# Moral Foundations



an explainer from the oregon education project

# **Moral** Foundations

an explainer from the **oregon education** project



Learn to Think Critically About the World

## How Values Divide Americans Today

One of the most important studies in social psychology comes from Moral Foundations Theory (MFT). It was developed by a team led by Jonathan Haidt, who popularized it in his book **The Righteous Mind**: **Why Good People Are Divided By Politics and Religion**.[1] Examining morality across many cultures, he discovered certain themes were universal.

Haidt inferred that there are several *innate psychological systems* at the core of our moral intuitions. He described them as the "taste receptors of the moral senses." They function as "moral taste buds". People often experience them as "gut feelings."

"Humans come equipped with a set of innate psychological mechanisms that automatically trigger emotionally-based *moral responses* to the situations we encounter in our social environment."[2]

These intuitions form the *foundation* of our experience of the world. Societies create *values* from them, generating narratives and building institutions around them that effectively hold people together. They also form the basis of *conflict* between people. **This is the fundamental source of America's deep cultural divide today**.

MFT identified five foundations[3] supported by evidence across various cultures:

**Care** — The ability to feel and relieve the pain of others.
This foundation is related to our evolution as mammals with attachment systems[4] and an ability to *feel* (and dislike) the pain of others — *affective* empathy.[5]
It underlies the values of kindness, gentleness, and nurturance. It's opposite is **Harm**.

**Fairness** — The ability to share and do good toward each other.
This foundation is related to the evolutionary process of reciprocal altruism.[6]
It underlies the values of *justice* and rights. It's opposite is **Cheating**.

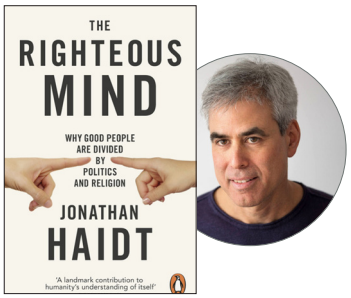
**Loyalty** — The ability to form coalitions or teams.
This foundation is related to our history as tribal creatures able to form coalitions.[7]
It is active anytime people feel that it's "one for all and all for one." It underlies the values of *patriotism* and self-sacrifice for the group. It's opposite is **Betrayal**.

**Authority** — The ability to navigate a hierarchical social order.
This foundation was shaped by our primate history of hierarchical social interactions.[8]
It underlies values of leadership and followership, including *respect* for legitimate authority figures (police, teachers) and honoring traditions. It's opposite is **Subversion**.

**Sanctity** — The ability to sense disgust and contamination.
This foundation underlies the widespread idea that the body is a temple that can be desecrated by immoral activities and contaminants (an idea not unique to religion).
It underlies the values of *self-discipline*, self-improvement, and spirituality.
It's opposite is **Degradation**.

In 2005 Haidt and his team launched the Moral Foundations Questionaire online[9] to survey people about this, especially in the USA. They found a profound difference existed in the moral foundations of people who identify on the political Left and Right respectively.[10] Those on the Left — especially the *progressive* Left — have a near obsession with the **Care** + **Fairness** foundations, basically excluding the other three.

**Whereas Conservatives have a balanced mix of all five foundations, Progressives focus their moral values on just two** — effectively **care and fairness for *victims*.**[11]




[1] **The Righteous Mind** by Jonathan Haidt (2012).

See Haidt's popular **TedTalk** for an excellent introduction to MFT.

[2] ibid. Emphasis added.

[3] These descriptions are based on Haidt with clarification and emphasis added throughout. Since its introduction, MFT has further developed and continues to add new insight. For example, a sixth foundation was added: **Liberty** — The ability to be *reactant* to excessive domination. See the **Liberty** Civics Primer from OEP.

These moral intuitions are a matter of *individual* personality and temperament. They have both genetic and environmental influences.

[4] **Attachment Theory** describes how humans form emotional bonds with primary caregivers.

[5] **Affective Empathy** is the natural impulse to share in the feelings of others. **Cognitive Empathy** is understanding what's going on in another person's mind.

[6] **Reciprocal Altruism** is a behavior whereby an organism acts in a manner that temporarily reduces its fitness while increasing another organism's fitness, with the expectation that the other organism will act in a similar manner at a later time.

[7] "Every human bears the whole stamp of the human condition. This includes evolved neural programs specialized for navigating the world of **coalitions** — *teams*, not groups" (John Tooby).

[8] See **Hierarchy in the Forest** by Christopher Boehm.

[9] YourMorals.org

[10] See Appendix 1 & 2 as well as the OEP Broadside **Moral Tribes**. See also the **Hidden Tribes** study, hiddentribes.us.

[11] See the OEP Investigation **Victim Culture**.

## The Psychology of Democracy

The key to understanding our politics today is recognizing it's about psychology. The moral vision of those on The Left since the late 1960s has narrowed, increasingly centered on helping "victims" and fighting for the rights of the so-called "oppressed". The vision of the Right has come to recently dominate politics because it addresses *all* of our moral values. Haidt calls this **The Conservative Advantage**.[12]

The Left insists that *affective* empathy — the engine for their narrow moral vision — will save the world.[13] As the progressive political scientist George Lakoff writes,

"Behind every progressive policy lies a single moral value: empathy."[14]

The Left "feels our pain" — as Bill Clinton put it. Psychologist Paul Bloom distills this:

"Bleeding hearts use progressive policy solutions to remedy problems encountered by distressed, generalized others."[15]

Empathy-driven solutions using the power of government on behalf of "marginalized" groups is the *focus* of progressives. But that ignores the other moral foundations that need to be employed in order to act with good *judgment*. As Haidt notes:

"**Authority**, **Loyalty**, and **Sanctity** are the moral foundations that bind people together to form *stable*, functioning, flourishing communities ... They promote *accountability*."[16]

A failure to hold people accountable, due to an excessive focus on empathy, explains why progressive "blue" cities have the most ***instability*** — with high levels of crime, drug abuse, and homelessness along with low levels of needed social trust.[17] **There's more to morality than care and fairness**. Progressives have a *thin* approach.

The absence of the **Authority** foundation explains why Conservatives have been viciously demonized as Nazis and Fascists (which were movements from The Left). If you've no "taste" for it, you'll be repulsed by even the most basic demonstration of *legitimate* authority — like maintaining a secure border. Partisan disputes over illegal immigration reveal it's *moral psychology* driving the issue, not politics.

This is more readily seen when a sixth moral foundation is added to the mix: **Liberty** vs **Oppression**.[18] The enemy of society to a progressive is a person who abuses their power [**Authority** vs **Subversion**] and demands respect. Combining these two moral foundations drives the "No Kings" meme of Far-Left agitators like **Indivisible**.[19] They've tapped into the deep psychology of *reactivity*, creating a platform to express *passive and active* ***aggression*** — like similar platforms on The Far-Right.[20]

America's success is due to what George Will calls a "conservative sensibility":

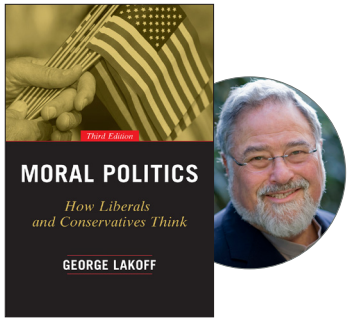
"Conservatism's great gift is preservation of the social space for the personal pursuit of higher aspirations".[21]

That happens by **paying attention to *all* of the moral foundations**, not just *some*.

People on the Left and Right experience "different worlds". This is due to **psychology**, not politics.

[12] **The Righteous Mind**.
The Left has lost influence due to its moral *narrowness* and the embrace of its most *extreme* elements. This is perhaps best seen in data collected by the Pew Research Center, showing how *dramatically* Democrats have moved from traditional values. The average Democrat in 1995 now votes reliably Republican (see Appendix 2).

[13] "The biggest deficit that we have in our society and in the world right now is an empathy deficit" (Barack Obama).




[14] **Moral Politics**: How Liberals and Conservatives Think by George Lakoff.

[15] **Against Empathy**: The Case for Rational Compassion by Paul Bloom.

[16] **The Righteous Mind**.

[17] See **San Fransicko**: Why Progressives Ruin Cities by Michael Shellenberger.

[18] **Liberty**: The ability to be *reactant* to excessive domination. See the **Liberty** Civics Primer from OEP and **Hierarchy in the Forest**.

[19] See ord2indivisible.org.

[20] See **Hidden Tribes**.

[21] **The Conservative Sensibility** by George F. Will.

## **Explainers** Learn to Think Critically About the World

Brief primers providing basic information about a particular topic, point of view, or "doctrine".
They include links to online references and resources (in the digital versions).



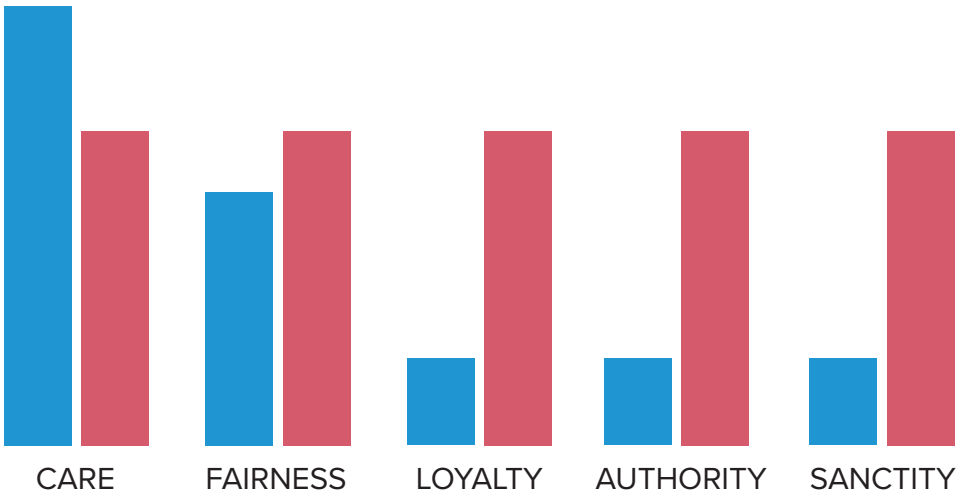

**Rob Schläpfer** is a retired social science educator who spent over a decade conducting classes and community conversations to bridge Oregon's deep political divide.

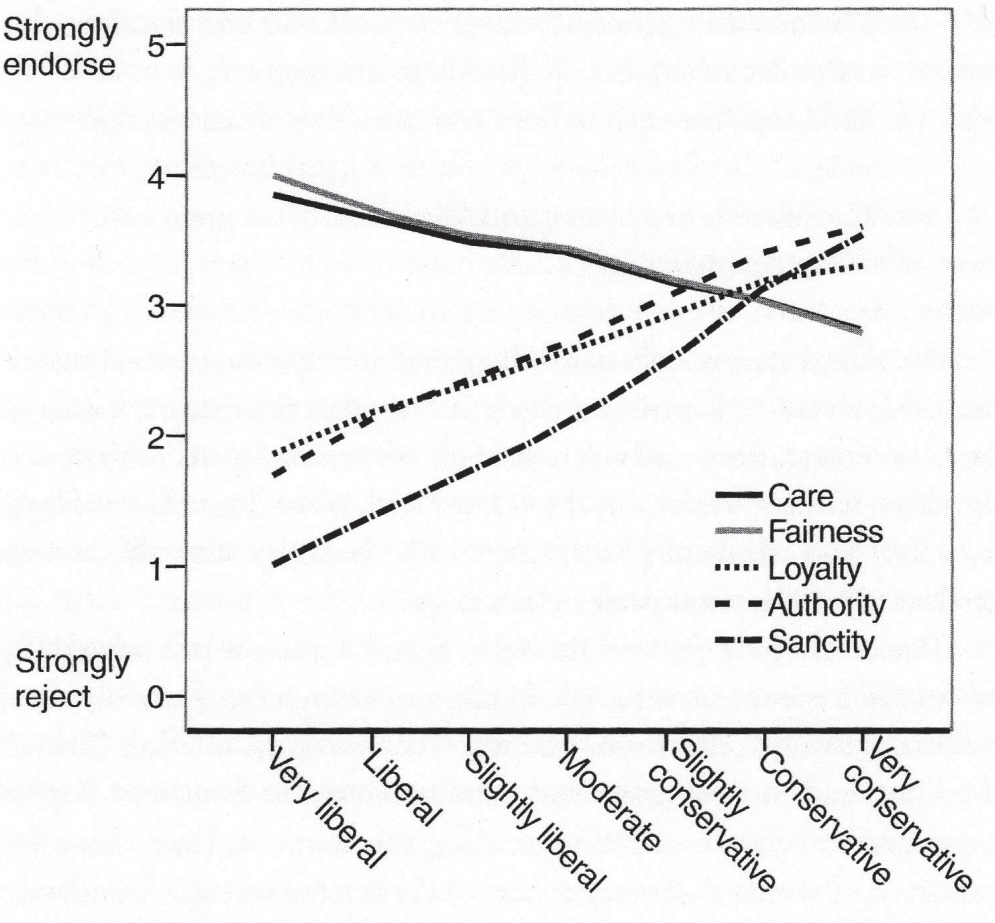
A former pastor, professor, and publisher, for 40+ years he's focused on Critical Thinking, Civics, and Cultural Studies.

He created the Oregon Education Project to restore high-quality American Education centered on merit, excellence, and success.

# **Moral** Foundations

People on the Left and Right experience “different worlds”. This is due to **psychology**, not politics.




Scores on the Moral Foundations Questionaire from 132,00 subjects, in 2011. Data from YourMorals.org

The Care/Harm foundation evolved in response to the adaptive challenge of caring for vulnerable children. It makes us sensitive to signs of suffering and need; it makes us despise cruelty and want to care for those who are suffering.

The Fairness/Cheating foundation evolved in response to the adaptive challenge of reaping the rewards of cooperation without getting exploited. It makes us sensitive to indications that another person is likely to be a good (or bad) partner for collaboration and reciprocal altruism. It makes us want to shun or punish cheaters.

The Loyalty/Betrayal foundation evolved in response to the adaptive challenge of forming and maintaining coalitions. It makes us sensitive to signs that another person is (or is not) a team player. It makes us trust and reward such people, and it makes us want to hurt, ostracize, or even kill those who betray us or our group.

The Authority/Subversion foundation evolved in response to the adaptive challenge of forging relationships that will benefit us within social hierarchies. It makes us sensitive to signs of rank or status, and to signs that other people are (or are not) behaving properly, given their position.

The Sanctity/Degradation foundation evolved initially in response to the adaptive challenge of the omnivore’s dilemma, and then to the broader challenge of living in a world of pathogens and parasites. It includes the behavioral immune system, which can make us wary of a diverse array of symbolic objects and threats. It makes it possible for people to invest objects with irrational and extreme values — both positive and negative — which are important for binding groups together.

**The Righteous Mind**
by Jonathan Haidt (2012).

## **HIDDEN** TRIBES

**HIDDEN**TRIBES.US

Hidden Tribes is a report by **More in Common**, a pro-democracy research group that analyzed the political attitudes of over 8,000 Americans in 2017 and 2018. The study identified seven groups, including the "Exhausted Majority," described as ideologically flexible and frustrated by polarization.

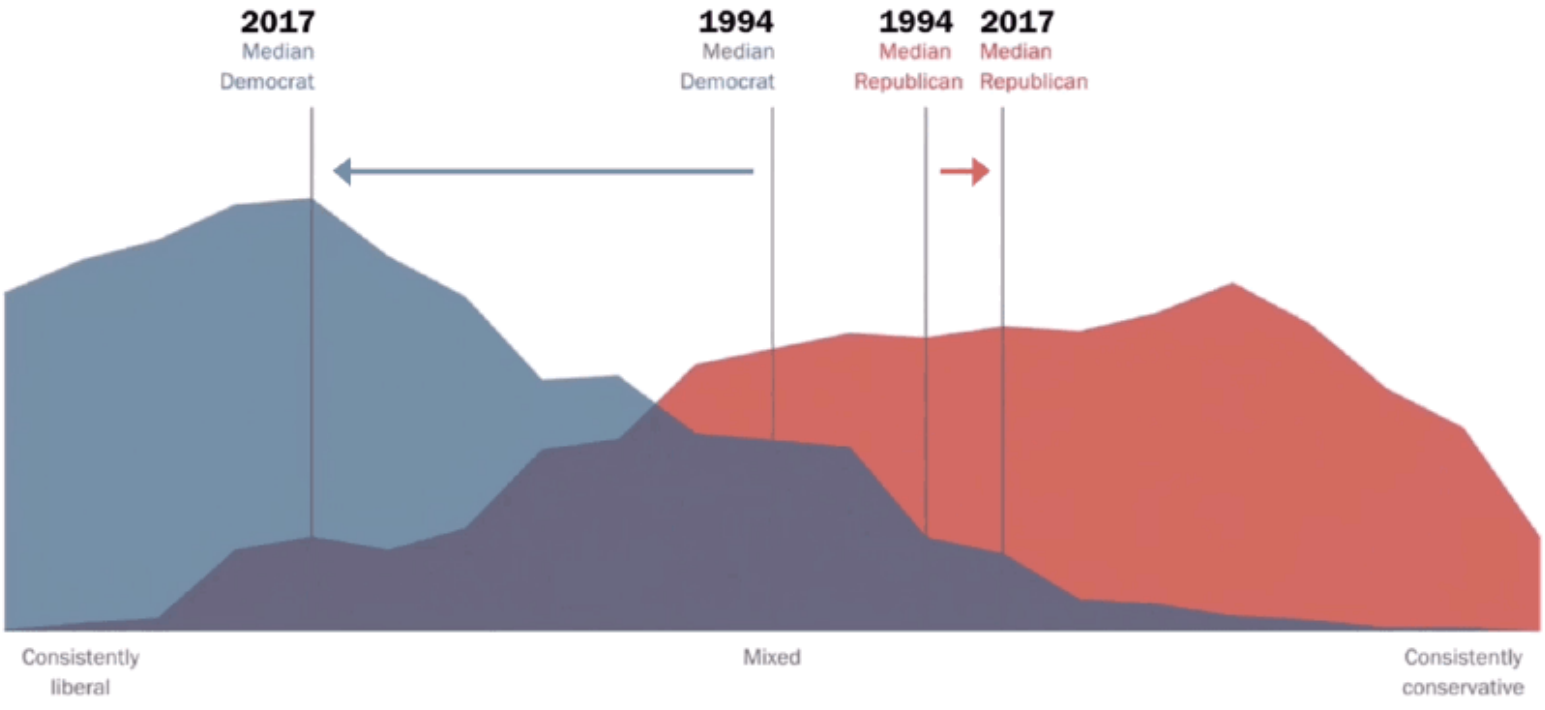
| PROGRESSIVE **ACTIVISTS** | TRADITIONAL "LIBERALS" | PASSIVE "LIBERALS" | POLITICALLY **DISENGAGED** | MODERATES | TRADITIONAL CONSERVATIVES | **DEVOTED** CONSERVATIVES |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **SOCIAL** DEMOCRATS | **LIBERAL** DEMOCRATS | | | | **ESTABLISHMENT** REPUBLICANS | **POPULIST** REPUBLICANS |
| **8%** | **11%** | **15%** | **26%** | **15%** | **19%** | **6%** |



THE **EXHAUSTED** MAJORITY **86%**



Pew Research Center




Source: Surveys conducted in 1994, 1999, 2004, 2011, 2015 and 2017.