

This information is based on the book “The Righteous Mind: Why good people are divided by politics and religion” by Jonathan Haidt. The book is about psychology and sociology and philosophy and morality... I enjoyed reading the book and a lot of it resonated with me, but I wouldn't call it an easy read. It has also been a bit challenging to summarize.

The bottom line (my take):

1. Morality is intuitive (a gut feeling) and then people rationalize their morality after the fact.
2. Across the spectrum of politics, liberals and conservatives base their morality on a different spectrum of moral foundations.
3. This difference manifests itself as liberals being more individual-oriented and conservatives being more group-oriented.
4. This is part of the reason for the partisan divide we are currently experiencing.
5. But I don't think that either group is more or less moral than the other, just different.
6. The real bottom line point is that both of these views are good and necessary for a healthy society.
7. Going extreme liberal ends up harming society at large.
8. Going extreme conservative ends up hurting large numbers of individuals.
9. Each side needs to try and understand the points and the value of the other side.

Key elements:

1. Morality comes from some built-in mechanisms and also from our cultures and guidance.
2. Morality is really intuitive.
3. We use reason to justify our intuition of what's moral, after the intuition.
4. Trying to argue morality using reason doesn't really work.
5. A broad model for morality has several foundations: Care/Harm, Liberty/Oppression, Fairness/Cheating, Loyalty/Betrayal, Authority/Subversion, Sanctity/Degradation.
6. Liberals tend to have a their morality more tuned to individual-oriented aspects: Care/Harm, Liberty/Oppression, Fairness/Cheating.
7. Conservatives tend to have a their morality more tuned to group-oriented aspects: Loyalty/Betrayal, Authority/Subversion, Sanctity/Degradation.
8. This difference in morality models is a reason that the people often don't understand each other and the choices they make.
9. People are mostly selfish (90% chimp) – individuals.
10. But we have evolved to occasionally be groupish (10% bee) – part of group/tribe/hive.
11. Moral systems are interlocking sets of values, virtues, norms, practices, identities, institutions, technologies, and evolved psychological mechanisms that work together to suppress or regulate self-interest and make cooperative societies possible.
12. Whether you are religious or not, religions have a place and value.
13. Political views turn out to be innate (organized in advance of experience, inheritable) but also malleable.
14. Our morality binds us into ideological teams that fight each other as though the fate of the world depended on 'our side' winning each battle.
15. Our morality blinds us to the fact that the 'other side' is composed of good people who have something important to say.

Haidt starts out slowly trying to weave together a general framework that he wants to appeal to liberal, conservative, religious, and secular audiences. It is a noble attempt but I think it leans a bit to the liberal side. (An alternate approach might have been a book in 2 halves – oriented respectively to liberal/secular and conservative/religious audiences. Then in the middle, tie them together and encourage the readers to go through the 'other' view and try to understand and empathize.) I would like to have seen more discussion about how liberals can open up to the loyalty, authority, and sanctity present in conservatives. Similarly, I would like to see more discussions on how conservatives can deal with loyalty, authority, and sanctity foundations balancing potential harm to individuals.

Part One: Intuitions come first, strategic reasoning second

The main concept for our minds in the first part of the book is that our mind is divided between the small 'conscious reasoning' part and the bulk of our other mental processes (the author's metaphor is driver/rider and the elephant). People would like to think of our conscience or reasoning as the driver. The author basically points out that our 'rational self' or conscience is the rider and its purpose is to serve the elephant, not other way around.

Chapter 1: Where does morality come from?

How do people know right from wrong (morality)? The starting possibilities for the answer are:

1. We prewired at birth (the nativist/biblical view)
2. We are a blank slate and we learn it (the empiricist/evolutionary view)
3. We figure it out as we go (the rationalist view)

The initial thought that morality is about harm. If something you do harms someone, it is morally wrong. But a lot of morality varies by culture. And within cultures, societies tend to be oriented either towards society or the individual. And this impacts morality... in sociocentric societies social conventions get mixed in with moral issues. In some research the author showed that the people even tried to make up victims who were being harmed even though there were none.

The author, after research, rejected all three of the previous possibilities and concluded:

1. Morality can't be entirely self-constructed by kids.
2. Culture and guidance plays a role in developing a child's morality.
3. People have gut feelings (involving disgust and disrespect) that impact their morality.
4. Morality is a mixture of innate, parental guidance, and cultural learning.

Chapter 2: The intuitive dog and its rational tail

People reason, are emotional, and make moral intuitions. The author looks at the relation between these:

1. Plato (300s BC) believed that reason could and should be the master of morality.
2. Thomas Jefferson (1800s) believed that they coexisted (emotion and reason impacted moral intuitions and judgment).
3. David Hume (1700s) believed that reason was the servant of morality.

The author sees through his research that Hume was right... hence the rider is the servant of the elephant.

A key insight is that moral judgments are not a rational thinking process, but are really intuition. It operates more like vision and happens much lower in our mental hardware. And this is where the rider is serving the elephant – we use reasoning to explain our intuition. This is very consistent with psychology's modular model of the mind – our 'consciousness' is not the driver, it is 'public relations manager' trying to make us not look crazy or bad. Again, it is serving the elephant (our intuition). And the reasons (post-hoc) don't need to have anything to do with the actual reasons or intuitions. All this said, about rider and elephant, doesn't mean there isn't some influence by the rider. It is possible to encourage the elephant in a direction.

The author talks about moral and social arguments and came up with the following model:

Figure 2.4. *The social intuitionist model*. Intuitions come first and reasoning is usually produced after a judgment is made, in order to influence other people. But as a discussion progresses, the reasons given by other people sometimes change our intuitions and judgments.

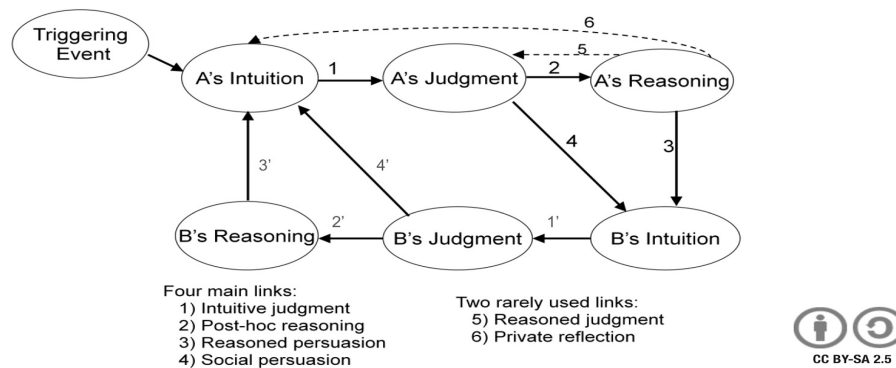


Figure from Jonathan Haidt
righteousmind.com

The Righteous Mind : Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion

This model explains why moral and political arguments are so frustrating – because reason comes after the intuition. As the author says, if you want to change people’s minds, you’ve got to talk to their elephant (you need to focus on links 3 and 4 to change their intuition, not their reasoning). The author also calls on Dale Carnegie:

1. Avoid direct conflict
2. Begin in a friendly way
3. Smile
4. Be a good listener
5. Never say ‘you’re wrong’

The point is to use respect, warmth, and openness – basically use social persuasion. The point was made late in the chapter that empathy is the antidote to righteousness but it is a challenge to empathize with someone at a moral polar opposite.

Chapter 3: Elephants rule

The first principle of moral psychology is that intuition comes first and strategic reasoning comes second.

The author talks about a variety of research that showed:

1. Brains evaluate instantly and constantly.
2. Social and political judgments depend heavily on quick intuitive flashes.
3. It is possible to give reasoning more of a say when the person is forced to wait a few minutes before coming up with a judgment.
4. Our bodies and the environments they are in can impact moral judgments – bad smells and tastes make people more judgmental as can anything that makes people think about purity and cleanliness.
5. Babies feel but don’t reason early on, but they seem to have some built in environment and social/moral mechanisms.

All this ties together to support that the elephant (automatic and intuitive processes) is where most of the action in moral psychology resides – i.e. elephants rule. The author closes the chapter asking why we have this brain architecture. Wouldn’t it be better to have an internal judge or scientist (determining truth) instead of a public relations manager (finding evidence of what we already believe)? He sets up for the answer – it depends on whether our survival depended more on truth or reputation.

Chapter 4: Vote for me (here's why)

So, is it better to be truthful or to be perceived as truthful (or virtuous)? Who is happier: 1) a just man who has a bad reputation or 2) an unjust man who has a good reputation? As much as we might like to hold ourselves to a higher standard, experience and research show our moral reasoning is in support of our reputations over doing the right thing. The outcome of this is that to have an ethical society, you need to have everyone's reputation on the line and visible.

Related to reputation is accountability. When asked to make a decision without having to explain it, people do their normal intuitive approach. However, if three conditions are added:

1. Before forming an opinion, the decision maker learns they are accountable to an audience
2. The audience views are unknown
3. The decision maker believes the audience is well informed and interested in accuracy

In this situation the decision maker works very hard on figuring out the truth. People use two types of thought to figure this out: exploratory (evenhanded) or confirmatory (one-sided). Unfortunately, most of us use confirmatory thought – the point of which is that we are trying to look right than to be right. And the research also shows we are trying to convince ourselves as much as others.

In an experiment, people were given too much money for a task. Only 20% of the people said something. However, when asked if they got the right amount, 60% said no. The difference is plausible deniability. When asked, the people no longer had the deniability. It appears that people want to appear honest, but most of us will cheat, but 'just a little'. An interesting side effect was that people only cheated up to the point where they could preserve their belief in their own honesty.

The key points of the chapter are:

1. We are obsessively concerned about what others think of us, and it is unconscious.
2. Conscious reasoning works like a press secretary (or public relations manager) and will automatically justify any intuition we have.
3. With the help of this press secretary, we are able to lie and cheat so effectively, we don't even know it.
4. When we are faced with a conclusion, we ask 'can I believe' when we want to reach that conclusion. And we ask 'must I believe' when we don't. (Confirmation bias.)
5. In moral and political matters we are often group-ish rather than selfish – i.e. we support our team even at the cost to ourselves.
6. A lot of people want to believe that reason is the way to go, but that's not how we are wired. This 'Rationalist Delusion' doesn't really work and for moral education and situations we would be better served taking an intuitionist's approach.

Part Two: There’s more to morality than harm and fairness

The main metaphor for morality in the second part of the book is that morality is composed of 6 different aspects (the author’s metaphor is a tongue with 6 taste receptors).

Chapter 5: Beyond WEIRD morality

The author talks about getting his PhD at McDonalds... He would ask people in the outside eating area some of the research questions (like eating a dog hit by a car). What he found was that they felt it was wrong but couldn’t give reasons why. This was different from his students at the university a few blocks away who clearly explained their moral reasoning. This led the author to understand that most subjects in psychology research projects (college students) are a very small subset of statistical outliers – they are ‘WEIRD’:

- Western
- Educated
- Industrialized
- Rich
- Democratic

Americans are more extreme outliers than Europeans and educated American upper middle class are more extreme outliers than Americans in general. The summary of this is that the *WEIRD*er you are, the more you see a world full of separate objects rather than relationships. This relates directly to the character of Americans being more independent, individualistic, and autonomous than other cultures. This is even shown in visual perception (and therefore is also down at the instinctive morality level).

Moralists/philosophers from the WEIRD side of things (European and American) will develop concepts around individuals and a morality of how to govern them. Moralists/philosophers from non-WEIRD societies will develop concepts around relationship duties and virtues. Further, WEIRD morality focuses on harm and fairness whereas non-WEIRD focuses on group and society health (there is no ‘I’ in ‘team’).

Chapter 6: Taste buds of the righteous mind

So if there is more to morality than harm and fairness, what else is there? The author and others worked on creating a moral foundations model. The start of this model is:

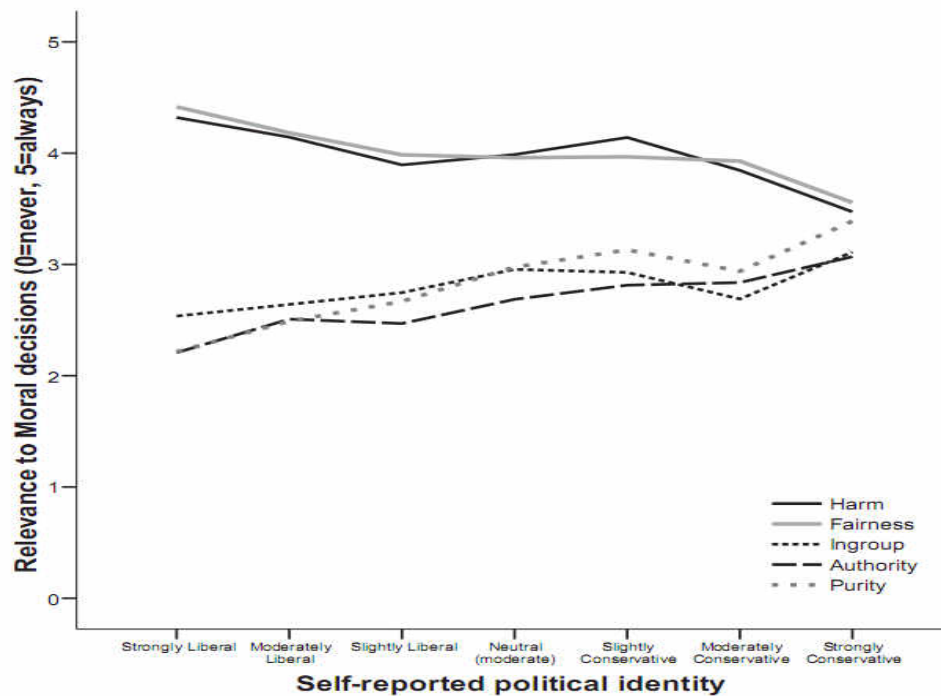
	Care/ Harm	Fairness/ Cheating	Loyalty/ Betrayal	Authority/ Subversion	Sanctity/ Degradation
Challenge	Protect and care for children	Reap benefits of 2 way partnerships	Form cohesive coalitions	Forge beneficial relationships in hierarchies	Avoid contaminants
Triggers	Suffering, distress needs (by one’s child)	Cheating, cooperation, deception	Threat or challenge to group	Signs of dominance and submission	Waste products, disease
Emotions	Compassion	Anger, gratitude, guilt	Group pride, rage at traitors	Respect, fear	Disgust
Virtues	Caring, kindness	Fairness, justice, trustworthiness	Loyalty, patriotism, self-sacrifice	Obedience, deference	Temperance, chastity, piety, cleanliness

Chapter 7: The moral foundations of politics

The author talks about the 5 foundations in more depth and how the current 2 ends of the political spectrum in America use/rely on them. In particular, it shows that the liberal side depends more on care/harm and fairness/cheating. The conservative side makes use of all five.

Chapter 8: The conservative advantage

Through additional research, the following chart shows that the aspects of political morality are not binary, but there is a definite difference between liberals and conservatives. And as stated previously, liberals care more about care and fairness – and conservatives care about all five.



Through the rest of the chapter, the author expands and refines the model adding a liberty/oppression foundation. In particular:

- The liberty/oppression moral foundation makes people notice and resent attempted domination. It triggers an urge to band together and resist tyrants.
- This liberty/oppression foundation forces a refinement of the fairness to make it strongly focused on proportionality and Karma. This foundation looks at making sure that people get what they deserve – and not the things they don't.

Initially, the author said liberals have 2 foundation morality and conservatives have a foundation of all 5. By the end of the chapter he modified this to:

- Liberals have a 3 foundation morality: **Care/Harm, Liberty/Oppression, Fairness/Cheating**
- Conservatives have a 6 foundation morality: Care/Harm, Liberty/Oppression, Fairness/Cheating, and adding **Loyalty/Betrayal, Authority/Subversion, Sanctity/Degradation**

This explains why rural and working-class Americans tend to vote Republican – they are not voting against their own economic and self-interest, they are voting for their moral self-interest. Until liberals can understand the difference between their three-foundation morality and six-foundation morality of conservatives, they won't be able to understand.

Part Three: Morality binds and blinds

The main metaphor for people in the third part of the book is that is that we have a dual nature – about 90% ‘primate’ (a self serving/conscious individual) and 10% bee (a member of a hive or team serving the interests of the greater group).

Chapter 9: Why are we so groupish?

People are selfish and a lot of our moral, political, and religious behavior can be understood as thinly veiled self-interest. We pursue things that are good for us, but we are competing against others. But on the other side of the coin, we are also groupish – teams, clubs, leagues, etc. We pursue things as groups for the group’s greater good over our own.

The author suggests that our occasional group behaviors are something that evolved in us over time. One of the steps is people going from simple individuals into a group (a ‘superorganism’). Just like some creatures, we were 1) territorial creatures with defensible nests, 2) had needy offspring requiring a lot of work, while 3) the group was under threat from neighboring groups. The author suggests the next step was shared intentionality – the ability to communicate and cooperate to achieve a bigger or more difficult task that is of higher value.

The third step is gene/culture co-evolution. Basically we do a group thing (like domesticate cattle) to have more food for our offspring which leads to a genetic change (adults who can tolerate lactose). The fourth aspect (not really a step, to me) is the awareness that evolution can be fast. There has been disagreement about human evolutionary speed but he hypothesizes that it is much faster than we think. (He refers to the Russian fox domestication experiments, which took about 30 generations. He also looks at the human genome project and the data that indicates a speeding up of genetic evolution.)

Chapter 10: The hive switch

The author refers to the transition from an individual into being part of group or team as turning on the ‘hive switch’. So, he hypothesizes that we are conditional hive creatures. There are many ways to turn on this switch: training/drilling (think military), awe in nature, chemically (psychedelics), raves, singing in groups, rallies, ceremonies, etc.

At one level, corporations are an example of the hive switch on overdrive. It is possible to make a corporation more ‘hive-ish’ by: 1) increasing similarities (uniforms), 2) exploit synchrony (like groups songs or activities), and 3) create healthy competition among teams, not individuals (pitting individuals against each other for bonuses destroys this).

An example of a ‘hive switch’ is Kennedy’s speech:

“And so, my fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.”

Another example is:

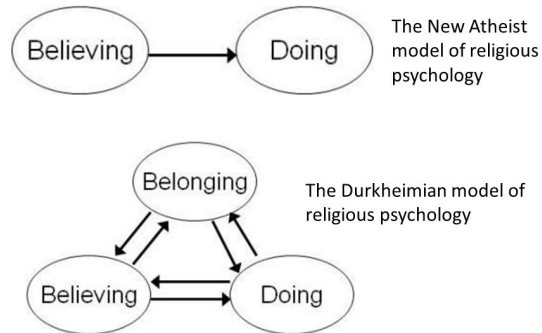
“[our movement reflects the view of man] as an individual, standing by himself, self-centered, subject to natural law, which instinctively urges him toward a life of selfish momentary pleasure; it sees not only the individual but the nation and the country; individuals and generations bound together by a moral law, with common traditions and a mission which suppressing the instinct for life closed in a brief circle of pleasure, builds up a higher life, founded on duty, a life free from the limitations of time and space, in which the individual, by self-sacrifice, the renunciation of self-interest... can achieve that purely spiritual existence in which his value as a man consists.”

This is from ‘The Doctrine of Fascism’ by Benito Mussolini. Hive mentality can be scaled up to grotesque heights. When a hive is scaled up to a nation, bad things can happen. But a nation full of intersecting hives tends to be full of happy and satisfied people.

Chapter 11: Religion is a team sport

If you think about religion simply as a set of beliefs about supernatural agents, in the context of morality, you're bound to misunderstand it. Religion is really about 'hive' aspects... Religion is a team sport where people collaborate for something bigger/greater. Some of this century's terrorism has triggered concerns about religion (some around Islam, others more broadly). The author talks about a 'new atheist model of religious psychology': believing leads to doing. He points out that this is not correct, that religiosity is really 3 complementary aspects: believing, doing, and belonging.

Chapt 11. Religion is a Team Sport



The author talks about the 'new atheists' and some other views around religion. The author feels that the 'new atheists' are wrong in stating that religion is the root of all evil. The view he promotes is that religions are 'moral exoskeletons' and they are well suited to support groupishness, tribalism, and nationalism. Religion helps suppress our selfish traits. And, like all things, it can be used for good and ill.

With the foundational aspects laid out, he closes out the chapter with his formal definition of morality:

Moral systems are interlocking sets of values, virtues, norms, practices, identities, institutions, technologies, and evolved psychological mechanisms that work together to suppress or regulate self-interest and make cooperative societies possible.

Chapter 12: Can't we all disagree more constructively?

This chapter starts out talking about the current partisanship and, since we seem to have gotten dysfunctional, wondering if we can't disagree in a better fashion.

The author starts out talking about twin studies that show that a lot of traits are inheritable – IQ, mental illness, personality traits, what we like, likelihood of divorce, religiousness, and even politics. Going back to the early discussions about nature versus nurture, these traits appear to be innate. But innate does not mean un-malleable, it means organized in advance of experience. So, again, our morality is a combination of nature and nurture.

The author shows how the 3 main political flavors in America (Liberal, Libertarian, and Conservative) construct their moral foundations:

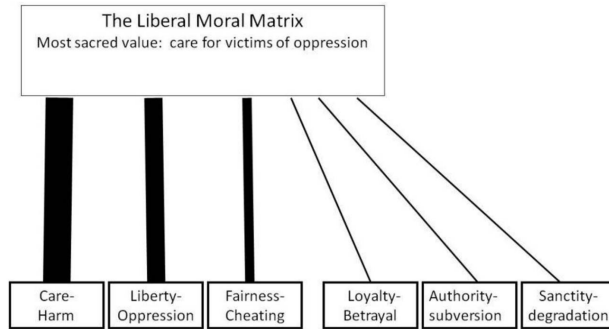


Figure 12.2. *The moral matrix of American liberals.*

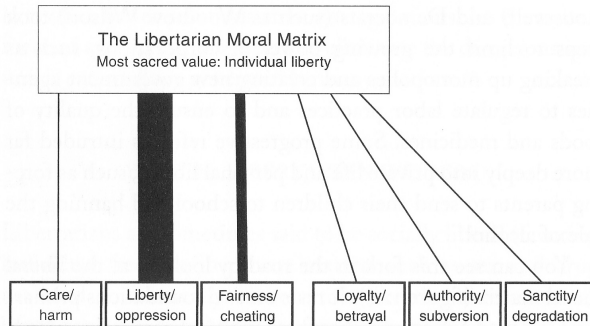


FIGURE 12.3. *The moral matrix of American libertarians.*

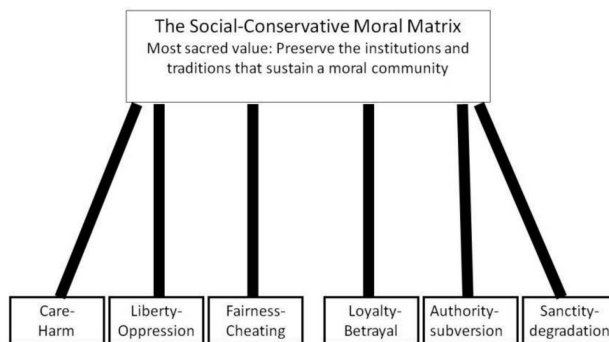


Figure 12.4. *The social conservative moral matrix.*

The author comments that on lots of issues, liberals try to help a subset of individuals (who really do need help) even though it diminishes society at large. Liberals are trying to help victims but because they don't think as much about loyalty, authority, and sanctity they can weaken groups, traditions, institutions and moral capital. An example of this was the welfare programs in the inner cities in the 1960s. It provided needed money (welfare) but ended up reducing the value of marriage, increased out of wedlock births, and weakened African American families.

This all relates to societal programs and figuring out what they do to social capital. The author describes two types of social capital: *Bridging capital* refers to the trust between groups (with different values and identities). *Bonding capital* refers to the trust within groups. There has been research that shows that high levels of immigration and ethnic diversity cause a drop in both types. Diversity doesn't cause an in-group/out-group division, but does seem to trigger a lack of the usual social/ethical standards and increasing social isolation. So, people living in ethnically diverse settings appear to 'hunker down' (pull in like a turtle).

A key point that the author makes is for the various sides to try to understand the moral foundations and how their own beliefs and actions impact moral capital (groups, institutions, ...). Each of these views/models (liberal, libertarian, conservative) has value but do miss some things. In particular:

- Conservatives and libertarians should understand:
 - Governments can and should restrain corporate super-organisms
 - Some problems really can be solved by regulation
- Liberals should understand:
 - You can't help the individuals if you destroy the society
 - Markets are miraculous (and are good things)

In some religions (Manichaeism), the concept is that there is absolute good and absolute evil. In this context you don't see God and the Devil issuing bipartisan proclamations – because in this context compromise is sin. That is all well and good in a religion, but American politics has gotten very partisan over the last several decades. Today, the most liberal Republican is more conservative than the most conservative Democrat. Besides all the other societal things causing this, one of the things that occurred in 1995 was when Newt Gingrich, the new speaker of the house, encouraged the incoming Republican congressmen to leave their families in their home districts rather than moving them to D.C. Before that change, on weekends, congressmen from both parties would attend the same social events and their spouses became friends and their children played together. They developed a level of understanding. (Other ways to deal with this issue are at www.CivilPolitics.org.)

If you want to understand another group, follow the sacredness. Start by thinking about the six moral foundations and try to figure out which one or two carry the most weight in a particular issue. And, if you can, have a friendly conversation with a member of the 'other side'. Given the preparation, you should find it easier to listen to their point of view. It may not get you to agreement, but maybe it will shift from the Manichean absolute good/evil to the Yin/Yang balance perspective.

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