

Haidt, Jonathan – The Righteous Mind

Penguin Group, 2012, [Surrounding Knowledge] Grade



The last few years' capital markets have been heavily influenced by politics. Hence, a political understanding is important. This book offers the most illuminating road map to politics I've read in years. It covers the differences in moral view between what in the US is called liberals (the political left wing) and pretty much everybody else in the world. Jonathan Haidt is a social psychologist and a professor of ethical leadership at Stern School of Business. He is unusual in that his work mixes psychology, sociology, biology and, importantly, cultural anthropology, allowing him to transcend normal academic departmental boundaries and view issues from new angles. He is also a very accomplished popular science writer letting him to eloquently argue for his sometimes-controversial opinions.

The book has three fairly different parts. The first shows that the systems that Daniel Kahneman calls system 1 and system 2 is equally at play when it comes to moral. We have an immediate, instinctive and emotional intuition on moral issues and only afterwards the slow and deliberate logic comes into play – and mostly the logic is simply used to rationalize the instinctive intuition. The aim of our moral actions is further more a PR effort towards our tribe than a search for truth.

The second part is the vital one. Through his research around the globe and in various US environments the author has shown that there are 6 innate moral “taste buds” that we all to some extent share: a) care-harm, b) liberty-oppression, c) fairness-cheating, d) loyalty-betrayal, e) authority-subversion and f) sanctity-degradation. The conservative westerner is similar to most people around the world in that all 6 facets of morality matter about equally, while the western liberal almost only focuses on (in decreasing amounts) a, b and c. With regards to b the focus is on liberty from the oppression of big corporations through the state, while conservatives and libertarians instead want liberty from the oppression of the

state itself. The low emphasis on d-f gives liberals and libertarians a very autonomous world-view while the others look more to relationships. A person with one type of moral matrix has a very hard time understanding that there can be more than one form of moral truth for people and the most trouble in understanding others the liberals have as they have the narrowest set of moral principles. The advantage (?) of the liberal will be that he will instead experience less moral dilemmas than the more diverse conservative.

In the third part Haidt brings forward the notion that the Darwinian selection that shapes our behavior not only is at work at the individual level but also on a group level. Groups that manage to better bind people together and foster stronger commitment have tended to out-compete less captivating ones. Natural selection favors group efforts and this is the explanation for the fact that people often experience the greatest joy during moments when they become a part of a whole. Unfortunately this also makes groups very competitive towards each other, making discussing differing moral world-views extremely hard.

In the tradition of psychology Haidt's work on moral is descriptive, it displays the map of different moral matrixes but doesn't really argue that any group's view is more or less right or wrong. Haidt is more of a moral anthropologist than a moral philosopher. On the plus side the description is a lot more interesting and nuanced than I had expected but personally I think that the question of morals cannot only concern itself with how it works but also with how it should work. To be fair the author gives a few brief suggestions for a moral middle ground between liberals, libertarians and conservatives that could be seen as normative.

With Haidt's map at hand one's navigation between various expressed political opinions becomes ridiculously easy. You will understand where everybody is coming from – even though they don't necessarily will themselves.

Mats Larsson, Jan 3, 2017