

personal and social responsibility.

The conservative moral system centers on the well-being system—on personal responsibility alone, on serving your own interests without depending on the empathy of others to take care of you and without having empathy and responsibility for others.

There are nuances, but this gets at the heart of the difference.

Empathy versus Sympathy

Empathy and sympathy both involve the capacity to know what others are feeling. But unlike empathy, sympathy involves distancing, overriding personal emotional feeling. Someone who is sympathetic may well act to relieve the pain of others but not feel the pain themselves. The word “compassion” can be used for either empathy or sympathy, depending on who is using the word. For example, George W. Bush, in first announcing his run for the presidency, called himself a “compassionate” conservative, citing the book by Marvin Olasky, *The Tragedy of American Compassion*.

Olasky and Bush’s take on compassion and conservatism point to a central difference between progressives and conservatives. Progressives tend to believe that society as a whole has a responsibility to aid those in real material need and that the government should be a major instrument, with support from taxes. Conservatives tend to prefer charity, delivered through nongovernmental organizations, and tend to believe that real help for most people in material need is a refusal of aid, to give them an incentive to help themselves. Hence the conservative motto: It is better to teach someone to fish than to give him a fish to eat. Incidentally, charity for the “deserving” few costs a lot less than taxes to provide resources for the benefit of all.

This dichotomy leads to two very different ideas of what an ideal person should be like, and how our politics should be arranged to produce a version of the ideal person with the “right” moral system, whether purely conservative, purely progressive, or the right combination of the two.

Reflexivity and Personhood