

A Vote for Reason

By *MICHAEL P. LYNCH*

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Suppose I offer, at no charge, to drop a drug in the water supply that would cause almost everyone in the country to vote like you this November. You would probably feel at least a little bit tempted to take the deal. Presidential politics is a matter of grave import, after all. Still — many of us would hesitate, and rightly so. There seems to be something really wrong with manipulating people to believe things even when the stakes are high. We want to convince our opponents, yes, but we want them to be convinced by our reasons.

The judgment that reasons play no role in judgment is itself a judgment. And Haidt has defended it with reasons.

This hope that exchanging reasons matters, not just for what it gets us but in itself is as old as Plato, but it has often been derided as something of a muddle-headed fantasy, as “nothing but dreams and smoke” as Montaigne put it in the 16th century. And of course there is some sense in this. You don’t have to be Karl Rove to appreciate the obvious fact that the evidence often fails to persuade, to suspect that what really works are the tried and true methods of good advertising, emotional associations and having the bigger stick (or “super PAC”).

Recently, however, some social scientists, most notably the psychologist Jonathan Haidt, have upped the cynical ante. In Haidt’s view, the philosophers’ dream of reason isn’t just naïve, it is radically unfounded, the product of what he calls “the rationalist delusion.” As he puts it, “Anyone who values truth should stop worshiping reason. We all need to take a cold, hard look at the evidence and see reasoning for what it is. [1] Haidt sees two points about reasoning to be particularly important: the first concerns the efficacy (or lack thereof) of reasoning; the second concerns the point of doing so publicly: of exchanging reasons.

According to Haidt, not only are value judgments less often a product of rational deliberation than we’d like to think, that is how we are *supposed* to function. That it is how we are hardwired by evolution. In the neuroscientist Drew Westen’s words, the political brain is the emotional brain.

Often “reasoning” really seems to be post-hoc rationalization: we tend to accept that which confirms what we already believe (psychologists call this confirmation bias). And the tendency goes beyond just politics. When people are told that they scored low on an I.Q. test, for example, they are more likely to read scientific articles criticizing such tests; when they score high, they are more likely to read articles that support the tests. They are more likely to favor the “evidence,” in other words, that makes them feel good. This is what Haidt calls the “wag the dog” illusion: thinking that reason is the tail that wags the dog of value judgment.

Indeed, reason sometimes seems simply beside the point. Consider some of Haidt’s own well-known research on “moral dumbfounding.” Presented with a story about consensual, protected sex between an adult brother and sister — sex which is never repeated, and which is protected by birth control — most people in the studies reacted with feelings of disgust, judging that it was wrong. Yet subjects struggled to defend such feelings with arguments when questioned by

researchers. [2] Even so, they stuck to their guns. Haidt suggests that this means that whatever reasons they could come up with seem to be just along for the ride: it was their feelings doing the work of judgment.

Data like this — and these examples are just the tip of a very large iceberg — certainly should give us pause; but we need to be careful not to exaggerate the lessons it has to teach us. The inability for people — in particular young *college students* like those in Haidt's study — to be immediately articulate about why they've made an intuitive judgment doesn't necessarily show that their judgment is the outcome of non-rational process, or even that they lack reasons for their view. Intuitions, moral or otherwise, can be the result of sources that can be rationally evaluated and calibrated.[3]

Moreover, rational deliberation is not a switch to be thrown on or off. It is a process, and therefore many of its effects would have to be measured over time. Tellingly, the participants in Haidt's original harmless taboo studies study had little time to deliberate. But as other studies have suggested when people are given more time to reflect, they *can* change their beliefs to fit the evidence, even when those beliefs might be initially emotionally uncomfortable to them.

Indeed, recent history seems to bear this out: Consider, for example, the change in attitudes toward homosexuality and gay marriage taking place in the United States. Perhaps we can explain large-scale moral and political change of this sort without having to evoke the efficaciousness of reasons, but it seems just as likely that appeals to evidence — evidence, in fact, often uncovered by social scientists — have had at least some impact on how people view same-sex (or interracial) marriage. And it seems downright likely that rational deliberation is going to be involved in the creation of *new* moral concepts — such as human rights. In short, to show that reasons have no role in value judgments, we would need to show that they have no role in changes in moral views *over time*.

This brings us around to Haidt's second main point about reasoning, mentioned above. He endorses what he calls a Glauconian view of reasoning about value. The reference here is to an old saw from Plato: What would you do with a ring of invisibility? Fight for truth, justice and the American way or spy on people and steal stuff? In Plato's "*Republic*," the character Glaucon asks this question to illustrate the idea that it is merely the fear of being caught that makes us behave, not a desire for justice. Haidt takes from this a general lesson about the value of defending our views with reasons. Just as those who do the "right" thing are not really motivated by a desire for justice, those who defend their views with reasons are not "really" after the truth. As the cognitive scientists Mercier and Sperber put it, what they are really after — whether they acknowledge it or not — are arguments supporting their already entrenched views. If so, then even if appeals to evidence are sometimes effective in changing our political values over time, that's only because reasons themselves are aimed at manipulating others into agreeing with us, not uncovering the facts. To think otherwise is to once again fall into the rationalist delusion.

In giving reasons we certainly aim to get others to agree with us (I'm doing that now, after all). And aiming at agreement is a good thing, as is searching out effective means of reaching it (indeed, this is one of the noble ideals of Haidt's book). But it is less clear that we can coherently represent ourselves as *only* aiming to get others to agree with us in judgment.

To see this, think about how Haidt's view applies to itself. The judgment that reasons play no role in judgment is itself a judgment. And Haidt has defended it with reasons. So if those reasons convince me that his theory is true, then reasons *can* play a role in judgment — contra the theory. Think about the passage I quoted above in this context: those who love truth need to take a good, hard look at the evidence and see reasoning for what it is. This sounds like a self-defeating argument: we are being advised to use reason to see that reason is flawed.

There is a larger point here. Even if we *could* start seeing ourselves as giving reasons only to manipulate, it is unclear that we *should*. To see ourselves as Glauconians is to treat the exchange of reasons as a slow-moving, less effective version of the political correctness drug I mentioned at the outset. And we are right to recoil from that. It is a profoundly undemocratic idea.

To engage in democratic politics means seeing your fellow citizens as equal autonomous agents capable of making up their own minds. And that means that in a functioning democracy, we owe one another reasons for our political actions. And obviously these reasons can't be "reasons" of force and manipulation, for to impose a view on someone is to fail to treat him or her as an autonomous equal. That is the problem with coming to see ourselves as more like Glauconian rhetoricians than reasoners. Glauconians are marketers; persuasion is the game and truth is beside the point. But once we begin to see ourselves — and everyone else — in this way, we cease seeing one another as equal participants in the democratic enterprise. We are only pieces to be manipulated on the board.

Critics of reason, from Haidt to conservative intellectuals like Burke and Oakeshott, see reason as an inherently flawed instrument. As a consequence, they see the picture of politics I've just suggested — according to which democracies should be spaces of reasons — as unfounded and naïve. Yet to see one another as reason-givers doesn't mean we must perceive one another as emotionless, unintuitive robots. It is consistent with the idea, rightly emphasized by Haidt, that much rapid-fire decision making comes from the gut. But it is also consistent with the idea that we can get better at spotting when the gut is leading us astray, even if the process is slower and more ponderous than we'd like. Giving up on the idea that reason matters is not only premature from a scientific point of view; it throws in the towel on an essential democratic hope. Politics needn't always be war by other means; democracies can, and should be places where the exchange of reasons is encouraged. This hope is not a delusion; it is an ideal — and in our countdown to November, one still worth striving for.

NOTE: A related article by Gary Gutting will be published later this week. The Stone has also invited a response from Jonathan Haidt.

FOOTNOTES

[1] *"The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion,"* p. 89. Haidt's fascinating book concerns much more than the points focused on here; its principal aim is to diagnose the causes of ongoing political rifts.

[2] I don't mean to suggest, and neither does Haidt, that such feelings can't be defended; that is a different topic.

[3]See Daniel Kahneman's "Thinking, Fast and Slow" (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2011) and "What Does the Modularity of Morals Have to Do With Ethics? Four Moral Sprouts Plus or Minus a Few," Owen Flanagan and Robert Anthony Williams. *Topics in Cognitive Science* 2 (2010) 430-453. On the following point about changes, see J. M. Patxton, L. Ungar, and J. Greene, "Reflection and Reasoning in Moral Judgment" *Cognitive Science* 36: 1, p. 163-177.

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Scott Iowa City

The fact that reason can be easily swayed by emotion does not mean that emotion must inevitably subvert reason. Spiritual traditions and the history of philosophy are candles of light, pointing towards the capacity within humans for compassion, reason, and emotion to coexist peacefully.

avispartan117 Coppell, TX

I find it interesting that so far, everyone has missed the elephant in the room; what is the definition of reason?

Is reason defined as the process of deriving true conclusions from true assumptions? That seems to be what most people here are implicitly accepting. If so, then you inevitably run into a whole bunch of problems related to knowing the truth of your assumptions: What, besides emotion, can justify moral assumptions? What aspect of reality do moral assumptions even refer to? You assume that the observed can be used to predict the unobserved, that other people have minds, and that a world exists independent of your perceptions, but how do you know all this is really true? The inevitable result of any "rational" skepticism under this definition of reason must be solipsism and moral nihilism, unless you choose to irrationally take some things on faith, which we all do out of necessity.

Another definition of reason is the instrumental one; good reasoning is any process that allows you to correctly achieve a goal. But then proper reasoning would only be defined relative to the goal, which itself is determined by desire.

That, in a nutshell, is what this article means to me: at the root of all well founded belief is an unfounded belief. You don't need neuroscience and psychology to prove this, all you need is an armchair and a passing grade in philosophy 101

robmattles Chevy Chase, MD

Reason has survived or even prospered through evolution. Its use is presumably a survival advantage still. If voters are swayed by raw emotion then those who so manipulate the emotions of we sappy-headed impressionable voters surely use reason to create their enticements. So though there's little hope for reason replacing base passion as our prime mover, it remains a power in our arsenal that gives advantage and reward. So here's to Reason, the step-child of Passion. It has its moments and I wish it many more.

Ross Williams Grand Rapids, Minnesota

"Perhaps we can explain large-scale moral and political change of this sort without having to evoke the efficaciousness of reasons"

There is no evidence that those changes resulted from reason. More likely they resulted from people being exposed to gays and having openly gay family, friends and co-workers. Its a great example of reasons following action, in this case the acceptance of gays.

"those who love truth need to take a good, hard look at the evidence and see reasoning for what it is. This sounds like a self-defeating argument: we are being advised to use reason to see that reason is flawed."

And the argument failed with the author for the reasons sited. But it seems to me this argument misses the point entirely. Its not that people aren't persuaded by argument, but that arguments only "persuade" us of things we are already prepared to accept emotionally. This is considerably different than using reason to discover or identify "truth".

In fact, the notion of the democratic process being a search for "truth" is a complete misunderstanding of its purpose common among abstract thinkers. But the purpose of the democratic process is to resolve conflicts between competing interests without resorting to violent conflicts. Truth has nothing to do with it. The importance of articulating reasons in that process is to provide a roadmap for compromise by clearly explaining what each side values.

Connor Wood Boston

There's something missing in this analysis of Haidt's position: Haidt espouses a Glauconian viewpoint in order to ultimately facilitate better integration of reason and intuition, not to dismiss reason outright. That is, he assents to the traditionally conservative claim that reason is inherently flawed and we require each other's oversight to behave well SO THAT he can point to the rare junctures in the decision-making process where reason really can have positive influence. ...

Ross Williams Grand Rapids, Minnesota

Cassamandra -

Actually not. I remember a training with Cesar Chavez and the insight this this statement provided to a young organizer. Paraphrased - "Don't try to reason with people. Get them to act and they will find the reasons for themselves." This was persuasive not because of its arguments, but because it reflected and explained the actual experience of both the speaker and the audience.

We remember the eloquence of people like Cesar Chavez and Martin Luther King. But it was their actions that changed us. Whether they were "great leaders of the people" or "radical outside agitators" depended on your own experience with them.

The notion that we are more accepting of gays because of reasoned argument seems silly to me. You have to believe we found undiscovered reasonable arguments that had always been there. We understand them, where past generations haven't. Apparently the idea is that we are somehow smarter than people before us.

I think what really changed was our experience. We came to accept reasons that explained that experience. It wasn't the reasons that changed us, we changed the reasons.

Howard Los Angeles

Reasoning is always from premises. If you disagree with someone else's premises, that doesn't mean that the conclusions that person draws from the premises are illogical; it means that you don't buy the premises and therefore don't think they warrant the conclusions.

Most people don't have complete philosophical systems consistently and rationally based on a few axioms. Spinoza and Leibniz may have done so, but most people hold beliefs that are not always compatible. Consider the champions of both free market competition and literal interpretation of the New Testament, for instance. Or those who favor DNA testing of everyone in the population but don't believe in the evolutionary science that explains the process. Or who give reasons for not believing in reason.

Reason, and testing our conclusions as a way of seeing if our premises are true, is the only method we have of validating or refuting anything that goes beyond our immediate experience. Learning enough logic to identify our own premises and those of our opponents would be a darn good thing.

The distinction between agreeing with the conclusions of an argument and accepting the validity of the argument is a weapon against prejudice

Rawebb Little Rock, AR

While there are clearly exceptions--both people and issues--where reason plays a constructive role, those are exceptions. The great majority of psychologists (I am one) would agree with Haidt. People's attitudes towards issues--including moral issues--represent some kind of internal balance among behavior, feelings and beliefs. We have known for years--and I just saw in confirmed in a major research report--that the least effective way of trying to change someone's mind is to tell them something that contradicts their beliefs. If you want to change people's minds, you have to change their behavior (e.g. give them the opportunity to interact with openly gay people so that normal human decency can prevail.) In a paraphrase of that famous line from the Vietnam era, if you have them by the behavior, their hearts and minds (feelings and beliefs) will come tagging along. Reason is what we use after the fact to justify our behavior to witnesses so they will not think we are horrible people.

Matt Upstate NY

"The judgment that reasons play no role in judgment is itself a judgment. And Haidt has defended it with reasons. So if those reasons convince me that his theory is true, then reasons can play a role in judgment — contra the theory."

I am not endorsing Haidt's larger position. But this is a poor argument. Haidt is claiming only that there is no appeal to reason in *moral* contexts; presumably he is not arguing against a role for reason in science and mathematics. But Lynch's argument here does not involve a moral judgment, but presumably is meant to be something more along the lines of scientific reasoning. After all, a general philosophical assertion about the role of reason in moral judgment is not itself moral in character, any more than a claim about obesity in the U.S. is itself fat. There is no self-reflexive problem here.

Deborah Houston

What I have found is that people simply don't believe facts that are contrary to their preconceived notions, not that they take the same facts and come to different conclusions. In fact, that implies that if they did believe the facts, they are convinced they would have to change their conclusions, so I don't think it is that people are not interested in reason, so much as people do not want to believe that they could be wrong. Therefore, it is the facts themselves they change in their minds rather than their interpretation of the facts. Changes in public mores such as attitudes toward same sex marriage really are made through education and the dissemination of facts. It is up to the press to sort this out as they used to instead of presenting different facts as if they were two equally valid opinions. A workable democracy depends on it

Josh Hill New London

More, I think, that it is practiced by a tiny minority, and debated by their followers. The caveat being that to some extent, all of us are followers -- no one can master every field today. So for example when I defend global warming, I am essentially passing along the views of scientists active in the field, along with my own belief -- based on my own scientific training and knowledge of history -- that