“Can we all get along?” That appeal was made famous on May 1, 1992, by Rodney King, a black
man who had been beaten nearly to death by four Los Angeles police officers a year earlier. The
entire nation had seen a videotape of the beating, so when a jury failed to convict the officers,
their acquittal triggered widespread outrage and six days of rioting in Los Angeles. Fifty three
people were killed and more than seven thousand buildings were torched. Much of the mayhem
was carried live by news cameras from helicopters circling overhead. After a particularly horrific
act of violence against a white truck driver, King was moved to make his appeal for peace.

King’s appeal is now so overused that it has become cultural kitsch, a catch phrase more often
said for laughs then as a serious plea for mutual understanding. I therefore hesitated to use
King’s words as the opening line of this book, but I decided to go ahead, for two reasons. First,
because most Americans nowadays are asking King’s question, not about race relations but about
political relations and the collapse of cooperation across party lines. Many Americans feel as
though the nightly news from Washington is sent to us from helicopters circling over the city–
dispatches from the war zone.

The second reason I decided to open this book with an overused phrase is because King followed
it up with something lovely, something rarely quoted. As he stumbled through his television
interview, fighting back tears and often repeating himself, he found these words: “Please, we can
get along here. We all can get along. I mean, we’re all stuck here for a while. Let’s try to work it
out.”

This book is about why it’s so hard for us to get along. We are indeed all stuck here for a while,
so while we’re waiting, let’s at least try to understand why we are so easily divided into hostile
groups, each one certain of its righteousness.

*   *   *   *

People who devote their lives to studying something often come to believe that the object of their
fascination is the key to understanding everything. Books have been published in recent years on
the transformative role in human history played by cooking, mothering, war . . . even salt. This is
one of those books. I study moral psychology, and I’m going to make the case that morality is
the extraordinary human capacity that made civilization possible. I don’t mean to imply that
cooking, mothering, war, and salt were not also necessary, but in this book I’m going to take you
on a tour of human nature and history from the perspective of moral psychology.

By the end of the tour, I hope to have given you a new way to think about two of the most
important, vexing, and divisive topics in human life: politics and religion. Etiquette books tell us
not to discuss these topics 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.
We are downright lucky that we evolved this complex moral psychology that allowed our species
to burst out of the forests and savannas, and into the delights, comforts, and extraordinary
peacefulness of modern societies in just the last few thousand years. My hope is that this book will make conversations about morality, politics, and religion more common, more civil, and more fun, even in mixed company. My hope is that it will help us to get along.

*Born to Be Righteous*

I could have titled this book *The Moral Mind* to convey the sense that the human mind is designed to “do” morality, just as it’s designed to do language, sexuality, music, and many other things described in popular books reporting the latest scientific findings. But I chose the title *The Righteous Mind* to convey the sense that human nature is not just intrinsically moral, it’s also intrinsically moralistic, critical, and judgmental.

The word *righteous* comes from the old Norse word *rettviss* and the old English word *rihtwis*, both of which meant “just, upright, virtuous.” This meaning has been carried into the modern English words *righteous* and *righteousness*, although nowadays those words have strong religious connotations because they are usually used to translate the Hebrew word *tzedek*. *Tzedek* is a common word in the Old Testament, often used to describe people who act in accordance with God’s wishes, but it is also an attribute of God and of God’s judgment of people (which is often harsh but always thought to be just).

The linkage of righteousness and judgmentalism is captured in some modern definitions of *righteous*, such as “arising from an outraged sense of justice, morality, or fair play.” The link also appears in the term *self-righteous*, which means “convinced of one’s own righteousness, especially in contrast with the actions and beliefs of others; narrowly moralistic and intolerant.” I want to show you that an obsession with righteousness (leading inevitably to self-righteousness) is the normal human condition. It is a feature of our evolutionary design, not a bug or error that crept into minds that would otherwise be objective and rational.

Our righteous minds made it possible for human beings—but no other animals—to produce large cooperative groups, tribes, and nations without the glue of kinship. But at the same time, our righteous minds guarantee that our cooperative groups will always be cursed by moralistic strife. Some degree of conflict among groups may even be necessary for the health and development of any society. When I was a teenager I wished for world peace, but now I yearn for a world in which competing ideologies are kept in balance, systems of accountability keep us all from getting away with too much, and fewer people believe that righteous ends justify violent means. Not a very romantic wish, but one that we might actually achieve.

*What Lies Ahead*

This book has three parts which you can think of as three separate books, except that each one depends heavily on the one before it. Each part presents one major principle of moral psychology.
Part I is about the first principle: *intuitions come first, strategic reasoning second.* Moral
intuitions arise automatically and almost instantaneously, long before moral reasoning has a
chance to get started, and those first intuitions tend to drive our later reasoning. If you think that
moral reasoning is something we do to figure out the truth, you’ll be constantly frustrated by
how foolish, biased, and illogical people become when they disagree with you. But if you think
about moral reasoning as a skill we humans evolved to further our social agendas—to justify our
own actions and to defend the teams we belong to—then things will make a lot more sense. Keep
your eye on the intuitions, and don’t take people’s moral arguments at face value. They’re
mostly post-hoc constructions made up on the fly, crafted to advance one or more strategic
objectives.

The central metaphor of these four chapters is that *the mind is divided, like a rider on an
elephant, and the rider’s job is to serve the elephant.* The rider is our conscious reasoning—the
stream of words and images that hogs the stage of our awareness. The elephant is the other 99
percent of mental processes—the ones that occur outside of awareness but that actually govern
most of our behavior. I developed this metaphor in my last book, *The Happiness Hypothesis*,
where I described how the rider and elephant work together, sometimes poorly, as we stumble
through life in search of meaning and connection. In this book I’ll use the metaphor to solve
puzzles such as why it seems like everyone (else) is a hypocrite and why political partisans are
so willing to believe outrageous lies and conspiracy theories. I’ll also use the metaphor to show
you how you can better persuade people who seem unresponsive to reason.

Part II is about the second principle of moral psychology, which is that *there’s more to morality
than harm and fairness.* The central metaphor of these four chapters is *that the righteous mind is
like a tongue with six taste receptors.* Secular Western moralities are like cuisines that try to
activate just one or two of these receptors—either concerns about harm and suffering, or
concerns about fairness and injustice. But people have so many other powerful moral intuitions,
such as those related to liberty, loyalty, authority, and sanctity. I’ll explain where these six taste
receivers come from, how they form the basis of the world’s many moral cuisines, and why
politicians on the right have a built-in advantage when it comes to cooking meals that voters like.

Part III is about the third principle: *morality binds and blinds.* The central metaphor of these four
chapters is *that human beings are 90 percent chimp and 10 percent bee.* Human nature was
produced by natural selection working at two levels simultaneously. Individuals compete with
individuals within every group, and we are the descendants of primates who excelled at that
competition. This gives us the ugly side of our nature, the one that is usually featured in books
about our evolutionary origins. We are indeed selfish hypocrites so skilled at putting on a show
of virtue that we fool even ourselves.

But human nature was also shaped as groups competed with other groups. As Darwin said long
ago, the most cohesive and cooperative groups generally beat the groups of selfish individualists.
Darwin’s ideas about group selection fell out of favor in the 1960s, but recent discoveries are
putting his ideas back into play, and the implications are profound. We’re not always selfish
hypocrites. We also have the ability, under special circumstances, to shut down our petty selves
and become like cells in a larger body, or like bees in a hive, working for the good of the group.
These experiences are often among the most cherished of our lives, although our hivishness can
blind us to other moral concerns. Our bee-like nature facilitates altruism, heroism, war, and genocide.

Once you see our righteous minds as primate minds with a hivish overlay, you get a whole new perspective on morality, politics, and religion. I’ll show that our “higher nature” allows us to be profoundly altruistic, but that altruism is mostly aimed at members of our groups. I’ll show that religion is (probably) an evolutionary adaptation for binding groups together and helping them to create communities with a shared morality. It is not a virus or parasite, as some scientists (the “new atheists”) have argued in recent years. And I’ll use this perspective to explain why some people are conservative, others are liberal (or progressive), and still others become libertarians. People bind themselves into political teams that share moral narratives. Once they accept a particular narrative, they become blind to alternative moral worlds.

(A note on terminology: In the United States the word liberal refers to progressive or left-wing politics, and I will use the word in this sense. But in Europe and elsewhere the word liberal is truer to its original meaning—valuing liberty above all else, including in economic activities. When Europeans use the word liberal, they often mean something more like the American term libertarian, which cannot be placed easily on the left-right spectrum. Readers from outside the United States may want to swap in the words progressive or left-wing whenever I say liberal.)

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In the coming chapters I’ll draw on the latest research in neuroscience, genetics, social psychology, and evolutionary modeling, but the take-home message of the book is ancient. It is one of the Great Truths found in most of the world’s wisdom traditions. It begins with the realization that we are all self-righteous hypocrites:

Why do you see the speck in your neighbor’s eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye? . . . You hypocrite, first take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor’s eye. (Matthew 7:3–5)

It continues with the claim that enlightenment (or wisdom, if you prefer) requires us all to take the logs out of our own eyes and then escape from our ceaseless, petty, and divisive moralism. As the eighth-century Chinese Zen master Sen-ts’an wrote:

*The Perfect Way is only difficult
for those who pick and choose;
Do not like, do not dislike;
all will then be clear.
Make a hairbreadth difference,
and Heaven and Earth are set apart;
If you want the truth to stand clear before you,
never be for or against.
The struggle between “for” and “against”
is the mind’s worst disease.*
I’m not saying we should live our lives like Sen-ts’an. In fact, I believe that a world without moralism, gossip, and judgment would quickly decay into chaos. But if we want to understand ourselves, our divisions, our limits, and our potentials, we need to step back, drop the moralism, apply some moral psychology, and analyze the game we’re all playing.

Let us now examine the psychology of this struggle between “for” and “against.” It is a struggle that plays out in each of our righteous minds, and among all of our righteous groups.