor, or immigrants, or farm animals). Efficient markets require government regulation. Liberals go too far sometimes—indeed, they are often reflexively antibusiness,<sup>53</sup> which is a huge mistake from a utilitarian point of view. But it is healthy for a nation to have a constant tug-of-war, a constant debate between yin and yang over how and when to limit and regulate corporate behavior.

*Point #2: Some Problems Really Can Be Solved by Regulation*

As automobile ownership skyrocketed in the 1950s and 1960s, so did the tonnage of lead being blown out of American tailpipes and into the atmosphere—200,000 tons of lead a year by 1973.<sup>54</sup> (Gasoline refiners had been adding lead since the 1930s to increase the efficiency of the refining process.) Despite evidence that the rising tonnage of lead was making its way into the lungs, bloodstreams, and brains of Americans and was retarding the neural development of millions of children, the chemical industry had been able to block all efforts to ban lead additives from gasoline for decades. It was a classic case of corporate superorganisms using all methods of leverage to preserve their ability to pass a deadly externality on to the public.

The Carter administration began a partial phaseout of leaded gasoline, but it was nearly reversed when Ronald Reagan crippled the Environmental Protection Agency's ability to draft new regulations or enforce old ones. A bipartisan group of congressmen stood up for children and against the chemical industry, and by the 1990s lead had been completely removed from gasoline.<sup>55</sup> This simple public health intervention worked miracles: lead levels in children's blood dropped in lockstep with declining levels of lead in gasoline, and the decline has been credited with some of the rise in IQ that has been measured in recent decades.<sup>56</sup>

Even more amazingly, several studies have demonstrated that the phaseout, which began in the late 1970s, may have been responsible for up to half of the extraordinary and otherwise unexplained drop in crime that occurred in the 1990s.<sup>57</sup> Tens of millions of children, particularly poor children in big cities, had grown up with high levels of lead, which interfered with their neural development from the 1950s until the late 1970s. The boys in this group went on to cause the giant surge of criminality that terrified America—and drove it to the right—from the 1960s until the early 1990s. These young men were eventually replaced by a new generation of young men with unleaded brains (and therefore better impulse control), which seems to be part of the reason the crime rate plummeted.

From a Durkheimian utilitarian perspective, it is hard to imagine a better case for government intervention to solve a national health problem. This one regulation saved vast quantities of lives, IQ points, money, and moral capital all at the same time.<sup>58</sup> And lead is far from the only environmental hazard that disrupts neural development. When young children are exposed to PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls), organophosphates (used in some pesticides), and methyl mercury (a by-product of burning coal), it lowers their IQ and raises their risk of ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder).<sup>59</sup> Given these brain disruptions, future studies are likely to find a link to violence and crime as well. Rather than building more prisons, the cheapest (and most humane) way to fight

crime may be to give more money and authority to the Environmental Protection Agency. When conservatives object that liberal efforts to intervene in markets or engage in “social engineering” always have unintended consequences, they should note that sometimes those consequences are positive. When conservatives say that markets offer better solutions than do regulations, let them step forward and explain their plan to eliminate the dangerous and unfair externalities generated by many markets.<sup>60</sup>

#### YANG #1: LIBERTARIAN WISDOM

Libertarians are sometimes said to be socially liberal (favoring individual freedom in private matters such as sex and drug use) and economically conservative (favoring free markets), but those labels reveal how confused these terms have become in the United States.

Libertarians are the direct descendants of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Enlightenment reformers who fought to free people and markets from the control of kings and clergy. Libertarians love liberty; that is their sacred value. Many libertarians wish they could simply be known as liberals,<sup>61</sup> but they lost that term in the United States (though not in Europe) when liberalism split into two camps in the late nineteenth century. Some liberals began to see powerful corporations and wealthy industrialists as the chief threats to liberty. These “new liberals” (also known as “left liberals” or “progressives”) looked to government as the only force capable of protecting the public and rescuing the many victims of the brutal practices of early industrial capitalism. Liberals who continued to fear government as the chief threat to liberty became known as “classical liberals,” “right liberals” (in some countries), or libertarians (in the United States).

Those who took the progressive path began to use government not just to safeguard liberty but to advance the general welfare of the people, particularly those who could not fend for themselves. Progressive Republicans (such as Theodore Roosevelt) and Democrats (such as Woodrow Wilson) took steps to limit the growing power of corporations, such as breaking up monopolies and creating new government agencies to regulate labor practices and to ensure the quality of foods and medicines. Some progressive reforms intruded far more deeply into private life and personal liberty, such as forcing parents to send their children to school and banning the sale of alcohol.

You can see this fork in the road by looking at the liberal moral matrix (figure 12.2). It rests on two foundations primarily: Care and Liberty (plus some Fairness, because everybody values proportionality to some extent). Liberals in 1900 who relied most heavily on the Care foundation—those who felt the pain of others most keenly—were predisposed to take the left-hand (progressive) fork. But liberals in 1900 who relied

more heavily on the Liberty foundation—those who felt the bite of restrictions on their liberty most keenly—refused to follow (see figure 12.3). In fact, the libertarian writer Will Wilkinson has recently suggested that libertarians are basically liberals who love markets and lack bleeding hearts.<sup>62</sup>

At YourMorals.org, we've found that Wilkinson is correct. In a project led by Ravi Iyer and Sena Koleva, we analyzed dozens of surveys completed by 12,000 libertarians and we compared their responses to those of tens of thousands of liberals and conservatives. We found that libertarians look more like liberals than like conservatives on most measures of personality (for example, both groups score higher than conservatives on openness to experience, and lower than conservatives on disgust sensitivity and conscientiousness). On the Moral Foundations Questionnaire, libertarians join liberals in scoring very low on the Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity foundations. Where they diverge from liberals most sharply is on two measures: the Care foundation, where they score very low (even lower than conservatives), and on some new questions we added about economic liberty, where they score extremely high (a little higher than conservatives, a lot higher than liberals).

For example, do you agree that “the government should do more to advance the common good, even if that means limiting the freedom and choices of individuals”? If so, then you are probably a liberal. If not, then you could be either a libertarian or a conservative. The split between liberals (progressives) and libertarians (classical liberals) occurred over exactly this question more than a hundred years ago, and it shows up clearly in our data today. People with libertarian ideals have generally supported the Republican Party since the 1930s because libertarians and Republicans have a common enemy: the liberal welfare society that they believe is destroying America's liberty (for libertarians) and moral fiber (for social conservatives). FIGURE 12.3. The moral matrix of American libertarians.

I believe that libertarians are right on many points,<sup>63</sup> but I'll focus on just one counterpoint to liberalism here.

### *Counterpoint #1: Markets Are Miraculous*

In 2007, David Goldhill's father was killed by an infection he caught while in the hospital. In trying to make sense of this unnecessary death, Goldhill began to read about the American health care system, which kills about 100,000 people annually by such accidental infections. He learned that the death rate can be cut by two-thirds when hospitals follow a simple checklist of sanitary procedures, but most hospitals don't adopt the checklist.

Goldhill, a businessman (and Democrat), wondered how it was possible for any organization to pass up a simple measure that yielded such massive payoffs. In the business world, such inefficiency would soon lead to bankruptcy. As he learned more and more about the health care system, he discovered just how bad things get when goods and services are provided without a properly functioning market.

In 2009, Goldhill published a provocative essay in *The Atlantic* titled “How American Health Care Killed My Father”:<sup>64</sup> One of his main points was the absurdity of using insurance to pay for routine purchases. Normally we buy insurance to cover the risk of a catastrophic loss. We enter an insurance pool with other people to spread the risk around, and we hope never to collect a penny. We handle routine expenses ourselves, seeking out the highest quality for the lowest price. We would never file a claim on our car insurance to pay for an oil change.

The next time you go to the supermarket, look closely at a can of peas. Think about all the work that went into it—the farmers, truckers, and supermarket employees, the miners and metalworkers who made the can—and think how miraculous it is that you can buy this can for under a dollar. At every step of the way, competition among suppliers rewarded those whose innovations shaved a penny off the cost of getting that can to you. If God is commonly thought to have created the world and then arranged it for our benefit, then the free market (and its invisible hand) is a pretty good candidate for being a god. You can begin to understand why libertarians sometimes have a quasi-religious faith in free markets.

Now let’s do the devil’s work and spread chaos throughout the marketplace. Suppose that one day all prices are removed from all products in the supermarket. All labels too, beyond a simple description of the contents, so you can’t compare products from different companies. You just take whatever you want, as much as you want, and you bring it up to the register. The checkout clerk scans in your food insurance card and helps you fill out your itemized claim. You pay a flat fee of \$10 and go home with your groceries. A month later you get a bill informing you that your food insurance company will pay the supermarket for most of the remaining cost, but you’ll have to send in a check for an additional \$15. It might sound like a bargain to get a cartload of food for \$25, but you’re really paying your grocery bill every month when you fork over \$2,000 for your food insurance premium.

Under such a system, there is little incentive for anyone to find innovative ways to reduce the cost of food or increase its quality. The supermarkets get paid by the insurers, and the insurers get their premiums from you. The cost of food insurance

begins to rise as supermarkets stock only the foods that net them the highest insurance payments, not the foods that deliver value to you.

As the cost of food insurance rises, many people can no longer afford it. Liberals (motivated by Care) push for a new government program to buy food insurance for the poor and the elderly. But once the government becomes the major purchaser of food, then success in the supermarket and food insurance industries depends primarily on maximizing yield from government payouts. Before you know it, that can of peas costs the government \$30, and all of us are paying 25 percent of our paychecks in taxes just to cover the cost of buying groceries for each other at hugely inflated costs.

That, says Goldhill, is what we've done to ourselves. As long as consumers are spared from taking price into account—that is, as long as someone else is always paying for your choices—things will get worse. We can't fix the problem by convening panels of experts to set the maximum allowable price for a can of peas. Only a working market<sup>65</sup> can bring supply, demand, and ingenuity together to provide health care at the lowest possible price. For example, there is an open market for LASIK surgery (a kind of laser eye surgery that removes the need to wear contact lenses). Doctors compete with one another to attract customers, and because the procedure is rarely covered by insurance, patients take price into account. Competition and innovation have driven down the price of the surgery by nearly 80 percent since it was first introduced. (Other developed nations have had more success controlling costs, but they too face rapidly rising costs that may become fiscally ruinous.<sup>66</sup> Like America, they often lack the political will to raise taxes or cut services.)

When libertarians talk about the miracle of “spontaneous order” that emerges when people are allowed to make their own choices (and take on the costs and benefits of those choices), the rest of us should listen.<sup>67</sup> Care and compassion sometimes motivate liberals to interfere in the workings of markets, but the result can be extraordinary harm on a vast scale. (Of course, as I said above, governments often need to intervene to correct market distortions, thereby making markets work properly.) Liberals want to use government for so many purposes, but health care expenses are crowding out all other possibilities. If you think your local, state, and federal governments are broke now, just wait until the baby boom generation is fully retired.

I find it ironic that liberals generally embrace Darwin and reject “intelligent design” as the explanation for design and adaptation in the natural world, but they don't embrace Adam Smith as the explanation for design and adaptation in the economic world. They sometimes prefer the “intelligent design” of socialist economies, which often ends in disaster from a utilitarian point of view.<sup>68</sup>

## YANG #2: SOCIAL CONSERVATIVE WISDOM

Conservatives are the “party of order and stability,” in Mill’s formulation. They generally resist the changes implemented by the “party of progress or reform.” But to put things in those terms makes conservatives sound like fearful obstructionists, trying to hold back the hands of time and the “noble human aspirations” of the liberal progress narrative.

A more positive way to describe conservatives is to say that their broader moral matrix allows them to detect threats to moral capital that liberals cannot perceive. They do not oppose change of all kinds (such as the Internet), but they fight back ferociously when they believe that change will damage the institutions and traditions that provide our moral exoskeletons (such as the family). Preserving those institutions and traditions is their most sacred value.

For example, the historian Samuel Huntington noted that conservatism can’t be defined by the particular institutions it sacralizes (which could be monarchy in eighteenth-century France, or the Constitution in twenty-first-century America). Rather, he said, “when the foundations of society are threatened, the conservative ideology reminds men of the necessity of some institutions and the desirability of the existing ones.”<sup>69</sup> FIGURE 12.4. The moral matrix of American social conservatives.

At YourMorals.org, we have found that social conservatives have the broadest set of moral concerns, valuing all six foundations relatively equally (figure 12.4). This breadth—and particularly their relatively high settings on the Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity foundations—give them insights that I think are valuable, from a Durkheimian utilitarian perspective.

### *Counterpoint #2: You Can’t Help the Bees by Destroying the Hive*

Liberals hate the idea of exclusion. At a talk I attended a few years ago, a philosophy professor bashed the legitimacy of nation-states. “They’re just arbitrary lines on the map,” he said. “Some people draw a line and say, ‘Everything on this side is ours. The rest of you keep out.’ ” Others in the room laughed along with him. At a talk that I gave recently, I found the same dislike of exclusion applied to religions. A graduate student was surprised by my claim that religions are often good for the rest of society, and she said, “But religions are all exclusive!” I asked her what she meant, and she replied: “Well, the Catholic Church won’t accept anyone who doesn’t believe its teachings.” I couldn’t believe she was serious. I pointed out that our graduate program at UVA was more exclusive than the church—we rejected almost all applicants. In the course of our discussion it became clear that her overriding concern was for victims of discrimination,



particularly gay people who are told that they don't belong in many religious communities.

Comments such as these convince me that John Lennon captured a common liberal dream in his haunting song "Imagine." Imagine if there were no countries, and no religion too. If we could just erase the borders and boundaries that divide us, then the world would "be as one." It's a vision of heaven for liberals, but conservatives believe it would quickly descend into hell. I think conservatives are on to something.

Throughout this book I've argued that large-scale human societies are nearly miraculous achievements. I've tried to show how our complicated moral psychology coevolved with our religions and our other cultural inventions (such as tribes and agriculture) to get us where we are today. I have argued that we are products of multilevel selection, including group selection, and that our "parochial altruism" is part of what makes us such great team players. We need groups, we love groups, and we develop our virtues in groups, even though those groups necessarily exclude nonmembers. If you destroy all groups and dissolve all internal structure, you destroy your moral capital.

Conservatives understand this point. Edmund Burke said it in 1790: *To be attached to the subdivision, to love the little platoon we belong to in society, is the first principle (the germ as it were) of public affections. It is the first link in the series by which we proceed towards a love to our country, and to mankind.*<sup>70</sup>

Adam Smith argued similarly that patriotism and parochialism are good things because they lead people to exert themselves to improve the things they can improve: *That wisdom which contrived the system of human affections ... seems to have judged that the interest of the great society of mankind would be best promoted by directing the principal attention of each individual individual to that particular portion of it, which was most within the sphere both of his abilities and of his understanding.*<sup>71</sup>

Now that's Durkheimian utilitarianism. It's utilitarianism done by somebody who understands human groupishness.

Robert Putnam has provided a wealth of evidence that Burke and Smith were right. In the previous chapter I told you about his finding that religions make Americans into "better neighbors and better citizens." I told you his conclusion that the active ingredient that made people more virtuous was enmeshing them into relationships with their co-religionists. Anything that binds people together into dense networks of trust makes people less selfish.

In an earlier study, Putnam found that ethnic diversity had the opposite effect. In a paper revealingly titled “E Pluribus Unum,” Putnam examined the level of social capital in hundreds of American communities and discovered that high levels of immigration and ethnic diversity seem to cause a reduction in social capital. That may not surprise you; people are racist, you might think, and so they don’t trust people who don’t look like themselves. But that’s not quite right. Putnam’s survey was able to distinguish two different kinds of social capital: bridging capital refers to trust between groups, between people who have different values and identities, while bonding capital refers to trust within groups. Putnam found that diversity reduced both kinds of social capital. Here’s his conclusion: *Diversity seems to trigger not in-group/out-group division, but anomie or social isolation. In colloquial language, people living in ethnically diverse settings appear to “hunker down”—that is, to pull in like a turtle.*

Putnam uses Durkheim’s ideas (such as anomie) to explain why diversity makes people turn inward and become more selfish, less interested in contributing to their communities. What Putnam calls turtling is the exact opposite of what I have called hiving.

Liberals stand up for victims of oppression and exclusion. They fight to break down arbitrary barriers (such as those based on race, and more recently on sexual orientation). But their zeal to help victims, combined with their low scores on the Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity foundations, often lead them to push for changes that weaken groups, traditions, institutions, and moral capital. For example, the urge to help the inner-city poor led to welfare programs in the 1960s that reduced the value of marriage, increased out-of-wedlock births, and weakened African American families.<sup>72</sup> The urge to empower students by giving them the right to sue their teachers and schools in the 1970s has eroded authority and moral capital in schools, creating disorderly environments that harm the poor above all.<sup>73</sup> The urge to help Hispanic immigrants in the 1980s led to multicultural education programs that emphasized the differences among Americans rather than their shared values and identity. Emphasizing differences makes many people more racist, not less.<sup>74</sup> On issue after issue, it’s as though liberals are trying to help a subset of bees (which really does need help) even if doing so damages the hive. Such “reforms” may lower the overall welfare of a society, and sometimes they even hurt the very victims liberals were trying to help.

#### TOWARD MORE CIVIL POLITICS

The idea of opposites as yin and yang comes from ancient China, a culture that valued group harmony. But in the ancient Middle East, where monotheism first took root, the metaphor of war was more common than the metaphor of balance. The third-century Persian prophet Mani preached that the visible world is the battleground between the

forces of light (absolute goodness) and the forces of darkness (absolute evil). Human beings are the frontline in the battle; we contain both good and evil, and we each must pick one side and fight for it.

Mani's preaching developed into Manichaeism, a religion that spread throughout the Middle East and influenced Western thinking. If you think about politics in a Manichaean way, then compromise is a sin. God and the devil don't issue many bipartisan proclamations, and neither should you.

America's political class has become far more Manichaean since the early 1990s, first in Washington and then in many state capitals. The result is an increase in acrimony and gridlock, a decrease in the ability to find bipartisan solutions. What can be done? Many groups and organizations have urged legislators and citizens alike to take "civility pledges," promising to be "more civil" and to "view everyone in positive terms." I don't believe such pledges will work. Riders can sign as many of them as they please, but the pledges are not binding for elephants. To escape from this mess, I believe that psychologists must work with political scientists to identify changes that will indirectly undermine Manichaeism. I ran a conference that tried to do this in 2007, at Princeton University. We learned that much of the increase in polarization was unavoidable. It was the natural result of the political realignment that took place after President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act in 1964. The conservative southern states, which had been solidly Democratic since the Civil War (because Lincoln was a Republican) then began to leave the Democratic Party, and by the 1990s the South was solidly Republican. Before this realignment there had been liberals and conservatives in both parties, which made it easy to form bipartisan teams who could work together on legislative projects. But after the realignment, there was no longer any overlap, either in the Senate or in the House of Representatives. Nowadays the most liberal Republican is typically more conservative than the most conservative Democrat. And once the two parties became ideologically pure—a liberal party and a conservative party—there was bound to be a rise in Manichaeism.<sup>75</sup>

But we also learned about factors that might possibly be reversed. The most poignant moment of the conference came when Jim Leach, a former Republican congressman from Iowa, described the changes that began in 1995. Newt Gingrich, the new speaker of the House of Representatives, encouraged the large group of incoming Republican congressmen to leave their families in their home districts rather than moving their spouses and children to Washington. Before 1995, congressmen from both parties attended many of the same social events on weekends; their spouses became friends; their children played on the same sports teams. But nowadays most congressmen fly to Washington on Monday night, huddle with their teammates and do battle for three

days, and then fly home on Thursday night. Cross-party friendships are disappearing; Manichaeism and scorched Earth politics are increasing.

I don't know how Americans can convince their legislators to move their families to Washington, and I don't know if even that change would revive cross-party friendships in today's poisoned atmosphere, but this is an example of the kind of indirect change that might change elephants.<sup>76</sup> Intuitions come first, so anything we can do to cultivate more positive social connections will alter intuitions and, thus, downstream reasoning and behavior. Other structural changes that might reduce Manichaeism include changing the ways that primary elections are run, the ways that electoral districts are drawn, and the ways that candidates raise money for their campaigns. (See a full list of potential remedies at [www.CivilPolitics.org](http://www.CivilPolitics.org).)

The problem is not just limited to politicians. Technology and changing residential patterns have allowed each of us to isolate ourselves within cocoons of like-minded individuals. In 1976, only 27 percent of Americans lived in "landslide counties"—counties that voted either Democratic or Republican by a margin of 20 percent or more. But the number has risen steadily; in 2008, 48 percent of Americans lived in a landslide county.<sup>77</sup> Our counties and towns are becoming increasingly segregated into "lifestyle enclaves," in which ways of voting, eating, working, and worshipping are increasingly aligned. If you find yourself in a Whole Foods store, there's an 89 percent chance that the county surrounding you voted for Barack Obama. If you want to find Republicans, go to a county that contains a Cracker Barrel restaurant (62 percent of these counties went for McCain).<sup>78</sup>

Morality binds and blinds. This is not just something that happens to people on the other side. We all get sucked into tribal moral communities. We circle around sacred values and then share post hoc arguments about why we are so right and they are so wrong. We think the other side is blind to truth, reason, science, and common sense, but in fact everyone goes blind when talking about their sacred objects.

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.

## IN SUM

People don't adopt their ideologies at random, or by soaking up whatever ideas are around them. People whose genes gave them brains that get a special pleasure from novelty, variety, and diversity, while simultaneously being less sensitive to signs of threat, are predisposed (but not predestined) to become liberals. They tend to develop certain "characteristic adaptations" and "life narratives" that make them resonate—unconsciously and intuitively—with the grand narratives told by political movements on the left (such as the liberal progress narrative). People whose genes give them brains with the opposite settings are predisposed, for the same reasons, to resonate with the grand narratives of the right (such as the Reagan narrative).

Once people join a political team, they get ensnared in its moral matrix. They see confirmation of their grand narrative everywhere, and it's difficult—perhaps impossible—to convince them that they are wrong if you argue with them from outside of their matrix.

I suggested that liberals might have even more difficulty understanding conservatives than the other way around, because liberals often have difficulty understanding how the Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity foundations have anything to do with morality. In particular, liberals often have difficulty seeing moral capital, which I defined as the resources that sustain a moral community. I suggested that liberals and conservatives are like yin and yang—both are "necessary elements of a healthy state of political life," as John Stuart Mill put it. Liberals are experts in care; they are better able to see the victims of existing social arrangements, and they continually push us to update those arrangements and invent new ones. As Robert F. Kennedy said: "There are those that look at things the way they are, and ask why? I dream of things that never were, and ask why not?" I showed how this moral matrix leads liberals to make two points that are (in my opinion) profoundly important for the health of a society: (1) governments can and should restrain corporate superorganisms, and (2) some big problems really can be solved by regulation.

I explained how libertarians (who sacralize liberty) and social conservatives (who sacralize certain institutions and traditions) provide a crucial counterweight to the liberal reform movements that have been so influential in America and Europe since the early twentieth century. I said that libertarians are right that markets are miraculous (at least when their externalities and other failures can be addressed), and I said that social conservatives are right that you don't usually help the bees by destroying the hive. Finally, I said that the increasing Manichaeism of American political life is not something we can address by signing pledges and resolving to be nicer. Our politics will become

more civil when we find ways to change the procedures for electing politicians and the institutions and environments within which they interact.

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 each battle. It blinds us to the fact that each team is composed of good people who have something important to say.