

Let's Not Give Up on Reason in Politics: A Response to Jonathan Haidt's 'The Righteous Mind'

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Lately, rational political thought has been under attack not only by pre-Enlightenment, religious zealots but also by some political psychologists¹ (1), who have denounced the Enlightenment concept of reason in the course of trying to explain why intelligent people often have vastly different and apparently irreconcilable political beliefs. These psychologists are certainly right that reason alone does not determine political views in real human life. Emotion plays a powerful role. They are also right that 18th century philosophers did not know as much about cognitive processes as we now know. But, the philosophers of the Enlightenment set the scientific, moral, and political progress of the last 300 years in motion by rejecting tradition, authority, and religion as the sole sources of knowledge and value. When some contemporary political psychologists ignore the critical distinction between pre and post-Enlightenment thought, when they fail to distinguish between political views that rely almost solely on faith and those that reflect an effort to use facts and logic to develop political views, they undermine those who attempt to temper emotion with reason and implicitly support those who are unreflective and uncompromising.

For example, [Jonathan Haidt](#), an unquestionably brilliant moral psychologist, has attempted to provide a psychological explanation of the differences between liberals and conservatives in his recent book, [The Righteous Mind](#).² His view is that political positions depend far more on "intuition" than on reason. To oversimplify, Haidt maintains that when we confront a moral or political question, our first reaction is intuitive. We use reason to defend our intuitions rather than to form them.

Suppose, for example, that two intelligent people are discussing same sex marriage. One is opposed; the other is for it. The person who is opposed says, "Marriage is by definition a union of a man and a woman." The person who is opposed says, "That's an antiquated definition of marriage; gender is irrelevant to love and commitment." Typically the argument continues along these lines until those arguing get tired of the futile exchange.

Haidt maintains that the impasse occurs because their political views rest on emotionally charged intuitions about what's right and wrong. Presentations of data and other facts and pointing to inconsistencies just don't have much influence on their positions. People do sometimes change their minds, but it is rarely, if ever, because of facts or logic, according to Haidt. It is almost

always in response to powerful images, stories, or personal experiences. (A conservative, it is sometimes said, is a liberal who has been mugged.)

Several of Haidt's critics^{3,4,5} have argued that Haidt vastly underestimates the importance of reason in the formation of political views and, in fact, that his book relies on reason to try to persuade people to change their style of argument so as to bridge gaps in political belief.

Haidt has responded⁶ (6) that his view is not that reason is irrelevant but that reason is primarily the servant of moral and political passions. His book, he says, is designed to influence people by "weaving together the history of moral psychology ... my own personal story, ... historical anecdotes, quotations from the ancients, ... praise of a few visionaries. [and] metaphors ... in order to 'tune up' [my readers'] intuitions about moral psychology." He hopes that this will persuade people that they can be more effective at bridging political differences if they appeal more to intuition.

Haidt strikes me as largely right about what happens when intelligent people with different political positions argue. But there are other situations in which political views are developed that he does not seem to take into account.

For example, some people rethink their views after the argument is over and change their minds. It's difficult for most people to give up their position in the heat of argument. But once they escape the pride of the battle, they can reconsider.

What happens during an argument is hardly a model for political decision-making. For example, it tells us nothing about how people who are undecided make up their minds. Of course -- as those who run political campaigns learned long ago -- people are moved by emotions and moral intuitions that can be evoked by images, stories, slogans, testimonials, and negative advertising. But even the most cynical of political consultants recommend the use of facts and logic to reach undecided voters. One campaign, for example, may offer factual evidence of economic progress after a recession, while the other claims that economic growth is woefully slow and promises economic gains that the other says are mathematically impossible. This is reason at work. And it matters; it is just not the only thing that matters.

Another example is the process that professional policy makers go through in order to develop public policy. Having been a social advocate most of my career and a public official for part of it, I have spent a great deal of time with groups of people hammering out policy proposals. Of course, the process is partially "political". That is, it depends on the values, ideologies, and interests of the people making policy or of their bosses. But the fact of the matter is that when people charged with developing policy sit down to do it, they use facts and logic. Whether to give spousal benefits to people in a same sex marriage depends not only on values but also on such matters as how many people will be affected, how much it will cost, what the experience has been in places where it has been tried, etc., etc. etc. One fact that always figures into the calculation is how voters, donors, and other important people will react. But to say that policy making depends to some extent on these kinds of political considerations is not to say that policy making is non-rational. It is simply to acknowledge that the reality of politics in a democratic society has to be part of the calculation.

Haidt may well be right that at the moment of being confronted with a question, we respond intuitively rather than thoughtfully and use reason to defend our views rather than to form them. But when we have time, many of us also examine facts, question consistency, and consider various points of view in the process of forming our own opinions⁷.

It may be, as Haidt maintains, that there are some values that have been built into the human species through the process of evolution -- though these are unlikely to be at the root of disagreements among members of the human species. And there are certainly values that are regarded as unquestionable givens by our communities and families, but human beings in democratic societies -- since the Enlightenment -- have frequently challenged these givens and formed new and different points of view.

It is, of course, important to understand Haidt's fundamental point -- that bridging the vituperative divisions that now dominate American politics may depend more on understanding the psychology of political thought than on rational resolution of ideological debates. But it is also important to be cautious about Haidt's view of the relative impotence of reason in matters of political belief. Let's not let the political process lapse into a pre-Enlightenment state.

¹ For example, in addition to Haidt, whose view is discussed here, both George Lakoff and Drew Westen, explicitly attack the Enlightenment view of reason and its role in moral and political thought.

² Haidt, Jonathan. *The Righteous Mind*. Pantheon Books. 2012

³ Gutting, Gary. "[Haidt's Problem with Plato](#)", in The Opinionator, *The New York Times*, October 4, 2012.

⁴ Lynch, Michael. "[A Vote for Reason](#)" in The Opinionator, *The New York Times*. September 30, 2012.

⁵ Bloom, Paul. "[How Morals Change](#)" in *Nature*, March 2010.

⁶ "[Reason Matters \(When Intuitions Don't Object\)](#)" in The Opinionator, *The New York Times*. October 7, 2012.

⁷ Paxton, J., et al. "[Reflection and Reasoning in Moral Judgement](#)" in *Cognitive Science*, 2011.