

Knowing Right from Wrong – the Righteous Mind

I've been thinking for a while now that we need to listen to the religious right.

Two things happened, convincing me. I saw [a TED talk](#) by a social psychologist named Jonathan Haidt that offered a plausible, well-thought out explanation of the moral chasm between liberals and conservatives. Shortly after, a colleague recommended a book called *"Righteous Minds: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion"*. You guessed it. Same author.

According to Haidt, we all come equipped with innate moral matrices in somewhat the way we have various taste receptors. To paraphrase greatly, children possess a "first draft" of a moral mind equipped to react to what is caring/harmful, fair/unjust, disloyal, subversive, disgusting. Those moral sensitivities are then developed (or not) by experience and coloured by family, culture, etc.

He's found in his studies that liberals consistently favour a few of those moral matrices over the others, whereas conservatives tend to value all much more equally. It seems such values as loyalty, respect for authority and a sense of the sacred are right up there with caring and fairness, for conservatives. Moral decisions are based not just on whether a behavior or action is harmful or unjust, but also whether it maintains social order (the "morality of community") and whether it leads to the honour or degradation of human beings (the "morality of divinity").

Admittedly, asking only "Is this hurting anyone?" (the "morality of autonomy") is an incredibly narrow basis for any system of ethics. One of the stories he used in his studies was incest with no chance of children. "Is this wrong?" he'd ask, to incredulous stares. Even dyed in the wool liberals hesitated.

I ended up removing myself from either category, rejecting polarized vision. Reading the book, a phrase from the Bahá'í Writings came to mind: *"...man should know his own self and recognize that which leadeth unto loftiness or lowliness, glory or abasement, wealth or poverty."*

Hopefully, active listening and efforts such as the Compassion book discussion groups will assist in the depolarization process. There are a few beginning in Victoria in September, based on Karen Armstrong's [12 Steps to a Compassionate Life](#).