

Escape the Moral Matrix with the Red Pill of Intellectual Diversity

Back in 2012, before the ascendance of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency and before neologisms such as “trigger warnings,” “microaggressions, and “safe spaces” [became part of regular college campus discourse](#), New York University social psychologist Jonathan Haidt published a groundbreaking book titled [*The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*](#).

As a bibliophile who reads extensively on a wide array of subject matters, I can declare without hesitation that Haidt’s book is by far the most fascinating and important work on social science that I’ve read within the last five years. It is a book that I have given away to a dozen of my friends working in the political realm or who are regular politicians, and one that I’ve recently reread given the profound insights of its central thesis. Today, America’s political polarization is deeper than ever. But there is hope and a way forward.

Intuitions Come First and Reasoning Second

Haidt’s tireless efforts through his book and other writings provide a promising path towards understanding the [psychological causes behind our tribal politics](#). Drawing upon his [background](#) in social psychology and twenty-five years of original research on moral psychology, Haidt shows how evolution is responsible for shaping people’s morality that both binds and divides and how politics and religion create conflicting communities of shared morality.

Most profoundly, moral attitudes and judgments originate from intuition, not calculated logic. In his 1739 magnum opus [A Treatise of Human Nature](#), the philosopher David Hume [mused](#)

that, “Reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them.” According to Haidt, the findings of modern social psychology research have largely vindicated Hume.

To illustrate his point, Haidt uses the [metaphor of a rider and an elephant](#). The rider represents the conscious mind with its rational functions and controlled processes. But the domineering elephant is everything else outside the rider’s control: automatic processes that include emotions and intuitions. Although the rider can do “several useful things” such as planning for the future and learning new skills, ultimately “the rider’s job is to serve the elephant.” As a result of this one-sided relationship, the rider mostly “fabricat[es] post hoc explanations for whatever the elephant has done, and it is good at finding reasons to justify whatever the elephant wants to do next.” In short, “conscious reasoning functions like a lawyer or press secretary.”

What does this mean for political discourse? If people are asked to believe something that conflicts with their intuitions, you can almost certainly expect them to reflexively find an escape route – any reason to doubt the argument or conclusion they’re confronted with – and they’ll usually succeed. Haidt takes pains to emphasize that:

Moral judgment is not a purely cerebral affair in which we weigh concerns about harm, rights, and justice. It’s a kind of rapid, automatic process more akin to the judgments animals make as they move through the world, feeling themselves drawn toward or away from various things. Moral judgment is mostly done by the elephant.

Thus, if you’re trying to change someone’s mind, especially when it concerns a moral or political issue, you have to “talk to the elephant first.” [Dale Carnegie’s 1936 classic, [How to](#)

[Win Friends and Influence People](#) is a good pairing with Haidt's book and is referenced in the latter's work. It contains many psychological insights that remain relevant today and in fact, are reinforced by modern findings.]

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Moral Foundations Theory

Through his interdisciplinary research, Haidt and his colleagues uncovered six [moral foundations](#) that are shared across human cultures:

1) Care/harm: This foundation is related to our long evolution as mammals with attachment systems and an ability to feel (and dislike) the pain of others. It underlies virtues of kindness, gentleness, and nurturance.

2) Fairness/cheating: This foundation is related to the evolutionary process of reciprocal altruism. It generates ideas of justice, rights, and autonomy. [Note: In our original conception, Fairness included concerns about equality, which are more strongly endorsed by political liberals. However, as we reformulated the theory in 2011 based on new data, we emphasize proportionality, which is endorsed by everyone, but is more strongly endorsed by conservatives]

3) Loyalty/betrayal: This foundation is related to our long history as tribal creatures able to form shifting coalitions. It underlies virtues of patriotism and self-sacrifice for the group. It is active anytime people feel that it's "one for all, and all for one."

4) Authority/subversion: This foundation was shaped by our long primate history of hierarchical social interactions. It underlies virtues of leadership and followership, including deference to legitimate authority and respect for traditions.

5) Sanctity/degradation: This foundation was shaped by the psychology of disgust and contamination. It underlies religious notions of striving to live in an elevated, less

carnal, more noble way. It underlies the widespread idea that the body is a temple which can be desecrated by immoral activities and contaminants (an idea not unique to religious traditions).

6) Liberty/oppression: This foundation is about the feelings of reactance and resentment people feel toward those who dominate them and restrict their liberty. Its intuitions are often in tension with those of the authority foundation. The hatred of bullies and dominators motivates people to come together, in solidarity, to oppose or take down the oppressor. We report some preliminary work on this potential foundation in [this paper](#), on the psychology of libertarianism and liberty.

Most intriguingly, Haidt found that left-liberals and progressives recognize primarily the first two moral foundations, Care/harm and Fairness/cheating. For the political Left, Loyalty, Authority, and Sanctity, are perceived not as proper morals at all but base human traits responsible for patriarchy, racism, sexism, xenophobia, and other forms of oppression. However, this stance is an outlier compared to most other parts of the world.

Haidt provides many examples from ethnographies and cross-cultural studies that show that in “Western, educated, industrial, rich, and democratic (WEIRD) cultures,” the moral spectrum is “unusually narrow” in largely limited to the ethics of individual autonomy.

In contrast, many non-WEIRD societies and conservatives use all five moral foundations that include embracing the ethics of divinity and community. Libertarians or ([classical](#)) [liberals in the European sense](#), are a [truly unique political species](#) and are not easily placed on the Left-Right political spectrum in that they prize the last moral foundation, Liberty, above all other values.

These are extraordinary differences and would explain the [growing political polarization](#) in the United States and why liberals can't understand conservatives (and vice versa). In today's political discourse, partisans often seem to argue not so much against each other, but past each other (an observation that forms the basis of Thomas Sowell's eye-opening work [A Conflict of Visions: Ideological Origins of Political Struggles](#), also alluded to in Haidt's book).

Given that [human nature is tribal](#), people automatically form teams when they share values and morals. While morality can "bind" people together through benefits such as group cohesion and unity, it also "blinds" them to the possibilities or even the existence of other legitimate perspectives akin to [The Matrix](#). This kind of "moral matrix" can be so strong that it "provides a complete, unified, and emotionally compelling worldview, easily justified by observable evidence and nearly impregnable to attack by arguments from outsiders."

As challenging as it may be to see through one's own ideological blinders, empathy is crucial for successful outreach, acts as an "antidote to righteousness," and has the added benefit of expanding one's own intellectual horizons.

Why Intellectual Diversity Matters

Because of the inherent limits of human reason, Haidt reminds us that "we should not expect individuals to produce good, open-minded, truth-seeking reasoning, particularly when self-interest or reputational concerns are in play."

However, under the right circumstances and conditions, people can use their reasoning powers to check the claims of others. Furthermore, when people "feel some common bond or shared fate that allows them to interact civilly, you can create a group that ends up producing good reasoning as an emergent property of the social system." Thus, it is especially "important to have intellectual and ideological diversity within any group

or institution whose goal is to find truth (such as an intelligence agency or a community of scientists) or to produce good public policy (such as a legislature or advisory board).”

Universities, most of which are still committed to their timeless mission to search for [truth](#) and push the boundaries of human knowledge, in particular must embrace complete [freedom of speech](#), [open inquiry](#), [epistemic humility](#), and tolerance for the most radical and [eccentric](#). Championing [viewpoint and philosophical diversity](#) goes hand in hand with these [fundamental principles](#) that form the bedrock of a [liberal education](#).

Speaking as an entrepreneur, I would further add that embracing intellectual diversity is of paramount importance to companies especially if they wish to attract top talent and stay innovative in an increasingly competitive world. Haidt’s findings from moral psychology are consistent with research from other fields highlighting the value of those who “[think different](#).”

Saras Sarasvathy at the University of Virginia’s Darden School of Business [profiled](#) some of the most successful entrepreneurs and found them to be spontaneous contrarians who have “confidence in their ability to recognize, respond to, and reshape opportunities as they develop” to the point that they “thrive on contingency.” Unsurprisingly, entrepreneurs relish bucking conventional wisdom whether it be following standard management practices or any other kind of defined linear process.

Adam Grant at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School has extensively researched how “[originals](#)” move the world. Startups, which by their very nature are nonconformist, have a special obligation to hire originals who can seed a resilient culture, anticipate market movements under conditions of extreme uncertainty, and repurpose dissenting ideas in

alternative ways. Grant [emphasizes](#) how originals can mitigate the risks every company faces:

Conformity is dangerous – especially for an entity in formation. If you don't hire originals, you run the risk of people disagreeing but not voicing their dissent. You want people who choose to follow because they genuinely believe in ideas, not because they're afraid to be punished if they don't. For startups, there's so much pivoting that's required that if you have a bunch of sheep, you're in bad shape.

[Launching a startup](#) requires boldness, imagination, and a contrarian streak. Perhaps then, it is not surprising that immigrants, individuals who leave the land of their birth for the unknown, have had a [disproportionate impact on American entrepreneurship](#) and may even be predisposed towards creativity. In trying to pin down the “[secret of immigrant genius](#),” Eric Weiner speculates that intellectual development is stimulated when one's world is turned upside down:

Many immigrants possess what the psychologist Nigel Barber calls “oblique perspective.” Uprooted from the familiar, they see the world at an angle, and this fresh perspective enables them to surpass the merely talented. To paraphrase the philosopher Schopenhauer: Talent hits a target no one else can hit. Genius hits a target no one else can see.

Beyond Identity Checkboxes

[Broad liberal attitudes](#) towards risk-taking, unorthodox thinking, and entrepreneurship are among the [reasons why the United States is still the richest country in the world](#). In his wide-reaching book [The Rational Optimist: How Prosperity Evolves](#), science writer Matt Ridley traced the origins and spread of economic prosperity. He credits voluntary exchange and specialization, specifically what happens when [different ideas meet, mate, and recombine to create new ideas](#), for being

the main drivers of human economic and social progress.

As [summarized](#) by John Daly at the University of Texas at Austin's McCombs School of Business:

Innovations often happen when you combine two or more things in unexpected ways. When you have a diverse group of people working on something, magic often happens because each person brings a different perspective and experience to the table.

Authentic diversity must go beyond identity checkboxes to fully include diversity in ideas. [Viewpoint diversity](#) drives creative tension, cross-cultural understanding, and the ability to identify and solve problems from multiple perspectives. Creativity and innovation ultimately depend on people stepping outside of comfort zones and trying new things including getting exposed to radical and unorthodox ways of thinking.

Companies that actively work to [prevent the dangers of groupthink](#) and foster a welcoming culture for [weirdos](#) and [mavericks](#) are better positioned to become more resilient and innovative environments. Cultivating the right processes and organizational norms may make the final difference in stronger financial returns. Whether it's a feisty little startup looking to challenge the dominant players or an established Fortune 500 company looking to defend its position, any company can gain an edge over its competitors by unleashing the "[gale of creative destruction](#)."

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Moving Forward

Besides its obvious economic benefits, intellectual diversity creates value that extends beyond material gains. A [marketplace of ideas](#) is one of the key underpinnings of a free

society. Truth can emerge when views are freely exchanged, challenged, and refined. People's individual reasoning have inherent limits but through our [collective intelligence](#), we can achieve the impossible.

Even though our intuition-based morality divides our allegiances into different tribes that seemingly cannot coexist with others, accepting and encouraging intellectual diversity creates awareness of our own blinders and provides a possible escape path out of our moral matrices. Jonathan Haidt's *The Righteous Mind* is an invaluable starting point. He and other courageous "[heterodox](#)" scholars working to advance viewpoint diversity, mutual understanding, and constructive disagreement fill me with hope.

If we were to understand the moral foundations on which all our moral interests are based, we just might be able to restore civility, [learn how to disagree more constructively](#), promote genuine tolerance, and ultimately advance human progress on every front.

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