Cultivating Reason & Civility - A Moral Priority

Joseph P. Hester
Independent scholar
Claremont, USA
E-mail: southcline@gmail.com

Abstract:

Cultivating reason and civility as a moral priority requires our attention as world alliances promoting peace, security, and human dignity are breaking down revealing the often immoral underbelly of nations and of national leaders. Our world has grown closer together due to modern technology, and, in a way, further apart, as a diversity of values is spread unevenly within nations and throughout the world. Seeking common or shared values, especially moral values, is needed, requiring political and personal transparency, but remains in short supply. Experience has shown that the assumptions we bring to moral discourse are often undisclosed causing confusion and often the collapsing of open dialogue. We learn from E.A. Burtt (1965, 28 ff.) that presuppositions are the given – the intuitively given – we present to reality that in turn modify reality and become reality itself. And we tend to shape our moral views, perhaps unaware of their cultural origins, by our own cultural genealogy. Presuppositions as culture are the "there" that is "there" but not-yet fully or intentionally realized or openly stated. We know about these presuppositions through the language of discourse and argument, but ever so often they remain hidden and protected so as not to reveal their intended consequences.

Our assumptions about value have a motivational quality pushing us to discover the causal links that complete the theory our presuppositions entail. This dynamic relativity calls for discussion – a dialectic of conversation – for agreement and consistency to be sustained. When we transfer this conversation to morals and ethics we notice that the suppositions we bring to the table when answering the question "Why should I be moral?" often determine the answers we give. Thus, if we are truly interested in locating our shared values, transparency is required. As we know, hidden motives – of individuals and nations – more often than not corrupt the search for ethical and moral comity.

To this conversation the theist brings his or her belief in God as law-giver and moral judge; the pragmatist, being oriented to science, recognizes that ethics lies outside of his or her method to procure and provides practical, social, reasons for being ethical, the politician often brings the hidden desire for manipulation and control, and the psychologist makes an effort to penetrate the human mind assuming the existence of an innate moral compass although often explained sociologically and developmentally. But what motivates either to pursue ethics remains hidden, lurking in the background of their beliefs and, perhaps, future hope. Moral knowledge remains elusive, but most agree that it is worth pursuing.

This paper acknowledges these pursuits and difficulties. As this paper will show, values are primarily cultural and/or social constructs orienting us to pre-conceived futures, difficult to change and discuss openly. Because we have been given a mixed bag evidenced by human diversity and moral pluralism, open dialogue is needed and cultivated civilly. Hence, this paper makes a case for dialogic civility as a means of communication and values adjudication understanding that communication

will remain closed unless someone steps up and begins to open such dialogue. Entailed by this is that ethics, morals, and civility are more than theoretical concerns; they imply social relationships immersed in cultural diversity, are person oriented, and are needed for world repair.

Candace Carnicelli (2019) Director, Common Peace Center for the Advancement of Nonviolence says, "Knowledge strengthens our conviction and deepens our wisdom and understanding. It opens up our mind – presents choices we did not previously know we had – allows for previously unknown possibilities to be birthed. It is a power that allows us to release fear – fear of the unknown." She quotes Martin Luther King, Jr, who said, "The function of education is to teach one to think intensely and to think critically. Intelligence plus character – that is the goal of true education." As David Brooks (2016, 183) advises, "Character development, like historic progress, best happens imperceptibly, through daily effort." And daily effort is sorely needed. Thus, dialogic (rational) discussions of ethics and values is recommended as a way of seeking commonly shared values and building a more civil and ethical society.

Keywords: Civility, cultural pluralism, dialogic civility, identity markers, innate, intuition, moral epistemology, moral knowledge reason, social knowledge, sources of moral knowledge, universal cognitive modules, will

Identity Markers: From Whence Came Our Values?

What Lies Behind The Righteous Mind?

Noticeably, every nation, like every person, has certain identity markers. These often include power, position, education, and wealth, to name a few. Nationally they come in the form of GDP, trade surpluses or deficits, a powerful military, a strong workforce, and identifying with either capitalism or socialism, possibly both, etc. Identify markers differentiate our values, point to their foundation, and hint at the undisclosed principles lurking just beneath the surface of our words and actions. They identify persons and groups – religious bodies, political parties, and nations. What is beneath these identity markers, often left unsaid, are ideals definitive of our deepest, most cherished beliefs. We are sometimes fooled by identity markers because we fail to look behind the words used, only to the actions of persons and groups. Unarticulated value assumptions are often hidden in plain sight.

Richard Rorty (1979, xxxi) correctly observed that the ideas and arguments of philosophers, theologians, educators, and scientists are embedded in a morass of unstated beliefs and assumptions. The clarity of their statements, the logic of their arguments, and the axiomatic assumptions guiding their theories provide only an illusion of objectivity. So, we ask, "What is it that motivates our moral perspicacity?" and "Why aren't people and groups more transparent about their beliefs and assumptions?" An example is the recent vote of the United Methodist Church to maintain their "traditional" view of the LBGTQ community. That is, although such individuals are welcomed in the church, the church will not hire them as ministers or elders, ordain them, or perform same-sex

marriages. Hidden just underneath the surface of this decision is the view, mostly taken from the Old Testament and then written into the Methodist Book of Discipline, that homosexuality is a sin.

To clarify the picture of value-markers, Johnathan Haidt (2012, 146 ff.), in his book *The Righteous Mind,* has identified some of the basic identity markers of moral life. He calls these "universal cognitive modules upon which cultures construct moral matrices." These motivators are identified as care/harm, fairness/cheating, loyalty/betrayal, authority/subversion, and sanctity/degradation. Haidt also calls these constructs "adaptive challenges" and indeed they are as the last two markers can easily be applied to the Methodist decision and perhaps bring some clarity to their resolution. Haidt's analysis is steeped in sociological insight supported by psychological interpretations from which much can be learned.

Haidt, being the psychologist that he is, begins his dissertatum by probing the origin of moral values. He concludes that each of the above foundations has an innate beginning; meaning, "being in advance of experience" (Haidt 2012, 178). He calls his proposal "an educated guess": "Particular rules and virtues vary across cultures, so you'll get fooled if you look for universality in the finished books. You won't find a single paragraph that exists in identical form in every human culture. But if you look for links between evolutionary theory and anthropological observations, you can take some *educated guesses* about what was in the universal first draft of human nature" (178). Being unsure what he means by "the universal first draft of human nature," we can only wonder what undisclosed assumptions lie behind this statement. Certainly, "being in advance of experience" requires a moral thorough explication.

The evidence is thin as Haidt's observation hangs on his initial scrutiny of young children about whom he believes evolutionary forces have brought them into some kind of primitive moral awareness. Left unsaid is whether these foundations are biologically innate or intuitions built through human experience. Although he gives "intuition" and "innate" the same meaning – "being in advance of experience" -- his "cognitive modules" bare the stamp of sociological analysis and his proposal appears to be developed more on the structure and functioning of human society, on patterns of social relationships, social interaction, and the habits of everyday life than on some kind of innate biological moral intelligence. To move around this quandary, he says, "...I call my theory the 'social *intuitionist* model of moral judgment'." For Haidt, moral sentiments originate as intuitions, innate and evolutionary, and appear later in life when cognition (reasoning) is applied to them (56-57).

We should point out that many researchers are concerned with combining epistemological considerations – that there is such a thing as "moral knowledge," especially innate moral knowledge – and viewing children as possessing moral capacities not solely imposed by their enculturation. Elliot Turiel remarks, "The development of social knowledge in children and adolescents is a broad topic requiring some choices regarding the focus of analysis. These choices are naturally guided by one's theoretical orientation to social reasoning and its formation and transformation in the process of growth. My research ... has led me to focus on categories of social reasoning...the analysis of

categories of social knowledge have provided a framework for an understanding of children's social interactions with peers, their relationship with adults, their processes of development, and the relationships between social judgments and actions." Turiel's thesis is "that social life is guided by rational processes and that the construction of fundamental and distinct categories of social knowledge begins early in childhood." His assumptions do not contradict those of Haidt's, as he side steps the issue of innateness, only to stress the importance of social interactions and the need to cultivate reason and civility (Turiel 2008, vii).

We All Wonder

Thus, there is much to unpack in Haidt's thesis as well as how moral/social knowledge develops. We all wonder whom we are and from whence we came. There is some mystery to this as we had nothing to do with our conception. But, here we are complete with our genetic and cultural past, trying to unwind our "self" in all its mysterious dimensions. Having been born, reared, and educated in the American South, history is of great importance to me. Yet, even though I can trace much of my surface life, the origins of my thoughts and values and how they came to be what they are remains vague and unidentified. Decisions were made to bring us into life and these decisions connect us to myriad ancestors far and wide. Who were these ancestors of mine? What was their conceptual make-up and how did their values impact my life? How did their mores seep into my genetic, evolutionary, development, if indeed they did? Is Haidt correct? Was I born with a built-in moral sensitivity? Why are some individuals pathological killers; what was built into the first draft of their human nature? Can universal conclusions to Haidt's assumptions be empirically reached?

Mine is not a fruitless wondering, for in me, as in others, are hidden values captured and convoluted within my genetic/social makeup. These are perhaps cultural implants difficult to define and even more difficult to dislodge and bring into rational inspection. As Ludwig Wittgenstein (1958, 50) has commented, "The aspect of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something—because it is always before one's eyes) The real foundation of his enquiry does not strike a man at all. Unless that fact has at sometime struck him.—and this means we fail to be struck by what, once seen, is most striking and powerful." Wittgenstein seems to be saying that our values are hidden in "plain sight"; perhaps they are.

Because values are deep-rooted, often concealed just beneath the surface of rationality, their origin is of some mystery. Haidt's is one thesis proposed to clarify this quandary. But, are they natural (innate) and modified by experience, or are cultual and environmental factors their source rather than unmodified psychological or personal characteristics? Given that values lie quietly within, often just underneath the surface of rational thought, through time and socialization some become instinctive and when reinforced, authoritarian. Obviously, they appear innate, but no MRI can reveal these inherent features and neither can they be denied. The way we talk and think and the decisions we make are not only products of family, nurture, and education, but are artifacts duly

embedded by our ancestral history. And all of these values are not "righteous" or "moral" as Haidt assumes them to be. Richard Rorty (1999, 173) thus warns against seeking a "source of moral knowledge." He argues that "knowledge is justified true belief" and recommends replacing subject-centered morality with *communicative reasoning*. Following the insights of Jürgen Habermas, Rorty says, "...that is why, in the public square of a pluralistic democracy, justification is always up for grabs, and why the term 'source of moral knowledge' will always be out of place."

Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1967, 1-3) also provide a clue to this quandary when saying "that reality is socially constructed and that the sociology of knowledge must analyze the processes in which this occurs." They point out, "Sociological interest in questions of 'reality' and 'knowledge' is thus initially justified by the fact of their social relativity." Not to throw away our biological evolution, we have been provided with some biological advantages, *special organs of equilibrium*, as noted by psychologist Jean Piaget (1967, 102). Piaget explained, "This is true of mental life, whose *organs of equilibrium* are special regulatory mechanisms. This is so at all levels of development, from the elementary regulators of motivation (needs and interests) up to *will for affectivity* and from perceptual and sensori-motor regulations up to operations for cognition." This seems to correlate with Haidt's view of "being innate," but *correlation* doesn't imply *identity*, only *resemblance*. Both Haidt and Piaget are using metaphors to explain what is unseen, only assumed. "Identity" and "correlation" are not equivalent.

Strangely vague is Piaget's notion of "will for affectivity." This feeling (will, desire) – *affectivity* – can be positive, open-minded, amiable, and helpful, or unpleasant and damaging to sociability. Obviously, these "special organs of equilibrium" do not have some identified consistent moral content – an "ought" deeply embedded in their "is." This is not clearly articulated by Piaget or Haidt. Internal social regulators can be positive social inter-actors – in tune with moral precepts – or negative, blocking civil interactions and even being irrational. Evolution has surely provided the means for value (moral) identification and regulation, but the natural world remains morally neutral. No doubt Darwin (Haidt 2012, 56) thought our values had an evolutionary modus operandi, but offered no biological proof of such.

Piaget (1967, 58) adds, "To the extent that the emotions become organized, they emerge as regulations whose final form of equilibrium is none other than the will. Thus, the will is the true affective equivalent of the operations of reason. Will is a late-appearing function. The real exercise of will is linked to the function of the *autonomous* moral feelings, which is why we have waited until this [late-childhood] stage to discuss it." Many agree that we must choose (will) to be rational as Piaget suggests, but to say our moral feelings are autonomous – self-directed and independent – seems to deny their social construction. Surely Piaget is letting his psychological assumptions guide his observations and conclusions. "Will" or "the expression of what we desire to happen" does not presuppose "what we desire to 'morally' happen." "Will" becomes linked to moral feelings or amoral feelings as experience and the socialization process moves forward. Likewise, as children grow into

maturity, they are able to provide reasons for their moral judgments, reasons for their wants, likes, and dislikes.

Thus, to say that our moral discernment is purely evolutionary or biological (innate) or autonomous ignores an additional observation of Piaget; namely, that "Will is late-appearing" and of Berger and Luckmann that moral knowledge is socially constructed. People desire many things, living morally rather than selfishly or otherwise is just one choice made in life. We continue to grow and exchange our ideas and thoughts with others, produce offspring that carry much of whom we are and what they will become. And there is more; birthing within, developing our thoughts and values, is a process of continuous learning and adjustment. This is a sociological, enculturation process, a process by which we learn the traditional content of a culture and assimilate its practices and values.

Social Control and Practical Reasoning

So, here I sit thinking and writing but unaware of the vastness of the genetic and social processes bringing me to this point in my life. This is a philosopher's nightmare as objectivity is always the goal of philosophical proclivity. But objectivity and even subjectivity melt in the vast, perhaps ambiguous, nature of whom we are—our intrinsic self about which we only get a peek now and then. Johnathan Haidt tries to clarify this picture, and does shed light on some basic moral constructs of social interaction, but appears to convolute biological innateness with evolutionary social development; these are not easily separated. There are others who dismiss the *intrinsic* altogether (Rorty, 1999, 50-51; 120; 263) considering it being too unsteady and ill-defined for moral theory building. This is understandable as science and technology have pushed us into a fact-based culture-seeking epistemological security. But, such security will not be found as our pre-rational dispositions color our decision-making, even the decision to be rational (See: Hester 1975). So dare I suggest we peek under the covers of our thoughts and decisions and therein exhume the hidden values that are regenerative and illusive? This is conceivably an impossible task, but not completely so, as we can explore many of the hidden assumptions, motives, and unwary messages from the past forming our present cognitive dispositions and why we act the way we do. This is a major insight of Haidt's work, but, as we are aware, the origin of an idea in no way constitutes its validation. The pre-verbal and pre-rational assumptions we bring to the table of human discourse and to our ethical behavior is a snarl of cultural habits and presuppositions that are difficult to untangle.

Moralities, and there are many, are special forms of social control and practical reasoning the purpose of which is to supply action-guidance for individuals in a social context. This is both a prudential and rational conclusion relying not on psychological metaphysics, but life's experiences. It is within social contexts that one encounters the problem of trying to determine what "is the "best" thing to do." In common language, this problem takes the form of knowing what is right and being able to distinguish right from wrong behavior. Thus, the crucial question for morality becomes, "Should I do what is right and refrain from doing what is wrong?" not, "Do I have an innate more

sense?" Implied by this is that there exists conclusive reasons for doing what action, if it is right, and conclusive reasons against doing the action if it is wrong. This may just be an overstatement as *conclusive reasons* often disappear in the fog of cultural diversity. No innate – before experience – moral knowledge can resolve this problem. Morality is a form of social reasoning motivated by social hope.

Social Hope

There are hidden connections – connections and relationships that define whom we are and how we respond to others. These hidden connections can be revealed by reason but reason doesn't create them. Our commitment to reason is itself a pre-rational commitment, a leap of affirmation pleading for consistency, contradiction avoiding, and pushing us into the future. Reason is a form of social equilibrium and is never as "pure" as some believe it to be. Noticing this uncertain quality, German philosopher Ernst Bloch (1986, xii) formulated what is called "the ontology of the not-yet," which is important to his idea of "social hope" and has significance for science and ethics as inference-making activities. Bloch points out that "actual thought never moves in straight lines, like thought that is fixed, cut and dried, in which nothing expands or changes and which is therefore incapable of doing justice to transformation"(xiii). Bloch's formulation reads, "P is *not-yet* Q" (strictly, "If P, then *not-yet* Q") and explains his commitment to avoid any possible closure to the dialectical interchange between individuals or groups of individuals. With this Bloch says "this forward-pressing urge latent in every moment is hope" (xiii).

Social hope implies a vision of *the not-yet* and cannot be contained in logical inference only or in un-exhumed assumptions and ideas. The openness of hope is revealed in the vision it embraces and vision is forward-looking where hope, ethical or otherwise, is activated in the existential moment of decision-making. More often than not, hope is situation dependent. Here hope finds meaning and musters the energy to move forward. Cultivating reason and civility hangs on social hope and our motivation to activate dialogical discussions that are open, fair-minded, and focused on shared moral values. Agreeing with Bloch, both science and ethics are built-up from yet-to-be tested hypothesis – the not-yet – the beliefs, hunches, and commitments we bring to both: from hypotheses that are yet-to-be tested (verified) empirically and in ethics from hypotheses that are yet-to-be assessed by one's experience in the social environment and what behaviors meet cultural expectations as to right and wrong behavior.

Both science and ethics rely on conditional judgments, having an *iffy* quality about them with reference to that which has yet-to-be discovered and/or confirmed, the motives and unspoken values they entail, and, in ethics especially, to the decision or indecision of following a recognized ethical rule or intuitive ethical belief. Both involve interpretations of the real and recognized—the physical and the social nature of human living and the cultural expectations under which one lives. And although empiricism is the hallmark of science, what is unspoken and only assumed is as important as what is said and placed in theoretical discourse. Be forewarned: just as we cannot build a secure

bridge from hope to certainty, neither can we build from science, a bridge from fact to value, from isness to oughtness. This is a fallacy inherent in moral psychology.

Yet, Marc Hauser (2006), like Haidt, seeks a science of morality. He comments, "On the contrary, I argue that moral judgments are mediated by an unconscious process, a hidden moral grammar that evaluates the causes and consequences of our own and others' actions."[1] Hauser says this shifts the burden of evidence (that we in fact have some sort of moral compass) "from a philosophy of morality to a science of morality." This is an assumption requiring our attention. Is Hauser agreeing that morality is innate – an unconscious process – or is our hidden moral grammar built up through social connections, our ancestral heritage, and enculturation? This is unclear, but either way it entails a search for the "hidden grammar" of moral discourse, the unspoken assumptions that drive our conclusions. This we should consider in both ethics and science.

To accept the causal relationship suggested by Haidt or Hauser at face value, between observing children and the inference that they possess an innate moral sense, may be an item of commonsense or perhaps a hidden assumption of psychology, but real life doesn't always move in this way. Moral value varies from culture to culture and from person to person revealing their particular pre-rational beliefs and habits. We are often fooled by the decisions others make. Inference-making pushes us into Bloch's "not-yet" about which there is an uncertain quality difficult to probe. Obviously, there is an inherent limit to reason as logic can note facts and infer relations, but cannot create either. Values and intrinsic motives or even so-called innate moral knowledge are inferences made, perhaps to confirm our own humanity, but their identity is always environmentally constructed, built or destroyed by relationships that are made and relationships that have failed.

Moral Reasons: A Practical Approach

Kurt Baier (1995) says the very purpose for entering into moral deliberation is to maximize the good life and seek the best possible course of action in one's day-to-day activities and choices. Obviously, not all of one's choices are moral ones, so what makes them moral? Baier points out that what makes one's deliberations moral is the use of moral reasons. So, in Baier's view, what are moral reasons? Baier says that *moral deliberations* take place if and only if choices and decisions are considered from the moral point of view. A person must adopt the point of view of morality if he or she is to be moral (Baier 1970, 331-333). He says the moral point of view is a standard of judgment by which individuals are called upon to weigh their convictions, sentiments, and assumptions about others. This standard looks at the world from the point of view of everyone recognizing that others too have a right to a worthwhile life. Obviously, in Baier's view, morality stresses equality, fair-treatment, and human decency. His definition of the "moral point of view" is a standard treating all people as

> equally important centers of craving, impulses, desires, needs, aims, and aspirations; as people with ends of their own, all of which are entitled, prima facie, to be attained. From this point of view everyone

> of these individuals is required to modify his impulsive behavior, his endeavors and his plans by observing certain rules, the genuinely moral rules. (Baier 1970, 333)

Given Baier's view of morality and because moral rules are designed to facilitate conflicts of interests, reason is required for arbitration when conflicts occur. Baier (1982, 13) explains,

> Human beings are not, it is plain, born as moral agents. Everybody has to learn to become one. We could not learn this if we did not grow up in a society which has what is sometimes called the institution of morality. Such a society teaches its members the roles to be played in determining what people may in reason ask of one another and what such requests by others they may reject. The basic role is, of course, that of the moral agent trying to work out what morally speaking is wanted of him in the particular situation in which he finds himself. To be able to do this he must have learnt the skill of practical reasoning and the general directives which formulate what is generally wanted of a moral agent. Being a moral agent thus presupposes the roles of moral teacher and moral learner. But since the general moral directives or precepts, which the learner accepts from his teacher are not necessarily sound, he must also learn to play the role of moral critic or reformer, the role moral philosophers have paid most attention to. All the roles mentioned so far are concerned with answering the question of what, morally speaking, one ought to do. But there also are three other roles, those of the moral accuser, defender, and judge. They are concerned with ascertaining the quality of someone's performance as a moral agent, that is, with his performance of the cognitive task of judging what he ought to do, and the executive task of doing it, in short his moral merit--and over time, his virtue. The moral accuser accuses someone, himself or another, of having performed these tasks badly, the defender will come to his defense, and the judge will pass judgment on him. Of course, unlike a legal verdict, such a judgment is never final.

Baier's thesis is pragmatic and often called "the good reasons approach to moral justification" (Hudson 1983). It is supported by the observations of Elliot Turiel (2008) whose thesis is that children are molders of society as much as cultural receptors, that they generate social knowledge through their own social understandings and experiences. Turiel reminds us that cognitive and emotional development is a maturation process as well as an educational strategy.

Reason and Civility

It is socially important to connect reason with morality; broadly, to civility. Also, in order to enrich our own understanding of human life we are rationally and, perhaps morally, compelled to acknowledge the diverse values freely expressed in our communities. As acknowledged, seeking their origin is often a fruitless task, but seeking their hidden suppositions is necessary for fair-mindedness and transparency. We are reminded by Thomas Jefferson (1787) "to shake off all the fears of servile prejudices, under which weak minds are servilely crouched." He said that we should, "Fix reason firmly in her seat, and call on her tribunal for every fact, every opinion" and "question with boldness even the existence of a God; because, if there be one, he must more approve of the homage of reason

than that of blindfolded fear." (Coffman, 2012) But how is this possible; that is, how do we unearth and then face up to the myriad values that define our lives? How do we even discover them, prioritize them from a moral perspective, and apply them in the public square? This remains an arduous task.

Acknowledging Jefferson's words, perhaps a fresh paradigm is needed for sorting out and prioritizing our values, and for transferring moral value to younger generations. In this search we should understand that the language freeing us to discuss and debate, dissent and support, can also constrict us. Dialogic civility is such a paradigm requiring open-mindedness, respect, and fair-treatment. This is often a messy business reminding us that mass culture generously flushes out, and renders successfully vague, standards of rationality. Educator Alan Olson (2004, 36) comments,

> Today's model of scientific rationality may be changing, but rationality itself remains important as a critical requirement for comprehension and maintaining dialogue with different cultures, a task impossible to carry out apart from rational reflection on basic values. Rationality provides the basic values and starting points of all systems, and for the openness of different cultural worlds in the dialogue and flow of information.

As moral dialogue opens, there will be some uncertainty, a confusion of *fact* with *value* and a confusion of *response* with *evaluation*. A. S. Kling and L. A. Brothers (1992, 371-372) have warned that we often believe that our response is identical with our evaluation of whatever issues and problems we encounter. But ever so often our responses to social issues are irrational, coming from motives and values unarticulated and hidden deeply within our value histories. Objectivity is difficult, but reason calls it forth. Jordan B. Peterson (1999, 466) concurs saying that it is this confusion that has often proven a great detriment to moral and civil discourse noting that unarticulated values can be formulated as morally uplifting or constricting ideologies. It is to the later our attention is drawn.

Constricting Ideologies

Assessing the moral fabric of our lives or others, and our own biases is needed as we begin discussions of ethics and values. Acknowledging this will be uncomfortable as we all are beset with ongoing cultural ideologies definitive of whom we are and about which we hardly understand or admit. Yet, it's not comfort we seek in discussions of morality, but an honest exchange of ideas and solutions to current moral problems. To break the ideological chain binding our thoughts and values and those of others will be difficult and many times disorienting, but this is where an honest assessment must begin. Acknowledgment is a step forward in this process. Acknowledging that entrenched beliefs, principles, creeds, and ideas are often couched in dogmatic truths daring others to challenge could open many dialogical doors. Of course, as our own moral narcissism is uncovered, negative and emotional – even pompous – reactions will often color the conversation. This we must try to avoid. In the age of social media, it seems that dialogical conversations would move forward,

but this hasn't proven true. Social media is often used to promote personal and political ideologies and defame others as much as it is used for dialectical communication.

Admittedly, much of one's values-orientation is directed from the outside, by the ideas of politicians, ministers, friends, and family members. If outside pressures prevail, dialogue will break down and provincial values – often intrinsic and undisclosed – will be a wall separating and not producing the moral outcomes of community cohesion definitive of dignity, decency, and equality. As we are aware, faith and belief, as well as loyalty to various ideas and dogmas set the horizon of moral truth. To question a prized belief, is for many, to question life itself. Transformation from where we are to where we desire to be – to move from a morally confused present to an idealized moral future will be difficult and often mentally painful.

Although claiming to express things as they are, ideologies are, in reality, a means of protecting and defending a particular point of view or situation. Ideology, no matter its substance or source, supports a moral superiority often negating positive value discussions. Objectivity may be the goal, but difficult to procure. "From this perspective," comments Eric Shyman (2013, 317), "ideologies are, by nature, resistant to change, as they are almost always developed and applied from a protective standpoint—that is to preserve a system that is to be defended by a particular group." This is best expressed by Dean Price who, when talking about America's early pioneers, demonstrated the birth of an ideology. Price said, "The people that built the roads followed the animal paths. And once that path is set, it takes a tremendous amount of effort and energy to take another path. Because you get in that set pattern of thinking, and it's passed down generation to generation to generation." (Packer 2013, 10) Socialization, the process of learning to behave in a way that is acceptable to society, when set in, is difficult to dislodge.

Students in Florida and around the United States are aware of this as they have called for "gun control" and perhaps revising the 2nd Amendment to the Constitution. They are sensitive to the values of their parents and, if they are religious, the values taught in their churches. This sensitivity often biases their understanding and their objectivity, but not always. Many are reaching beyond this cultural horizon to a more holistic and inclusive ethical view. The pressures are many and the growing pains severe. Taking this into consideration, attention needs to be given to the language used in moral discourse as there can be a slippery slope effect to what has been labeled "political correctness," "moral relativity," and "identity politics." Often complex, blocking open and honest discourse, these can be engines of "unchanged," constricting moral vision. Troubling is, with overt and self-inflicted sensitivity, many in our public schools and universities have sacrificed the search for truth filling their classrooms with sympathy, warmth, and ungarnished understanding rather than hard-hitting and fact-checking dialectical discussions characteristic of exposing false beliefs and eliciting truth. Moral relativity is often the result, with everyone – students and teachers – happy that "their" truth is left unaffected and everyone feels good about themselves.

About this, Richard Rorty (1999, 276) comments,

> Insofar as 'postmodern' philosophical thinking is identified with a mindless and stupid cultural relativism – with the idea that any fool thinking that calls itself culture is worthy of respect – than I have no use for such thinking. But I do not see that what I have called 'philosophical pluralism' entails any such stupidity. The reason to try persuasion rather than force, to do our best to come to terms with people whose convictions are archaic and ingenerate, is simply that using force, or mockery, or insult, is likely to decrease human happiness.
>
> We do not need to supplement this wise utilitarian counsel with the idea that every culture has some intrinsic worth. We have learned the futility of trying to assign all cultures and persons places on a hierarchical scale, but this realization does not impugn the obvious fact that there are lots of cultures we would be better off without, just as there are lots of people we would be better off without. To say that there is no such scale, and that we are simply clever animals trying to increase our happiness by continually reinventing ourselves, has no relativistic consequences. The difference between pluralism and cultural relativism is the difference between pragmatically justified tolerance and mindless irresponsibility.

What Rorty points out is the unreality within the reality of the values-muddle we are today experiencing. Many are asking if there are universal principles definitive of "morality" and, if so, what are they. They often look to their parents, teachers, and religious leaders for support. And be put on guard, practices prevalent in our society such as political correctness and moral relativity, including an appeal to our heritage, could just be the patina concealing the hidden biases through which Constitutional rights are defined and defended. This I believe is what Olson (2004) meant when he said that *culture often renders successfully vague common standards of rationality*.

Johnathan Haidt (2012, 132-133) appears to confer, as he comments,

> Neither Shweder (1993, 360-365) nor I am saying that 'anything goes,' or that all societies or all cuisines are equally good. But we believe that moral monism—the attempt to ground all of morality on a single principle—leads to societies that are unsatisfying to most people and at high risk of becoming inhumane because they ignore so many other moral principles. ... To understand why people are so divided by moral issues, we can start with an exploration of our common evolutionary heritage, but we'll also have to examine the history of each culture and the childhood socialization of each individual within that culture.

Sensitivity to Differences

Care needs to be taken, as gender, race, sexuality, nationality, and social status are sensitive matters that draw our concern. Other than gun control, the status of immigrants, the right to protest, and religious freedom are additional issues that will drag hidden biases from under the cover of "being rational." The "culture wars" of some thirty years ago have not gone away as they too have taken on a political recasting. (See: Hunter, 1990 and Wuthnow, 1989) For example, with two alleged extramarital affairs looming over the presidency in 2019, white evangelicals are doubling down on their support for Donald Trump. But the political gains their support is yielding may come

at a high cost for the future of their faith. A new survey released in April 2018 by PRRI (Public Religion Research Institute) finds white evangelical support for Trump remains strikingly high, with 75 percent holding a favorable view of the president and only 22 percent holding an unfavorable view. This level of support far exceeds his favorability among all Americans, which is at 42 percent. Among all non-white evangelical Americans, Trump's favorability is only 36 percent.[2]

Strange as this may sound from a moral perspective, religion has become another source of diversity rather than a unifying force in America life. The variety of religious beliefs today surpasses the nation's multitude of ethnicities, nationalities, and races. With the advances in immigration from both Spanish speaking countries and from the Far East, America, which was once thought of as a cultural/moral melting pot, may resemble broken shards in 2019 rather than a grand blend of religious diversity, dignity, and decency. This is true even though the vast majority of Americans – 76 percent – identify themselves as Christian. It remains that 16 percent of Americans are unaffiliated with any faith, and 1/3 of the self-identified Christians are unaffiliated with any church. (See: Caplow, et. al., 2000) As the church's influence has weakened in American life, what other source of value and morality will take its place?

Cultivating Civility

To identify the relationships among moral beliefs expressed in religions, politics and laws, especially Constitutional laws, is a major challenge of moral thinking. This needs to be accomplished before alternative solutions to important social problems are recommended. Understanding our emersion in a diverse society, moral, civil, and legal consistency are vital to the political health of the country. This is not an intuitive overreach; commonsense tells us that. A productive first step is to examine the moral premises of American culture for no dialogue about American values is possible without a set of common moral assumptions. This does not imply the standardization of morality or the death of individualism, only that we are challenged to identify moral assumptions comprising our diversity that are able to unify our relationships and consistently guide our behavior when immersed in moral conflict situations.

To identify a new value-paradigm that includes an evaluation of our values and seek a common moral point of view, we need to proceed slowly and patiently. Time and effort are required to effectively interact with ideas such as "democracy," "inalienable rights," "the rights of minorities," and "dialogic civility." Furthermore, we should remain sensitive to gender equality, the LGBTQ community, and religion and race inclusion. Some will be open to dialogue on these issues, others will not. No innate moral sense can correct this problem. Cognitive and emotional development is a maturation process and, admittedly, many in our society demonstrate a deficiency in this regard. It will be an arduous task to uncover the hidden assumptions of social knowledge.

Democracy—a working principle for American government and American schools—is founded on the values of freedom, justice, fairness, integrity, honesty, responsible behavior, and the rule of law. But, be forewarned, as Thomas Jefferson said, "Though [the people] may acquiesce, they

cannot approve what they do not understand." (Coffman 2012) Understanding and application ought to be our goals. And this is conceivably a moral "ought" weighed by history and deep consideration. My thesis is simple: cultivating reason and civility ought to be a moral priority in schools, churches, government, and community organizations. Thus, care must be taken and attention given to the meaning of these principles, including the skills required for their application in value disputes. Surely, the violence that has now pervaded American life and especially its schools demands such reconsideration. Also, with a President constantly sending mixed value messages, reason and objectivity are needed.

Conclusion: Democracy, Our Mooring to Reason and Civility

Moral Foundations

In the more than two hundred years of American democracy, Constitutional safeguards, although living documents and not absolutes, have provided a buffer between the majority and minorities, the rich and poor, and those with an expansive education and those whose education is limited. These safeguards only work when they are enforced by people of strong moral character. But one must be aware as corporate creed, the hidden agenda of political pundits, and those using social media for unethical and undemocratic purposes are disruptive to moral and democratic development. A hidden assumption lying at the foundation of democracy is the requirement for honesty, responsibility, and fair-mindedness. These are pre-requisites for a working democratic culture. A study of ethics will reveal the blurred edges of morality and moral principles. It is along these edges where discussion will find meaning and importance and were dialogue is needed. Thus, we need mental and physical room, a forum, in which we can explore atypical ideas and avenues of action, and express our opinions in a non-coercive or intimidating setting. We need a place to examine beliefs, values and practice civility in the give-and-take of differences of opinion and the rational interchange of ideas. From this perspective, democracy as a moral principle must be preserved. Democracy is our mooring to reason and civility.

Willing engagement in such conversations will build connections to our cultural histories, especially our religious or nonreligious histories. Here we can begin to unearth the hidden assumptions and prejudices hopefully brought freely for open discussion. These connections will add ethical perspective in a world beset with mixed value-messages. For example, what value-messages were received when hearing about or reading about the demonstrations, protests, and violence in the August 2017 encounters in Charlottesville, Virginia? What value-messages were received from political leaders or from the clergy? Were these discussed with friends, teachers, and parents? Did Christian ministers place these within the context of Jesus' moral advice—to love others as we love ourselves? Were there mixed message in these exchanges resulting in values confusion? More often than not, it is along these distorted edges were meaning and understanding will be found. All of these represent open moral wounds in our historical past. Until these wounds

are cleaned out and disinfected with truth and moral knowledge, there will be no chance for healing. About the wisdom needed for intellectual and moral growth James L. Christian (2007, xix) writes,

> In a sense, intellectual growth happens to us; it is not something that we do. But it happens to us only when our minds are given a chance to operate on their own terms. They take their own time to process information and begin developing a web of interconnecting lines of illumination among their material ... Only disciplined study with an open mind will produce philosophic awareness. Insight and consciousness still come only with relentless labor. In this age of instant everything; there is no instant wisdom, unfortunately.

Many have lost contact with the moral foundations of democracy, and there has been a diminished cultivation of reason in schools stemming from an educational system that relies on fact-based teaching and constrained thinking. Problem solving, concept analysis, and creative thinking are essential tools for morally responsible behavior. Vladislav Lektorsky (2004, 51 ff.) concurs,

> This kind of education is an important means of cultivating moral and civic virtues because many people cannot make political and moral judgments, cannot argue their positions, cannot foresee the consequences of their actions, and cannot, therefore, make a reasonable choice between different alternatives.

Admittedly, there is a certain vagueness and uncertainty in American values. Is this due to our inability to think and reason with logical acuity? Americans, especially, are a divided and diverse people. Obviously, there is a pragmatic need for identifying the value touchstones that support democracy and flesh out their moral foundations. Teachers may require "re-education" to do this successfully, but it's a task worth pursuing. Objectivity in this re-assessment is difficult, but reason, dialogue, tolerance, and even civil dissent remain its moral prerequisites. Without these, freedom, liberty, and human rights have no chance of permeating our personal lives and political processes.

Socialization is an important educative process; this can't be over emphasized. Education, at any level, is a normative experience. It is value-based as it focuses on civility and democracy and challenges learners to understand and apply their values to a wide-range of problems and issues. Presumably, many will be challenged to evaluate and understand friendships, relationships, and how best to treat others. Given today's political climate, there are many who are stressed over human relationships and national/international entanglements. They are concerned with their future and the future of their children. To openly and objectively discuss these issues, no matter the ilk, is not a simple task and requires thinking about our behavior and attitudes and addressing those attitudes and behaviors that might be morally destructive. Albert Einstein has commented, "The world we have created is a product of our thinking. It cannot be changed without changing our thinking." (Calaprice, 2005)[3] In a world overwhelmed with diverse beliefs and morally inconsistent behaviors,

change is something we seek. We acknowledge that our relationships with others are as important as any scientific discovery believing that cultivating reason and civility is indeed a moral priority.

Democracy, represented by civil discourse and moral behavior, is an ideal to which we ought to strive. Especially important is Bloch's introduction of the ontological priority of the "not-yet," of becoming, of what might happen sometime in the future. "It is therefore not," says Dennis J. Schmidt his translator, "the static or finished self-identity of concepts but their dynamic relativity to other concepts that lets them be meaningful or intelligible" (Bloch 1986, xii). It is this dynamic relativity that is the subject of this dialogue implying a more expansive notion of ethics preferable to one that is narrow, legalistic, self-centered, logic-based, and bleak. Ethics, which pursues human equality, happiness, and responsibility – which views the self as it views others – cannot be allowed to be diminished by a valueless rationality based on unreasonable self-interest or a survival of the fitness mentality implied in neo-Darwinian ethics and accepted as a hidden motive behind personal or national policies.

Endnotes

1. Hauser, M., (2006) *Moral Minds: The Unconscious Voice of Right and Wrong*. New York, NY: Harper Collins. Cited by Shaun Nichols and Joshua Knobe, "Moral responsibility and determinism: The cognitive science of folk intuitions" (*Nous*, Vol. 41, Issue 4, 10/25/2007).
2. Robert P. Jones, "White Evangelicals Can't Quit Donald Trump." *The Atlantic*, Apr 20, 2018. www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/04/white-evangelicals-cant-quit-donald-trump/558461
3. Calaprice, Alice, (2005) T*he New Quotable Einstein* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. Editor Alice Calaprice suggests that two quotes attributed to Einstein which she could not find sources for, "The significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them" and "The world we have created today as a result of our thinking thus far has problems which cannot be solved by thinking the way we thought when we created them," may both be paraphrases of the 1946 quote above. A similar unsourced variant is "The world we have created is a product of our thinking; it cannot be changed without changing our thinking."

References:

Baier, Kurt. "The point of view of morality." *Readings in contemporary ethical theory.* Ed. Kenneth Pahel and Marvin Schiller. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1970.

Baier, Kurt. "Virtue ethics." *Philosophic Exchange* 13.1 (1982):57-70.

Baier, Kurt. *The rational and the moral order: The social roots of reason and morality*. Chicago and La Salle, IL: Open Court Publishing Company, 1995.

Berger, Peter and Thomas Luckmann. *The Social Construction of Reality, a Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York, NY: Anchor, 1996.

Bloch, Ernst. *Natural law and human dignity.* Trans. By Dennis J. Schmidt. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1986.

Brooks, David. *The road to character*. New York, NY: Random House, 2016.

Burtt, E.A. *In search of philosophic understanding*. New York, NY: Mentor Books, 1965.

Caplow, Theodore and Louis Hicks. *The first measured century*. Washington, DC: AEI Press, 2000.

Carnicelli, Candace. (2019) *Center for the Advancement of Nonviolence*. www.commonpeace.org.

Christian, James L. *Philosophy: An introduction to the art of wondering*. Boston: Cengage Learning, 2007.

Coffman, Steve. *Words of Our Founding Fathers*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2012. http://nelsonllawyer.ga/words-of-the-founding-fathers-coffman-steve.pdf

Haidt, Jonathan. *The righteous mind*. London: Penguin Books, 2012.

Hauser, Marc. *Moral minds: The Unconscious voice of right and wrong*. New York, NY: Harper Collins, 2006.

Hester, Joseph P. "Subjective commitment and the problem of moral objectivity." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* Vol. XXXV. No. 4. (1975): 534-539.

Hudson, W.D. *Modern moral philosophy*. England: Basingstoke, 1983.

Hunter, J. D. *Culture Wars, the Struggle to Define America*. New York: BasicBooks, 1990.

Jones, Robert P. "White Evangelicals Can't Quit Donald Trump." *The Atlantic*, Apr 20, 2018. www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2018/04/white-evangelicals-cant-quit-donald-trump/558461

Kling, A. S. and L. A. Brothers. "The amygdale and social behavior." *The amygdale: neurobiological aspects of emotion, memory, and mental dysfunction*. Edited by J. P. Aggleton. New York, NY: Wiley-Liss, 1992.

Lektorsky, Vladislav. "Paideia, critical thinking and religion in education." *Educating for Democracy*. Edited by Alan M. Olson, David M. Steiner, and Irina S. Tuuli. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004.

Olson, Alan, David M. Steiner, and Irina S. Tuuli (Eds.). *Educating for democracy: Paideia in an age of uncertainty.* Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004.

Packer, George. *The unwinding*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2013.

Peterson, Jordan B. *Maps of meaning.* New York, NY: Routledge, 1999.

Piaget, Jean. *Six psychological studies.* New York, NY: Random House, 1967.

Rorty, Richard. *Philosophy and social hope.* London: Penguin Books, 1999.

Rorty, Richard. *Philosophy as a mirror of nature*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979.

Shweder, R.A. and J. Haidt. "The future of moral psychology: Truth, intuition, and the pluralist way." *Psychological Science,* 4 (1993):360-365.

Shyman, Eric. *Beyond equality in the American classroom: the case for inclusive education*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013.

Turiel, Elliot. *The Development of social knowledge.* Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

Turiel, Elliot. "The development of children's orientations toward moral, social, and personal orders: more than a sequence in development." *Human Development* 51. 1 (2008): 21-39.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical investigations*. New York, NY: Macmillan, 1958.

Wuthnow, R. *The struggle for America's soul: Evangelicals, liberals, and secularism*. New York: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989.