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The elephant in the room: Righteous minds and cosmopolitan communication

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1. *The righteous mind* proposal

It was only a passing comment. A group of students in a “Wearable Technologies” class at Syracuse University’s Collaboration Laboratory (or COLAB) were critiquing each other’s ideas on how to use technology to extend the reach of the human body. One of the ideas suggested was met with the response, “That’s so gay.” An awkward silence fell, then someone offered that such a statement might be offensive to some; others disagreed, dismissing the concern as political correctness. Their professor suggested they get back to the task at hand, and they did. But the awkwardness continued.

After the meeting, two of the group members, Lily Chong and Matt Kalish, talked about what happened. They had been thinking about an interactive toy project, something along the lines of stuffed tigers whose eyes light up when their paws are held. The awkward group situation shifted their thinking. Instead of tigers, they focused on elephants. Maybe the presence of elephants-in-the-room would help people talk through difficult group dynamics they might otherwise skirt or leave unsaid. So Kalish and Chong created prototypes of stuffed elephants embedded with wireless chips which light up the eyes of all the elephants around the table when any one person squeezes their elephant for more than three seconds. When elephant eyes light up, everyone knows that something has happened that needs to be addressed. No one would know who actually squeezed the elephant, enabling someone who might not otherwise speak up to draw attention to an issue in the group’s dynamics.

In *The Righteous Mind*, psychologist Jonathan Haidt (2012) uses as one of his central metaphors, the image of a rider on an elephant, to explain how humans become so self-righteous in defending their political views. Haidt believes that our moral judgments are largely intuitive, or as he puts it “intuitions come first, then strategic reasoning.” In his metaphor, the elephant represents our intuitive feelings about moral issues while the rider represents the strategic reasoning we create in support of the elephant’s intuitions. In other words, as riders we typically imagine ourselves to be in charge of our own behavior, not realizing that we are just doing the elephant’s bidding. For Haidt, one reason we become so easily frustrated and angry with each other when discussing politics is our failure to realize the extent to which we are all “born to be righteous.” Our human nature, says Haidt, “is not just intrinsically moral, it’s also intrinsically moralistic, critical, and judgmental (Haidt, 2012, p.xix). Knowing

this, he says, should provoke awe, wonder, and curiosity about how the righteous mind works and maybe, just maybe, turn down the heat a notch.

So, in the spirit of the design students mentioned earlier, we want to explore in this essay how we might collectively draw attention to the elephants-in-the-room when we get into our next heated conversation about politics.

Three principles of moral psychology

So, let's take a closer look at how this all works, according to Haidt. He cites three major principles of moral psychology at work here and proposes an appropriate metaphor for each:

Principle 1: *Intuitions come first, strategic reasoning second.*

Metaphor: This is the rider on the elephant mentioned above. The elephant is that dominant and unconscious part of us that relies on our body's senses and feelings to intuit what to do in a given situation. The job of the rider (our conscious reasoning) is not to steer, but to "lean in the direction" the elephant wants to go and provide a rationale for going that way. In effect, the rider is the elephant's public relations agent.

Principle 2: *There's more to morality than harm and fairness.*

Metaphor: think of the mind as a tongue with six taste receptors. According to Haidt, liberals tend to use only three of these taste receptors, *harm/suffering*, *justice/fairness*, and *liberty/oppression*. Conservatives, on the other hand, tend to draw on all six receptors, but lean heavily on four of them: *liberty/freedom*, *loyalty to tribe*, *authority*, and *sanctity/cleanliness/disgust*. Haidt identifies an evolutionary basis for all six receptors being sources of morality for human beings.

Principle 3: *Morality binds and blinds.*

Metaphor: human beings are 90% chimp and 10% bee. The chimp in us is the individual selected by evolution for excelling at competition. The bee represents the fact that nature also selected on the basis of groups that were better at cooperation and thus survived over groups that failed at cooperating. As chimps who often proceed blindly, we are "selfish hypocrites so skilled at putting on a show of virtue that we fool even ourselves" (Haidt, p. xxii). This is perhaps our "lower nature." As social bees, we occasionally provide a glimpse of our "higher nature," our capacity for profound acts of altruism that bind us together. The catch here is that our normal modes of altruism are usually aimed at, you guessed it, those who happen to be part of our own tribe.

A key take-away for enabling us to work through issues that divide us politically and religiously is to remind ourselves repeatedly that we are all self-righteous hypocrites. With that understanding of our nature as a starting point, we should not be surprised when others seem blind to how self-righteous they are, and we should at least recognize that we aren't any better at the game. Applying just a smidgeon of curiosity about all this, maybe we cut the other some slack. As Haidt has pointed out, we certainly give ourselves plenty of slack.

Haidt's book is interesting in so many ways. He takes the reader through the trajectory of his own research in which time after time his research participants made quick moral judgments about lots of different social scenarios and then tried, often in vain, to articulate reasons for why they thought they were right. Many times, they stuck with their initial moral judgment even when challenged and they were forced to agree that the reasons they gave in support of that judgment were weak or unfounded. He also shows how what is considered moral varies widely by culture, leading him to conclude that "We're born to be righteous, but we have to learn what, exactly, people like us should be righteous about" (Haidt, p. 31).

Haidt turns to a discussion of how we try to persuade each other of our righteous judgments. We do it backwards, he suggests. We try to use reasoning, which appeals to the rider but ignores the elephant altogether. Our best strategy, he says, is to "talk to their elephants." Try "to elicit new intuitions, not new rationales" (p. 57). How do we do that? Haidt turns to an unusual source, Dale Carnegie, author of the 1936 book *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. Carnegie told his readers to avoid confrontations and instead to smile, be a good listener, convey warmth and respect, and most importantly, to see things from the other person's angle as well as your own. In other words, he was suggesting we empathize with the other in all the richness that term suggests. "Empathy is an antidote to righteousness, although it's very difficult to empathize across a moral divide" (Haidt, p. 58). Thus, we need to move away from rationale arguments about what divides us and talk to each other's elephants instead. His suggestion is to discover and explore the feelings of fear, disgust, disrespect, loss of freedom, injustice or harm (remember the six taste receptors) that are driving the elephant's behavior.

Even as Haidt emphasizes the intuitive and unconscious aspects of our behavior, he sees value in the role that social interaction can play. "We make our first judgments rapidly, and we are dreadful at seeking evidence that might disconfirm those initial judgments. Yet friends can do for us what we cannot do for ourselves: they can challenge us, giving us reasons and arguments that sometimes trigger new intuitions, thereby making it possible for us to change our minds" (p. 55). This implies that when

we encourage our riders to speak, we should push for a broader discussion of the morals that the elephant intuitively feels. So, let's look at the six moral foundations available to us.

Six taste receptors of morality

Based on his own research and that of others, Haidt identified six moral foundations that evolved during the earliest years of human history. He explains the context within which each moral foundation evolved and what the original triggers were. Today's triggers may be different, but these six moral intuitions still drive much of our elephant behavior. We each draw on some foundations more than others, and in different ways. Speaking to the elephant requires a rich understanding of what constitutes our moral core. As noted previously, Haidt believes that liberals and conservatives operate from quite different moral matrices.

Haidt's own work was heavily influenced by cultural psychologist Richard Shweder, who identified three very different ethics at work across cultures. Some cultures embody an *ethic of autonomy* in which people are first and foremost seen as individuals with wants, needs, and preferences. This is the dominant ethic in individualistic societies, like the United States. Other cultures are more powered by an *ethic of community* in which people are first and foremost members of larger entities (families, teams, armies, companies, tribes, nations). Cultures in which this ethic dominates develop moral concepts like duty, hierarchy, respect, reputation, and patriotism. Shweder also found a third cultural ethic, an *ethic of divinity*. In this frame, people are first and foremost temporary vessels in which have been implanted a divine soul. When this ethic dominates, people avoid certain actions because they degrade a person or dishonor their creator. Such societies develop moral concepts such as sanctity and sin, purity and pollution, elevation and degradation. Haidt says the ethic of divinity helped him better understand one particular divisive issue in American politics:

I also began to understand why the American culture wars involved so many battles over sacrilege. Is a flag just a piece of cloth, which can be burned as a form of protest? Or does each flag contain within it something nonmaterial such that when protesters burn it, they have done something bad (even if nobody were to see them do it)? (Haidt, 2012, p. 123)

It's easy to see all three of these ethics as reflecting particular combinations of the six moral foundations that Haidt has articulated. Let's look at each of the six in a little more detail:

Foundation #1: Care/Harm

The cuteness of babies primes us to care, nurture, protect, and interact with them. This caring has historically been extended to a wider range of people and animals. The moral matrix of liberals rests more heavily on the Care receptor, but conservatives also care. Where liberals tend to care almost universally for victims of oppression, consumer fraud, corporate greed, police brutality, and other forms of power, conservatives tend to limit care to more local spheres, for example to victims of crime, wounded warriors, and members of their own immediate communities. conservatives are more likely to believe that police protect us from harm and that abuse is the result of a few bad apples whereas liberals emphasize the need to protect victims of systematic racism and see police culture as all-too-often engaged in sustaining racism. Both political tribes care and feel the need to ward off harm, but they intuit them in very different ways.

Foundation #2: Fairness/Cheating

Haidt says selfish genes can give rise to generous creatures as long as those creatures are selective in their generosity (and can remember who has been nice to them in the past). He points to Robert Trivers (1971) theory of “reciprocal altruism” which suggests we’re usually nice to people when we first meet, but after that we’re selective: cooperating with those who are nice to us and shunning those who took advantage of our niceness. Current triggers of this matrix are massive economic inequality and lack of social justice, hallmarks of liberal thought. For conservatives, fairness is concerned exclusively with people being rewarded proportionately to what they contribute to society. Conservatives are disgusted by liberals who want to take money from hardworking people and give it to lazy ones (a concern about “free riders”). Instead of laziness, liberals see too many people, often minorities, who the system has held back by discrimination, low minimum wage, lack of funding for schools in poor neighborhoods, unfair redistribution of wealth at the front end (business owners getting tax breaks that make themselves richer but fail to share savings with workers). Conservatives, as staunch believers in free markets, think it only fair that hardworking entrepreneurs be rewarded in proportion to the greater risks they take.

Foundation #3: Loyalty/Betrayal

The original trigger for the loyalty foundation is anything that tells you who is a team player and who is a traitor. In terms of loyalties, today’s political left tends toward universalism and away from nationalism, and so often has trouble connecting to voters who rely heavily on the loyalty foundation. There’s also an interesting gender difference here. Men tend to define loyalty in terms of teams and coalitions; women relate loyalty more to two-person relationships. Loyalty is the first of three moral foundations that serve primarily to bind people together in groups and blind them to

moral matrices of others. Authority and Sanctity are the other two “binding foundations.” Haidt argues persuasively that conservatives have a significant advantage attracting voters because they articulate views that connect to people’s sense of loyalty, authority, and sanctity. Liberals, on the other hand, find it more difficult to make appeals using these three foundations. In fact, they are more likely to view them as “immoral” rather than moral foundations (as blind loyalty, abuse of authority, and sanctimonious self-righteousness).

Foundation #4: Authority/Subversion

Cultures vary in terms of how much they demand respect be shown to people in authority (e.g., parents, teachers, those in law enforcement). Haidt says that authority should not be confused with power. A common liberal belief is that authority=power=exploitation=evil. Haidt is convinced that early humans lived successfully in hierarchical arrangements that took the form of mutual expectations, more like a parent-child relationship than a strong-armed dictator and fearful underlings. In fact, tribal members used gossip and collective resistance to keep their leaders in line if they abused their authority. Authority for conservatives is more about protecting order and fending off chaos. It’s much easier for the right to build off this foundation than for the left because the left so often defines itself by its opposition to hierarchy, inequality, and power.

Foundation #5: Sanctity/Degradation

Feelings of stain, pollution, and purification, irrational from a utilitarian point of view make perfect sense in Shweder’s ethic of divinity. The original triggers were most likely the need to avoid spoiled food or people who had a contagious illness. Disgust is a natural reaction to impurities of this kind. And the psychology of sacredness is one of the primary ways that people bind to each other. Conservatives even use this language, “the sanctity of life,” “sanctity of marriage,” etc. When liberals do access this foundation, it tends to show up in the more universal contexts: the environmental movement, the degradation of nature, and in the arena of health (cleansing your body of toxins), etc.

Foundation #6: Liberty/Oppression

Liberty/Oppression makes people notice and resent any sign of attempted domination (e.g., bullying and other tyrant behavior). This supports the anti-authoritarianism of liberals as well as the “don’t tread on me” anti-government anger of libertarians and conservatives. In individualistic cultures like the United States, morality of liberty is typically about freedom in the form of individual rights. Both political tribes use this but tend to defend very different rights: on the right, it’s gun rights, rights of the unborn, and the right not to wear masks in a pandemic. On the left, it’s civil rights, the right of a woman to choose what happens to her own body,

and so on. Both sides want to protect freedom of speech for all who agree with them, while seeking limits to free speech by the other side (the right would do away with politically correct speech, the left would prefer to ban speech by white nationalists).

With all six moral foundations now in fuller view, it may be easier to see how liberals tend to appeal to the Care, Fairness, and Liberty foundations, while conservatives appeal to voters with all six foundations. This, says Haidt, gives conservatives the advantage, and he regularly advises liberals to change their tactics and formulate appeals based on the three “group-binding” foundations.

We want to explore Haidt’s model of six moral foundations, particularly as it relates to political arguments and appeals, from within a couple of different frames. The first frame is the communication perspective advocated by Barnett Pearce (Pearce, 2007), while the second draws upon insights from interpersonal neurobiology (Siegel, 2012; Porges, 2011) and developmental psychology (Kegan, 1994).

2. Assessing *The Righteous Mind* model

While we find much of Haidt’s model insightful and intriguing, we also believe it could benefit from some additional perspectives. These perspectives, described below, both challenge and complement different aspects of Haidt’s model. Emerging from this analysis will, I hope, result in a combined outlook, one that offers potential insight into communication practices that create and sustain the current political divide as well as pointing to constructive ways in which we might transcend that divide.

A communication perspective

Barnett Pearce and colleagues, working from a practical communication theory called the Coordinated Management of Meaning (CMM), challenge much of our culture’s current thinking about communication. If, in Haidt’s terms, we need to be “talking to each other’s elephants,” then how we engage in both intuitive and reason-based processes of communicating becomes critically important.

At the heart of Pearce’s (2007) ‘communication perspective’ is the notion that humans are storytellers who live in communication. To “live in communication” means to be engulfed in, suggesting as an appropriate metaphor that humans are like fish living in water, but for us the water is communication. We are so immersed in patterns of communication that we often do not attend to them closely. As a result, we attribute the influence of our jointly created patterns of interaction to other things, like personality or circumstance. For Pearce, the communication perspective prompts us

to ask questions about the patterns of interaction we engage in with others, questions such as “What are we making together when we interact in this way?” or “Do we like the kind of social world we are making?” Typically, the patterns of interaction we jointly produce create highly rewarding and fulfilling dialogue, relationships, family dynamics, organizational cultures, and likeable selves. At other times, the patterns we produce feel more like partisan diatribe, conflictual relationships, awkward family moments, toxic organizations, and unhealthy selves. The makeup of these patterns can be both elephant- and rider-like. That is, the patterns may be those of the elephant: intuitively generated, emotionally laced, with the reasons for them largely unknown to us. And yet as riders, we can also be capable of producing patterns that we both fully understand and are highly conscious of creating. We know we are headed for another pull-out-all-the-stops argument, and we both choose to see it through.

Haidt may be right that we behave intuitively most of the time and then seek explanations to support the elephant’s behavior. Yet we are certainly capable of more than that. Our riders are not limited to being only public relations agents; sometimes we demonstrate agency, acting like full-fledged clients. In fact, one could argue that riders who are more fully engaged with their own and each other’s elephants (not just blindly serving their interests) can jointly shepherd those elephants to act in more productive ways. The communication perspective suggests how we might do this—by focusing attention on our jointly produced patterns of interaction, interrogating them on occasion, and altering them when necessary. Haidt does suggest that riders can nudge their elephants at times. Pearce’s communication perspective implies that getting to know our own and other’s elephants as well as possible can transform us into world-class nudgers. I’ll say more about Pearce’s perspective in the discussion of cosmopolitan communication later in this essay.

One reason why I think Haidt can give riders a little more credit is implicit in his discussion of the difference between genetic evolution and cultural evolution. In laying out his reasoning for why we are 10% bees (groupish) and 90% chimpanzees (individualistic), Haidt talks about how genes and cultures co-evolve, and that at some point in our evolutionary history humans began living “in an environment that was increasingly of their own making” (p. 243). Haidt quotes paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould as saying “natural selection has almost become irrelevant in human evolution” because cultural change works “orders of magnitude” faster than genetic change (Haidt, p. 247). This strongly suggests that collective social behavior, or cultural evolution can increasingly provide riders with more tools for creating social practices that can shift the balance in the rider-elephant relationship. We see this with mindfulness and mindsight practices (Siegel, 2010) in that as individuals become more aware of how their bodies work, they are enabled to gain a modicum of control over the elephant. For instance, research in interpersonal neurobiology demonstrates

how many neural patterns in the brain can be altered by categories of mind and patterns of social relationships. Daniel Siegel argues that brains, minds, and social relationships operate in an ongoing symbiotic relationship. In effect, they “make each other up” (Siegel, 2012, p. 8). This does not reverse what Haidt describes in terms of the elephant and rider relationship, but it certainly suggests a wider set of possibilities.

A developmental perspective

Cognitive development

Given Haidt’s emphasis on the dominance of intuitive elephants, he is less inclined to articulate what potentialities riders may be afforded by cultural and social evolution. I want to turn to the work of developmental psychologist Robert Kegan and draw on his consideration of how different “levels of consciousness” evolve during adolescence and well into adulthood. Once we see some of these differences, we can ask how more advanced levels of consciousness enable new affordances in the rider’s relationship with the elephant. Kegan’s research with adults (Kegan, 1994, Kegan and Lahey, 2009) demonstrates five levels of consciousness, three of which are relevant to the present discussion (levels 3,4, and 5). Each level of development is dependent on and subsumes the previous level, as the person transcends the previous level.

Level 3 thinking: Kegan describes a level 3 mind as a “socialized mind.” This capacity of mind abstracts properties across many concrete experiences, creating mental categories, many of which are moral in nature (e.g., courage, honesty, trustworthiness). The label socialized mind suggests that these mental categories are learned from one’s family, political tribe, or the culture at large. The limits of a socialized mind include the fact that the category, once established, has an enormous influence on the mind. Kegan says that at this level of consciousness our mental categories “have a hold on us” much more than we have a hold on them. For instance, once a relationship with another person solidifies into a firm definition, a level 3 mind is not yet capable of stepping outside that definition and imagining the relationship in different terms. The category’s hold is too strong. Haidt’s description of the relationship between the rider and the elephant appears to involve this type of level 3 thinking. The elephant’s moral intuitions represent the mental categories the rider has absorbed and cannot seem to escape. No wonder the rider is seen more as a press agent than a client with agency.

Level 4 thinking: The shift to the next level of consciousness involves a transcendence of previously immutable categories, enabling a “self-authoring” mind to emerge. Here the person begins to formulate a sense of self that chooses which mental categories are most important and how to organize them into a coherent

whole. There is a sense here of self (albeit a single holistic self) as one's primary life project. The self-authoring mind assumes responsibility for its mental categories rather than being subject to them. With regard to Haidt's metaphor, the rider begins to see their relationship with the elephant in somewhat more malleable terms. The elephant is still a primary source of intuitively held moral beliefs, yet the rider is more engaged in the selection of favored moral spectra (emphasizing some moral dimensions more than others or attempting to integrate all six in some manner) as well as how those dimensions are ordered in various contexts. Most importantly, the rider begins to establish the self as more independent of the mental categories of their tribe. Haidt's growing appreciation of the more conservative end of the spectrum, and ability to create some distance from his liberal tribe is a hallmark of level 4 thinking. The rider is self-authoring the relationship with the various moral spectra.

Level 5 thinking: While Kegan is careful to say that this level of consciousness is quite rare in the general population, he is also quick to say that the level of complexity in this form of "self-transforming mind" is increasingly necessary in the complex social worlds in which we live. A self-transforming mind is one that has become capable of seeing its former self-authoring self as just one among many possibilities. Kegan says there is an "aha moment" for many during the transition to level 5 thinking, as the former self is recognized as "a tendency to pretend to completeness" (Kegan, 1994, p.313). A level 5 mind not only develops a transcendent relationship with self, but also with social/cultural systems in which it participates. "The self-transforming mind can stand back from its own filter and look at it, not just through it...[it] both values and is wary about any one stance, analysis, or agenda" (Kegan and Lahey, 2009, p. 19-20). A rider, armed with a self-transforming mind, recognizes that they could be one of a variety of types of riders, forging multiple kinds of relationships with the elephant, as circumstances change.

It is this latter, level 5 type of rider that needs further exploration in an expanded version of Haidt's moral influences. We also need a sense that we do not ride alone, that being the social creatures that we are, we can collectively create the environments in which we want to live. We can also spur on the cultural evolution process in such a way that our elephants, not just our riders, are seen as living in communication processes and therefore altering our intuitions.

Emotional development

Lisa Feldman Barrett, in her fascinating book *How Emotions are Made* (2018), contrasts a classical view of emotions which says that external events trigger emotional reactions inside us, intuitions and feelings that live in distinct brain areas, with a constructionist approach to emotions. The classical view implies that emotion categories (i.e., happiness, anger, fear, etc.) each have a bodily fingerprint, located in a

distinct region of the brain or in a specific neural network. The constructionist approach, supported by a considerable amount of recent neuroscientific research, tells a different story:

An emotional category such as anger or disgust does not have a fingerprint. One instance of anger need not look or feel like another, nor will it be caused by the same neurons. Variation is the norm. Your range of anger is not necessarily the same as mine, although if we were raised in similar circumstances, we will likely have some overlap...[emotions] are not an inevitable consequence of your genes. What's inevitable is that you'll have some kinds of concepts for making sense of sensory input from your body in the world because...your brain has wiring for this purpose...But particular concepts like 'Anger' and 'Disgust' are not genetically predetermined. Your familiar emotion concepts are built-in only because you grew up in a particular social context where those emotion concepts are meaningful and useful, and your brain applies them outside your awareness to construct your experiences...Other cultures can and do make other kinds of meaning from the same sensory input (Barrett, 2018, pp.32-33).

At one point, Barrett makes a comment that sounds remarkably like Haidt's notion of the elephant and the rider. She says that our belief that we are rational creatures, weighing options before we act, is an "implausible fiction." Instead she says that our intuitive feelings (she uses the term affect) are deciding for us. "Affect is in the driver's seat and rationality is a passenger" (p. 80). And yet, she goes on to describe how we learn affective emotion concepts (as well as other types of concepts) through our interactions with others. In discussing how this happens with infants, she says this:

You can show human infants a bunch of objects that look different, sound different, and feel different, and merely add a word—a WORD—and these little babies form a concept that overcomes the physical differences. They understand that the objects have some kind of psychological similarity that can't be immediately perceived through the five senses. This similarity is what we called the goal of the concept. The infant creates a new piece of reality" (Barrett, 2018, p.99).

Words, she says, invite infants (and yes, adults, too) to "equate wildly dissimilar objects" (p.100). Barrett speculates that infants learn emotion concepts in a similar manner. The child may experience various instances of feeling that share no obvious similarities but hearing a caregiver's use of the word "anger" in relation to these disparate feelings invites the child to group them into a single concept. Thus, Barrett's research suggests that the intuitive feelings of our elephants, while perhaps reflecting some aspects of our genetic wiring, are thoroughly social constructions. Is it not also highly likely that this is how we learn moral concepts? An evolutionary account may well suggest some broad categories of moral experience along the lines that Haidt describes, but given the extent to which cultural evolution via communication

processes continues to shape the development of even our most intuitive emotional and moral concepts, these appear less and less likely to be universally shared across cultures. As we've seen from Barrett's research on emotions and interpersonal neurobiology more generally, as well as the potential for more level 5 thinking, perhaps we should be looking more at cultural evolution than natural selection.

Refining Haidt's proposal

At this particular moment in our cultural evolution (some might call it a de-evolution) we seem to be consumed by the political categories of liberal and conservative. In Kegan's terms, these categories have more of a hold on us than we have on them. Even at the level of self-authoring, more of us appear to be choosing to define ourselves at the more extreme ends of the spectrum within these categories. Such choosing reflects a self-authoring mode in that we may have escaped the political or religious categories of our parents or of a previous stage in our thinking. Yet we are still caught up in seeing these categories as binary, as either-or rather than both-and. With the capacity of Kegan's level five form of consciousness (self- or system-transcendence), it is possible to escape these binary categories of self-definition. Rather than feeling forced to align exclusively with a liberal or conservative tribe, we may come to see ourselves as both liberal and conservative, recognizing that we need both to thrive. Without conservatism, we don't have coherent traditions that promote the formation and continuation of culture; without liberalism, rigidity sets in, innovation stagnates, and culture atrophies. We are and need both ends of the spectrum, perhaps held in tension, leaning in different directions at different times. Imagine how political conversations might proceed if more of us acknowledged the full spectrum in ourselves. What would happen to the polarized discourse so common today?

Haidt talks about his own transformation from a self-described liberal to a person who has come to appreciate both liberal and conservative views, especially in moral terms. And yet he relies on a language of moral foundations, and a fixed sense of humans who are born to be self-righteous. The moral principles and metaphors he employs are couched in highly immutable language: intuitions that always come first, moral taste receptors, 90% chimp and 10% bee. Given what we now know about the plasticity of the human brain throughout adulthood and Kegan's research demonstrating the possibility of seismic shifts in our mental capacities, we ought to be suspect of immutable language describing humans in such fixed terms. If we soften the language a bit, we don't lose the insights that Haidt offers, yet we open the door to additional possibilities. What if we said, "intuitions often come first, strategic reasoning second" (implying more of a two-way relationship between rider and elephant)? What if, instead of and static moral "foundations," we described the six

moral dimensions as “energies” or “moral dynamics” and replaced the pairing of opposites as “spectra” rather than “taste receptors?” We’d then talk about the care or fairness spectrum, the loyalty spectrum, and so on. A more fluid conception of moral nexus, with all the complexities and subtleties that implies, might go further toward Haidt’s stated goal of enabling us to turn down the political heat while still conveying the need to appeal to a wider range of our moral intuitions and sensibilities.

3. Drawing upon a revised righteous mind model to engage in cosmopolitan communication

For even the casual observer, it’s fairly easy to see that human cultures have frequently evolved into very different ways of being human. As we saw with Shweder’s three ethics, some cultures are more individualistic, some more oriented around group harmony and conformity. Whatever a particular culture’s way of being human entails, Barnett Pearce (1989) thought ways of being human and forms of communication tend to coevolve and mutually influence each other. Let’s look at three forms of communication Pearce named as supporting very different understandings of how human beings should treat each other.

Three forms of communication

One way of understanding forms of communication is to note differences in the patterns of interaction in a conversation, a lecture, or a business meeting. Pearce (1989) thought that we could also identify patterns within a society that show up across many different contexts and constitute larger forms of communication. He named some of these larger forms as ethnocentric, modernistic, and cosmopolitan forms of communication. We might think of these larger forms of communication as meta-patterns or “broad, remarkably stable and significant features of speech acts and episodes of communication that show up time and time again in a given culture” (Jensen, 2020). We might also expect similar forms of communication to be shared by cultures that are otherwise quite different from one another. Likewise, it’s not uncommon to see multiple forms of communication practiced by different groups within the same culture, or even by different individuals or groups on different occasions. Let’s look briefly at each of the three forms of communication Pearce described and in what ways they differ from one another.

Ethnocentric communication. Pearce saw two distinct dimensions which distinguished communication forms from each other. These dimensions are best expressed as questions. The first question asks: when people belong to a social or cultural group (i.e., see themselves as 'a native' of that group), how do they typically interact with non-members or nonnatives? In moral terms, do they accept non-natives as basically similar to or different from themselves? The second question focuses on: to what extent are natives willing to risk their own group's beliefs, values, and modes of interpreting messages. Are beliefs and interpretations open to question or so strongly held that questioning would be discouraged or dismissed? For those who function within an ethnocentric form of communication, the answers to those questions would be to treat others as non-natives (as more different than similar) and to treat their own group's values, practices, and interpretations as "not subject to risk." As a result, when we communicate in an ethnocentric form, we create a strong sense of "us versus them" while holding our own beliefs and practices to be superior to those of other groups. The group's own moral stories are viewed as sacrosanct and not to be challenged, and not open to revision. The reasons for this cultural superiority may be many. Perhaps the beliefs and practices are derived from a higher power (an ethic of divinity) or perceived as having been tested over time and found to have no equal. Conservative beliefs in the sanctity of the founder's original intent are often treated in this way.

Modernistic communication. In contrast, those who operate within the framework of a modernistic form of communication tend to treat everyone, including themselves, as non-natives, and are more than willing to put their own resources (beliefs, values, and interpretations) "at risk." To treat everyone as a non-native means to both recognize and celebrate that we each bring different values and criteria for making judgments into our interactions. Modernists tend to view many beliefs, even ones they grew up honoring as subject to revision as times change, and as science and technology make them obsolete. Resources are therefore always open to risk. Old traditions and outdated belief systems are expected to be replaced by new discoveries and fresh thinking. There is, however, some limits placed on this openness. Modernists value scientific findings and rational analysis as part of a governing story that is often called a "narrative of progress." This narrative does function as a broad umbrella which allows for many, but not all beliefs and practices to be called into question. Arguments that fit the narrative of progress are favored over those that do not.

In the West, and certainly in the United States, ethnocentric and modernistic forms of communication share a common feature—a particular mindset about communication. This view is sometimes called a transmission model of communication, wherein language is viewed primarily as a tool, as a means of conveying ideas that have already been formed by psychological processes. This

results from the individualistic nature of most Western societies. Individuals are viewed as self-contained and their thoughts, ideas, and messages are believed to be generated as internal mental processes and then shared through channels of communication. Language and communication more generally are viewed as a way of transmitting mental processes from one person to another, or one to many.

Cosmopolitan communication. This third form of communication starts with a different mindset about communication. Instead of an ethic of autonomy leading to a transmission model, cosmopolitan communication is premised on an ethic of community and a co-construction model of communication. This model treats language and communication as the property of speech communities, not individuals. Thus, communication processes, and not psychological processes are the primary generative mechanisms of mental concepts. It is in communication that people collectively make and remake the social worlds they inhabit. This mindset is buttressed by recent research in interpersonal neurobiology (Siegel, 2012; Schore, 2009) which demonstrates that while individual brains are constrained in their development by some genetic programming, they remain remarkably malleable by experience and particularly by social experience. As psychologist Daniel Siegel puts it, “brains, minds, and social relationships make each other up.” This deeply social mindset about communication directs our focus to how communication processes make all kinds of social entities, including relationships, families, selves, group and organizational identities, and cultures.

With this communication focus in mind, cosmopolitan communication can be distinguished from the other two forms in terms of how others are treated and the extent to which resources of meaning are placed at risk. In contrast to the other forms, cosmopolitan communicators simultaneously treat others as both natives and non-natives. We are all natives in that we are subject to being formed socially by communication processes. We live in communication, are shaped by the patterns of interaction we engage in and cannot escape its influence. At the same time, by jointly producing different patterns of communication, social groups can easily become non-natives to each other by virtue of the different values, beliefs, traditions, and practices each group creates together. In a similar manner, cosmopolitan communicators recognize their own meaning-making (i.e., beliefs, values, traditions, and interpretations) as both “at risk” and “not at risk.” Resources are intrinsically “at risk” because we know they could have turned out differently (e.g., we might have been born into a different culture, our past communication practices could have shaped us in a different way than they did). And we know that future interactions can result in modifications to current beliefs and values. At the same time, we may continue to find meaning in the value commitments we’ve made and can exempt some of them from risk. A critical difference here is that we know that our own tribe’s way of being human has been shaped by social interaction patterns, and the same is true for any

other tribe's way of being human. As co-heirs of the human condition, each of our social realities is a partial and incomplete rendering of what is possible. This means that there is no basis for seeing our own tribe as superior (as ethnocentrists do), nor do we need to be subject to perpetual innovation and change (as modernists do). We may in fact like our way of being very much, and we have a basis for understanding why other tribes might also favor their way of being just as much as we do ours. This shifts the all-too-frequent goal of communicating from persuasion (convincing other tribes to do things our way) or searching for commonalities to a more manageable "coordination" of differences.

Like the communication perspective, cosmopolitan communication grows out of the Theory of the Coordinated Management of Meaning, or CMM for short (Pearce & Cronen, 1980; Pearce, 1989; Pearce 2007). One of the central tenets of that theory is a concept of mystery as a frame for understanding and practicing communication. While single but separate stories of what it means to be human are perhaps inevitable given the extent of moral influence (especially as shaped by the foundations of authority, loyalty, and sanctity) on cultural/tribal interactions, the concept of mystery points to each of these cardinal stories as both crucial to human connection as well as partial and incomplete tellings of the human story. Groups and individuals cannot sustain themselves morally without such stories. As a result, cosmopolitan communication starts from a position of awe and curiosity about the many ways of being human, seeing each one as one reality among many, constructed in communication.

Cosmopolitans participate fully in their own values traditions and recognize others' traditions as equally significant for them. In practice, cosmopolitans seek to coordinate differences through dialogue and engagement rather than eliminating those differences through assimilation, tolerating them via passive acceptance, or ignoring them altogether (Jensen, 2020, p. 17).

Cosmopolitan communication is not practiced extensively in any culture of which I am aware, yet it has the potential to do so, and can enable diverse others to connect in ways that resemble "bridges" more than "bonds" of solidarity. "Great citizens build bridges between unacquainted realms, more than they reinforce bonds among people already close" (Lui & Hanauer, 2011, p. 63). With our friendly revisions regarding Haidt's moral dynamics and Pearce's cosmopolitan communication, let's look at how these two perspectives complement and enhance one another.

How cosmopolitan communication can draw from and build upon Haidt's moral foundations

Haidt's work speaks eloquently about the need to talk to each other's elephants (connect in moral and emotional terms) more so than talking directly to the riders (persuade through reasoning). Both, we want to stress, are forms of communicating. We see talking to the elephant as the communication equivalent of temporarily setting aside the goal of persuading and focusing instead on "making" stronger relationships that can then serve as a higher-level context for engaging about differences. This is also the starting point for cosmopolitan communication. Earlier we made the point that we need to move beyond binary thinking to a both/and perspective. At the moment, we are deeply ensconced in either/or thinking that encourages us to identify only as liberals or conservatives and to bristle at the thought of anyone mistaking us for being on the wrong side of the spectrum. Haidt is encouraging us to be less binary and shows us that both sides in the U.S. culture wars have something important to say morally, and that we should be striving to listen for that in our interactions with each other across our moral divides. I suspect that he believes, given that the six moral dynamics evolved to enhance the survival of our human ancestors, that there is moral common ground to be found. What may be different in a cosmopolitan frame is an emphasis on coordinating with those with whom we have fundamental differences rather than always searching for common ground.

For instance, in the last chapter of *The Righteous Mind* Haidt identifies what he sees as "blind spots" in liberal and conservative thinking. Liberals, he says, tend not to consider "the effects on moral capital that result from the changes and reforms they promote" (p. 342-43). As a result, they tend to "overreach, change too many things too quickly, and reduce the stock of moral capital inadvertently" (p. 243). Conservatives and libertarians are better at appealing to and sustaining moral capital. They have a blind spot in that they often "fail to notice certain classes of victims, fail to limit the predations of certain powerful interests, and fail to see the need to change or update institutions as times change" (p. 343). He goes on to claim that both sides make some fundamentally sound points, such as 1) the liberal insight that government is necessary for restraining corporate superorganisms and correcting market distortions, and 2) regulations really can solve some problems. Likewise, he affirms the libertarian claim that "markets are miraculous" and despite occasional market distortions, markets are the best way to bring supply, demand, and ingenuity together. Conservatives are correct in saying tribal connections are important and destroying them undermines moral capital. Haidt's colorful way of stating this last point is to say, "You can't help the bees by destroying the hive" (p. 358). The implication is that if both sides were to overcome their blind spots, common interests

would be much more apparent. Citing John Stuart Mill, Haidt concludes that liberals and conservatives are like yin and yang, both sets of views being necessary for a healthy politics. This is consistent with our sense of moving beyond the binary oppositions of liberal-conservative, recognizing the importance of the full spectrum.

While common ground may lurk beneath some opposing moral worldviews, a cosmopolitan communication perspective does not presume that is always the case, especially as we converse across highly distinct cultures. We repeat that there is nothing inherently wrong with the search for common ground. In the case of the U.S. cultural wars, finding such common ground could be transformative. And it's easier to imagine locating common ground within the frame of a single nation or culture. Still, sometimes the differences are so substantial that finding common ground may be futile and not even necessary. In such cases, the cosmopolitan approach is to seek some means of coordinating across differences. Coordinating starts with the assumption that one's own moral views, as important and grounding as they are for one's own tribe, remain at best a partial telling of the human story. One goal of coordinating is to use one's imagination to try and comprehend what it is like to "live by the light" of another culture or worldview. Sir Isaiah Berlin said eloquently:

Our values are ours, and theirs are theirs. We are free to criticize the values of other cultures, to condemn them, but we cannot pretend not to understand them at all, or to regard them as simply subjective. I am not blind to what the Greeks valued—they may not be mine, but I can grasp what it would be like to live by their light, I can admire and respect them, and even imagine myself as pursuing them, although I do not—and do not wish to, and perhaps could not if I wished. Forms of life differ, Ends, moral principles are many. But not infinitely many; they must be within the human horizon (Berlin, 1998, p .9).

While coordinating across differences begins with a sincere and even curious respect for alternative forms of life and ways of being human, and a growing sense of what it must be like to "live by their light," it does not stop there. A critical goal of coordinating is to keep the conversation going, which privileges the relationship between parties over and above any common ground or consensual coherence that might be achieved. Coordinating can have the effect, if one seeks to learn something from the difference encountered, of enlarging one's own horizons of meaning, moral and otherwise. Coordination is, in effect, a form of loyalty to one's neighbors despite differences in beliefs, values, or practices. As Brene Brown (2017) puts it, "people are hard to hate close up," so "move in" (p. 63). Haidt says the research shows it is difficult to extend loyalty beyond one's own tribe, but this may simply reflect our penchant to form tribes around similarities in values. If our neighborhoods are diverse, and neighborhood becomes a tribe on equal footing with our other tribes, such loyalty seems less implausible. That's a goal worth striving for, but it does require conviction

regarding the concept of mystery. When mystery serves as one of the larger frames in our lives, as something important and beyond self or tribe, even elephants can lean into that.

This is not the first time that the communication perspective or cosmopolitan communication has dealt with moral issues. Barnett Pearce and Stephen Littlejohn explored a variety of ways of working with intractable “moral conflicts” from this perspective (Pearce & Littlejohn, 1997; Littlejohn, 2014). They argued eloquently for using “a vocabulary of transcendent discourse and dialogue” in managing moral differences more productively. They noted that traditional forms of conflict discourse (advocacy and negotiation) rarely work when the nature of the conflict is between different moral orders, with Littlejohn describing the all-too-typical pattern in this way

1) one party expresses its view in a form considered eloquent within its moral order; 2) the other party attempts persuasion using its own forms of eloquence; 3) attempts to persuade fail as both parties not only refuse to accept the good arguments of the other, but, in fact, take these arguments as evidence that the other side is mad or bad; 4) both sides become incredibly frustrated at the failure of what they consider to be valid and eloquent forms of discourse; and 5) the interaction degrades into reciprocal diatribe and even violence. (Littlejohn, 2014, p. 187)

Haidt’s work also suggests some ways that we might enhance cosmopolitan communication by using the six moral dynamics as touchstones for bridging the political and moral divide that prompts so much heat and vitriol between conservatives and liberals in the U.S., and increasingly around the globe. Such a focus could seek moral common ground where possible, along the yin and yang lines that Haidt suggests. Even when that is not possible, we could forefront differences as convictions to each side’s respective moral centers of gravity, hopefully fending off all-too-easy claims that the other side reflects a complete lack of moral fiber. Thus, in presenting one’s own stand on a given issue (whether conservative or liberal), an emphasis could be placed on the moral vision that undergirds that stance, rather than articulating it simply as a policy position. For liberals, this might take the form (again as Haidt suggests) of framing views in relation to all six moral dynamics, not just the ‘big three’ of caring, autonomy, and liberty as a means of helping conservatives to better conceive what “living by a liberal light” might look like in moral terms. For conservatives, articulating the vision of their own moral worldview could be approached more in terms of how it can be inclusive of the whole citizenry and by recognizing and appreciating the morality expressed in liberal viewpoints even though finding agreement remains a significant challenge. For both liberals and conservatives, a cosmopolitan sensibility would start with a much greater emphasis on building relational bridges across the divide and listening with a moral curiosity to the other’s viewpoint before sharing one’s own.

Let's imagine that we were to collectively demonstrate a greater willingness to move beyond the binary oppositions of liberal-conservative as distinct persons or positions, entertaining the concept of self as both liberal and conservative. What difference could this make in our political conversations? One place to start is by asking ourselves:

"As a conservative, I want to know how the Black Lives Matter movement, for example, contributes to American culture? What traditional American values does it embody and promote? How is it good for the economy? How is it good for my business?"

"As a liberal, I want to know how Christian evangelicalism, for example, expresses the generosity of the human spirit, what it contributes to the diversity of religious expression in the world, and how its values lead us forward on the path to freedom, equality, and brotherhood."

Furthermore, what if we don't posit these questions as if I were a conservative or as if I were a liberal, but because I am both and need both to conduct a fuller human life and to participate fully in community with others? If we can see ourselves in this light, would we not be better prepared to engage in political conversations with others? This move beyond the binary is the guiding light that CMM's concept of mystery points us toward.

The great insight in Haidt's work is that virtually every tribal worldview derives from different and often innovative ways that human groups combine and socially construct moral orders (including, but perhaps not limited to the six moral dynamics Haidt articulates). And as evolutionary theory also suggests, cultural evolution has in many ways surpassed natural evolution via genetic selection. Cosmopolitan communication represents an important next step in the social evolution necessary for survival of our species and perhaps even our planet.

And unlike the design students at Syracuse, we won't need to hold stuffed elephants in our hands, waiting for the eyes to light up around the table. We will have evolved our forms of communication to create the kinds of social worlds we all want to live in, and that our elephants intuitively recognize.

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