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THE THIRD CULTURE

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...the second rule of moral psychology is that *morality is not just about how we treat each other* (as most liberals think); *it is also about binding groups together, supporting essential institutions, and living in a sanctified and noble way*. When Republicans say that Democrats "just don't get it," this is the "it" to which they refer.



WHAT MAKES PEOPLE VOTE REPUBLICAN? [9.9.08] By Jonathan Haidt

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BLOGWATCH

WHAT MAKES PEOPLE VOTE REPUBLICAN?

What makes people vote Republican? Why in particular do working class and rural Americans usually vote for pro-business Republicans when their economic interests would seem better served by Democratic policies? We psychologists have been examining the origins of ideology ever since Hitler

sent us Germany's best psychologists, and we long ago reported that strict parenting and a variety of personal insecurities work together to turn people against liberalism, diversity, and progress. But now that we can map the brains, genes, and unconscious attitudes of conservatives, we have refined our diagnosis: conservatism is a partially heritable personality trait that predisposes some people to be cognitively inflexible, fond of hierarchy, and inordinately afraid of uncertainty, change, and death. People vote Republican because Republicans offer "moral clarity"—a simple vision of good and evil that activates deep seated fears in much of the electorate. Democrats, in contrast, appeal to reason with their long-winded explorations of policy options for a complex world.

Diagnosis is a pleasure. It is a thrill to solve a mystery from scattered clues, and it is empowering to know what makes others tick. In the psychological community, where almost all of us are politically liberal, our diagnosis of conservatism gives us the additional pleasure of shared righteous anger. We can explain how Republicans exploit frames, phrases, and fears to trick Americans into supporting policies (such as the "war on terror" and repeal of the "death tax") that damage the national interest for partisan advantage.

But with pleasure comes seduction, and with righteous pleasure comes seduction wearing a halo. Our diagnosis explains away Republican successes while convincing us and our fellow liberals that we hold the moral high ground. Our diagnosis tells us that we have nothing to learn from other ideologies, and it blinds us to what I think is one of the main reasons that so many Americans voted Republican over the last 30 years: they honestly prefer the Republican vision of a moral order to the one offered by Democrats. To see what Democrats have been missing, it helps to take off the halo, step back for a moment, and think about what morality really is.

I began to study morality and culture at the University of Pennsylvania in 1987. A then-prevalent definition of the moral domain, from the Berkeley psychologist Elliot Turiel, said that morality refers to "prescriptive judgments of justice, rights, and welfare pertaining to how people ought to relate to each other." But if morality is about how we treat each other, then why did so many ancient texts devote so much space to rules about menstruation, who can eat what, and who can have sex with whom? There is no rational or health-related way to explain these laws. (Why are grasshoppers kosher but most locusts are not?) The emotion of disgust seemed to me like a more promising explanatory principle. The book of Leviticus makes a lot more sense when you think of ancient lawgivers first sorting everything into two categories: "disgusts me" (gay male sex, menstruation, pigs, swarming insects) and "disgusts me less" (gay female sex, urination, cows, grasshoppers).

For my dissertation research, I made up stories about people who did things that were disgusting or disrespectful yet perfectly harmless. For example, what do you think about a woman who can't find any rags in her house so she cuts up an old American flag and uses the pieces to clean her toilet, in

private? Or how about a family whose dog is killed by a car, so they dismember the body and cook it for dinner? I read these stories to 180 young adults and 180 eleven-year-old children, half from higher social classes and half from lower, in the USA and in Brazil. I found that most of the people I interviewed said that the actions in these stories were morally wrong, even when nobody was harmed. Only one group—college students at Penn—consistently exemplified Turiel's definition of morality and overrode their own feelings of disgust to say that harmless acts were not wrong. (A few even praised the efficiency of recycling the flag and the dog).

This research led me to two conclusions. First, when gut feelings are present, dispassionate reasoning is rare. In fact, many people struggled to fabricate harmful consequences that could justify their gut-based condemnation. I often had to correct people when they said things like "it's wrong because... um...eating dog meat would make you sick" or "it's wrong to use the flag because... um... the rags might clog the toilet." These obviously post-hoc rationalizations illustrate the philosopher David Hume's dictum that reason is "the slave of the passions, and can pretend to no other office than to serve and obey them." This is the first rule of moral psychology: *feelings come first and tilt the mental playing field on which reasons and arguments compete*. If people want to reach a conclusion, they can usually find a way to do so. The Democrats have historically failed to grasp this rule, choosing uninspiring and aloof candidates who thought that policy arguments were forms of persuasion.

The second conclusion was that the moral domain varies across cultures. Turiel's description of morality as being about justice, rights, and human welfare worked perfectly for the college students I interviewed at Penn, but it simply did not capture the moral concerns of the less elite groups—the working-class people in both countries who were more likely to justify their judgments with talk about respect, duty, and family roles. ("Your dog is family, and you just don't eat family.") From this study I concluded that the anthropologist Richard Shweder was probably right in a 1987 critique of Turiel in which he claimed that the moral domain (not just specific rules) varies by culture. Drawing on Shweder's ideas, I would say that the second rule of moral psychology is that *morality is not just about how we treat each other* (as most liberals think); *it is also about binding groups together, supporting essential institutions, and living in a sanctified and noble way*.

When Republicans say that Democrats "just don't get it," this is the "it" to which they refer. Conservative positions on gays, guns, god, and immigration must be understood as means to achieve one kind of morally ordered society. When Democrats try to explain away these positions using pop psychology they err, they alienate, and they earn the label "elitist." But how can Democrats learn to see—let alone respect—a moral order they regard as narrow-minded, racist, and dumb?

After graduate school I moved to the University of Chicago to work with Shweder, and while there I got a fellowship to do research in India. In

September 1993 I traveled to Bhubaneswar, an ancient temple town 200 miles southwest of Calcutta. I brought with me two incompatible identities. On the one hand, I was a 29 year old liberal atheist who had spent his politically conscious life despising Republican presidents, and I was charged up by the culture wars that intensified in the 1990s. On the other hand, I wanted to be like those tolerant anthropologists I had read so much about.

My first few weeks in Bhubaneswar were therefore filled with feelings of shock and confusion. I dined with men whose wives silently served us and then retreated to the kitchen. My hosts gave me a servant of my own and told me to stop thanking him when he served me. I watched people bathe in and cook with visibly polluted water that was held to be sacred. In short, I was immersed in a sex-segregated, hierarchically stratified, devoutly religious society, and I was committed to understanding it on its own terms, not on mine.

It only took a few weeks for my shock to disappear, not because I was a natural anthropologist but because the normal human capacity for empathy kicked in. I *liked* these people who were hosting me, helping me, and teaching me. And once I liked them (remember that first principle of moral psychology) it was easy to take their perspective and to consider with an open mind the virtues they thought they were enacting. Rather than automatically rejecting the men as sexist oppressors and pitying the women, children, and servants as helpless victims, I was able to see a moral world in which families, not individuals, are the basic unit of society, and the members of each extended family (including its servants) are intensely interdependent. In this world, equality and personal autonomy were not sacred values. Honoring elders, gods, and guests, and fulfilling one's role-based duties, were more important. Looking at America from this vantage point, what I saw now seemed overly individualistic and self-focused. For example, when I boarded the plane to fly back to Chicago I heard a loud voice saying "Look, you tell him that this is the compartment over MY seat, and I have a RIGHT to use it."

Back in the United States the culture war was going strong, but I had lost my righteous passion. I could never have empathized with the Christian Right directly, but once I had stood outside of my home morality, once I had tried on the moral lenses of my Indian friends and interview subjects, I was able to think about conservative ideas with a newfound clinical detachment. They want more prayer and spanking in schools, and less sex education and access to abortion? I didn't think those steps would reduce AIDS and teen pregnancy, but I could see why the religious right wanted to "thicken up" the moral climate of schools and discourage the view that children should be as free as possible to act on their desires. Conservatives think that welfare programs and feminism increase rates of single motherhood and weaken the traditional social structures that compel men to support their own children? Hmm, that may be true, even if there are also many good effects of liberating women from dependence on men. I had escaped from my prior partisan mindset (reject first, ask rhetorical questions later), and began to think about liberal and conservative policies as manifestations of deeply

conflicting but equally heartfelt visions of the good society.

On Turiel's definition of morality ("justice, rights, and welfare"), Christian and Hindu communities don't look good. They restrict people's rights (especially sexual rights), encourage hierarchy and conformity to gender roles, and make people spend extraordinary amounts of time in prayer and ritual practices that seem to have nothing to do with "real" morality. But isn't it unfair to impose on all cultures a definition of morality drawn from the European Enlightenment tradition? Might we do better with an approach that defines moral systems by what they do rather than by what they value?

Here's my alternative definition: *morality is any system of interlocking values, practices, institutions, and psychological mechanisms that work together to suppress or regulate selfishness and make social life possible.* It turns out that human societies have found several radically different approaches to suppressing selfishness, two of which are most relevant for understanding what Democrats don't understand about morality.

First, imagine society as a social contract invented for our mutual benefit. All individuals are equal, and all should be left as free as possible to move, develop talents, and form relationships as they please. The patron saint of a contractual society is John Stuart Mill, who wrote (in *On Liberty*) that "the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others." Mill's vision appeals to many liberals and libertarians; a Millian society at its best would be a peaceful, open, and creative place where diverse individuals respect each other's rights and band together voluntarily (as in Obama's calls for "unity") to help those in need or to change the laws for the common good.

Psychologists have done extensive research on the moral mechanisms that are presupposed in a Millian society, and there are two that appear to be partly innate. First, people in all cultures are emotionally responsive to suffering and harm, particularly violent harm, and so nearly all cultures have norms or laws to protect individuals and to encourage care for the most vulnerable. Second, people in all cultures are emotionally responsive to issues of fairness and reciprocity, which often expand into notions of rights and justice. Philosophical efforts to justify liberal democracies and egalitarian social contracts invariably rely heavily on intuitions about fairness and reciprocity.

But now imagine society not as an agreement among individuals but as something that emerged organically over time as people found ways of living together, binding themselves to each other, suppressing each other's selfishness, and punishing the deviants and free-riders who eternally threaten to undermine cooperative groups. The basic social unit is not the individual, it is the hierarchically structured family, which serves as a model for other institutions. Individuals in such societies are born into strong and constraining relationships that profoundly limit their autonomy. The patron

saint of this more binding moral system is the sociologist Emile Durkheim, who warned of the dangers of anomie (normlessness), and wrote, in 1897, that "Man cannot become attached to higher aims and submit to a rule if he sees nothing above him to which he belongs. To free himself from all social pressure is to abandon himself and demoralize him." A Durkheimian society at its best would be a stable network composed of many nested and overlapping groups that socialize, reshape, and care for individuals who, if left to their own devices, would pursue shallow, carnal, and selfish pleasures. A Durkheimian society would value self-control over self-expression, duty over rights, and loyalty to one's groups over concerns for outgroups.

A Durkheimian ethos can't be supported by the two moral foundations that hold up a Millian society (harm/care and fairness/reciprocity). My recent research shows that social conservatives do indeed rely upon those two foundations, but they also value virtues related to three additional psychological systems: ingroup/loyalty (involving mechanisms that evolved during the long human history of tribalism), authority/respect (involving ancient primate mechanisms for managing social rank, tempered by the obligation of superiors to protect and provide for subordinates), and purity/sanctity (a relatively new part of the moral mind, related to the evolution of disgust, that makes us see carnality as degrading and renunciation as noble). These three systems support moralities that bind people into intensely interdependent groups that work together to reach common goals. Such moralities make it easier for individuals to forget themselves and coalesce temporarily into hives, a process that is thrilling, as anyone who has ever "lost" him or herself in a choir, protest march, or religious ritual can attest.

In several large internet surveys, my collaborators Jesse Graham, Brian Nosek and I have found that people who call themselves strongly liberal endorse statements related to the harm/care and fairness/reciprocity foundations, and they largely reject statements related to ingroup/loyalty, authority/respect, and purity/sanctity. People who call themselves strongly conservative, in contrast, endorse statements related to all five foundations more or less equally. (You can test yourself at www.YourMorals.org.) We think of the moral mind as being like an audio equalizer, with five slider switches for different parts of the moral spectrum. Democrats generally use a much smaller part of the spectrum than do Republicans. The resulting music may sound beautiful to other Democrats, but it sounds thin and incomplete to many of the swing voters that left the party in the 1980s, and whom the Democrats must recapture if they want to produce a lasting political realignment.

In *The Political Brain*, Drew Westen points out that the Republicans have become the party of the sacred, appropriating not just the issues of God, faith, and religion, but also the sacred symbols of the nation such as the Flag and the military. The Democrats, in the process, have become the party of the profane—of secular life and material interests. Democrats often seem to think of voters as consumers; they rely on polls to choose a set of policy

positions that will convince 51% of the electorate to buy. Most Democrats don't understand that politics is more like religion than it is like shopping.

Religion and political leadership are so intertwined across eras and cultures because they are about the same thing: performing the miracle of converting unrelated individuals into a group. Durkheim long ago said that God is really society projected up into the heavens, a collective delusion that enables collectives to exist, suppress selfishness, and endure. The three Durkheimian foundations (ingroup, authority, and purity) play a crucial role in most religions. When they are banished entirely from political life, what remains is a nation of individuals striving to maximize utility while respecting the rules. What remains is a cold but fair social contract, which can easily degenerate into a nation of shoppers.

The Democrats must find a way to close the sacredness gap that goes beyond occasional and strategic uses of the words "God" and "faith." But if Durkheim is right, then sacredness is really about society and its collective concerns. God is useful but not necessary. The Democrats could close much of the gap if they simply learned to see society not just as a collection of individuals—each with a panoply of rights—but as an entity in itself, an entity that needs some tending and caring. Our national motto is *e pluribus unum* ("from many, one"). Whenever Democrats support policies that weaken the integrity and identity of the collective (such as multiculturalism, bilingualism, and immigration), they show that they care more about pluribus than unum. They widen the sacredness gap.

A useful heuristic would be to think about each issue, and about the Party itself, from the perspective of the three Durkheimian foundations. Might the Democrats expand their moral range without betraying their principles? Might they even find ways to improve their policies by incorporating and publicly praising some conservative insights?

The ingroup/loyalty foundation supports virtues of patriotism and self-sacrifice that can lead to dangerous nationalism, but in moderate doses a sense that "we are all one" is a recipe for high social capital and civic well-being. A recent study by Robert Putnam (titled *E Pluribus Unum*) found that ethnic diversity increases anomie and social isolation by decreasing people's sense of belonging to a shared community. Democrats should think carefully, therefore, about why they celebrate diversity. If the purpose of diversity programs is to fight racism and discrimination (worthy goals based on fairness concerns), then these goals might be better served by encouraging assimilation and a sense of shared identity.

The purity/sanctity foundation is used heavily by the Christian right to condemn hedonism and sexual "deviance," but it can also be harnessed for progressive causes. Sanctity does not have to come from God; the psychology of this system is about overcoming our lower, grasping, carnal selves in order to live in a way that is higher, nobler, and more spiritual. Many liberals criticize the crassness and ugliness that our unrestrained free-market society has created. There is a long tradition of liberal anti-materialism often

linked to a reverence for nature. Environmental and animal welfare issues are easily promoted using the language of harm/care, but such appeals might be more effective when supplemented with hints of purity/sanctity.

The authority/respect foundation will be the hardest for Democrats to use. But even as liberal bumper stickers urge us to "question authority" and assert that "dissent is patriotic," Democrats can ask what needs this foundation serves, and then look for other ways to meet them. The authority foundation is all about maintaining social order, so any candidate seen to be "soft on crime" has disqualified himself, for many Americans, from being entrusted with the ultimate authority. Democrats would do well to read Durkheim and think about the quasi-religious importance of the criminal justice system. The miracle of turning individuals into groups can only be performed by groups that impose costs on cheaters and slackers. You can do this the authoritarian way (with strict rules and harsh penalties) or you can do it using the fairness/reciprocity foundation by stressing personal responsibility and the beneficence of the nation towards those who "work hard and play by the rules." But if you don't do it at all—if you seem to tolerate or enable cheaters and slackers -- then you are committing a kind of sacrilege.

If Democrats want to understand what makes people vote Republican, they must first understand the full spectrum of American moral concerns. They should then consider whether they can use more of that spectrum themselves. The Democrats would lose their souls if they ever abandoned their commitment to social justice, but social justice is about getting fair relationships among the parts of the nation. This often divisive struggle among the parts must be balanced by a clear and oft-repeated commitment to guarding the precious coherence of the whole. America lacks the long history, small size, ethnic homogeneity, and soccer mania that holds many other nations together, so our flag, our founding fathers, our military, and our common language take on a moral importance that many liberals find hard to fathom.

Unity is not the great need of the hour, it is the eternal struggle of our immigrant nation. The three Durkheimian foundations of ingroup, authority, and purity are powerful tools in that struggle. Until Democrats understand this point, they will be vulnerable to the seductive but false belief that Americans vote for Republicans primarily because they have been duped into doing so.

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