The Real Difference between Liberals and Conservatives

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According to a song by Gilbert and Sullivan, "Every boy and every gal, That’s born into the world alive, Is either a little Liberal, Or else a little Conservative"\(^1\). The division between liberal and conservative intrudes into many aspects of our lives, triggering arguments between relatives and coworkers, flooding the airwaves and cable news with dueling tirades and polemics, and creating political paralysis when politicians place party loyalty above the interests of the country as a whole. We have probably all had the experience of being infuriated by the idiotic statements of people with different political views and have been bewildered that otherwise sane, rational individuals could hold such obviously false and silly views.

However, when our blood pressure returns to normal, we may find ourselves wondering what, really, were we arguing about? What, at its core, is the fundamental difference between liberalism and conservatism? Is there some single, core principle that explains the entire bundle of disagreements between liberals and conservatives? What conceivable principle could possibly explain why someone's opinions about modern art are tied so closely to their opinions about whether gun ownership reduces crime, or whether raising the minimum wage increases unemployment, or whether corporal punishment improves children's behavior? Could political orientation simply be a modern-day badge of tribal membership with no underlying rationale? Or does it reflect some psychological trait that triggers a huge collection of opinions and attitudes?

Understanding the nature of the differences between liberals and conservatives isn't just a matter of idle curiosity. As religious liberals, we are committed to the dignity and worth of every human being, not just other liberals. Part of valuing other human beings is acknowledging their values, motives, and beliefs, and this in turn requires understanding what those values, motives, and beliefs really are.

In addition to this religious reason for trying to understand the real nature of political orientation, there is a social reason as well. Every bit of energy that liberals and conservatives spend arguing with each other is energy that is taken away from solving our real shared national problems. This wasted energy is particularly unfortunate when it is based on mutual misunderstanding rather than genuine policy differences. Policy differences can usually be resolved by compromises, but if each side thinks that the other is acting in bad faith, the result is paralysis. Distorted views of one's political

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\(^1\) Sullivan, A., Gilbert, W., (1986) Iolanthe, or the Peer & the Peri: Vocal Score with Dialogue, G. Schirmer, Inc.
opponents can lead to increasingly venomous and unproductive disputes.

Finally, understanding political differences is important for understanding *ourselves*. The fact that opinions about any single political issue are so strongly connected to other apparently unrelated political opinions makes one wonder whether the arguments that we and everyone else use to support our views on gun control, abortion, government ownership of bankrupt financial institutions, and so forth, aren't just rationalizations for conclusions that we have reached for reasons that we might not even be aware of. If all these opinions are really proxies for something else, it would be nice to know what that thing is.

My exploration of the nature of political orientation will be in 3 parts. First, I will describe research identifying the *psychological* factors that account for liberal/conservatism differences. Second, I will discuss political orientation in terms of *moral* values. Finally, I will suggest how we as religious liberals should act in response to these findings. You may find some of this presentation surprising, unbelievable, or annoying. In fact, if you're not provoked by anything I say, then I just haven't gotten through to you.

So, let's start with psychological theories of conservatism. This research started in the years immediately after WWII, when social scientists were searching for an explanation for the rise of authoritarianism and fascism in Europe. Over the decades, these studies expanded into a search for a theory of conservatism in general, not just authoritarianism.

One oddity of this research, which may have already struck you, is that it seems to assume that conservatism, but not liberalism, requires an explanation. Why would that be? Critics of this work argue that it's because most social scientists are liberal, so they consider liberalism the default position and only conservatism as being in need of explanation.

Be that as it may, the goal of this research is to find psychological factors that explain conservative political orientation. The first step in doing this is to identify what we mean by “conservative political orientation.” One way to do this is to ask people whether they consider themselves liberal or conservative. A second way is to select subjects who are members of organizations with a clear liberal or conservative orientation, e.g., democrats versus republicans. Most common, however, is to use a dictionary definition of political conservatism having 2 elements: (1) resistance to change, and (2) acceptance of inequality. Liberalism is the reverse: acceptance of change, resistance to inequality.

Researchers at Stanford, Berkeley, and the University of Maryland recently published a
meta-analysis of 88 studies from 12 countries involving more than 22,000 subjects. This study identified a number of psychological motives and tendencies that are strongly associated with conservatism. These motives and tendencies can be divided into three categories:

1) individual psychological traits
2) culture and ideology
3) situations that trigger fear, insecurity, or anger.

Let's start with the first, individual psychological traits. Numerous psychological studies have shown that conservatism is associated with avoidance of uncertainty, discomfort with ambiguity, and need for order, structure, and closure. (Conversely, liberalism is associated with the opposite traits). There is recent evidence that these psychological traits have a biological origin. A study at the University of Nebraska in 2008 showed that liberals and conservatives tend to respond differently to startling events. In one experiment, subjects were shown placid images—a happy child, a bunny—and startling images, such as a large spider on the fact of a terrified person. As measured by a skin galvanometer, conservatives had a stronger involuntary physiological response than liberals to the startling images. In a second experiment, conservatives blinked harder—an involuntary startle response—in reaction to a sudden noise played through headphones.

In 2007, scientists at NYU and UCLA found that political orientation was reflected in neurological reactions to unfamiliar stimuli. In an experiment that required subjects to respond to uncommon events in a different manner than to common events, liberals were significantly more accurate in their response to the uncommon events, and electroencephalogram readings showed more brain activity in liberals in a portion of the brain that detects conflicts between habitual and novel actions. Finally, there is some evidence from twin studies suggesting that political orientation is inherited. So, part of the liberal/conservative divide seems to arise from individual neurological differences in the way different people respond to novelty, ambiguity, and surprise.

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3 Jost et al. (2003) refer to these factors as epistemic, ideological, and existential motives, respectively, but these terms are not very informative to non-specialists in this research.
The second category of motives and tendencies that predict conservatism are those that arise from culture and ideology. Ideologies and cultures vary in the extent to which they justify the dominance of some groups over others and in the extent to which they promote or impede social change. Our attitudes about whether change is desirable or inequality acceptable arise in part from the beliefs that we absorb from these cultural influences. For example, a person raised in Saudi Arabia is much more likely to accept an unequal role for men and women than a person raised in Denmark, regardless of individual psychological differences, simply because Saudi culture extols and justifies gender inequality, whereas Danish culture extols and justifies gender equality.

The third set of factors that predict conservatism are situational and temporary, and concern fear, insecurity, and anger. In general, events that make people feel threatened, angry, or endangered make them resistant to change and less tolerant of others whom they perceive as different from themselves. In a particularly striking experiment, municipal judges were asked fill out a questionnaire and then decide fines for defendants in hypothetical cases. The questionnaires for half the judges included several questions about the judge's mortality, such as what their body would look like several days after they died. Even though this mortality reminder was never referred to again, and none of the judges reported being upset by the questions, nevertheless judges in the mortality-reminder group imposed fines that were almost 10 times as high as those in the non-mortality-reminder group. Numerous other experiments have shown that reminders of death lead people to defend their own cultural norms and practices more strongly and to be more hostile to those that they perceive as outsiders. This mortality-reminder response doesn't depend on individual traits or ideology. Everyone seems susceptible to this effect, which can cause a shift to the political right when disaster strikes. For example, there was a huge, if temporary, change in political attitudes in the US immediately after 9/11.

To summarize, 60 years of psychological research identifies three sources of liberal/conservative political orientation:

1. Individual psychological traits that seem to be rooted in neurological differences in response to novelty, uncertainty, and threats,
2. Social factors, like ideologies that justify social dominance and oppose social change or vice versa, and
3. Situations that trigger fear or thoughts of death.

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At this point, we can make a good start at explaining the connection between modern art, gun ownership, the minimum wage, and corporal punishment that seemed so bewildering just a few minutes ago. Conservative attitudes towards these things fit together because modern art is distasteful to people who dislike ambiguity, gun ownership is important to people who are fearful, raising the minimum wage threatens the status quo in unpredictable ways, and corporal punishment fits with an ideology that elevates adults over children. Conversely, liberal attitudes towards these things fit together because modern art is fascinating to those comfortable with ambiguity, gun ownership seems like a hobby rather than a vital right to those with little fear of crime, and raising the minimum wage is desirable—and corporal punishment undesirable—to those ideologically opposed to inequality. So do we have now a full explanation of political orientation?

Not according to Jonathan Haidt of the University of Virginia who suggests that the traditional theory of conservatism may be asking the wrong questions about political orientation. Haidt suggests instead that we focus instead on the moral motivations of liberals and conservatives.

For modern moral philosophers, and for most liberals, morality consists of two basic elements: fairness, and compassion. Fairness is expressed in the golden rule—treat others as you should desire to be treated—a principle that is universal throughout history and across the world. Compassion is awareness of the welfare of others, and a commitment to help those in need. For modern western liberals, morality is synonymous with fairness and compassion.

Haidt and his colleagues argue, however, that there are actually five fundamental moral motivations to which we are naturally predisposed. These foundations arose during our evolutionary history and have been important in the majority of cultures throughout history. These foundations are the two already mentioned—fairness and compassion—and three others: group loyalty, respect for authority, and purity or sanctity.

According to Haidt, each of these foundations was adaptive to evolving humans. Group loyalty reflects the tremendous benefits of “belonging to groups while being vigilant about and hostile toward cheaters, slackers, free-riders, and traitors.” Respect for authority arises from the challenge of negotiating one's position in social hierarchies, making it “adaptive for individuals to recognize signs of status, show respect and deference upwards, and offer protection and restraint towards subordinates.” Finally,
purity or sanctity seem connected to the emotion of disgust, which started as a motivation to avoid contaminated food, but gradually began to be applied to selfish or undesirable behavior, and eventually to people and groups that exhibit that behavior. The germ theory of disease developed late in human history, but it has always been adaptive to avoid contact with potential contagion and to value things that are free of biological, social, or moral contamination.

Haidt's theory says that people in all cultures are born with the capacity for virtues based on all five foundations. The first two foundations—fairness and compassion—are observed in all cultures, but modern societies, with their emphasis on autonomy and individualism, have increasingly neglected the other three more traditional foundations.

So, Haidt's proposal is that the basic distinction between liberal and conservative political orientations is between a morality based on the first 2 foundations alone, and a morality based on all 5 foundations. Many conservative positions can be explained by these additional moral foundations. For example, distaste for contemporary art and music may result from group loyalty (valuing the group's traditions), purity (dislike of degrading or sexual art) or authority (fear that subversive art and music encourages rebellion in youth). Conservative opposition to welfare could result from group loyalty (dislike of freeloaders within the group), authority (favoring a hierarchy based on hard work and earned wealth), or fairness (opposing giving something for nothing). Liberal positions on these issues, by contrast, can all be explained by appealing just to fairness and compassion.

Now, some liberals may object at this point that group loyalty, respect for authority, and purity or sanctity aren't moral values it all, but just conventions or, worse, atavisms that we should be working to overcome. However, if you think that your moral sense concerns only fairness and compassion and not group loyalty, respect for authority, and sacredness, ask yourself whether you think that there is anything wrong in the following scenarios:

A war widow is cleaning out her closet, and she finds the American flag that she was sent her husband died in battle. She needs to clean her house, so she cuts it up into pieces and uses the rags to clean her bathtub and toilet.

A family's beloved dog was killed by a car in front of their house. They had heard that dog meat was delicious, so they cut up the dog's body and cooked it and ate it for dinner.

Do these actions really seem O.K. to you? If not, why not? The qualms that almost
everyone feels about these scenarios are hard to justify in terms of fairness or compassion, but make sense in terms of sanctity or sacredness.

Now, some skeptics of Haidt's position may be thinking that this theory of 5 moral fundamentals misses the most important difference between conservatives and liberals which, according to stereotype, is that conservatives are more intolerant, close-minded, and mentally rigid than liberals, and less able to see the world from an alternative moral standpoint.

Haidt was actually able to test this view. Haidt gave participants a questionnaire that measured what factors were relevant to their moral judgments and decisions. As predicted, the answers showed that conservative participants placed less emphasis on fairness and compassion and more emphasis on group loyalty, authority, and purity. However, Haidt also asked the participants how they thought the questionnaire would be answered by someone with the opposite political orientation.

Contrary to stereotypes, liberals were actually less accurate overall than conservatives at this task. Both liberals and conservatives correctly guessed that liberals would place more weight than conservatives on fairness and compassion, whereas conservatives would emphasize the other 3 factors more than liberals. But liberals were inaccurate in guessing that conservatives would place little or no weight on fairness and compassion.

Does this experiment mean that it's actually liberals who suffer most from mental rigidity? No, but it does suggest that when liberals think about conservative positions on such issues as gay marriage, immigration, and stem cell research, they often can't see any moral justifications, so they tend to assume the worst: “that conservatives are motivated by homophobia, racism, xenophobia, and ignorant fear of new technologies.” It may be, as Haidt says, that “liberals don't appreciate the extent to which issues such as gay marriage are morally conflicting for conservatives; it's not that conservatives don't care about fairness and equal rights, it's that they also care about in-group loyalty, traditional family structures, and spiritual purity. Recognizing that conservatives have a variety of moral concerns which liberals do not share and often do not recognize as legitimate can help liberals better understand conservatives and respond to their arguments.”

To recap what I have told you so far, political orientation has both psychological and moral dimensions. The psychological dimension consists of:

• individual differences in reacting to novelty and surprise,
• ideology, and
• situational factors involving fear or thoughts of death.
On the moral dimension, liberals focus primarily on fairness and compassion, while conservatives also emphasize group loyalty, authority, and purity. As a result, liberals often perceive conservative positions as being immoral when in fact they are based on one or more of the 3 more traditional moral foundations.

I'd like to conclude by discussing what the differences between liberals and conservatives identified by social science researchers mean to us as religion liberals. No man (or woman) is an island; we are all of us social creatures, and our perceptions of ourselves and the world are constantly being recalibrated in response to our interactions with others. Part of our adaptation to social life consists of biases that keep us in harmony with our group. One of the most basic discoveries in social psychology is that if you randomly divide people into two groups, make these groups compete with each, then ask members of each group describe their team-mates and their opponents, you will find an almost immediate divergence in perception\textsuperscript{10}. People perceive their team's scores as a matter of skill, and their opponent's as a matter of luck. They perceive their team as playing fairly, and the opponents as cheating. Identical events will appear completely different to members of the different teams, no matter how hard they try to be objective. All these social biases are adaptations to life in the small groups that we human beings lived in as we evolved, but these biases create problems in today's larger societies. Perceptions of contending groups rapidly diverge, and our bias towards adopting our group's beliefs makes it increasingly difficult to understand the actions or beliefs of competing groups.

This trend has been exacerbated in our own society by a demographic trend called the Big Sort by author Bill Bishop\textsuperscript{11} under which people with differing political and social views are increasingly segregated from one another. Whereas liberals and conservatives once lived in the same neighborhoods and attended the same churches and community events, increasingly people associate only with like-minded people. Many studies have shown that groups of people with similar views reach positions that are more extreme than were held by any person individually, whereas in mixed groups the positions become more moderate\textsuperscript{12}. All these trends make it harder for the two competing political clans to cooperate, acknowledge common goals, or even agree on basic facts.

All human beings are inherently moral, but our personal strengths and weaknesses, culture, and circumstances affect the size of our moral circle. For some, the circle of

\textsuperscript{11} Bishop, B. 2008 \textit{The Big Sort}: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America Is Tearing Us Apart, Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
\textsuperscript{12} Sunstein, C. R. 2006 \textit{Infotopia: how Many Minds Produce Knowledge}. Oxford University Press, Inc.
morality includes only their immediate family and friends. For others, the moral giants—perhaps Gandhi, Jesus, the Dalia Lama—this circle is expanded to include all people, or even all living things. Our challenge and struggle as moral agents is to broaden this circle as far as we can, given our inevitable limitations, biases, and weaknesses.

Willfully ignoring the actual values and motives of members of other groups—political as well as national, ethnic, or racial—contracts our moral circle. Political pundits who fabricate false narratives that mislead their listeners or readers about the actual motives and values of those with opposite political orientation, contract our moral circle. Ridiculing and demonizing the views of those with differing political orientation contracts our moral circle. In contrast, recognizing and acknowledging the views and motives of others, even when we don't agree with them, expands the circle.

It is my conviction that each of us has a moral obligation to try to understand the motives and values of those with differing political orientation. Conservatives and liberals are more similar than they imagine, as indeed all people everywhere are more similar than they imagine.

In conclusion, my answer to the question, “What is the real difference between liberals and conservatives?” is that, “In the things that are most important—our essential moral nature and our need for connection to others—we are really not different at all.” I hope that learning about the psychological nature of political orientation and of our own social biases can help us understand and value people with different political views, reach more effective political compromises, and better understand ourselves.