

Why *The Righteous Mind* may be the most helpful book for Incoming College Students
by Jonathan Haidt

Americans have long known that they have racial, ethnic, class, and partisan divides. But the 2016 presidential election has forced all of us to recognize that these gaps may be far larger, more numerous, and more dangerous than we thought. Americans are not just failing to meet each other and know each other. Increasingly, we hate each other—particularly across the partisan divide.

Hatred and mistrust damage democracy, and they can seep onto campus and distort academic life as well. In these politically passionate times, and with all students immersed in social media, it's no wonder that students, as well as faculty, often say that they are walking on eggshells—fearful of offending anyone by offering a provocative argument or by choosing the wrong word.

If you could pick one book that all incoming college students should read together—one book that would explain what is happening and promote discussion about how to bridge these divisions, what would it be?

My suggestion—*The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion*.

Here's why:

1) *The Righteous Mind is non-partisan, and teaches cross-partisan respect.*

I'm a social psychologist who has studied moral and political psychology for thirty years. I first began research for *The Righteous Mind* in 2004, motivated in part by a desire to help progressives do a better job of connecting with American moral values. But after immersing myself in the writings of all sides and doing my best to find the good on all sides, I became a non-partisan centrist. As I show clearly in my book, the three major philosophical camps—left, right, and libertarian—are each the guardians of deep truths about how to have a humane and flourishing society. I treat all sides fairly and respectfully and help students to step out of their “moral matrix” in order to appreciate the ways that ideological teams distort thinking, and blind us to the motives and insights of others.

2) *The Righteous Mind makes big ideas accessible to eighteen-year-olds.*

The Righteous Mind takes students on a tour of the history of life, from bacteria through the present day, explaining the origins of cooperation and human “ultra-sociality.” I explain what morality is, how it evolves—both biologically and culturally—and why it differs across societies and centuries. The book explores the fundamentals of social and cognitive psychology to explain why people are so susceptible to “fake news,” or anything else that offers to confirm our pre-existing

judgments. In short, it is a book about some of the biggest and most pressing questions addressed by scholars today. This is why the *New York Times Book Review* hailed it as “A landmark contribution to humanity’s understanding of itself.”

The Righteous Mind has been widely praised by reviewers on the left *and* the right, many of whom noted that the book conveys the grandest ideas in language that makes it fun and easy to read.

From the left, *The Guardian* (UK) said: “What makes the book so compelling is the fluid combination of erudition and entertainment.”

From the right, *The American Conservative* said: “The author is that rare academic who presents complex ideas in a comprehensible manner.”

3) **The Righteous Mind links together most of the academy.**

Like sexuality, morality is too multifaceted to fit within a single department, and I have drawn on scholarship from across the social sciences, humanities, and natural sciences. *The Righteous Mind* is one of the most interdisciplinary, trade books in recent decades, making it ideal as a common reading that professors across the university will be able to draw on. Students will be thrilled to find so many links among their classes—they’ll see that knowledge is often unified, and that the insights from each field often complement those of others.

This table shows which disciplines are drawn on to a substantial degree in each of the three parts of the book:

	Part I	Part II	Part III
Social Sciences:			
Psychology	+	+	+
Anthropology	+	+	+
Sociology		+	+
Political Science		+	+
Humanities:			
Philosophy	+	+	+
English/Rhetoric	+		
Religion			+
Natural Sciences:			
Biology (Neuroscience)	+		+
Biology (Evolution)		+	+

4) The Righteous Mind comes with lots of supporting materials.

I maintain and update regularly a website for the book: ***RighteousMind.com***. The site has a tab of materials labeled “Applying Moral Psych.” There you’ll find a page of resources specifically for professors who are using the book in class. The page has links to videos to show with each chapter, links to projects, and videos created by students. It also has links to research sites, such as *YourMorals.org*, where students can obtain their own scores on the “Moral Foundations Questionnaire.”

5) The Righteous Mind will make all other conflicts on campus more tractable.

In a time of rising conflict and tension on many campuses, *The Righteous Mind* will calm things down and teach students skills they can use to engage in difficult conversations. As I write in the introduction:

Etiquette books tell us not to discuss [politics and religion] in polite company, but I say go ahead. Politics and religion are both expressions of our underlying moral psychology, and an understanding of that psychology can help to bring people together. My goal in this book is to drain some of the heat, anger, and divisiveness out of these topics and replace them with a mixture of awe, wonder, and curiosity.

There is no better way to prepare for discussions of race, gender, climate change, politics, or any other potentially controversial topic than to start your students’ college experience by assigning *The Righteous Mind* as the “common reading” to your incoming class.