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What the Tea Partiers Really Want

The passion behind the populist insurgency is less about liberty than a particularly American idea of karma.

By JONATHAN HAIDT

What do the tea partiers really want? The title of a recent book by two of the movement's leaders offers an answer: "Give Us Liberty: A Tea Party Manifesto." The authors, Dick Armey and Matt Kibbe, write that "We just want to be free. Free to lead our lives as we please, so long as we do not infringe on the same freedom of others."



Photo Illustration by CJ Burton for The Wall Street Journal

This claim should cause liberals to do a double-take. Isn't it straight out of John Stuart Mill, the patron saint of liberalism? Last year my colleagues and I placed a nearly identical statement on our research site, YourMorals.org: "Everyone should be free to do as they choose, so long as they don't infringe upon the equal freedom of others." Responses from 3,600 Americans showed that self-described libertarians agreed with the statement most strongly, but liberals were right behind them. Social conservatives, who, according to national polls, make up the bulk of the tea party, were more tepid in their endorsement.

Because a generalized love of liberty doesn't distinguish tea partiers from other Americans, liberals have been free to speculate on the "real" motives behind the movement. Explanations so far have spanned a rather narrow range, from racism (they're all white!) to greed (they just don't want to pay taxes!) to gullibility (Glenn Beck has hypnotized them!). Such explanations allow liberals to disregard the moral claims of tea partiers. But the passion of the tea-party movement is, in fact, a

moral passion. It can be summarized in one word: not liberty, but karma.

The notion of karma comes with lots of new-age baggage, but it is an old and very conservative idea. It is the Sanskrit word for "deed" or "action," and the law of karma says that for every action, there is an equal and morally commensurate reaction. Kindness, honesty and hard work will (eventually) bring good fortune; cruelty, deceit and laziness will (eventually) bring suffering. No divine intervention is required; it's just a law of the universe, like gravity.

Karma is not an exclusively Hindu idea. It combines the universal human desire that moral accounts should be balanced with a belief that, somehow or other, they will be balanced. In 1932, the great developmental psychologist Jean Piaget found that by the age of 6, children begin to believe that bad things that happen to them are punishments for bad things they have done.

To understand the anger of the tea-party movement, just imagine how you would feel if you learned that

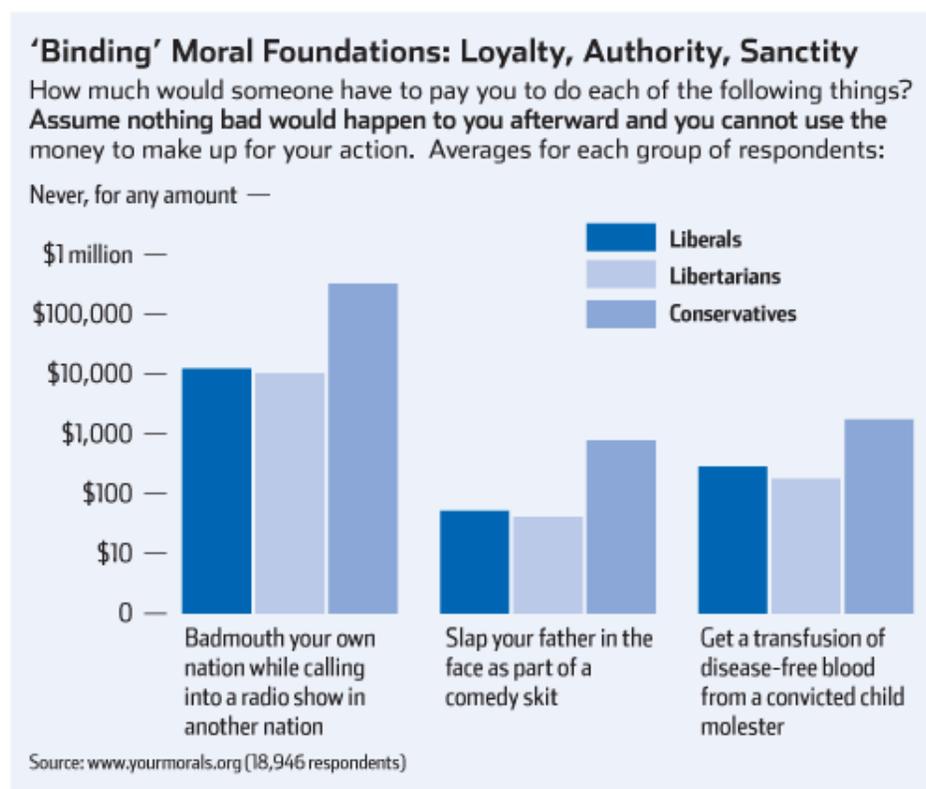
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government physicists were building a particle accelerator that might, as a side effect of its experiments, nullify the law of gravity. Everything around us would float away, and the Earth itself would break apart. Now, instead of that scenario, suppose you learned that politicians were devising policies that might, as a side effect of their enactment, nullify the law of karma. Bad deeds would no longer lead to bad outcomes, and the fragile moral order of our nation would break apart. For tea partiers, this scenario is not science fiction. It is the last 80 years of American history.

In the tea partiers' scheme of things, the federal government got into the business of protecting the American people—from market fluctuations as well as from their own bad decisions—under Franklin D. Roosevelt. During the Great Depression, most Americans recognized that capitalism required safety nets here and there. But Lyndon Johnson's effort to build the Great Society, and particularly welfare programs that reduced the incentives for work and marriage among the poor, went much further.



Liberals in the 1960s and 1970s seemed intent on protecting people from the punitive side of karma. Premarital sex was separated from its consequences (by birth control, abortion and more permissive norms); bearing children out of wedlock was made affordable (by passing costs on to taxpayers); even violent crime was partially shielded from punishment (by liberal reforms that aimed to protect defendants and limit the powers of the police).

Now jump ahead to today's ongoing financial and economic crisis.

Again, those guilty of corruption and irresponsibility have escaped the consequences of their wrongdoing, rescued first by President Bush and then by President Obama. Bailouts and bonuses sent unimaginable sums of the taxpayers' money to the very people who brought calamity upon the rest of us. Where is punishment for the wicked?

As the tea partiers see it, the positive side of karma has been weakened, too. The Protestant work ethic (karma's Christian cousin) holds that hard work is a duty and will bring commensurate rewards. Yet here, too, liberals have long been uncomfortable with karma, because even when you create equal opportunity, differences in talent and effort result in unequal outcomes. These inequalities must then be reduced by progressive taxation, affirmative action and other heavy-handed government intervention. Such social engineering violates our liberty, but most of us accept limitations on our liberty when we agree with the goals and motives behind the rules, such as during air travel. For the tea partiers, federal activism has become a moral insult. They believe that, over time, the government has made a concerted effort to subvert the law of karma.

Listen, for example, to Rick Santelli's "rant heard 'round the world" on CNBC last year and its most famous lines: "The government is promoting bad behavior," and "How many of you people want to pay for your neighbors' mortgage that has an extra bathroom and can't pay their bills?" It's a rant about karma, not liberty.

Or look at the political issue that most enraged the early tea partiers. Messrs. Armev and Kibbe state

categorically that it was not Mr. Obama's stimulus bill that turned millions into activists; it was Mr. Bush's bank bailout. "Many of us knew instinctually that the bailout was wrong," they write. "We understood that in order for capitalism to work we need to be able to not only keep the potential gains from the risks we take but also accept the losses that may come." This is capitalist karma in a nutshell.



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A rally organized by radio and TV commentator Glenn Beck in August.

One of the biggest disagreements between the political left and right is their conflicting notions of fairness. Across many surveys and experiments, we find that liberals think about fairness in terms of equality, whereas conservatives think of it in terms of karma. In our survey for [YourMorals.org](#), we asked Americans how much they agreed with a variety of statements about fairness and liberty, including this one: "Ideally, everyone in society would end up with roughly the same amount of money." Liberals were evenly divided on it, but conservatives and libertarians firmly rejected it.

On more karmic notions of fairness, however, conservatives and libertarians begin to split apart. Here's a statement about the positive side of karma: "Employees who work the hardest should

be paid the most." Everyone agrees, but conservatives agree more enthusiastically than liberals and libertarians, whose responses were identical.

And here's a statement about the negative side of karma: "Whenever possible, a criminal should be made to suffer in the same way that his victim suffered." Liberals reject this harsh notion, and libertarians mildly reject it. But conservatives are slightly positive about it.

The tea party is often said to be a mixture of conservative and libertarian ideals. But in a [study](#) of 152,000 people who filled out surveys at [YourMorals.org](#), led by my colleague Ravi Iyer of the University of Southern California, we found that libertarians are morally a bit more similar to liberals than to conservatives.

Libertarians are closer to conservatives on two of the five main psychological "foundations" of morality that we study—concerns about care and fairness (as described above). But on the other three psychological foundations—group loyalty, respect for authority and spiritual sanctity—libertarians are indistinguishable from liberals and far apart from conservatives. We call these the three "binding" foundations because they are the psychological systems used by groups—including religious groups, the military and even college fraternities—to bind people together into tight communities of trust, cooperation and shared identity. When you think about morality as a way of binding individuals together, it's no wonder that libertarians (who prize individual liberty above all else) part company with conservatives.

To see this divergence in action, ask yourself how much somebody would have to pay you (in secret) to get you to do things that violate one of the three group-oriented moral foundations—that is, those based on loyalty, authority and sanctity. We asked people, for example, to name their price to "Say something bad about your nation (which you don't believe to be true) while calling in, anonymously, to a talk-radio show in a foreign nation."

As shown in the graph, conservatives were far more horrified than the other groups by this act of petty treason. The same goes for this minor act of disrespect toward authority: "Slap your father in the face (with his permission) as part of a comedy skit," and for this harmless desecration of the body: "Get a blood transfusion of 1 pint of disease-free, compatible blood from a convicted child molester." (Sanctity refers to the belief that things have invisible spiritual essences—the body is a temple, the flag is far more than a piece of cloth, etc.)

To see the full spectrum of tea party morality in a single case, consider (or better still, Google) a transcript on Glenn Beck's website titled "Best caller ever?," which relates one man's moment of enlightenment. The exchange, which aired live in late September, starts with karmic outrage. A father in Indiana, proud of his daughter's work ethic and high grades, learned that she would have to retake a social studies test because most of the students—who, he says, run around after school instead of studying—had failed it. The teacher confirmed that

yes, the whole class would have to take the test several more times because "we have to wait for the other children to catch up." The father asked if his daughter could work on new material while the other kids retook the test. The teacher said no, it would "make the other children in the class feel not as equal." That was the last straw. At that moment, the father says, he rejected "the system" and decided to home-school his daughter.



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Photo By Tom Williams/Roll Call via Getty Images)

A tea partier at the Taxpayer March on Sept. 12.

What makes this call so revealing is the caller's diagnosis of how America became the land that karma forgot: "It's time for America to get right, and it all starts in the home. It comes from yes, sir, no, ma'am, thank you, get on your knees and pray to God." He continues by telling Mr. Beck how, when his daughter's friends sleep over at his house, he asks them to help with chores. When their parents object, he tells them: "Well, they wanted a meal. See, we've all got to row our boat. We've all got to be in the boat. We've all got to row as one. And if you are not going to row, get the hell out of the way or stop getting in mine." It's the perfect fusion of karmic thinking and conservative binding.

The tea-party movement is a blend of libertarians and conservatives, but it is far from an equal blend, and it's not clear how long it can stay blended. The movement is partially funded and trained by libertarian and pro-business groups—such as FreedomWorks, the organization run by Messrs. Armey and Kibbe—whose main concern is increasing economic liberty. They may indeed "just want to be free," particularly from regulation and taxes, but the social conservatives who make up the great bulk of the movement have much broader aims.

The rank-and-file tea partiers think that liberals turned America upside down in the 1960s and 1970s, and they want to reverse many of those changes. They are patriotic and religious, and they want to see those values woven into their children's education. Above all, they want to live in a country in which hard work and personal responsibility pay off and laziness, cheating and irresponsibility bring people to ruin. Give them liberty, sure, but more than that: Give them karma.

—Jonathan Haidt is a professor of psychology at the University of Virginia. He is the author of "The Happiness Hypothesis" and "The Righteous Mind: Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion," which will be published late next year.

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