

## Taboos Handout

I became interested in this subject when I started reading and thinking about the differences between conservatives and liberals in several politically oriented 5CLIR seminars. By certain models, the Venn diagram of belief systems among libertarian liberal and conservative, and authoritarian liberal and conservative makes up the **political compass**. There are clear differences in how each group defines itself, ranging from the “live and let live” philosophy of libertarians to those comforted with strict guardrails of behavior set forth by authoritarian leaders. This exploration of the compass led to further reading in sociology and essays about different moral codes that best exemplify each of these groups.

Taboos, by virtue of the fact that they offer a detailed look at the society and moral code in which they exist, offer a great window into a deeper examination of our moral codes. Are we bound by the same beliefs about what is taboo as our fellow human beings? Do the left and right agree on how our moral codes should take precedence in society and in our daily lives? It turns out, not very much (left and right are really mostly about our economic views, not our social beliefs). Jonathan Haidt argues convincingly in his essays and books that conservatives and liberals differ, sometimes markedly, in the moral values they hold dearest. I am optimistic that thinking about these distinctions will lead to an enrichment of our political discourse with a deeper awareness of human nature.

Taboos are interesting. They directly relate to a human emotion, disgust, which is much less written about and examined than some other emotions (jealousy and anger come to mind). Many taboos directly relate to our bodily functions and most basic behaviors (e.g. sexuality); some others relate to cohesion or exclusion of groups (e.g. dietary laws) and still others to something akin to universal or near-universal agreement (incest, treatment of the dead). By first examining disgust, the political compass and the elements of human moral foundations, we can then explore taboos as a direct reflection of what we value, what we disparage or recoil from, and what is most important to us.

**My hope is that this seminar serves to enlighten us about the moral intuitions of other people.** Do we value responsibility, patriotism and family stability over other values, and believe that people reap what they earn? Or do we value care for others, multiculturalism and fighting oppression above all, and leveling the playing field? These might be political attributes, or simply different value systems.

By examining taboos in the West and elsewhere, we will explore what moral attributes are served by each. We will read and discuss what the emotion we name disgust really means in our lives, and how we deal with it. We'll look closely at how certain moral foundations reflect our choices about behavior and rules.

Our introductory week we'll read and discuss an interesting essay about disgust, and begin a way to talk about morality with a common language. Participants will choose an area of taboos they'd like to explore from a list of 15 or so, such as dietary laws, incest, or hygiene, and present

a short summary (history, details about the taboo, rationale, where practiced etc) to the group. Discussions as a group will be at least half of every meeting, and will focus on the connection between these taboos and what moral, economic, social or political value might be emphasized by forbidding the particular action. We'll try to utilize the political compass to help us situate certain behaviors and actions within a larger framework. We will find out where we are ourselves situated on the compass, and what values we emphasize in our worldview, and which moral values and taboos resonate with us.