Born This Way?

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As a nation, we've made great strides overcoming our differences. North vs. South, Catholic vs. Protestant, black vs. white. These divisions once brought forth extraordinary animosity. Even male vs. female had its day in the sun, for those of us old enough to remember the absurd 1973 tennis match between Bobby Riggs and Billie Jean King. Those differences have not disappeared, but the urgency and rancor has faded.

There is one difference, however, that is widening into a chasm and threatening to split the nation into two dysfunctional halves: left vs. right. Voters themselves have spread out only a bit in the last 10 years: Gallup reports a decline in the number of people calling themselves centrists or moderates (from 40 percent in 2000 to 36 percent in 2011), a slight rise in the number of conservatives (from 38 percent to 41 percent), and a slight rise in the number of liberals (from 19 percent to 21 percent).

But the political class, the political parties, and the media have completely changed their game since the 1980s. Politics used to be hardball: very competitive, but at the end of the day, Ronald Reagan and Tip O'Neill could meet for a drink and a private conversation. Congressmen and senators had the sense that they all belonged to a grand institution. They had enough in common, and enough friends across the aisle, that they could work together on solving the nation's biggest challenges, from facing down the Soviets to dismantling Jim Crow.

Not any more. Now it's cage-match wrestling, and there is a lot more blood. As long-serving former congressman Rep. Jim Cooper (D-Tenn.) put it in September, "This is not a collegial body any more. It is more like gang behavior. Members walk into the chamber full of hatred."

What is going on here? Part of the answer will come from historians who can trace out the events of recent decades and their effects on our political institutions. But part of the answer must come from psychology. In the last 10 years we psychologists have discovered a great deal about the origins of ideology and why ideology makes it so hard for people to

understand, respect, and accept each other. This research partly confirms what Gilbert and Sullivan said in the light opera *Iolanthe*: "Nature always does contrive / That every boy and every gal / That's born into the world alive / Is either a little Liberal / Or else a little Conservative!" But the story is more interesting than that.

(A note about political diversity: People don't come in just two types. Unfortunately, most research on political psychology has used the left-right dimension with American samples, so in many cases that's all we have to go on. But I should also note that this one dimension is still quite useful. Most people in the United States and in Europe can place themselves somewhere along it—though usually somewhere near the middle. And it is the principal axis of the American culture war and of congressional voting, so even if relatively few people fit perfectly into the extreme types I'm going to describe, understanding the psychology of liberalism and conservatism is vital for understanding a problem that threatens the entire nation.)

What Is Ideology?

Here's a simple definition of ideology: "a set of beliefs about the proper order of society and how it can be achieved." And here's the most basic of all ideological questions: Should we preserve the present order or change it?

Political theorists since Marx had long assumed that people chose ideologies to further their self-interest. The rich and powerful want to preserve and conserve; the peasants and workers want to change things (or at least they would if their consciousness could be raised and they could see their self-interest properly, said the Marxists). But while social class may once have been a good predictor of ideology, that link has been largely broken in modern times, when the rich go both ways (industrialists mostly right, tech billionaires mostly left), and so do the poor (rural poor mostly right, urban poor mostly left). And when political scientists looked into it, they found that self-interest does a remarkably poor job of predicting political attitudes.

So for most of the late 20th century, political scientists embraced blank-slate theories in which people soaked up the ideology of their parents or the TV programs they watched. Some

political scientists even said that most people were so confused about political issues that they had no real ideology at all.

But then came the studies of twins. In the 1980s, when scientists began analyzing large databases that allowed them to compare identical twins (who share all of the same genes, plus, usually, their prenatal and childhood environments) to same-sex fraternal twins (who share half of their genes, plus their prenatal and childhood environments), they found that the identical twins were more similar on just about everything. What's more, identical twins reared in separate households (because of adoption) usually turn out to be very similar, whereas unrelated children reared together (because of adoption) rarely turn out similar to each other, or to their adoptive parents; they tend to be more similar to their genetic parents. Genes contribute, somehow, to just about every aspect of our personalities.

We're not just talking about IQ, mental illness, and basic personality traits such as shyness. We're talking about the degree to which you like jazz, spicy foods, and abstract art; your likelihood of getting a divorce or dying in a car crash; your religiosity; and your political orientation as an adult. Whether you end up on the right or the left of the political spectrum turns out to be just as heritable as most other traits: Genetics explains between one-third and one-half of the variability among people in their political attitudes. Being raised in a liberal or conservative household accounts for much less.

How can that be? How can there be a genetic basis for attitudes about nuclear power, progressive taxation, and foreign aid when these issues emerged only in the last century or two? And how can there be a genetic basis for ideology when people sometimes change their political parties as adults?

Innate does not mean "hard-wired" or unmalleable. To say that a trait or ability is innate just means it was "organized in advance of experience." The genes guide the construction of the brain in the uterus, but that's only the first draft, so to speak. The draft gets revised by childhood experiences. To understand the origins of ideology you have to take a developmental perspective, starting with the genes and ending with an adult voting for a particular candidate or joining a political protest. There are three major steps in the process.

Step 1: Genes Make Brains

After analyzing the DNA of 13,000 Australians, 15 researchers, led by Penn State political scientist Peter K. Hatemi, found several genes that differed between liberals and conservatives. Most of them related to the functioning of neurotransmitters, particularly glutamate and serotonin, both of which are involved in the brain's response to threat and fear. This finding, published in *The Journal of Politics* last October, fits well with many studies showing that conservatives react more strongly than liberals to signs of danger, including the threat of germs and contamination, and even low-level threats such as sudden blasts of white noise. Other studies have focused on genes related to receptors for the neurotransmitter dopamine, which has long been tied to sensation seeking and openness to experience, among the best-established correlates of liberalism. As the Renaissance writer Michel de Montaigne said: "The only things I find rewarding…are variety and the enjoyment of diversity."

Even though the effects of any single gene are tiny, these findings are important because they illustrate one sort of pathway from genes to politics: the genes (collectively) give some people brains that are more (or less) reactive to threats and that produce less (or more) pleasure when exposed to novelty, change, and new experiences. These are two of the main personality factors that have consistently been found to distinguish liberals and conservatives. A major 2003 review paper by political psychologist John Jost in *Psychological Bulletin* found a few other traits, but nearly all of them are conceptually related to threat sensitivity (e.g., conservatives react more strongly to reminders of death) or openness to experience (e.g., liberals have less need for order, structure, and closure).

Step 2: Traits Guide Children Along Different Paths

Where do our personalities come from? To answer that question, we need to distinguish among three different levels of personality, according to a useful theory from Northwestern University psychologist Dan McAdams. The lowest level of our personalities consists of what he calls "dispositional traits," which are the sort of broad character dimensions that manifest themselves in many different situations. These are traits such as threat sensitivity, novelty seeking, extraversion, and conscientiousness, and they are fairly consistent from childhood

through old age. Don't think of them as mental modules that some people have and others lack; they're more like adjustments to dials on brain systems that everyone has.

Let's imagine a pair of fraternal twins, a brother and sister raised together in the same home. During their nine months together in their mother's womb, the brother's genes were busy constructing a brain that was a bit higher than average in its sensitivity to threats, a bit lower than average in its tendency to feel pleasure when exposed to radically new experiences. The sister's genes were busy making a brain with the opposite settings.

The two siblings grow up in the same house and attend the same schools, but they gradually create different worlds for themselves. Even in nursery school, their behavior causes adults to treat them differently. One 2006 study in the *Journal of Research in Personality* found that women who called themselves liberals as adults had been rated by their nursery school teachers as having traits consistent with threat insensitivity and novelty seeking.

Future liberals were described as more curious, verbal, and self-reliant, but also more assertive and aggressive, less obedient and neat. So if we could observe our fraternal twins in their first years of schooling, we'd find teachers responding differently to them. Some teachers might be drawn to the creative but rebellious little girl; others would crack down on her as an unruly brat, while praising her brother as a model student.

But dispositional traits are just the lowest of the three levels, according to McAdams. The second level is our "characteristic adaptations." These are traits that emerge as we grow. They are called adaptations because people develop them in response to the specific environments and challenges that they happen to face. Let's follow our twins into adolescence, and let's suppose they attend a fairly strict and well-ordered school. The brother fits in well, but the sister engages in constant battles with the teachers. She becomes angry and socially disengaged. These are now parts of her personality—her characteristic adaptations—but they would not have developed had she gone to a more progressive and less structured school.

By the time they reach high school and begin to take an interest in politics, the two siblings have chosen different activities (the sister joins the debate team in part for the opportunity to travel; the brother gets more involved with his family's church) and amassed different friends

(the sister becomes a goth; the brother joins the jocks). The sister chooses to go to college in New York City, where she majors in Latin American studies and finds her calling as an advocate for the children of illegal immigrants. Because her social circle is entirely composed of liberals, she is enmeshed in a moral matrix based primarily on the psychology of care and compassion. In 2008 she is electrified by Barack Obama's promise of change and concern for the poor.

The brother, in contrast, has no interest in moving far away to a big, dirty, and threatening city. He chooses to stay close to family and friends by attending the local branch of the state university. He earns a degree in business and then works for a local bank, gradually rising to a high position. He becomes a pillar of his church and his community. There is occasional talk in church sermons of helping victims of oppression, but the most common moral themes in his life are personal responsibility (based on concerns about not being a free rider or a burden on others) and loyalty to the many groups and teams to which he belongs. He resonates to John McCain's campaign slogan, "Country First."

Things didn't have to work out this way. On the day they were born, the sister was not predestined to vote for Obama; the brother was not guaranteed to become a Republican. But their different sets of genes gave them different first drafts of their minds, which led them down different paths, through different life experiences, and into different moral subcultures. By the time they reach adulthood they have become very different people whose one point of political agreement is that they must not talk about politics when the sister comes home for the holidays.

Step 3: People Construct Life Narratives

The human mind is a story processor, not a logic processor. Everyone loves a good story; every culture bathes its children in stories. Among the most important stories we know are stories about ourselves, and these "life narratives" are McAdams' third level of personality. McAdams' greatest contribution to psychology has been his insistence that psychologists connect their quantitative data (about the two lower levels, which we assess with questionnaires and reaction-time measures) to a more qualitative understanding of the narratives people create to make sense of their lives. These narratives are not necessarily true stories; they are simplified and selective reconstructions of the past, often connected to

an idealized vision of the future. But even though life narratives are to some degree post hoc fabrications, they still influence people's behavior, relationships, and mental health.

Life narratives are saturated with morality. They provide a bridge between a developing adolescent self and an adult political identity. Here, for example, is how Keith Richards describes a turning point in his life in his recent autobiography. Richards, the famously sensation-seeking and nonconforming lead guitarist of the Rolling Stones, was once a marginally well-behaved member of his school choir. The choir won competitions with other schools, so the choirmaster got Richards and his friends excused from many classes so they could travel to ever-larger choral events. But when the boys reached puberty and their voices changed, the choirmaster dumped them. They were then informed that they would have to repeat a full year in school to make up for their missed classes, and the choirmaster didn't lift a finger to defend them. It was a "kick in the guts," Richards says. It transformed him in ways that had obvious political ramifications: "The moment that happened, Spike, Terry and I, we became terrorists. I was so mad, I had a burning desire for revenge. I had reason then to bring down this country and everything it stood for. I spent the next three years trying to fuck them up. If you want to breed a rebel, that's the way to do it.…It still hasn't gone out, the fire. That's when I started to look at the world in a different way, not their way anymore. That's when I realized that there's bigger bullies than just bullies. There's them, the authorities. And a slow-burning fuse was lit."

Richards may have been predisposed by his personality to become a liberal, but his politics were not predestined. Had his teachers treated him differently—or had he simply interpreted events differently when creating early drafts of his narrative—he could have ended up in a more conventional job surrounded by conservative colleagues and sharing their moral matrix. But once Richards came to understand himself as a crusader against abusive authority, there was no way he was ever going to vote for the British Conservative Party. His own life narrative just fit too well with the stories that all parties on the left tell in one form or another.

Grand Narratives of Liberalism and Conservatism

In the 2003 book *Moral, Believing Animals*, Notre Dame sociologist Christian Smith writes about the moral webs or networks of meaning within which human life takes place. He agrees with

French sociologist Emile Durkheim that every social order has at its core something sacred, and he shows how stories, particularly "grand narratives," identify and reinforce the sacred core of each matrix. Smith is a master at extracting these grand narratives and condensing them into single paragraphs. Each narrative, he says, identifies a beginning ("once upon a time"), a middle (in which a threat or challenge arises), and an end (in which a resolution is achieved). Each narrative is designed to orient listeners morally—to draw their attention to a set of virtues and vices, or good and evil forces—and to impart lessons about what must be done now to protect, recover, or attain the sacred core of the vision.

One such narrative, which Smith calls the "liberal progress narrative," organizes much of the moral matrix of the American academic left. It goes like this: "Once upon a time, the vast majority of human persons suffered in societies and social institutions that were unjust, unhealthy, repressive, and oppressive. These traditional societies were reprehensible because of their deep-rooted inequality, exploitation, and irrational traditionalism.…But the noble human aspiration for autonomy, equality, and prosperity struggled mightily against the forces of misery and oppression, and eventually succeeded in establishing modern, liberal, democratic, capitalist, welfare societies. While modern social conditions hold the potential to maximize the individual freedom and pleasure of all, there is much work to be done to dismantle the powerful vestiges of inequality, exploitation, and repression. This struggle for the good society in which individuals are equal and free to pursue their self-defined happiness is the one mission truly worth dedicating one's life to achieving."

This narrative may not mesh perfectly with the moral matrices of the left in European countries (where, for example, there is more distrust of capitalism). Nonetheless, its general plot line should be recognizable to leftists everywhere. It's a heroic liberation narrative. Authority, hierarchy, power, and tradition are the chains that must be broken to free the "noble aspirations" of the victims.

In my own research, I have sought to describe the major elements of these narratives. With my colleagues at YourMorals.org, I have developed Moral Foundations Theory, which outlines six clusters of moral concerns—care/harm, fairness/cheating, liberty/oppression, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation—upon which all political cultures and movements base their moral appeals. Political liberals tend to rely primarily on

the moral foundation of care/harm, followed by fairness/cheating and liberty/oppression. Social conservatives, in contrast, use all six foundations. They are less concerned than liberals about harm to innocent victims, but they are much more concerned about the moral foundations that bind groups and nations together, i.e., loyalty (patriotism), authority (law and order, traditional families), and sanctity (the Bible, God, the flag as a sacred object). Libertarians, true to their name, value liberty more than anyone else, and they value it far more than any other foundation. (You can read our complete research findings, including our report on libertarians, at www.MoralFoundations.org.)

Smith wrote the "liberal progress" narrative before Moral Foundations Theory existed, but you can see that the narrative derives its moral force primarily from the care/harm foundation (concern for the suffering of victims) and the liberty/oppression foundation (a celebration of liberty as freedom from oppression, as well as freedom to pursue self-defined happiness). In this narrative, fairness is political equality (which is part of opposing oppression); there are only oblique hints of fairness as proportionality. Authority is mentioned only as an evil, and there is no mention of loyalty or sanctity.

Contrast that narrative to one for modern conservatism. Emory University clinical psychologist Drew Westen is another master of narrative analysis, and in his 2007 book *The Political Brain* he extracts the master narrative that was implicit, and sometimes explicit, in the major speeches of Ronald Reagan.

Reagan defeated incumbent Democrat Jimmy Carter in 1980, at a time when Americans were being held hostage in Iran, the inflation rate was over 10 percent, and America's cities, industries, and self-confidence were declining. The Reagan narrative goes like this: "Once upon a time, America was a shining beacon. Then liberals came along and erected an enormous federal bureaucracy that handcuffed the invisible hand of the free market. They subverted our traditional American values and opposed God and faith at every step of the way.…Instead of requiring that people work for a living, they siphoned money from hardworking Americans and gave it to Cadillac-driving drug addicts and welfare queens. Instead of punishing criminals, they tried to 'understand' them. Instead of worrying about the victims of crime, they worried about the rights of criminals.…Instead of adhering to traditional American values of family, fidelity, and personal responsibility, they preached promiscuity, premarital sex, and

the gay lifestyle…and they encouraged a feminist agenda that undermined traditional family roles.…Instead of projecting strength to those who would do evil around the world, they cut military budgets, disrespected our soldiers in uniform, burned our flag, and chose negotiation and multilateralism.…Then Americans decided to take their country back from those who sought to undermine it."

This narrative would have to be edited for use in other countries and eras, where what is being "conserved" differs from American concerns. Nonetheless its general plot line and moral breadth should be recognizable to conservatives everywhere. This too is a heroic narrative, but it's a heroism of defense. It's less suited to being turned into a major motion picture. Rather than the visually striking image of crowds storming the Bastille and freeing the prisoners, this narrative looks more like a family reclaiming its home from termites and then repairing the joists.

The Reagan narrative is also visibly conservative in that it relies for its moral force on at least five of the six moral foundations. There's only a hint of care (for the victims of crime), but there are very clear references to liberty (as freedom from government constraint), fairness (as proportionality, which means it's wrong to take money from those who work hard and give it to welfare queens), loyalty (soldiers and the flag), authority (subversion of the family and of traditions), and sanctity (replacing God with the celebration of promiscuity).

Crossing the Divide

The two narratives are as opposed as they could be. Can partisans even *understand* the story told by the other side? The obstacles to empathy are not symmetrical. There is no foundation used by the left that is not also used by the right. Even though conservatives score slightly lower on measures of empathy and may therefore be less moved by a story about suffering and oppression, they can still recognize that it is awful to be kept in chains. And even though many conservatives opposed some of the great liberations of the 20th century—of women, sweatshop workers, African Americans, and gay people—they have applauded others, such as the liberation of Eastern Europe from communist oppression.

But when liberals try to understand the Reagan narrative, they have a harder time. When I speak to liberal audiences about the three "binding" foundations—loyalty, authority, and

sanctity—I find that many in the audience don't just fail to resonate; they actively reject these concerns as immoral. Loyalty to a group shrinks the moral circle; it is the basis of racism and exclusion, they say. Authority is oppression. Sanctity is religious mumbo-jumbo whose only function is to suppress female sexuality and justify homophobia.

In a study I conducted with colleagues Jesse Graham and Brian Nosek, we tested how well liberals and conservatives could understand each other. We asked more than 2,000 American visitors to fill out the Moral Foundations Questionnaire. One-third of the time they were asked to fill it out normally, answering as themselves. One-third of the time they were asked to fill it out as they think a "typical liberal" would respond. One-third of the time they were asked to fill it out as a "typical conservative" would respond. This design allowed us to examine the stereotypes that each side held about the other. More important, it allowed us to assess how accurate they were by comparing people's expectations about "typical" partisans to the actual responses from partisans on the left and the right. Who was best able to pretend to be the other?

The results were clear and consistent. Moderates and conservatives were most accurate in their predictions, whether they were pretending to be liberals or conservatives. Liberals were the least accurate, especially those who described themselves as "very liberal." The biggest errors in the whole study came when liberals answered the care and fairness questions while pretending to be conservatives. When faced with statements such as "one of the worst things a person could do is hurt a defenseless animal" or "justice is the most important requirement for a society," liberals assumed that conservatives would disagree. If you have a moral matrix built primarily on intuitions about care and fairness (as equality), and you listen to the Reagan narrative, what else could you think? Reagan seems completely unconcerned about the welfare of drug addicts, poor people, and gay people. He is more interested in fighting wars and telling people how to run their sex lives.

If you don't see that Reagan is pursuing positive values of loyalty, authority, and sanctity, you almost have to conclude that Republicans see no positive value in care and fairness. You might even go as far as Michael Feingold, a theater critic for the liberal weekly *The Village Voice*, when he wrote in 2004: "Republicans don't believe in the imagination, partly because so few of them have one, but mostly because it gets in the way of their chosen work, which is to destroy

the human race and the planet.…Which is why I personally think they should be exterminated before they cause any more harm." One of the many ironies in this quotation is that it shows the inability of a theater critic—who skillfully enters fantastical imaginary worlds for a living—to imagine that Republicans act within a moral matrix that differs from his own.

Toward a More Civil Politics

In the ancient Middle East, where monotheism first took root, the third-century prophet Mani preached that the visible world is the battleground between the forces of light (absolute goodness) and the forces of darkness (absolute evil). Human beings are the front line in the battle; we contain both good and evil, and we each must pick one side and fight for it.

Mani's preaching developed into Manichaeism, a religion that spread throughout the Middle East and influenced Western thinking. If you think about politics in a Manichaean way, compromise is a sin. God and the devil don't issue many bipartisan proclamations, and neither should you.

America's political class has become far more Manichaean since the early 1990s, first in Washington and then in many state capitals. The result is an increase in acrimony and gridlock, a decrease in the ability to find bipartisan solutions. What can be done? Many groups and organizations have urged legislators and citizens alike to take "civility pledges," promising to be "more civil" and to "view everyone in positive terms." I don't believe such pledges will work. You can't just will yourself to be more civil to people you think are evil. If conscious self-control was determinative, New Year's resolutions wouldn't have such a wretched track record. Indirect methods are better.

To escape from this political mess, I believe that psychologists must work with political scientists to identify changes that will indirectly undermine Manichaeism. I ran a 2007 conference at Princeton University that tried to do this. We learned that much of the increase in polarization was unavoidable. It was the natural result of the political realignment that took place after President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act in 1964. The conservative Southern states, which had been solidly Democratic since the Civil War (because Lincoln was a Republican), then began to leave the Democratic Party, and by the 1990s the South was solidly Republican. Before this realignment there had been liberals and conservatives in both parties,

which made it easy to form bipartisan teams that could work together on legislative projects. But after the realignment, there was no longer any overlap, either in the Senate or in the House of Representatives. Nowadays the most liberal Republican is typically more conservative than the most conservative Democrat. And once the two parties became ideologically pure—a liberal party and a conservative party—there was bound to be a rise in Manichaeism.

But we also learned about factors that might possibly be reversed. The most poignant moment of the conference came when Jim Leach, a former Republican congressman from Iowa, described changes that began in 1995. Newt Gingrich, the new speaker of the House of Representatives, encouraged the large group of incoming Republican congressmen to leave their families in their home districts rather than moving their spouses and children to Washington. Before 1995 congressmen from both parties attended many of the same social events on weekends; their spouses became friends; their children played on the same sports teams. But nowadays most congressmen fly to Washington on Monday night, huddle with their teammates and do battle for three days, and then fly home on Thursday night. Cross-party friendships are disappearing; Manichaeism and scorched-earth politics are increasing.

The problem is not limited to politicians. Technology and changing residential patterns have allowed each of us to isolate ourselves within cocoons of likeminded individuals. In 1976 only 27 percent of Americans lived in "landslide counties"—counties that voted either Democratic or Republican by a margin of 20 percentage points or more. But the number has risen steadily; in 2008, 48 percent of Americans lived in a landslide county. Our counties and towns are becoming increasingly segregated into "lifestyle enclaves," in which ways of voting, eating, working, and worshipping are increasingly aligned. If you find yourself in a Whole Foods store, there's an 89 percent chance that the county surrounding you voted for Barack Obama. If you want to find Republicans, go to a county that contains a Cracker Barrel restaurant; 62 percent of these went for McCain.

Morality binds and blinds. This is not just something that happens to people on the other side. We all get sucked into tribal moral communities. We circle around sacred values and then share post hoc arguments about why we are so right and they are so wrong. We think the other side is blind to truth, reason, science, and common sense, but in fact everyone goes blind

when talking about their sacred objects. Morality binds us into ideological teams that fight each other as though the fate of the world depended on our side winning each battle. It blinds us to the fact that each team is composed of good people who have something important to say.

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