

LETTERS

The Righteous Mind'

April 5, 2012

To the Editor:

In his review of “The Righteous Mind” (March 25), William Saletan describes Jonathan Haidt’s contention that conservatives are morally broader-minded than liberals because conservatives’ themes of faith, patriotism, valor, chastity, and law and order outnumber liberals’ emphases on mere care and fighting oppression. Trouble is, most of these conservative ideals are neutral virtues. What type of faith is valued — that of the Taliban? The raw courage of the 9/11 hijackers, though murderous, was indisputable. And law and order, of course, were important underpinnings of slavery and racial discrimination.

A further problem is that these noble-sounding themes tend to find their widest utility in service of amoral or even immoral political goals. One obvious example: three of the supposed virtues — patriotism, valor, and law and order — were used as justification and rallying points for conservatives in their near-unanimous support for invading and occupying Iraq. Meanwhile, the war’s destructiveness and costly futility were obvious to millions of liberals who, perhaps mindful of their own morality centered on caring, knew that peace was the true patriotic stance.

BRAD BONHALL

Rancho Santa Margarita, Calif.

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To the Editor:

William Saletan’s review of “The Righteous Mind” argues that the Republican Party does not effectively dupe working-class voters because moral tastes play an underappreciated role in decision making. But these claims are not actually incompatible. Elite Republicans began using appeals to social conservatism to attract white working-class voters during the Nixon era. Today, the strategy is basically the same. By exploiting moral instincts around race, sexuality, gender and religion, elite Republicans who are less concerned with these social issues than the rank and file are able to maintain and enhance political — and thus economic — power.

YOSEF BRODY

Paris

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To the Editor:

William Saletan's review is a gullible, shallow and ultimately dangerous attempt to assess the book "The Righteous Mind" — and I can say that confidently without having ever laid eyes on that book or any portion thereof. My criticism is entirely based on numerous bits of reasoning that would not pass scrutiny in a freshman English course.

For example, Saletan writes: "In the West, we think morality is all about harm, rights, fairness and consent. Does the guy own the chicken? Is the dog already dead? Is the sister of legal age?" These sound more like issues of law than morality, but certainly the question of whether someone is of legal age is exclusively a question of law and not morality.

Saletan asserts: "The Tea Party hates redistribution because it interferes with letting people reap what they earn" without questioning whether the Tea Party (as if it were a unified whole) might think it "hates redistribution" because some powerful people with an ulterior motive have deliberately whipped up the emotions of citizens whose last thought in the world would, without the incitement, have ever been anything remotely related to the morality of redistribution.

And how would Saletan have the slightest idea of the distinction between what the Tea Party says it hates and what it actually hates (even if we ignore the fact that it is not a unified whole)? It is a political entity, and it is never safe to presume to believe the words of a political entity.

Saletan asserts, regarding evolutionary traits that are maladaptive in today's world: "A pure scientist would let us purge these traits from the gene pool by fighting and killing one another." Does Saletan have even the vaguest idea of what science is and what scientists do? If he had, he would never have made such an outrageous claim.

These constitute only a small sampling of the nonsense that is spread throughout the review.

DANIEL ASIMOV

Berkeley, Calif.

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To the Editor:

There's something I'm not getting either about "The Righteous Mind" or William Saletan's review of it. Saletan writes, "Another aspect of human nature that conservatives understand better than liberals, according to Haidt, is . . . that saving Darfur, submitting to the United Nations and paying taxes to educate children in another state may be noble, but they aren't natural."

I thought that human nature — a philosophical and not a scientific concept — included the sum of all human qualities and capacities that all humans share. In that case, cannibalism and altruism are equally illustrative of human nature, as are the attitudes of liberals who want to save Darfur as well as those of the conservatives who apparently don't.

Indeed, in earlier times, as Haidt seems to read matters, "human nature" didn't include such noble but "unnatural" yearnings as the desire for political democracy, either.

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