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## THE RIGHTEOUS MIND About Jonathan Haidt *The Righteous Mind* (New York/Toronto, Pantheon Books, 2012).

Stephen Vaisey

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LET ME BEGIN with the conclusion: you should read this book. Or to be more precise, if you are a sociologist interested in social conflict, social change, social movements, politics, comparative sociology, culture, morality, religion, social psychology or the explanation of behavior, you should read this book. Why? Not because it is perfect; indeed, viewed from a sociological perspective, the book has real limitations. But it is important for at least two reasons: first, because it provides better tools than those currently available in sociology for describing ideological differences between groups; and second because it represents an opening to break down some of the disciplinary boundaries that prevent scholars who study the same phenomena from working, talking, and thinking together.

*The Righteous Mind* is a synthesis, summary, and extension of the work Jonathan Haidt and his collaborators have been doing on morality and moral judgment since the early 1990s. The motivating question of the book is political – why are people divided by politics and religion? But although much of the argument uses examples and illustrations from these institutional domains, the book is not really *about* them. What it really *is* about is moving toward a theory of “moral systems” that integrates both psychological and sociological elements into a coherent account.

The book has three parts. Part I examines the psychological mechanisms that produce moral judgments. The main foil here is the Socratic (or Kohlbergian) idea that moral judgment is based on reason. Haidt, by contrast, draws on his own and others’ research to show that reason has little to do with how such judgments get made. The alternative to reason is not “emotion”, but “intuition”, a broader category that includes emotions as well as fast, automatic cognitions. Reasons are produced primarily to persuade other people of our judgments. Reason is intuition’s “press secretary”.

Part II investigates the extent of the moral domain (descriptively, not normatively). Haidt takes issue with the once-standard view that morality is only about harm, rights, and justice. Building on and extending Richard Shweder’s work on morality in India, Haidt claims that the moral mind “is like a tongue with six taste receptors”: harm/care, fairness/cheating, liberty/oppression, loyalty/betrayal, authority/

\* About Jonathan HAITT *The Righteous Mind* (New York/Toronto, Pantheon Books, 2012).

subversion, and sanctity/degradation (p. 114). Educated, Western liberals only recognize the first three of these whereas many others – including political conservatives in the US and members of most non-Western societies – recognize all six. This gives, Haidt argues, conservatives an advantage in US politics because they are able to draw on a wider range of moral intuitions among voters.

Part III explores what morality *does*, with a focus on the role morality plays in social relations. This section is Durkheimian in an explicit and implicit sense. First, it draws directly on Durkheim's work to highlight the role of morality in creating and sustaining group solidarity. Second, it is functionalist in that it ties this solidarity to its value for group survival; morality exists, Haidt claims, *in order to* "make cooperative societies possible" (p. 270). Part of this binding effect of morality, however, is that it makes it almost impossible for us to understand the moral commitments of outsiders. Through an analysis of religion and politics, Haidt argues that morality "binds" and "blinds", making social life in these institutions more like "team sports" than potential venues for communicative rationality.

It should be clear from even this brief summary that Haidt is working in areas that overlap substantially with sociology. Sociologists have long recognized the role that "accounts" or "repertoires of justification" play in the maintenance of the interaction order. The work of Pierre Bourdieu has highlighted the role of unconscious principles of judgment. Sociological work on the "culture wars" has sought to understand the principles of division between left and right. And – as Haidt acknowledges – sociologists have explored the role of moral consensus in creating solidarity since the days of Durkheim.

There are at least two possible reactions to this overlap. The first is to take offense at how little sociological research informs Haidt's analysis; where, for example, are the references to James Davidson Hunter's work on the culture wars or Michèle Lamont's writings on moral boundaries? But another, more constructive, response is to be heartened at just how much sociology *did* make it into the argument and how clearly interested Haidt is in learning from it. He cites Durkheim 24 times, provides a long discussion of social capital, and takes three pages of "cultural narratives" directly from Christian Smith's *Moral, Believing Animals* [Oxford University Press, 2003]. There is a clear desire here to make connections, even if many possible connections were missed.

The danger of this "charitable" reading, however, is that sociologists might think that the book is filled with reinvented sociological ideas attached to different citations. This would be a mistake. Of course it

does not really matter if we get our ideas about unconscious cognition from Bargh or Bourdieu as long as they are basically correct. But there are new things in *The Righteous Mind* that sociologists should take away and use in their own work. The most important, in my view, is the rich measurement framework Haidt and his collaborators have developed (and continue to refine) to map the moral domain. The metaphor of a “moral equalizer” with six settings (one for each moral foundation) provides a complex yet general way of describing ideological differences between groups. Sociologists who study such differences typically rely on unidimensional frameworks like individualism *vs.* collectivism, orthodoxy *vs.* modernism, or absolutism *vs.* relativism. Though useful, these typologies obscure meaningful variation and rely too heavily on philosophical distinctions that aren’t salient to lay people. Haidt’s framework seems a clear improvement and will be useful for sociologists in many different substantive areas. Most obviously, the same measures Haidt uses in his convenience samples could be used in representative survey research to get richer measures of moral differences and relate them to other variables. But cultural research on narratives, social movement research on frame resonance, and economic sociology research on the moral dimensions of markets (to name only a few) would all also benefit from using Haidt’s six moral foundations as an orienting framework.

Not all of Haidt’s ideas are either compatible or complementary with sociological research, however. His summary of the moral development process, for instance, gives social processes far too limited a role. He argues that people genetically disposed to enjoy novelty and variety tend to gravitate toward the narratives of the left “team” and those genetically disposed to detect threats tend to gravitate toward the narratives of the right “team”; once on a team, the binding and blinding mechanisms take over (p. 312). Though genes clearly play a role in moral development, this account disregards the social institutions (like families, churches, and the media) that selectively – and purposefully – shape exposure to narratives. And although Haidt discusses “cultural learning” earlier in the book (p. 22), his explanatory summary ignores the ways in which differential exposures to narratives and practices can actually *influence* things like a person’s taste for novelty or sensitivity to threats. (Indeed, without such socialization mechanisms, the very cross-national differences Haidt relies on in Part II would not exist.) This account also pays insufficient attention to how institutions structure the “teams” that are available to join. In US politics, Manichaeian psychological tendencies are doubtless exaggerated by our two-party,

winner-takes all system. It is not clear that such processes would work the same way in a multiparty system.

More abstractly, sociologists in the Weberian tradition might also take exception with Haidt for not broadening the moral domain quite far *enough*. Haidt's view of morality as social and psychological mechanisms for "regulating self-interest" takes the notion of self-interest as a given (p. 270). In Weber's account, a person's conception of their self-interest is itself the product of historical ideas. It is difficult to see how moral ideas like the spirit of capitalism's "vocational calling" could be understood through Moral Foundations Theory. In a richer Weberian account, morality is not just about what (not) to do; it is also about what kind of person it is good to *become*. Notions like these – though hinted at – are not well developed in Haidt's theory.

Despite these limitations, *The Righteous Mind* deserves the endorsement I gave it above. I believe it represents the best available bridge to bring together sociological and psychological theorizing about morality. This is not only because of the useful ideas the book contains but also because of its broader intellectual tone and commitments. *The Righteous Mind's* "trade book" take home message is that political civility is possible through mutual understanding and appreciation, but I think its scholarly message is identical: no one discipline – just like no one party – has a monopoly on good ideas. Though a psychologist, Haidt expressly rejects the idea that moral ideas exist only "in our heads". He concludes that morality must be studied as moral systems: "interlocking sets of values, virtues, norms, practices, identities, institutions, technologies, and evolved psychological mechanisms" (p. 270). In effect, Haidt is trying to place a lot of the action in morality out of his area of expertise and into ours – into the social world. There is nothing of intellectual imperialism here, no eagerness to do away with all other ideas by imposing his own. In my experience, this sort of generosity and openness is extremely rare. Much more common is the attempt to assert that things are "really" X, where X is the adjective form of the author's own discipline.

*The Righteous Mind*, then, represents an opening, an invitation for sociologists and other social scientists to get involved in developing these ideas, pushing them, revising them, and improving them. This book is not only important for sociologists because of what Jonathan Haidt can teach us but also – perhaps more importantly – because of what he is asking us to teach him.