



Faculty Lecture 2021

Bending the Moral Arc Towards Justice:

Cultivating the Virtues of Global Citizenship

By Dr. Ryan Falcioni



Ryan Falcioni is a professor of philosophy at Chaffey College, where he has taught since 2000 (full-time since 2005). Ryan is a proud alumnus of Chaffey College, and credits professors such as Eva Rose, Laura Hope, Michelle Dowd, Gary Arouze, and Maura O’Neill, for inspiring him to think critically and creatively. Furthermore, his time at Chaffey helped to cultivate a lifelong interest in many different areas of the academy. From Chaffey he transferred to UCR, where he received an interdisciplinary B.A. in Anthropology, Psychology, and Sociology in 1998. Without much background in philosophy, his curiosity (and a bit of prodding from family members) took him to Talbot School of Theology at Biola University, where he completed an M.A. in Philosophy of Religion and Ethics in 2000. During his final semester at Biola, he started a teaching internship at Chaffey College under the guidance of Monica Carter and with his mentor, Dr. Maura O’Neill. It was here at Chaffey that Ryan began to learn how to teach... and admits that the first year or two were much more difficult than he had anticipated (w/apologizes to Monica, Maura, and his first

few classes of students). Ryan completed his Ph.D. in Philosophy of Religion and Theology from Claremont Graduate University in 2011. He is grateful for the opportunity to have worked under D.Z. Phillips until Phillips’s passing in 2006. He would also like to thank Dr. Patrick Horn for serving as a most thoughtful and encouraging doctoral advisor in D.Z.’s stead. Ryan continues to research, write, and lecture, on issues in philosophy of religion, secularism, ethics, philosophy of language, and cultural theory. If you are interested in any of these things, Ryan would like to invite you to have an inappropriately lengthy discussion over a coffee or beer sometime!

Ryan is also unsure as to why these things are generally written from a third-person perspective and would like to now switch to a first-person one, as he believes that this makes more sense and feels more natural. To be completely honest, it just feels strange to write about myself at all. I hope to never attempt writing an autobiography. I am grateful that the world undoubtedly shares my lack of interest in such an endeavor! That said, I mostly just want to express my gratitude for those people in my life, in addition to those mentioned above, who have played meaningful roles in my personal and academic journeys. My parents, Alan and Dandinelle, continue to parent in ways that are meaningful and affirming. They model ethical courage as they demonstrate a willingness to entertain new and challenging ideas, and make real and lasting change year after year. I would like to thank my wife, Jocelyn, and son, Miles, for being my world! Both of you are constant sources of love and encouragement, and you continually motivate me to be a better me. I know that I have a lot of work to do and I appreciate your patience and forgiveness along the way. I also want to thank my three brothers: Aaron, Benjamin, and Jonathan, for their continually evolving roles in my life and their willingness to have me be a part of theirs. I know that we don’t say these things often enough, so I am putting it down in this semi-permanent record: I love you and am proud to call you my brothers! I am also blessed to have such good colleagues and friends (many are both) who support me and hold me accountable. I hate mentioning names in these things as I am bound to leave many out. So, hopefully you all know who you are. If not, just assume that you are one of these awesome people!

I am guessing that between Nicole’s introduction, my prefatory remarks during the talk, and this brief bio, you know more than enough about me. If for some reason you want to know more, just Google me (on second thought, please don’t). In the meantime, thank you for watching this lecture. If successful, I hope that something I say gets you to think in new ways about (and/or reinvigorates your commitment to) the interconnectedness of our ethical lives. I know that I need these sorts of reminders and encouragement more often than most.

INTRODUCTION

This lecture is very personal for me! Over the past few years I thought that if I ever had the opportunity to do a Faculty Lecture, I would jump into my ongoing research on religious and secular ethical theory. Alternatively, I had been thinking a lot about artificial general intelligence and also some provocative new studies on the historical Jesus. Then Covid hit! And like the rest of the world, my daily routine got flipped upside down. I found my thoughts turning more toward the future, both short-term and long-term. I worried (even more than usual) about the world that my son was experiencing and eventually inheriting. My worries coincided with his own social and moral awakening. He began to ask the kinds of questions that filled me with equal parts dread and pride. They began with a curiosity about issues of justice, inequality, and suffering in the world. The ethicist in me was beaming with pride as I did my professorial and parental best to explain the root causes of some of these phenomena. Being conscious of his age, I focused on stories of those that have stood on the right side of justice, often at great personal cost, throughout history. I bought him a few books about such moral heroes. He dove into this material, spawning even more discussions (and more than a few tears) about the history of humanity's inhumanity...but always ending with messages of courage, heroism, and hope.

Following several months of such talks, I felt like we had reached a new stasis of understanding and awareness. I even indulged in a few self-congratulatory pats on the back for doing my part to raise a compassionate and courageous kid. However, unbeknownst to me (but completely known to anyone familiar with a good video game), a new level had been unlocked. This new level brought unsuspected, but entirely deserved, instant karma! He began to ask about our (mostly my) contributions to some of these problems. How was it that I could spend so much money on my car, on our home, on my hobbies, while many children were dying for lack of food, clean water, and from treatable diseases? Why weren't we volunteering more of our time and money to issues that really mattered? As I stammered to rationalize some of my middle-class lifestyle choices, he decided to put his money where his mouth was. He dug around in his treasure box and (after crunching the numbers) came to me with \$100 dollars to be donated to The Humane Society. A few seconds was all that it took for him to part with roughly half of his life savings. And, it was clear that he was willing to give it all. Even as I fought back the tears and tried to tell him that it was okay to save a little for himself...I knew that he was right! It shouldn't take any of us (who know from where our next meal is coming) more than a few seconds to realize that we ought to make substantial lifestyle changes so that others can simply survive in this world. Any of the lies we tell ourselves in shortsighted efforts to avoid change, to avoid our obligations to others, must be faced with the same moral courage of this 10-year-old! He was right, I was wrong! My hypocrisy was exposed with a couple of questions and one simple act. So...these events are the impetus for this lecture.

As we shall see, virtually all of the world's religions, wisdom traditions, and peoples, agree that our duties to humanity (and often all life) do not know regional, racial, ethnic, or national boundaries. To even begin drawing circles of exclusion around any of the world's children is the very definition of inhumanity! In my view, this understanding, appreciation, and cultivation of our duties to all of humanity is most clearly captured in the concept of *kosmopolitês* (global citizenship). This paper is an exploration of this important notion. This will unfold in three parts. The *first* is simply to locate the concept of global citizenship within the larger debate about the nature of moral progress in the world. As I took a deep dive into this literature, two very different narratives emerged. In many ways, the world is experiencing unprecedented moral progress and many argue that we simply need to stay the course. On the other hand, the world is also experiencing increasing injustice, inequality, and novel existential threats. After tracing the nature of this paradox, I will move to the *second* part in proposing that embracing an ethos of global citizenship is a necessary starting point for any hopes of moving forward in continuing the project of creating a more humane, just, and equitable world. In the *third* and final part we will look at some of the obstacles to embracing and cultivating the virtues of global citizenship. The goal in this final section is to deconstruct some of these obstacles and begin to propose a way forward. Spoiler alert: There is no magic bullet here! I wish that we could all just take the red pill and see the light, instantly becoming our best moral selves. Unfortunately, thousands of years of philosophy and religion, and a couple hundred years of psychology have yet to yield a cure for the human condition. In many ways this lecture is asking the broadest

question in all of moral thought: How do we become better people? I do not pretend to know the answer(s). But through a look at insights from the fields of philosophy, the arts, the sciences, and moral psychology in particular, I hope that we can at least have a better understanding of the obstacles in our way. Furthermore, we can find new inspiration from the moral heroes that have gone before us to do our part to help bend the arc towards a more just, compassionate, and humane world for us all!

THE PARADOX OF PROGRESS (A)

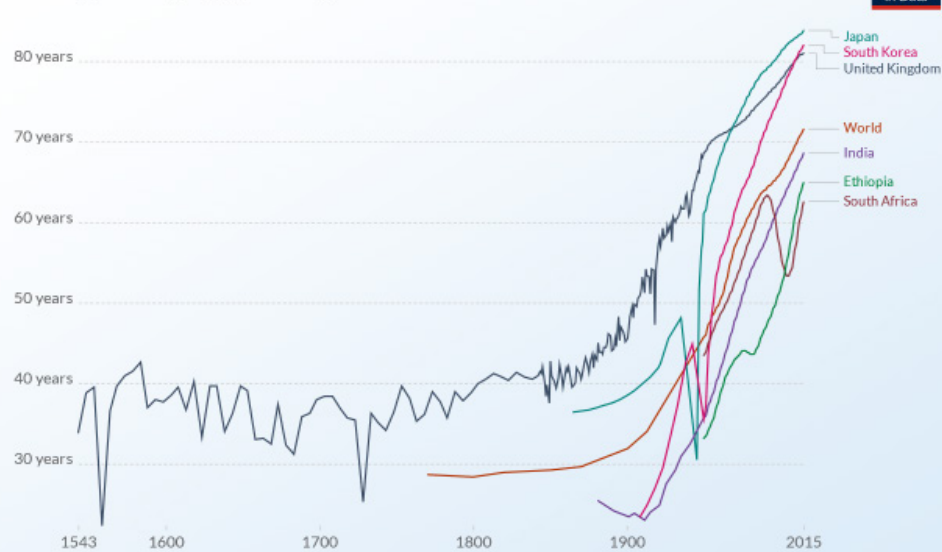
I would like to start by asking you a brief question that (if successful) reveals an important truth that represents one side of the paradox that we shall explore. It has been posed in many ways by many people over the last few years, from figures such as [Harvard Psychologist Steven Pinker](#), Elon Musk, [Bill Gates](#), and [President Barack Obama](#), and it goes something like this: If you could pick any time in history to be born, without knowing who you would be (in terms of race, class, gender, or location), when would it be? I'll give you a second to ponder this...but if variables like the likelihood of surviving infancy/childhood, the possibility of being enslaved, probability of being a victim of violent crime, overall health and wellbeing, life expectancy, and economic prosperity matter to you (or probably even just one of these variables), **then it would be absurd to pick any time before now.**

And, even in light of the many events that have transpired in recent years, it seems likely that our answer would (or at least should) be “now” for the foreseeable future. To imagine our lives in any of the decades and centuries past, in virtually any region in the world, is to imagine a worse life! Statistically, we would be much more likely to live shorter, more painful, more impoverished, more subjugated, more brutal lives. So once the fantasies of being born into the world of *Bridgerton* have worn off, the sobering statistical reality of facing the plight of nearly everyone born before the 20th century should set in. **To be clear: the nobleman to peon ratio is not in our favor!** From the era of hunter-gatherers right up until the end of the 19th century, global life expectancy hovered around 30 years.¹ And even accounting for a significant dip due to Covid deaths this past year, it is currently at around 73 years.² Constitutive of much of this global increase is the substantial decline in death by disease, famine, violence, and virtually all varieties of deaths related to extreme poverty and lack of resources.

¹ Steven Pinker, *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Science, Humanism, and Progress* (New York: Penguin Random House, 2018), 53-54.
<https://ourworldindata.org/life-expectancy>

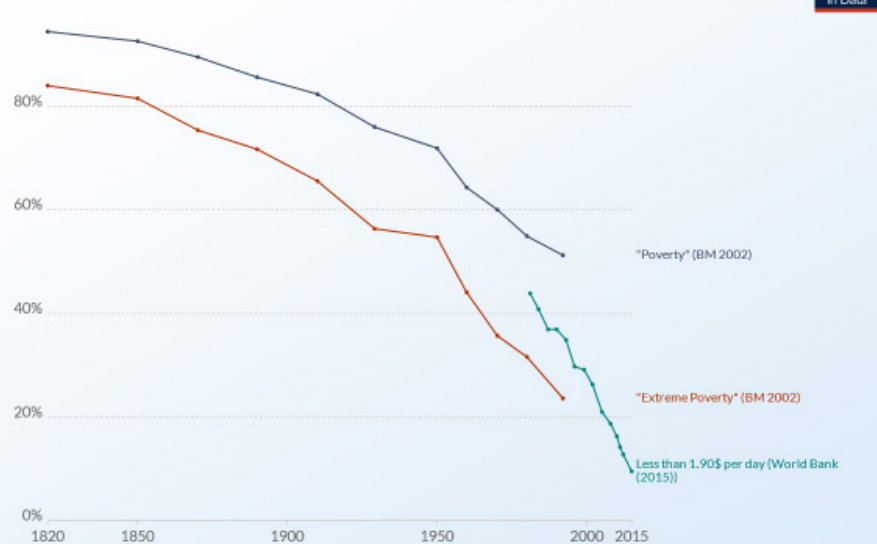
² “Life Expectancy at Birth (years),” *World Health Organization*, accessed April 11, 2021,
[https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/indicators/indicator-details/GHO/life-expectancy-at-birth-\(years\)](https://www.who.int/data/gho/data/indicators/indicator-details/GHO/life-expectancy-at-birth-(years)).

Life expectancy, 1543 to 2015



Source: Riley (2005), Clio Infra (2015), and UN Population Division (2019)
 Note: Shown is period life expectancy at birth, the average number of years a newborn would live if the pattern of mortality in the given year were to stay the same throughout its life.
 OurWorldInData.org/life-expectancy • CC BY

Declining global poverty: share of people living in extreme poverty, 1820-2015



Source: Bourguignon and Morrisson (2002) and World Bank (PovcalNet) (2015)
 OurWorldInData.org/extreme-poverty/ • CC BY

To highlight just a few significant statistics from this [video of Stephen Pinker's](#) analysis: 250 year ago, 1/3 of children in the **richest** nations did not live to see their 5th birthday. Now fewer than 6 percent of children in the **poorest** countries die before age 5. Two hundred years ago, 90% of people subsisted in extreme poverty. Now less than 10% do. In light of these and thousands of other metrics of happiness and flourishing, Pinker states, "*The world has made spectacular*

*progress in every single measure of human well-being.*³ Pinker and others are of course correct in asserting that on many of the most significant markers of moral/social progress, we have made profound improvements. The arc seems to indeed be bending ever closer to greater safety, happiness, and justice for all.

In light of all of these achievements, I think that it is okay to pause and take a brief victory lap. In fact, reflecting on how we (okay, maybe not me, but the collective “we”) have worked together to achieve such advances in improving humanity is an essential part of continuing this work and making further advances for our planet and all of its inhabitants. The only danger is to rest on our laurels and stop this momentum...or to move ahead without making the necessary adjustments in light of our lessons through the centuries and in light of the new (many of them existential) challenges that lay ahead.

THE PARADOX OF PROGRESS (PART B)

In full view of this empirical data on global improvements, many [scholars, groups, and activists](#) have challenged some of the [specific claims](#) and generally optimistic conclusions of such champions of progress. By way of one brief counterpoint, University of London economic anthropologist, [Jason Hickel](#) has pointed out that if we adjust the “extreme poverty” line, from subsisting on under \$1.90 a day, to \$7.40 a day (which is still quite low), the number of people living under it would go from Pinker’s 10% of the world to roughly 60% (over 4.2 billion in 2019).⁴ Furthermore, this number is actually **increasing** globally (with a modest decline in rate) since meaningful data on poverty began to be collected in 1981. [Max Roser](#) further elaborates on this situation, “In all regions outside of high-income countries more than 85% of all people live in moderate poverty.”⁵ In addition to contesting some of the data, their larger contention is that other variables should be considered in telling the full story of moral progress. Increases in [incarceration rates](#) (especially affecting [people of color](#)), [economic inequality](#), political and ideological balkanization, [the rise of hate groups](#), [ethno-nationalism](#), terrorism, [despeciation](#), and unprecedented [environmental degradation](#) must factor into any such assessment of progress. Furthermore, the emergence over the last century of a host of new existential threats: nuclear proliferation, [biological weapons](#), [transhumanism](#), automation, the rise of AI, global warming, and [pandemics](#) should give us pause before asserting, as Michael Shermer does, that “we are living in the most moral period in our species’ history.”⁶

In the description/teaser for this lecture, I mentioned the complex interrelationship between these two tales of global progress. There is indeed a provocative paradox that emerges here when we look at the primary drivers behind much of the progress in health, wealth, and longevity. Stated succinctly: **The drivers of this moral progress are also the biggest threats to continued progress.** It is through the advances in technology, infrastructure, and more efficient means of transforming natural resources into energy, food, and goods, that the global standards in health, wealth, and longevity, have increased. And...it is precisely the technology, methods, markets, and politics behind this globalized development that are at the core of virtually all of the threats to continuing this “moral” progress. This [paradox of progress](#) is often most explicit in particular domains or with specific advances in science and technology. Advances in communication, markets, and travel, can increase efficiency and even connectedness...but they can also spread pandemics, instruments of war, and hate, much more easily. I recently had a debate with a colleague about the net effect of social media on the state of the world (P.S. this is an unwinnable debate). We essentially engaged in a cost-benefit

³ Pinker, *Enlightenment Now*, 52.

⁴ Jason Hickel, “Bill Gates Says Poverty is Decreasing, He Couldn’t Be More Wrong,” *The Guardian*, Jan 29, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2019/jan/29/bill-gates-davos-global-poverty-infographic-neoliberal>.

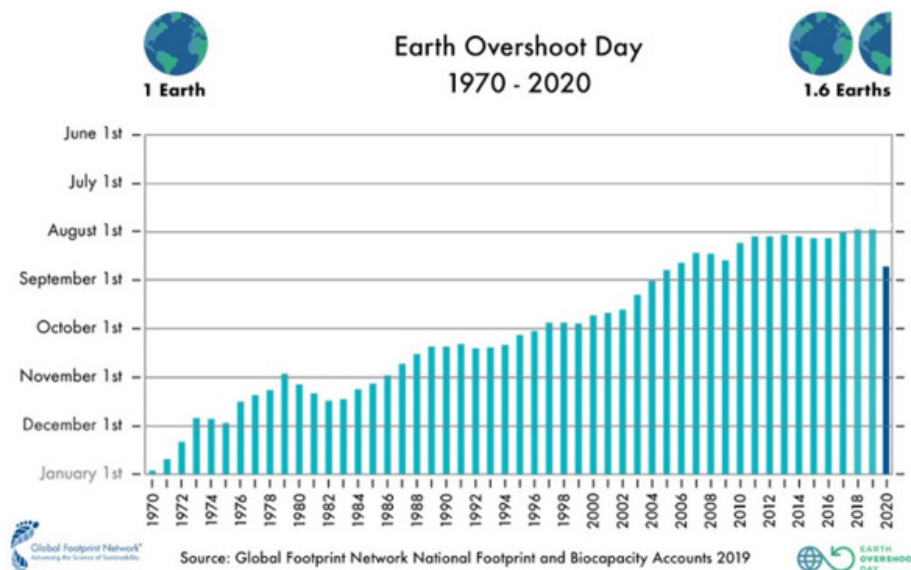
⁵ Max Roser, “Global poverty in an unequal world: Who is Considered Poor in a Rich Country? And What Does This Mean for our Understanding of Global Poverty?,” *Our World in Data*, March 5, 2021, <https://ourworldindata.org/higher-poverty-global-line>.

⁶ Michael Shermer, *The Moral Arc: How Science and Reason Lead Humanity Toward Truth, Justice, and Freedom* (New York: Henry Holt, 2015), 4.

analysis on both the global and personal levels. It struck me that this debate is a case in point of this broader paradox. Social media has undoubtedly enabled us to connect with each other in new and meaningful ways, it brings so many of us closer, it enables us to have relationships with people all over the world. Counterpoint: it has done the same for Nazis! The increase in the spread, consolidation, and efficiency of hate, bigotry, and terrorism cannot be overstated or swept up as a mere side effect of advances in technology. Such problems and risks are endemic to the very modes and methods of progress...hence this frustratingly intractable paradox.

The various dimensions of this paradox will become more explicit as we take a brief look at the domain that is most directly affected by these advances in agriculture, industry, and technology...the biosphere itself. But, it should be noted that many of the social problems involving race, class, gender, ethnonationalism, etc., have their roots in the broader inequities that are exacerbated by increasing economic globalization. Oxford professor of globalisation and development, [Ian Goldin](#), captures this paradox of global progress most starkly:

The drivers of progress are rising incomes and connectivity; these also lead to greater negative spillovers and systemic risk. Managing globalization's underbelly is essential, and the gulf between what needs to be done and what is being done is widening. Economic growth has come at the expense of ecosystems. Because nature does not respond to price signals (rhinos do not reproduce more when their horns are more valuable), increasing freedom of choice has led to overexploitation of a growing number of natural systems.⁷



One provocative way to capture this exploitation of natural systems and its effects is to look at how quickly during each calendar year humanity's resource consumption exceeds Earth's capacity to regenerate these resources. This [Earth Overshoot Day](#) has gotten progressively worse since 1970. The cumulative effect of this reality cannot be overstated.

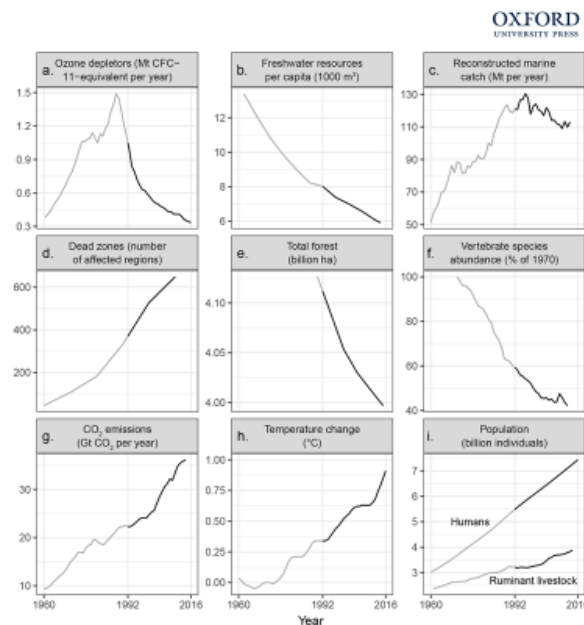
⁷ Ian Goldin, "The Limitations of Steven Pinker's Optimism," *Nature* 554, no. 7693 (2018): 421. <https://doi.org/10.1038/d41586-018-02148-1>.

As further [studies](#) reveal, we are doing irreparable damage to ecosystems, plant and animal species, and human populations as well.

In the tragically prescient 1992 report, [“World Scientists’ Warning to Humanity”](#), over 1,700 of the world’s top scientists issued dire warnings and a desperate plea to the world to engage in major economic and political changes to avoid the collapse of the natural world. The ethos of this report, backed up by substantial evidence from a variety of scientific fields is succinctly summed up in its opening statement,

Human beings and the natural world are on a collision course. Human activities inflict harsh and often irreversible damage on the environment and on critical resources. If not checked, many of our current practices put at serious risk the future that we wish for human society and the plant and animal kingdoms, and may so alter the living world that it will be unable to sustain life in the manner that we know. Fundamental changes are urgent if we are to avoid the collision our present course will bring about.⁸

WORLD SCIENTISTS’ WARNING TO HUMANITY: A SECOND NOTICE (NOVEMBER 2017)



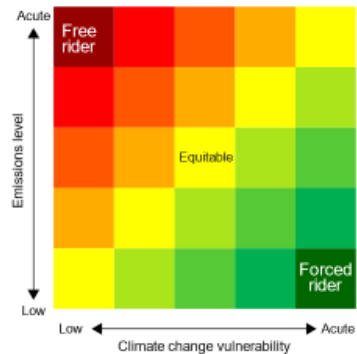
BioScience, Volume 67, Issue 12, December 2017, Pages 1026–1028. <https://doi.org/10.1093/biosci/bix125>

Marking the 25th anniversary of this initial report, the aptly titled [“World Scientists’ Warning to Humanity: A Second Notice”](#), now with over 15,000 signatories, the world’s top scientists have made another, even more frantic, plea to change course. The warnings have not generally been heeded. In virtually all areas, the condition of our planet is substantially worse than it was 25 years ago. And we have now “unleashed a mass extinction event, the sixth in roughly 540 million years, wherein many current life forms could be annihilated or at least committed to extinction by the end of this century.”⁹

⁸ Henry W. Kendall, et al. “World Scientists’ Warning To Humanity,” *Union of Concerned Scientists*. July 16, 1992. <https://www.ucsusa.org/resources/1992-world-scientists-warning-humanity>.

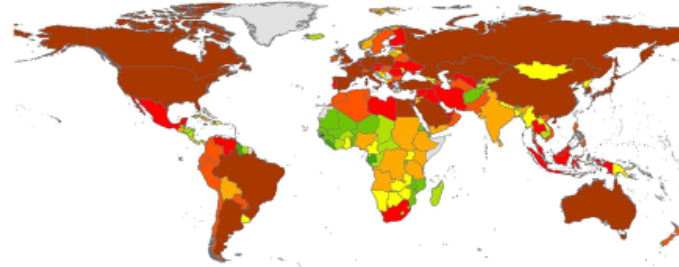
⁹ William J. Ripple, Christopher Wolf, Thomas M. Newsome, Mauro Galetti, Mohammed Alamgir, Eileen Crist, Mahmoud I. Mahmoud, and William F. Laurance, “World Scientists’ Warning to Humanity: A Second Notice,” *BioScience*, Volume 67, Issue 12, December 2017, pg. 1026, <https://doi.org/10.1093/biosci/bix125>

CLIMATE FREE RIDERS VS. FORCED RIDERS

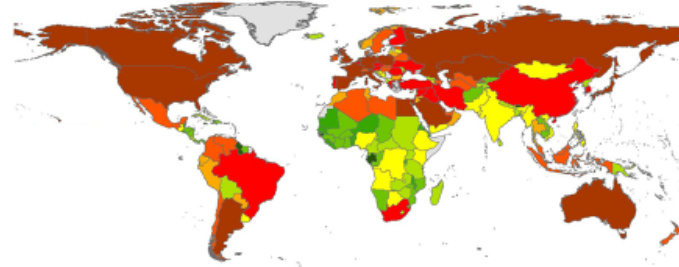


Althor, G., Watson, J. & Fuller, R. "Global mismatch between greenhouse gas emissions and the burden of climate change". *Sci Rep* 6, 20281 [2016]. <https://doi.org/10.1038/srep20281>

(a) Climate change equity for 2010.



(b) Climate change equity for 2030.



An additional dimension emerges in this discussion of the devastating environmental impact of current practices of globalization: Those countries and regions that are most responsible for causing such devastation are not the ones suffering the brunt of the consequences.

The chart above is the literal and symbolic representation of the injustice and inequity of the impact of environmental devastation. Both the benefits and the harms of global production have an inverse relationship to justice. This should bother us all! Free riders are those who consume or abuse common resources and pollute heavily, but are not vulnerable to the consequences of such actions. Inversely, the forced riders are those who do not consume or abuse common resources yet are forced to be the most vulnerable to the brutal consequences. Put simply: The free rider countries are largely immune from the devastating effects of their environmental destruction. The forced rider nations and regions suffer the consequences caused by the free riders. This *Scientific Reports* [article](#) states the situation most succinctly:

In line with the results of other studies, we find an enormous global inequality where 20 of the 36 highest emitting countries are among the least vulnerable to negative impacts of future climate change... Moreover, future emissions scenarios show that this inequality will significantly worsen by 2030. Many countries are manifestly free riders causing others to bear a climate change burden, which acts as a disincentive for them to mitigate their emissions.¹⁰

Georgetown philosopher [Olúfẹ́ mí O. Táíwò](#) and colleagues have chronicled the various ways in which the world's poorest people and regions will continue to pay a hugely disproportionate cost of global climate change. For example the UN Refugee Agency (as of 2016) reports that among the roughly 21.5 million environmental migrants that are forced to leave their homes due to weather related hazards each year, "low and lower-middle income countries have the most displacement".¹¹ The plight of these "[climate refugees](#)" is not adequately being addressed at the international

¹⁰ Glenn Althor, James E. M Watson, and Richard A Fuller. 2016. "Global Mismatch between Greenhouse Gas Emissions and the Burden of Climate Change," *Scientific Reports* 6 (1): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1038/srep20281>.

¹¹ Frequently asked questions on climate change and disaster displacement," United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, November 16, 2016, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/news/latest/2016/11/581f52dc4/frequently-asked-questions-climate-change-disaster-displacement.html>

level. This is reflective of an alarming trend of “the developing countries in the earth’s low latitudinal band”¹² continuing to pay an [inordinate and unfair \(relative to their contributions\) price](#) for global climate change. Furthermore, this displacement and its attending inequality are expected to increase in the coming years.

There are two truths that emerge from this literature: 1) Irreparable damage is being done to ecosystems and the peoples living in and around them, and 2) Those most responsible for causing this damage are increasingly transferring these harms to those that are least responsible. Both realities should bother us all!

The Rise of the Machines-Automation and Artificial Intelligence

Beyond these broader environmental concerns, there are other, more distinctively technology related reasons, to be concerned about our path on this trajectory of moral progress. [Ian Goldin](#) points out that one consequence of the rapid growth in resource transformation and the profound increases in the technologies associated with the improvement in health and longevity for so many, is that, “Inequality is rising in almost all countries that are experiencing rapid change. The faster the pace of change, the more rapidly people are being left behind.”¹³ The rise of automation and artificial intelligence is likely to greatly exacerbate this increase in economic inequality. Globally, roughly 50% of all paid tasks have the potential to be automated with current technology.¹⁴ A McKinsey Global Institute [study](#) projects the global number of lost/displaced workers at 400-800 million by 2030.¹⁵

¹² Jon Podesta, “The Climate Crisis, Migration, and Refugees,” *The Brookings Institution*. July 29, 2019. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-climate-crisis-migration-and-refugees/>

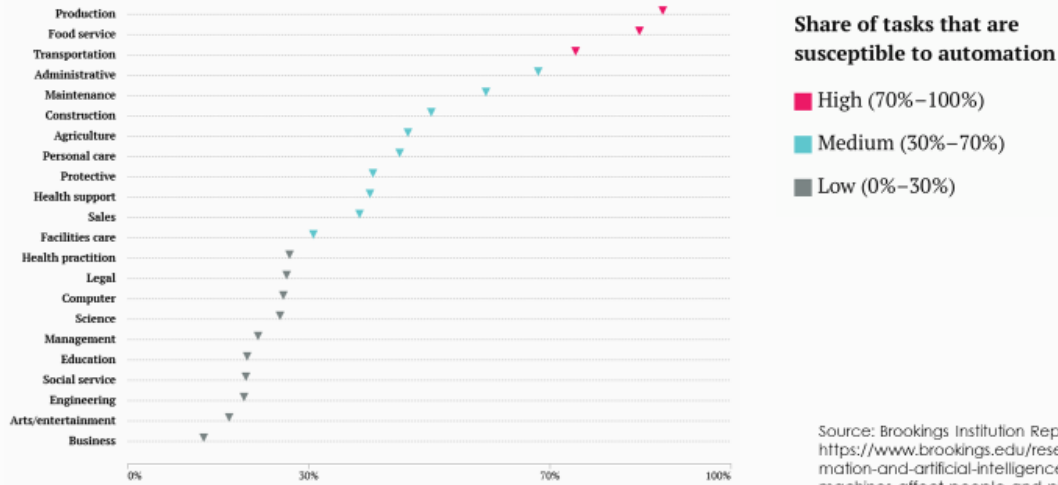
¹³ Ian Goldin, “The Second Renaissance,” *Nature* 550 (7676): 327–29, <https://doi.org/10.1038/550327a>.
<https://www.nature.com/news/the-second-renaissance-1.22827>.

¹⁴ Michael Chui, James Manyika, and Mehdi Miremadi, “The Countries Most (and Least) Likely to be Affected by Automation,” *Harvard Business Review*, April 12, 2017, <https://hbr.org/2017/04/the-countries-most-and-least-likely-to-be-affected-by-automation>.

¹⁵ “Jobs Lost, Jobs Gained: What the Future of Work Will Mean for Jobs, Skills, and Wages,” *The McKinsey Global Institute*, November 28, 2017, <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/jobs-lost-jobs-gained-what-the-future-of-work-will-mean-for-jobs-skills-and-wages>

AUTOMATION POTENTIAL

by major occupation group, 2016



According to another [recent study](#), roughly 36 million American jobs are currently at risk of being replaced through some form of automation by 2030. [Others](#) have put this figure much higher. And although much of this automation revolution will bring greater efficiency and greater profits to many industries, many/most of these jobs will be gone forever. “The future will bring new jobs, but their number will be small relative to those lost. And the quality of many of these new jobs will be inferior, in terms of the conditions of work and pay”.¹⁶ Put simply, many of the manufacturing, service, and other lower-skilled workers will lose their livelihoods without having other options for gainful employment. This permanent replacement of a large percentage of our workers through this [automation revolution](#) is already underway and brings with it a host of social, economic, psychological, and existential hurdles. And again, these hurdles are often more significant for the most vulnerable in the world. The previously mentioned study projects much greater “automation potentials” for Native American, Hispanic, and black workers relative to whites and Asians.¹⁷ A recent [Oxford Economics report](#) summarizes this situation globally,

The effects of these job losses will vary greatly across countries and regions, with a disproportionate toll on lower-skilled workers and on poorer local economies. In lower-skilled regions, we find that robots lead to almost twice as many manufacturing job losses. In many places, the impact will aggravate social and economic stress in times when political polarisation is a worrying trend.¹⁸

As with the inequitable impact of climate change, this exacerbating of global inequalities through automation will continue to increase related social problems.

¹⁶ Goldin, “The Second Renaissance,” 328.

¹⁷ Mark Muro, Robert Maxim, and Jacob Whiton, “Automation and Artificial intelligence: How Machines are Affecting People and Places,” *Metropolitan Policy Program at Brookings*, January, 2019, 7. https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/2019.01_BrookingsMetro_Automation-AI_Report_Muro-Maxim-Whiton-FINAL-version.pdf

¹⁸ “How Robots Change The World: What Automation Really Means For Jobs and Productivity,” *Oxford Economics*, June, 2019, <https://www.oxfordeconomics.com/recent-releases/how-robots-change-the-world>.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Will the “automation revolution” bring greater inequality?

- As with climate – poorer people and regions are most severely affected
- Invest in “reskilling” and other policies to ensure basic human needs are met.

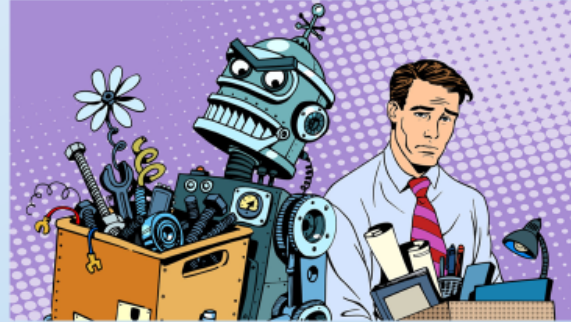


Image at: <https://www.raconteur.net/will-robots-actually-take-your-job/>

Reskilling needs



Unless there are significant changes to economic policies that focus on reskilling and other efforts to meet the needs of those displaced via automation, we can expect increasing economic inequality, class division, and the social ills that come with these realities. The recent resurgence of [nationalist groups](#) and ideology reflect the anxiety and fear surrounding the increasingly technology dependent, and automated, global economy. As the job market changes, economic (and climate) migration increases, and new cultures and ideas realize greater interconnectedness, many people feel threatened. British pollster, Stephan Shakespeare, has used the metaphor of [“drawbridge up”](#) vs. [“drawbridge down”](#) to describe the two common reactions to such changes, and how they play out in the arenas of domestic and foreign

policy. The Brexit debate is a real-time thought experiment on this struggle between these two drawbridge tendencies. The anti-immigrant, xenophobic, and oftentimes outright racist rhetoric and actions of many emerging populist and nationalist movements are a most disturbing trend of misdirected frustration and fear. Consistent with increases in many other parts of the world, [hate crimes](#) reached a ten year high (with a new record for hate-motivated murders) in the U.S. in 2019.¹⁹ There are, of course, numerous variables involved in the rise of ethno-nationalist, fascist, and other hate groups all over the world. In America, [white nationalist roots](#) run very deep, embedded in the very fabric of our nation. And, much of the increase in American ethno-nationalism (which takes many forms, one of which we will examine later through a deep dive into the dizzying world of QAnon) can be attributed to a frequently occurring [backlash](#) against recent economic and demographic changes and the equality movements that emerge out of them.

ROBOT OVERLORDS? WHAT IS AGI?

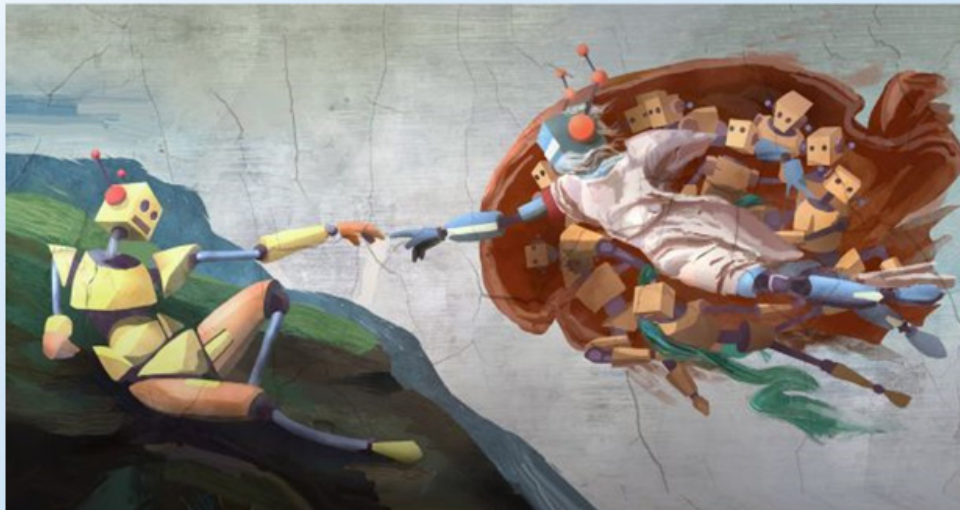


Image by Bryn G. Jones at: <https://highexistence.com/our-ai-overlords/>

In addition to the threats to moral progress that come with automation, there are a handful of [emerging existential threats](#) to humanity and our world more broadly.²⁰ And, although I appreciate a good old-fashioned apocalypse as much as anyone, I am not (primarily) interested in storytelling or fear mongering, here. For our purposes, I just want to establish that many [philosophers](#), scientists, and futurists recognize the threat that advances in nuclear and biological warfare, artificial intelligence, transhumanism, pandemics, and nanotechnology, potentially pose to both us and the biosphere.

I am particularly curious about the possibility of [artificial general intelligence](#) (AGI) emerging. To be clear, [most experts](#) do not buy into the popular sci-fi dystopian visions of our robot overlords turning on us. But most believe that the singularity (the point at which AI will achieve, and quickly surpass, human level thinking) will occur by [2060](#). The most provocative (and feared) scenario involves such entities learning and applying values that are misaligned with the goals, or even the existence, of biological humans. In such a scenario, these conscious agents could manipulate

¹⁹ For these and other relevant data, see the Uniform Crime Reporting Program's annual report on Hate Crime Statistics: <https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2019>

²⁰ Some of these are connected with the previously addressed issues of global resource depletion, environmental degradation, and global warming. But, there are a few that are relatively novel and are rooted in technological advancement itself. This is a fascinating (and infinitely speculative) area of discussion.

and imperil our future through taking control of the world's computers and networks.²¹ What is both tragic and ironic about such a situation is that by programming AGI with our own best moral systems (e.g. “no harm” principles, rights, dignity, equality, and even religious ethics), it is quite possible that we (humanity) would be judged as the biggest threat to such a moral order. I have come to think of AGI's potential opposition to humanity, achieved through judging us by our own morality, as a perfect moral mirror...exposing both our moral failures and frequent hypocrisy. There is a reason why this sci fi trope resonates with so many! Let's just hope that when “Skynet” goes live, we have more safeguards in place than cyborg Arnold Schwarzenegger!

A WAY FORWARD

We will need more than Arnold to help us.

Global risks/crises demand global solutions.

Global solutions require global cooperation.

Global cooperation requires cultivating a sense of kosmopolitês.



A Way Forward?

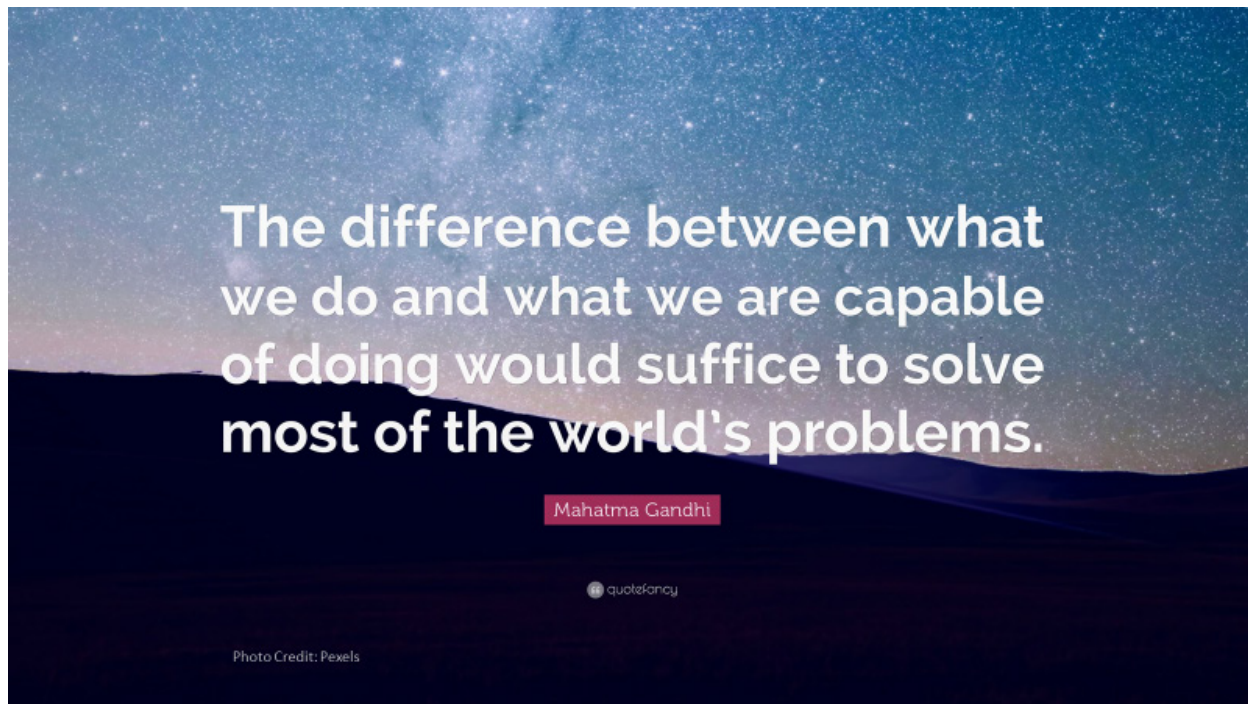
Okay...so enough of the doomsday scenarios. Beyond indulging in a little sci fi lore, my ultimate goal here is simply to highlight this paradox of two tales of moral progress and our moral futures. I believe that insufficient attention is paid to many of the catastrophic possibilities that currently face us. I share much of Pinker's and Gates's hope that further advances in technology will play a pivotal role in ameliorating many of these concerns. Such advances are undoubtedly the very foundation of solutions in areas of pollution, biotechnology, and automation/AI. However, there is no guarantee here. As we have seen, many developments in industry and technology bring with them new challenges both practical and existential. Advances in nuclear and biological weaponry are in themselves profound threats. These might be areas in which “progress” should not be pursued. Other areas of progress, like automation, AI, and biotechnology bring with them systemic risks that are endemic to these technologies and their applications in a globalized world.²² Such risks cannot be eliminated, only managed! And, such management takes a lot of technological know-how and also wisdom, humility, and an ethical commitment to others that is not restricted to the boundaries of race, class, and nation. Historian Noah Yuval Harari rightly captures the civilizational import of the current situation:

²¹ Toby Ord, *The Precipice: Existential Risk and the Future of Humanity* (New York: Hachette Books, 2021), 41-51.

²² Ian Goldin and Mike Mariathasan, *The Butterfly Defect: How Globalization Creates Systemic Risks, and What to Do About It* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2014).

The challenges posed in the twenty-first century by the merger of infotech and biotech are arguably bigger than those thrown up by steam engines, railways, electricity and fossil fuels. Given the immense destructive power of our modern civilization, we cannot afford more failed models, world wars and bloody revolutions. We have to do better this time.²³

It is my contention that in addition to advances in technology, healthcare, information science, etc. we also need to fundamentally change our moral orientation to each other and to the biosphere. Stated more strongly, we have an ethical duty to actively cultivate a moral awareness of, and consequent commitment to, each other. This must be the foundation for any way forward in an increasingly globalized and interconnected world. We do not lack the intellect or ingenuity to mitigate many of the inequities and existential threats to the world. But, with the current reality of both increases in global inequity and the number and severity of existential threats, we are not currently succeeding in our ethical duties to each other and to the planet. Our frequent failures to consider the effects of our actions and policies on the most vulnerable members of our global community is unconscionable and shortsighted. This tale of self-interest over altruism is a story as old as morality itself. It is at the very core of the current global increases in inequality, tribalism and ethno-nationalism. But as we shall see in the following section, virtually all ethical and religious systems have the resources to support a broader, more inclusive notion of ethical community. Whether or not we agree to such demands on our ethical lives is of course, up to us. But, it is my hope that we all take seriously our love of neighbor and continually struggle against those seemingly ubiquitous, hard-wired, tendencies to ignore the cries of the other in favor of self. Continuing Dr. King’s vision of expanding the moral arc of both love and justice, **now** is the time for universal, dangerous, and excessive altruism. “The ultimate measure of a man is not where he stands in moments of comfort and convenience but where he stands at times of challenge and controversy. The true neighbor will risk his position, his prestige, and even his life for the welfare of others”.²⁴



²³Noah Yuval Harari. 2017. “Reboot for the Ai Revolution,” *Nature* 550, no. 7676 (2017): 327. <https://doi.org/10.1038/550324a>.

²⁴Martin Luther King, Jr., “On Being a Good Neighbor,” in *Strength to Love*, 26-27.

PART II: THE ETHICAL CASE FOR GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP A Brief Disclaimer

Over the past few years, in light of many events in my personal life (trying to raise a loving, compassionate, and ethically engaged son), in the classroom, and in the world at large, I have struggled to find the words and frameworks to best understand these developments and challenges facing us in the modern world. There are ways of interpreting these changes (and constructing paths forward) through the lenses of economics, politics, sociology, psychology, and biology. And, it may be the case that some of the issues that I get into are best addressed through the methods and theories of these related disciplines. But...at the end of the day, I am an ethicist and philosopher and can't help but look at these concerns through my disciplines. I do not pretend to have all (or even any) of the answers here. Nor am I claiming that the views that I am expressing are the best way forward. I merely hope that some of what I say here resonates with most you! Hopefully this succeeds in setting the bar for the success of this talk sufficiently low. If I fail to do this much, I apologize in advance! So...my goal here is to first make a brief ethical case for a type of global citizenship and to then look at some of the obstacles that we all face as we hopefully endeavor to make the world a better place.

As I was workshoping this talk with a few friends, family members, and colleagues, I immediately realized that the notions of “global citizenship” and “cosmopolitanism” carry some unfortunate conceptual baggage. Some seem to associate this term “global citizenship: with some sort of “one world government” proposal. I haven't been able to track down the origins of this confusion, but my guess is that the word “global” here is unfortunately shared with the concepts of globalism and globalization (which is particularly unfortunate as one of the major tenets of global citizenship involves the respecting of regional and cultural differences).²⁵

WHAT COSMOPOLITANISM (GC) IS NOT:

- A tasty drink, magazine, or world traveler!
- Globalism or “One-World Government” conspiracies
- Globalization
- “Open Borders”



Image: <https://www.instagram.com/instachaaz/>

Cosmopolitanism arguably brings even more conceptual baggage to the table. People think of *Cosmopolitan* magazine, or the resurgent [cranberry martini](#) and its connections with coastal elitism. I can't undo these associations, but merely invite you to listen to this discussion with an open mind.

²⁵ There is an added layer of irony in this confusion as the fear of a one world government is often a central tenet in emerging ethno-nationalisms, which generally constitute the opposing end of the ideological continuum with cosmopolitanism.

DIOGENES THE CYNIC (404-323 BCE)

- Diogenes declared himself kosmopolitês (citizen of the world)
- “Get out of my light”!
 - Ancient internet troll
 - Contempt for power and hierarchy
- Through Cicero and the Stoics we get the GC ethos:
 - All humans deserve equal respect.
 - Our duties to justice are not bound by nation!



Nicolas-André Monsiau, "Alexander and Diogenes", Musée des Beaux-Arts, Rouen, France, 1818.

As is the trend in philosophical writing, let us begin at the beginning (of Western philosophy, anyway). The 4th century cynic, [Diogenes](#) is generally credited with coining the term, “global citizen”...and also with being the ancient predecessor of the modern internet [troll](#). According to philosophical legend, when asked where he was from, he simply replied, “kosmopolitês”...a citizen of the world. This refusal to identify with his region of origin, preferring to define himself in solidarity with all people is a significant position to take on at a time when one’s local allegiances were of paramount importance. By way of brief background, Diogenes was known for living in a wine barrel/jar, subsisting on a diet of onions, and badmouthing Alexander The Great to his face. As [the story](#) goes, Alexander The Great sought Diogenes out and asked him what he could do to assist in his efforts. Diogenes quickly responded, “Get out of my light”.²⁶ There are many philosophical interpretations of this encounter but I choose to believe that Diogenes was attempting to speak truth to power, to assert his essential worth and self-sufficiency as a human being. In addition to being banished from Sinope for defacing currency and engaging in other acts of anti-establishment sabotage and political stunts, he succeeded in making several profound points about the nature of our shared humanity. And however apocryphal some of the accounts of his life and lifestyle are, it is clear that he was a seminal figure in both Cynic and Stoic thought. His insistence in shirking the distinctions of region and class, seeing the inherent dignity and worth of each person inspired this deep philosophical tradition of kosmopolitês. His philosophical successors, the Stoics, greatly expand this notion of global citizenship, and what it requires of all of us. This Cynic/Stoic idea of cosmopolitanism takes as a starting point in ethics, the “equal, and unconditional worth of all human beings... grounded in (practical) reason and moral capacity”.²⁷ The Stoics emphasize our duties to assist all human beings, whose dignity is being violated, to the best of our ability! Cicero continues this Stoic ethos and makes this global nature of our duties explicit, as our commitment to pursuing justice must be “...fully global. National boundaries are morally irrelevant, and Cicero sternly reproves those who think them relevant”.²⁸ For him and many of the Stoics, there is an inherent absurdity to claiming to believe in inherent human value and then proceeding to apply it selectively. The history of ethics and

²⁶This account is adapted from Martha Nussbaum. *The Cosmopolitan Tradition: A Noble But Flawed Ideal*. Mass: Harvard University Press, 2019. 1-5.

²⁷Martha Nussbaum. *The Cosmopolitan Tradition*, 64.

²⁸Ibid., 29-30.

political philosophy is replete with interpretations of what exactly such a recognition of the inherent worth and dignity of humanity demands of all of us. The Stoics, for example, often saw our universal duties to humanity more narrowly, not to include duties of material aid. And by way of a brief aside, Adam Smith, the philosophical darling of many laissez-faire capitalists, believed that our duties to each other included “the importance of national commitment to material redistribution.”²⁹ This duty is especially relevant in areas of education and health and should also extend (at least to some extent) to the rest of the world. I am not (here, anyway) interested in jumping into this debate and making a case for a specific set of duties, or policies. I would like to simply make the case that we all have some such duties and that these must factor in to our daily decisions on matters as where we shop, what we purchase, what we eat, and how we vote. To be clear: I will make no endorsements of specific companies, products, policies, or politicians.

My Definition(s) of Global Citizenship

I have come to think of global citizenship as a type of ethical orientation to the world. It is an orientation that looks beyond or through regional and national boundaries, and again through the “isms” of race, gender, and religion that often divide us and keep us from seeing the humanity in each and every human being. To be clear, this is not a Pollyannish notion of colorblindness or a request to ignore such differences. Rather, it is the ethical imperative to take a deep dive into the lived experiences of others in order to understand them and how best to fulfill our duties to them. It is a duty to spend a lot of time being uncomfortable...learning new things about other peoples, their cultures, their values, and their needs. This duty is grounded in our shared humanity but it does not seek to minimize or ignore our differences. Nor does it ignore or minimize our particularity. The brand of global citizenship that I am articulating here allows for and even encourages a certain regionality (some might even use the term “patriotism” here). Indeed, we can and should have a type of pride and gratitude in and for our cultures, languages, and regions. Global citizenship is consistent with this and in many ways even depends on this reality. Many of the virtues of global citizenship (compassion, honesty, generosity, open-mindedness, humility) must first be practiced in our homes and in our communities. We cannot expect to fulfill our duties to the world if we have not cultivated the virtues necessary to consistently act in accordance with them. I think here of the “Think Globally, Act Locally” bumper sticker. I would just add a brief rejoinder “Think Globally, Act Locally, but Also Act Globally”, which is a nicer shorthand for what I really want to say, “Think Globally, Act Locally...and Please, Whatever You Do, Do Not Forget To Also Act Globally, or Think That Your Duties to Humanity End at Some Arbitrary Geographical Boundary...or Worse Yet, Some Boundary of Race, Class, Gender, or Sexual Orientation”. But, that would be a bit much for a bumper sticker!

²⁹Ibid., 12.

THE CASE FOR GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP

An argument in (*hopefully*) two questions:

1) Does anyone or anything have rights, dignity, or inherent value?

- "Yes"- wait for the second question.
- "No"- really?

2) What duties follow from such rights/dignity/value?

- "None"- really? Go back to the first question! Rights/dignity cannot exist without duties.
- "Some" - ok, let's talk.

A Brief (Two-Question) Case For Global Citizenship

In case this discussion on a cosmopolitan ethic has so far fallen on deaf ears, I would like to attempt a relatively simple (two question) argument for some notion of global ethical duties. Question #1: Do you believe that humans³⁰ possess a fundamental dignity, worth, or are entitled to certain unalienable rights? If your answer to this is categorically "no", then I don't think much of anything we are about to discuss will be of interest to you. More importantly if your answer is "no", I am not sure that there is any way to persuade you. But if your answer is "yes", then the 2nd question is a necessary follow-up: What duties or obligations follow for each of us from our affirmation of such universal notions of dignity and/or rights? If notions of universal rights or dignity have any value they necessarily involve the obligation to respect or nurture them in some way. As I often tell my classes, "a right is not a right if no duties, obligations, or responsibilities, flow from it." Similarly, the notion of dignity is rendered completely vacuous if it doesn't obligate anyone to treat anyone else in any particular way. To help us ferret out our intuitions about how far our duties to each other should extend, consider this real-life thought experiment in this talk by bioethicist [Peter Singer](#). Again, if you do not find yourself having the intuition to help in such situations, our conversation might be over. I do not think that we can prove such starting points. We can merely appeal to them and then push for greater honesty and consistency in our application of them.

As alluded to earlier, there is a [substantial discussion](#) and debate here as to what types of obligations are required in the recognition and application of rights and/or dignity. For many on the political right, there is often an emphasis on "negative" or "liberty" rights (i.e. rights obligating others to not interfere with you). For many [such thinkers](#), the very notion of positive rights (i.e. rights obligating others to provide something for you) is a nonstarter. On the political left,

³⁰At this point, I am only discussing the inclusion of humans in this class of beings with moral worth. However, I believe that our goal should be to continue the extension of the dignity of life to all sentient bodies. These circles of moral concern should ultimately be inclusive of all of the natural world. This does not mean that we have the same duties to all of nature, just that there is some inherent value that should factor into our moral decision-making.

“positive” or “welfare” rights are generally viewed as essential for ensuring our safety, health, and freedom. The current divide on issues such as [healthcare](#) and [education](#) perfectly exemplify this debate. But, I am not interested in weighing in on any of the particulars of these issues. I just want each of us to think about what duties we genuinely believe that we have to others. And no matter how we answer this question, I would ask us all to reflect on how fully we live up to such obligations. Given the state of the world, it hard to imagine that we are generally keeping our obligations to even the most negative and limited conceptions of human rights. Recall that over 1 billion children are currently multidimensionally poor, “without access to education, health, housing, nutrition, sanitation or water.”³¹ For those of you feeling a need to pigeon hole me in some way, I do believe that human rights and dignity do obligate us to act, and not merely ignore, the suffering of others.

Thankfully (for my argument, anyway), there is often [widespread agreement](#) on such starting points. Moreover, such agreed upon notions of the value of human life often show great promise to bridge many of the political and ideological divides, as they are relatively neutral on the political spectrum. Conservatives often start here as such notions of “unalienable rights” and dignity are at the very core of our national and religious histories. There is of course no clearer statement of this starting point than the opening of our [Declaration of Independence](#). And for those more left of center in the political arena, a commitment to fundamental human rights is as close to doctrine as virtually anything. Furthermore, such notions of the inherent value of humanity, and our mutual duties to respect and aid each other are at the core of most world religions. The Buddhist and Hindu traditions are grounded in compassion and active efforts to help others alleviate *dukkha* (suffering).³² Furthermore, many indigenous traditions in the Americas and beyond hold to a deeply global ethic, maintaining duties to each other and to the natural world, of which we are but a small part.³³

The ethical commitment to helping one’s family, neighbors, and foreigners is absolutely central to virtually all versions of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic ethos. The Hebrew Bible makes this duty to ethnic and national “others” explicitly clear, “The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt; I am the Lord your God”.³⁴

³¹“Child Poverty,” UNICEF, accessed April 11, 2021, <https://www.unicef.org/social-policy/child-poverty>

³² See, for example, the teachings on both compassion and suffering in *The Art of Happiness* by the Dalai Lama. The teachings of Thin Nhat Hanh on “interbeing” and interconnectedness are also particularly illuminating on the nature of being and our duties to each other and to all of nature.

³³ This statement by the Canada’s Assembly of First Nations on our duties in “Honouring Earth” captures a profound sense of our ethical inter-relationship with, and consequent duties to, all of life: <http://www.afn.ca/honoring-earth/>.

³⁴ Leviticus 19:34 (NASB).



I also think here of Jesus' admonitions in the [Sermon On The Mount](#) regarding our duties to love not just our neighbors but even our enemies.³⁵ He further reiterates the Golden Rule, stating that this duty to others is the distilled truth of "the Law and the Prophets".³⁶

Jesus expands this understanding on our duties to others in one of the more radical (for its time) parables, [The Good Samaritan](#). Jesus tells the story of the Good Samaritan in response to an inquisitive lawyer wanting clarification on just exactly who should count as one's neighbor? In Luke's account, Jesus had just stated that one must love "your neighbor as yourself"³⁷ to inherit eternal life. I sure hope that you all know this story...or at least the moral of it. But for the uninitiated, Jesus's parable is about a young man who is beaten, stripped, and left for dead. He is both noticed and promptly avoided (being passed on the opposite side of the road no less) by both a priest and a Levite. Then, a Samaritan (whose people and region were engaged in mutual hatred with Jews) sees him, "felt compassion" and attends to his wounds. The Samaritan later takes him (on his own animal) to an inn and pays the bill, adding, "Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, when I will return, I will repay you".³⁸ After this illustration of the duty to our "neighbors", especially when they may be different from us in terms of ethnicity or religion, Jesus commands that we "Go and do the same".

Again...you can see why this story features prominently in the ethical teachings of Christian leaders throughout history. [MLK's elaboration](#) on the significance of this story for addressing segregation and race relations in America is particularly enlightening:

³⁵ Matthew 5:43-44 (NASB).

³⁶ Matthew 7:1 (NASB).

³⁷ Luke: 10-27 (NASB).

³⁸ Luke: 10:35 (NASB).

More than ever before, my friends, men of all races and nations are today challenged to be neighborly. The call for a worldwide good-neighbor policy is more than an ephemeral shibboleth; it is the call to a way of life that will transform our imminent cosmic elegy into a psalm of creative fulfillment. No longer can we afford the luxury of passing by on the other side. Such folly was once called moral failure; today it will lead to universal suicide. We cannot long survive spiritually separated in a world that is geographically together. In the final analysis, I must not ignore the wounded man on life's Jericho Road, because he is a part of me and I am a part of him. His agony diminishes me, and his salvation enlarges me.³⁹

PART III: Overcoming Obstacles and Cultivating Virtue

THE OBSTACLES TO GLOBAL CITIZENSHIP

- Ourselves
 - Obstacles of the Intellect (Ignorance, Cognitive Biases, Motivated Reasoning)
 - Obstacles of the Will (Stubbornness, Selfishness, Habits)
- Tribalism
- American Mythology – Conspiracism and Meritocracy

So...hopefully I have succeeded in convincing you (or just confirming for many of you) that it is better for ourselves, each other, and the world, to think and act in ways that embody the virtues of global citizenship. To me, working together to create a more just, equitable, prosperous, compassionate, and sustainable future for the world and all of its inhabitants **just is** the human project! It is the essence of the Jewish understanding of our unique role and duty in the created order...*tikkun olam* (to repair the world).

I would like to think that the above was the easy part of my presentation. This final section might prove to be the most difficult. If my assessment about the values of both the political left and right, the majority of world religions, and secular humanism are correct, we are all on the same page here.

So, why are we not all working toward these goals? It is this question that continues to vex me. There are surely many contributing factors, and I will focus my attention on three interrelated ones: 1) Ourselves, 2) Tribalism and 3) Mythologies of merit and conspiracism. With regard to the first variable, ourselves, I mean something like the ways that our minds and wills often work against change and progress. I see these in two broad categories: obstacles of the intellect and obstacles of the will. And, I have found that many/most philosophers and psychologists have largely focused on the obstacles of the intellect. These obstacles include a general ignorance about suffering in the world,

³⁹Martin Luther King, Jr., "On Being a Good Neighbor," in *Strength to Love*, New ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2010), 3.

our complicity, or other failures to understand our true moral duties. Many ethics classes treat ethics as primarily an academic matter. We are taught to develop rational arguments, bolstered by the best evidence available. We are even cautioned against the decidedly fallacious tendency to appeal to nonrational variables (e.g. feelings, authority, personal experience). In the interest of full disclosure, all but one chapter in the ethics text that I currently use are on ethical theories and arguments. We treat ethical dilemmas as problems to be solved through reason and evidence. Unfortunately, my own experience teaching ethics for over 20 years has shown me that the primary obstacle to meaningful and lasting moral change is not primarily intellectual. To be sure, there is a significant role for reason in educating ourselves about innumerable ethical issues of the world. And, reason can and should be repurposed to question our moral intuitions, judgments, and arguments...and also guide us toward greater clarity on most ethical matters. It is at this juncture where we run into two shortcomings of reason in guiding us toward more ethical lives: 1) Reason evolved to serve our passions and is thus particularly ill-suited to serve as a corrective to them, and 2) There is a profound moral judgment-moral action gap. It is my contention that too little attention (in philosophy anyway) has been paid to this latter shortcoming. All too often, the goal in ethics seems to be in proving one's case. The enterprise of intercollegiate "ethics bowls" is a testimony to the perceived significance of this evidence and reason-based approach to the study and application of ethics. But, pacing Aristotle, the goal of ethics should not be the mere accumulation of "theoretical knowledge like the others (for we are inquiring not in order to know what virtue is, but in order to become good, since otherwise our inquiry would have been of no use)".⁴⁰ And unfortunately, relative to this enterprise of becoming good, reason does not appear to be a well-suited ally. Evolutionary biology and moral psychology show us that reason largely takes a back seat to our nonrational intuitions, drives, and habits, in determining both what we believe in the ethical sphere, and how we act on such beliefs.

Obstacles of the Self

FART SPRAY ETHICS

- Paul Rozin (UPenn), David Pizarro (Cornell), Yoel Inbar (Toronto) study the moral psychology of disgust.
- Fart spray increases the frequency and severity of moral judgments!
- Disgust sensitivity is highly correlated with negative moral judgments on "purity" issues.
- **Takeaway: We are not all that rational!**



⁴⁰ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103b25, <http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/nicomachaen.mb.txt>

A discussion of studies involving fart spray might seem like an odd detour in this analysis of the personal obstacles we face in committing to the virtues of global citizenship. However, these studies might be the most promising in getting at the origins of moral judgment and behavior in all of contemporary moral psychology. This [research on disgust](#) and its effects on moral judgment is exploding (pun intended) these days. Disgust (of the kind elicited by particularly odorous fart spray) is one of the most common types of morally relevant feelings/intuitions that humans experience. “Disgust evolved to help our omnivorous species decide what to eat in a world full of parasites and microbes that spread by physical contact...Across many cultures, the words and facial expressions used to reject physically disgusting things are also used to reject certain kinds of socially inappropriate people and behaviors.”⁴¹ It continues to have a regulatory function in our lives that is now quite removed from its evolutionary origins. Disgust guides our moral judgments and actions in profound ways of which most of us are largely unaware.

In a particularly provocative and alarming study, [Paul Bloom](#), Yoel Inbar, and [David Pizarro](#) have shown that inducing the feeling of disgust through noxious odors can have a large effect on people’s judgments of others. In this particular study, participants were asked to rate their feelings towards different people groups. When they were exposed to a particularly foul smelling fart spray, it “caused participants to evaluate gay men more negatively”.⁴² And although this study did not reveal significant increases in negative views on other (non-disgust related issues), other studies have shown significant increases in the harshness of moral judgments and even the frequency of judging scenarios as immoral to begin with, when exposed to disgust-inducing experiences.⁴³ Studies consistently show that disgust sensitivity is itself highly correlated with negative views on homosexuality, commitment to conservative views of sexual purity, and also with [political and moral conservatism](#) more broadly.⁴⁴ So, what is the point of all of this disgust research? The first takeaway is simply that when it comes to our moral judgments and related belief systems, **we are not all that rational!** What drives our commitment to certain values and ethical viewpoints is largely unconscious and intuitive. If we continue to treat moral viewpoints and inevitable disagreements as if they are primarily rational matters, we cannot expect to make much progress (both with ourselves and others). I am sure that we have all had mind-numbingly frustrating debates with those on the other side of the aisle, wherein appeals to reason and evidence simply fall on deaf ears. However, it is our own misdiagnosis of the locus of moral judgment that led us to believe that this was anything more than a fool’s errand to begin with. Moral reasoning can occasionally play some role in changing people’s judgments. But, since the groundbreaking [1977 study](#) by Nisbett and Wilson⁴⁵, studies across a variety of disciplines consistently show that there is frequently a startling disconnect between our moral intuitions and judgments, and the *ex post facto* use of reason to justify such convictions.⁴⁶ Building upon this work, [Mercier and Sperber](#) postulate that, in light of research across the relevant fields, the very function of human reason is to argue.⁴⁷ Specifically, it is to argue to convince others (and ourselves) to some evolutionary advantage. Like all evolved traits that persist, reasoning endures as it serves a fitness function(s). And, “reasoning is best adapted for its role in argumentation, which should therefore be seen as its main function.”⁴⁸ Their book, *The Enigma of Reason* (2017), painstakingly details the evolutionary origins and functions of reasoning. Related to our context, moral reasoning

⁴¹ Simone Schnall, Jonathan Haidt, Gerald Clore, and Alexander Jordan. “Disgust As Embodied Moral Judgment,” *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 34, no. 8 (2008): 1097, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167208317771>.

⁴² Yoel Inbar, David A. Pizarro, and Paul Bloom. “Disgusting Smells Cause Decreased Liking of Gay Men,” *Emotion* 12, no. 1 (2012): 23–27.

⁴³ Simone Schnall, et al., “Disgust As Embodied Moral Judgment,” 1096–1109,

⁴⁴ Yoel Inbar, David Pizarro, Ravi Iyer, and Jonathan Haidt. “Disgust Sensitivity, Political Conservatism, and Voting,” *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 3, no. 5 (September 2012): 537–44, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550611429024>.

⁴⁵ Richard E. Nisbett and Timothy D Wilson, “The Halo Effect: Evidence for Unconscious Alteration of Judgments,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 35 (4) (1977): 250–56, doi:10.1037//0022-3514.35.4.250.

⁴⁶ Jonathan Haidt, Fredrick Björklund, and Scott Murphy, “Moral Dumbfounding: When Intuition Finds no Reason,” unpublished manuscript, 2000, <https://polpsy.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/haidt.bjorklund.pdf>

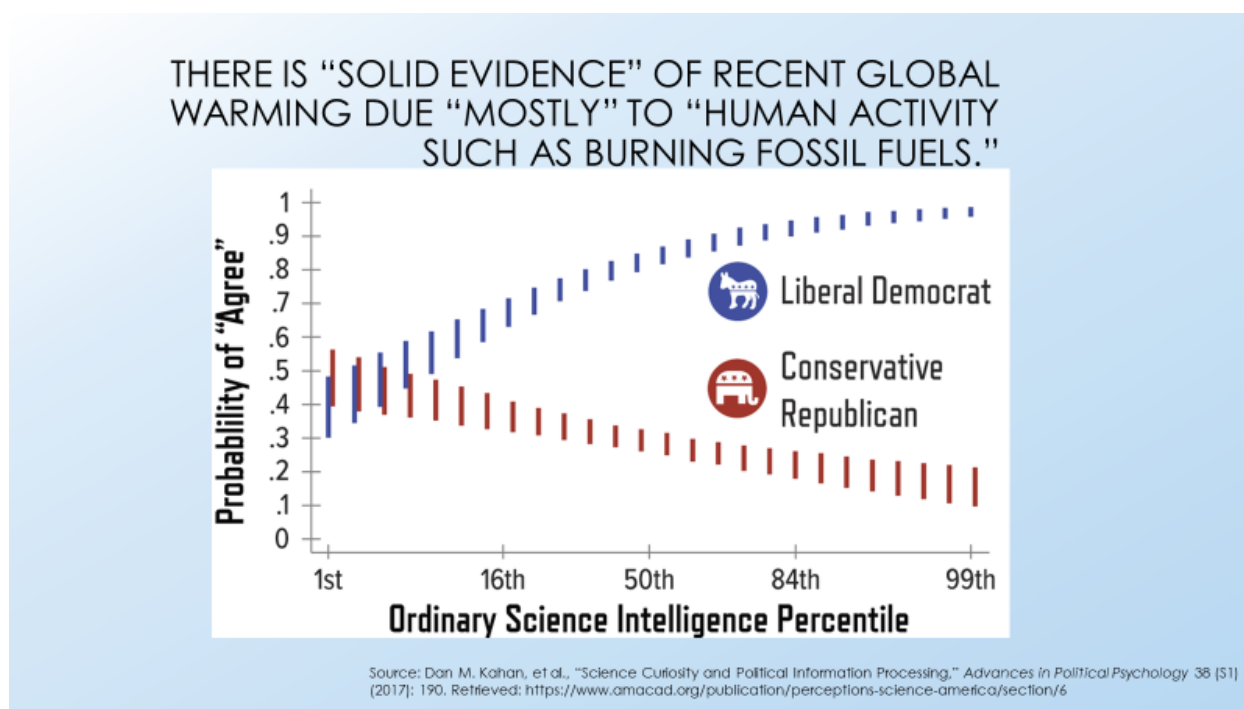
⁴⁷ Hugo Mercier and Dan Sperber, “Why Do Humans Reason? Arguments for an Argumentative Theory,” *The Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 34 (2) (2011): 57–74, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X10000968>.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 59.

is often used to bolster our nonrational moral intuitions and to convince others of our rightness (or of our allegiance to our tribe). Jonathan Haidt distills the essence of the function(s) of moral reasoning:

Moral intuitions arise automatically and almost instantaneously, long before moral reasoning has a chance to get started, and those first intuitions tend to drive our later reasoning. If you think that moral reasoning is something we do to figure out the truth, you'll be constantly frustrated by how foolish, biased, and illogical people become when they disagree with you. But if you think about moral reasoning as a skill we humans evolved to further our social agendas-to justify our own action and to defend the teams we belong to-then things will make a lot more sense.⁴⁹

Haidt further describes the way in which reason comes in to justify our prior ethical intuitions as having our own built-in press secretary.⁵⁰ As with any good press secretary, our moral reasoning consistently rises to the defense of our judgments, no matter how non or irrational their origins may be. This is our reasoning at its persuasive best and logical/evidentiary worst. The compulsive ways in which our reasoning mind can seemingly conjure “reasons” and “evidences” to argue for an indefensible action or statement is to see [Kellyanne Conway](#) in her prime.



As this chart, and additional research through Dan Kahan's work at the [Cultural Cognition Project](#) at Yale continually attest, intelligence does not reliably serve as a corrective to our inner KellyAnne Conway! In fact (and unfortunately for all of us in higher education), intelligence is not generally correlated with a decrease in biased, *ad hoc*, reasoning. [Julia Galef's discussion](#) of this phenomenon is particularly enlightening...and disheartening. Her labeling of Kahan's above chart, "[the graph of despair](#)" accurately captures my sentiments. It appears that when ethical, political, and tribal commitments are made, more intelligent people are just better at giving more, and more nuanced, reasons and evidences to bolster their views. It is unclear whether intelligence actually increases bias...but it is clear that it often functions in the service of strengthening our biases. The silver lining in this research is that intellectual **curiosity**

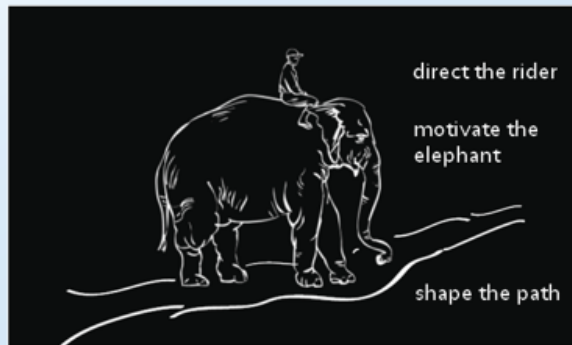
⁴⁹ Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind: Why Good People Are Divided by Politics and Religion* (New York: Vintage Books, 2013), xx-xxi.

⁵⁰ Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 91.

is correlated with decreases in motivated reasoning and a host of cognitive biases.⁵¹ So, it is possible to re-appropriate our reasoning apparatus to pursue the truth...we just have the evolutionary function of reason working against us. As Kahan, Haidt, Mercier and Sperber, and many others have shown us, the default use of reason is to argue for the rightness of our nonrational commitments and convictions.

Left to run on autopilot, our inner press secretary engages in motivated reasoning and exhibits a cornucopia of cognitive biases at virtually every opportunity. A few of these biases will be explored in a bit as we look at the fascinating world of QAnon and related conspiracy theories. But at this point, I just want to posit that despite what many philosophers have said for millennia, and many psychologists have postulated for decades, the capacity for reason is not generally geared toward discovering the truth. It is therefore not (not without significant repurposing) a loyal guide in helping us to see more clearly, honestly, and consistently.

ELEPHANT AND RIDER



- Haidt on two kinds of thinking
 - Elephant: 99% of cognition is automatic, non-rational.
 - Rider: 1% is conscious and rational.
- Chip and Dan Heath in *Switch*
 - Important to change the path!
 - Change environment to force elephant and rider to change.

To illustrate this often precarious relationship between our reasoning mind and our nonrational drives and intuitions that largely determine our actions, Jonathan Haidt uses this metaphor of the elephant and the rider. “The rider is our conscious reasoning...The elephant is the other 99% of mental processes-the ones that occur outside of awareness but that actually govern most of our behavior”.⁵² As he points out, many approaches to understanding moral development have focused mostly on the rider. We have tried to teach the rider rather than train our elephants. The work of [Erik Schwitzgebel](#) is particularly revealing of the failures of many “rider” based approaches to ethics. His work on the ethical lives of ethics professors consistently demonstrates that despite having higher (often quite substantially) levels of commitment to many ethical norms, they do not generally behave any better relative to such norms.⁵³ By way of one example for this study, 60% of ethics professors reported that eating mammal meat was morally wrong and 37% ate such meat in their last meal. 19% of non-ethics professors reported that eating mammal meat was wrong and 45%

⁵¹ Dan M. Kahan, Asheley Landrum, Katie Carpenter, Laura Helft, and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, “Science Curiosity and Political Information Processing,” *Political Psychology* 38 (2017): 179–99. doi:10.1111/pops.12396.

⁵² Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, xxi.

⁵³ Eric Schwitzgebel and Joshua Rust. “The Moral Behavior of Ethics Professors: Relationships among Self-Reported Behavior, Expressed Normative Attitude, and Directly Observed Behavior.” *Philosophical Psychology* 27, no. 3 (2014): 293–327. doi:10.1080/09515089.2012.727135.

ate it in their last meal. Similarly, ethics professors do not donate significantly more money to charity or even call their mothers more often. The provocative point here is that ethics professors seem to have well trained “riders” yet fail to direct their elephants to act accordingly.

Mirroring Schwitzgebel’s findings, Haidt’s overall assessment of rider-based approaches is that they have been largely ineffective. He sees these rider/reason-based methods of ethical instruction as part of a broader problem that he terms “the rationalist delusion”.⁵⁴ For Haidt, greater attention to our elephant, in terms of motivating it through habituation and training are necessary. To this metaphor, Dan and Chip Heath have added the dimension of “shaping the path”. Their book, *Switch*, is a practical guide to the methods of improving all three parts of the divided mind. Their emphasis on utilizing these insights from moral psychology to make a plan for moral change through training our elephants and altering their environments offers an encouraging path forward on the road to real and lasting moral change. So, if we believe that we have a duty to do our part to make the world a better place and to cultivate the virtues of global citizenship, we have to plan ahead. We must motivate our elephant through actively engaging with the lives of others. Our belief that others’ suffering matters is quickly overwhelmed by the habits of daily life, distractions, and less-than-rational justifications of our inaction.

TRIBALISM

- There is a strong, innate tendency to prefer one’s “groups” over others.
- Upside-There was a powerful evolutionary advantage to such social bonding.
- Downside-Strong propensity to discriminate against the “outgroups”.
 - Xenophobia, ethno-nationalism, and racism continually reemerge.



“There can be no peace until they renounce their Rabbit God and accept our Duck God.”

⁵⁴Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 103-108.

Tribalism

At this point, we have already unpacked many of the pieces of tribalism through our look at evolutionary moral psychology. Its function as one of the primary obstacles to realizing, and acting on, our moral duties to others can

hardly be overstated. Tribalism (in its various iterations of nationalism, political partisanship, religious separatism, etc.) is often understood as the orientation that is the other end of the polarity with global citizenship. It is the “drawbridge up” to cosmopolitanism’s “drawbridge down” response to the paradox of moral progress that we have been discussing. I believe that we have addressed much of this material, but I would like to briefly highlight a few of the salient features of the literature on the moral roots of tribalism. My goal is to demystify this tendency as it is deep in the human experience. Hopefully through unpacking it, we can begin to release the hold that such ways of thinking and acting have on us. Our earlier look at Dan Kahan’s research highlights the ways in which the obstacles of the mind are most devastatingly effective when stirred up by tribal (specifically political) allegiances. Ongoing research at Yale’s “Baby Lab” is revealing just how innate this tendency to prefer tribe seems to be. This video with [Paul Bloom and Karen Wynn](#) offers some new insights on this evolutionary and developmental reality. It is clear that there is a strong evolutionary benefit to prefer the self, and by extension, one’s family. The dark side of this evolved tendency is our consequently innate distrust of those that are not us...strangers. Bloom elaborates, “We are by nature indifferent, even hostile, to strangers; we are prone toward parochialism and bigotry. Some of our instinctive responses, most notably disgust, spur us to do terrible things, including acts of genocide”.⁵⁵ Bloom and Wynn articulate the ways in which our innate tendencies to prefer self, drive us to create “us vs. them” boundaries in all sorts of ways that have long outgrown their evolutionary benefit. We have become almost compulsively tribal animals. The Baby Lab’s Cheerios vs. graham crackers quickly turns into Lakers vs. Celtics, Protestant vs. Catholic, and God’s children vs. Satan’s spawn.

Tribal tendencies are so strong because we have evolved as social animals with a most profound ability to bond in solidarity with our kin and tribal groupings. [Patricia Churchland](#) has demonstrated the neuroscience behind these intense bonding instincts that are at the roots of our tribal allegiances. The neurochemistry of bonding emerged as an evolutionary development in parents’ caring for their children, and remains at the roots of our circles of moral caring. Her book [Braintrust](#), offers great insight into how and why we create such circles and why it can be very difficult to work against the darker side of such tendencies. As we will see, when our tribalist tendencies go unchecked, they facilitate a feasting upon the vices of our nature to a disastrous result. Our inner elephant’s desire to be viewed as a good member, and act in defense of, our tribe is much stronger than our rider’s desire to pursue the truth.

Keep before your mind these corrosive effects of tribalism on our ability to both reason clearly and (more importantly) to see the humanity in others, as we look into the world of contemporary conspiracism. What I want to say here is that if you find yourself baffled at how and why, for instance, a sitting member of Congress ([Rep. Marjorie Taylor Greene](#)) could post the now infamous conspiracy about the California wildfires being started by a group of conspirators that prompted the hashtag #JewishSpaceLasers....you really shouldn’t be! This is what can be expected to happen if we give in to the worst of our tribal instincts; subverting reason, evidence, and basic human decency for good standing in our tribe. To end this section on a lighter note, the National Museum of American Jewish History now sells 1/400 scale Jewish Space Lasers and related [Secret Jewish Space Laser Corps](#) merch!

⁵⁵ Paul Bloom, *Just Babies: The Origins of Good and Evil* (New York: Crown, 2013)

Q ANON: A CASE STUDY IN TRIBALISM AND CONSPIRACY THINKING



Photo: Olivier Tournon



Photo: Stephanie Keith

As a case study in what happens when we let our elephant run wild, abandoning reason and giving our passions, biases, bigotries, and tribal instincts free reign, let us dive into the world of QAnon. While a discussion of the sordid, bizarre, and often humorous details of the varying iterations of [QAnon](#) would be an entertaining way to spend our afternoon... or next few weeks, I am more interested in the reasons for the emergence and [wide appeal](#) of QAnon in the first place. The goal is to notice the aspects of ourselves that movements like QAnon can appeal to, and how they can be nurtured and led to a very dark and dangerous place.

But, to make sure we are all on the same page for this wild ride, let us start at the conspiracy that beget this conspiracy. QAnon is a conspiracy theory movement, having its roots in the [Pizzagate](#) scandal of 2016. And...although I do not have the time (or will) to rehash the entire debacle, it centered around allegations (emerging over imageboard website 4chan) that The Clintons were running a pedophile sex ring out of the basement of Comet Ping Pong pizza in Washington D.C. Like a phoenix from the ashes, QAnon emerged to carry the conspiratorial torch after this conspiracy was dramatically exposed as fraudulent following a shooting at Comet Ping Pong pizza. On December 4th, 2016, one of the Pizzagate faithful entered the restaurant with the goal of freeing the Clintons' child sex slaves from the basement. Much to his surprise (and hopefully none of ours), when he entered the storage closet to descend into the pit of sexual debauchery, he soon realized that it was merely a tiny storage closet, with no stairs and no children...the only occupants being some pizza shop sundries. But, as with all good conspiracies, the story must go on. Could there be a secret panel in the closet, revealing the hidden staircase? Did the Clintons and their minions get tipped off? Could the closet house an alien portal to a real pedophile prison?

CORE Q ANON BELIEFS:

- “the world is run by a cabal of Satan-worshipping pedophiles, who are also plotting against Mr. Trump while operating a global child sex-trafficking ring.” (Roose, 2021)
 - This cabal often includes figures such as: George Soros, Hillary Clinton, Chrissy Teigen, Oprah, the Pope, and the Dalai Lama.
 - They are claimed to molest children, kill them, drink their blood, and eat them to extract adrenochrome to extend life.
- Pres. Trump was put into place by top military generals to become president in 2016 to end this criminal ring, destroy their hold on media and politics and bring all of its members to justice (Roose, 2021).

In October of 2017, some long-awaited answers were dropped on 4chan. “[Q Clearance Patriot](#)” (a.k.a. “Q”) emerges on 4chan as an anonymous high-level governmental official claiming to have knowledge of the depth and scope of this pedophilic sex ring. And, unfortunately, it is much worse than we could imagine. The Clintons, and their cabal of liberal elite friends (almost invariably involving Jewish financiers and masterminds) were indeed still operating a pedophilic sex-trafficking syndicate. But now, their motives had become clear...they were (now definitively invoking the anti-Semitic tropes of blood libel, greed, and desire for power) raping them, then killing them in elaborate satanic ritual fashion, to extract and then feast on the adrenochrome in their blood, with the goal of attaining virtual immortality via its anti-aging properties. As you can imagine, details are rarely spared in the graphic depictions of the brutal fate facing these juvenile victims. Coopting [#SaveTheChildren](#) emerged as a most successful branding strategy, serving as rallying cry, and drawing in many new adherents focused on fighting this global injustice. Thankfully, with the inside information and guidance of “Q”, the brutality of such atrocities, we were told, would finally be matched and overcome by the gloriousness of the coming apocalyptic deliverance of justice. “[The Storm](#)” was on the horizon, wherein (with the help of President Trump and some sort of military coup) the global cabal would be publicly exposed, the children would be set free, and a righteous abundance of arrests and public executions would follow.

As with the failed claims and prophecies of its predecessor, Pizzagate, The Storm (and virtually all other projected claims and expectations) did not materialize. Throughout much of 2020, and reaching a fevered pitch in the weeks before Biden’s inauguration, updated timelines and details on the coming Storm were posted. And even as many of the preliminary predictions were not being realized, hope remained in a final apocalyptic showdown on Inauguration Day. But alas, this day came and went without any [day of reckoning](#) for the wicked. There was no liberation of untold numbers of juvenile victims, no military takeover, no tribunals, and no public executions.

And, as predictable as it is bizarre, the myth continues. Numerous new dates, events, and timelines have emerged to salvage faith in the face of [The Great Disappointment](#). Was the inauguration faked...an elaborate ruse? Was there a last-minute act of sabotage, a necessary alteration to the timeline, or even some sort of divine intervention? As I am writing this during the last week of February, one of more popular current views is that The Storm is still coming as Trump will be inaugurated on [March 4, 2021](#). Apparently borrowing from a neighboring family of conspiracy theories

known as the Sovereign Citizen movement, this QAnon remnant is claiming that the last valid amendment was the 14th (after which America apparently became a corporation rather than a nation). Therefore, the last valid president was, in fact, Ulysses S. Grant. In this now revised (and substantially upgraded) game plan, Trump (backed by the military) will play an even more profound role in both restoring the United States as a bona fide nation and also taking his rightful role as the legitimate 19th president of the United States, on the correct (i.e. as it was before the incorporation of America) inauguration day of March 4th. And just in case this does not all come to fruition on March 4th, May 20th is also a candidate as this is 120 days after January 20th and under the conditions of the National Economic Security and Recovery Act (NESARA) that Trump is claimed to have enacted on his final day in office, the military can be employed to dissolve the illegitimate USA Inc.

The details of each of these *ad hoc* yarns are not nearly as important as the reality that they are a seemingly essential component of any good conspiracy theory. The story must go on. Think again here of our inner press secretaries compulsively churning out a narrative to save face, to defend the legitimacy of our tribe. There is often a progressive pathology to conspiracy theories: The more they are shown to be false or lacking in evidence, the stronger the conviction of the faithful and the greater the creativity and (from the outside) absurdity of its explanations and predictions. Since Festinger's work on [The Seekers](#), cognitive dissonance and its host of related theories on motivated reasoning and cognitive biases has shown us: The human capacity to maintain deeply held beliefs in the face of clearly falsifying evidence and experience, seemingly knows no bounds. This is especially pronounced when identity and tribal loyalties are on the line.

WE ARE ALL Q!

- Q is what happens when we let our elephant run wild!
- [December 2020 NPR/Ipsos poll](#): American adults asked about the existence of a Satanic pedophile ring controlling politics and media.
 - 54% - Did not identify this as false (17% claimed to believe it).
 - 83% - Concerned about the spread of false information.
 - 40% - "True" that COVID-19 was created in a lab.
- Roughly half of Americans consistently endorse at least one conspiracy theory (Oliver and Wood, 2014).

So how do we (the collective we of course... I am not accusing any of you in particular of harboring such views... although statistically many of you undoubtedly do) come to believe in such absurdities? Among other intriguing findings, a [December 2020 NPR/Ipsos poll](#) found that only 47% of Americans were "able to correctly identify that this statement is false: 'A group of Satan-worshipping elites who run a child sex ring are trying to control our politics and media.'" Thirty-seven percent were unsure whether this theory backed by QAnon is true or false, and 17% believed it to be true."⁵⁶ How do otherwise thoughtful, compassionate, and rational people come to believe the latest iterations of

⁵⁶"More Than 1 in 3 Americans Believe a 'Deep State' is Working to Undermine Trump," *IPSOS*, December 30, 2020, <https://www.ipsos.com/en-us/news-polls/npr-misinformation-123020>

“Satanic Panic” conspiracies from the 1990’s, gory tales of cannibal cults, allegations of a global Jewish cabal from *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, and blood libel (and associated) antisemitic propaganda from the Middle Ages in the spring of 2021 in multicultural America?

The answer, of course, is not because of the evidentiary or other rational merits of such claims. It is because of how deeply we bond with our tribe(s) and find identity in and through them. And as uncomfortable as this might be to hear, the QAnon faithful believe these things in much the same way that most of us come to believe (and rabidly defend) many of our most cherished...and least substantiated ideological, political, and religious views. There are many types of conspiracy theories (some are, of course, true). Watergate, Pearl Harbor, and 9/11 were all complicated criminal conspiracies. And, the efforts to uncover the details of them generally follow (9/11 Truthers excluded) the rules of evidence and reason. The goal of investigating such conspiracies is to find out the truth. What I am interested in here is the contemporary type of conspiracism that is rooted in tribal allegiance and not a disinterested analysis of the facts.⁵⁷ Quassim Cassam’s recent book on [Conspiracy Theories](#) makes the claim that this is really a novel type of conspiracism and it is fundamentally a form of political propaganda.⁵⁸ It is not interested in truth nor does it engage in evidence gathering or analysis in any academic sense. It is, again, what happens when we let our elephant run loose.

SAMUEL ADAMS: BREWER, PATRIOT, CONSPIRACY THEORIST?



July, 1 BC (Before Covid)

- Purveyor of fine beer and propaganda.
 - Exaggerated offenses of the British.
 - Invented and publicized fictional attacks.
- Peddled conspiracy about King George’s plan to physically enslave Americans.
- Did Sam Adams (the beer company) conspire to scrub the internet of this information???

⁵⁷ Such conspiracies use reasons and offer a type of evidence. But they are wielded as weapons in the service of tribal identity and ideology. Once reason is severed from a context with clearly defined rules and boundaries, with the goal of pursuing the evidentiary trail wherever it may lead, it is a thing. It can give one the feeling of discovering something important, which bolsters and confidence in one’s beliefs as this coopted utilization of reason feels very much like legitimate applications of reason and science. I have come to think of this whole enterprise as “critical thinking adjacent”. It is as a type of parallel process to the research, experimentation, and critical thinking, that is the goal of the academy.

⁵⁸ Quassim Cassam *Conspiracy Theories* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2019).

A Brief Interlude: My Misadventures with Samuel Adams

I recently listened to a brief discussion with historian Joseph J. Ellis on an [NPR podcast](#) regarding Samuel Adams, and his penchant for conspiracy theories. Apparently, the much-revered brewer and patriot was (in)famous for his use of propaganda in stoking anti-British sentiment in the build up to The Revolutionary War. He put up posters detailing (and occasionally embellishing and outright fabricating) the abuses of power of the ruling British. As discussed in the podcast, Samuel Adams peddled the conspiracy theory “that the British government and the ministry of George III, newly crowned king of England in 1760, is plotting, systematically, the enslavement of the American colonists.”⁵⁹ According to Ellis, many/most of the colonists were reasonably content with remaining subjects of the crown. Samuel Adams was not content with this status quo and aggressively pushed his fake news (through heavy pamphleteering) about the alleged attacks, and his larger conspiracy theory about impending enslavement. He was successful in mobilizing sentiment against the crown, ultimately resulting in the Boston Massacre. This was all new to me and not wanting the good name of America’s favorite brewer to be unjustly sullied, I decided to look into things. And here is where it gets a bit strange. As I hopped onto Google Scholar the next day to vet what I had heard on NPR...and to hopefully uncover some more juicy details about this ordeal, I ran into numerous roadblocks. Beyond a couple of [opinion pieces](#) and older historical texts, there wasn’t much to see. Similarly, I only found two reasonably relevant sources on JSTOR that even mentioned the possibility of Samuel Adams being an embellishing propagandist...let alone a full blown QAnon-for-his-day conspiratorial loon. After a few more hours of sleuthing...I realized that we have all been bamboozled. In my brief, but reasonably exhaustive, internet research I had uncovered a deep conspiracy theory of my own...due to their wild success in brewing many of the tastiest beers on the market, the Samuel Adams Brewing company had succeeded in scrubbing the internet, and history books, from any negative messaging about Samuel Adams, the best brewer and patriot that this country has ever known...and now, will ever know.

Of course, I only entertained these thoughts for a moment. I mostly had a good chuckle at how quickly I was able to convince myself that there was some sort of foul play in the historical record. But for at least a few seconds, I felt a little thrill. Based largely on a hunch and a few biases (namely about how companies and countries like to cover up damaging information), I briefly wandered into a conspiratorial rabbit hole of my own. It felt “researchy” and “detectivey”. There is an addictive quality to such “discoveries”. Now of course, there wasn’t really much at stake for me here. But, it made me think about how much easier it is to follow bogus evidence (and in my case mainly just a lack of evidence) when your identity and tribal loyalties are on the line. We want to make sense of things in ways that fit our in-group and out-group biases. In particular, blaming others (any out-group) just feels so good! Maintaining our tribal narratives of good vs. evil is validating and further bonds us with those on our side. It is both primal and often quite juvenile. The bizarre depths of the QAnon rabbit hole are a testament to this absurd logic. It is one thing to say that someone on the other side (say, Hillary Clinton) has policies on health care that you disagree with. But, this doesn’t do much identity or bonding work for us or our tribe. It is entirely another thing to say that through our own careful research and unique abilities to read between the lines, we have discovered that Hillary is the leader of a global cabal of Satanic, cannibalistic, pedophiles (which is also conveniently comprised of various members of other opposition groups), who are hell bent on destroying the world...and the only way to stop this is through an apocalyptic showdown, wherein our messiah and tribal compatriots lead a triumphant and righteous day of reckoning, when justice and goodness and true patriots will once again prevail! Now that does some work for our group!

⁵⁹Joseph J. Ellis, “American Shadows,” *Throughline*, NPR, March 7, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/transcripts/694463513>.

THE TYRANNY OF MERIT BY MICHAEL SANDEL

- Meritocracy-power and economic success are awarded to those who most deserve it based on their talents/merit.
 - This myth is one of the most pervasive antagonists to moral progress
 - It offers a demoralizing false hope to many.
- Meritocratic Hubris: “the tendency of the successful to inhale too deeply of their success” (Sandel)
- It offers a “moral” justification for great inequity.

The Myth of Meritocracy

In addition to the obstacles of tribalism and conspiracism, America (more so than most contemporary democratic nations) maintains a myth that is often inimical to the realization of our duties to each other as both national and global citizens. This myth functions to legitimate persisting inequality both here and abroad. It offers a moral justification for the economic and social successes of some...and more importantly, a moral justification of the economic and social failures of others! This belief that America is (or at least should be) a meritocracy-where economic rewards and power are granted to individuals based on merit -is about as close to a national dogma as anything could be.⁶⁰ As politicians on both the left and right utilize this “rhetoric of rising” in different ways, they maintain the core of the myth which functions to maintain deep structural inequalities.⁶¹ As numerous [studies](#) have shown, this myth is most destructive to those that are already disadvantaged within this political and economic framework. It allows for systems (like ours) to maintain deep inequality through the promise of individual upward mobility. This is a messy mythology as it contains bits of truth and has the power to inspire many. The idea that if you work hard, study hard, and earn the proper meritocratic credentials (e.g. a four-year college degree) you can rise as high as your merit and abilities warrant is the American Dream.⁶² But, as Michael Sandel points out, “the rhetoric of rising” now rings hollow. In today’s economy, it is not easy to rise. Americans born to poor parents tend to stay poor as adults...It is easier to rise from poverty in Canada or Germany, Denmark, and other European countries than it is in the United States”.⁶³ And, yet despite our much lower rates of upward mobility, “Seventy percent of Americans believe the poor can make it out of poverty on

⁶⁰ Michael j. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit What’s Become of the Common Good?* First ed. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 22-24.

⁶² We live in a country that fetishizes achievement. Our love of the underdog, come-from-behind, rags-to-riches, pull yourself up by your bootstraps stories seemingly knows no bounds. *A brief side note: We also like to villainize the super-rich (arguably as much out of jealousy than sustained ethical critique).* In a nutshell, such stories are the embodiment of “The American Dream”. I often ask my students about their majors and why they are in college and one of the most common responses is some version of this dream for their lives. And, there is much hope and inspiration to be found in such stories.

⁶³ Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit*, 23.

their own, while only 35 percent of Europeans think so.”⁶⁴ And even as opportunity, income, and wealth inequality get worse in America and in many other places around the world, our faith in the virtues of meritocracy remain. We fail to realize that we continue to perpetuate the [tyranny of merit](#) through our allegiance to this myth.

I unwittingly ran headfirst into the power of this mythology when I participated in a panel at Chaffey a few years ago in partnership with the One Book, One College Committee on “The American Dream”. And, although I have participated in many panel discussions and debates on controversial ethical issues (female genital mutilation, gun control, terrorism, etc.), I received the most pushback for the views that I expressed on this panel. By some of the reactions I received, you would think that I said “Death To America”, or something profoundly unpatriotic. And...in a sense, I guess that I did. I realized very quickly that for many, the myth/story of “The American Dream” is virtually synonymous with being American, or Americanism. To question it **is** to question America. This reminds me of one of the phrases that continues to echo through the struggle for civil rights in American history: “Racism is so American that when you protest it, people think you are protesting America”. That day I found out the hard way that for many, even attempting to re-frame “The American Dream” was viewed as un-American.

For the record, I merely said that for the vast majority of Americans, the pursuit of the “American Dream” is simply unattainable...a pipedream that often brings more harms than benefits in people’s lives. I went on to say that a modified version of this dream is indeed worth pursuing...one that focuses on duties to others and towards creating a more just and equitable society. That with greater economic, social, and political equity, more people will have access to such a “Dream”. But, the way the current dream fetishizes the achievements of a few individuals also ignores the significance of the often insurmountable obstacles to such success that so many people face. In short, the focus on the possibility of a few achieving greatly, often comes at the expense of addressing the much greater probability of such great achievements being unattainable for the many. It teaches a lie about the true nature of achievement that (as we’ve discussed) can have disastrous consequences psychologically, socially, and economically on so many. Success is not (and should not) be found through struggling against systems of great inequity to achieve some economic goals through the utilization of one’s talents tethered to an ethos of rugged individualism. It is an amazing testament to the power of the will that some can succeed despite being dealt such bad cards. But our ability to eke out an existence in a deeply inequitable system should not be elevated as some functional model for how we should all pursue and measure our own success. True success, lasting success, is achieved through the ever-increasing removal of the obstacles to success that our political, social, and economic systems have placed before so many. It is achieved through deconstructing the myths about rugged individualism, egoism and selfishness that are at the heart of “The American Dream”. And although there should be praise for those who achieve in their respective efforts, we should avoid the drive to valorize such individual achievements and should rather shift our focus on creating more equitable systems that allow for and encourage even more people to achieve.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

LEARNING TO APPRECIATE MORAL LUCK

- We do not get to pick our parents...nor any of the realities surrounding our births.
 - These are the variables that are most determining of our life outcomes.
- Humility and gratitude should replace notions of pride.
- Cultivate compassion for those who are not so lucky!
- Advocate for policies that attempt to remedy the inequities of moral luck.

To begin to break the hold that this meritocratic myth has on so many of us, we need to begin with a greater appreciation of moral luck. We need to remind ourselves that the variables that are most determining of life's outcomes are largely accidents of birth. We can still exercise agency in playing the cards that we've been dealt, and should make the most of them. But, only through a greater appreciation of the randomness of our lot, can we cultivate the appropriate, non-judgmental, non-condescending compassion for others. We would do well to meditate on the great suffering that is caused through a meritocratic orientation. Removing the obstacle of this very American way of judging others for their perceived failures is a necessary step on the path to realizing our duties as global citizens. But as we've seen, myths of tribal identity are tough to move beyond. As we will see in these final remarks, there is a need for new stories and myths. We need to valorize the legends of those who give up power and privilege to be of service to their fellow citizens of this world.

BEST PRACTICES FOR CULTIVATING VIRTUE (1)

1) Honest introspection on one's own beliefs, values, arguments

- Socratic Method: State claim, brutally question, restate....repeat!
- Confront your own cognitive biases and recognize your fallacies!

2) Active Perspective Taking

- Endeavor to "try on" others' worlds, moral foundations, and beliefs.
- Learn another language, travel, & read fiction from others' perspectives.
- Pursue the arts!
- "Steel Man" opposing viewpoints!

I am hoping that much of the work in this lecture in both making a case for committing to an ethos of global citizenship and then in unpacking the most difficult obstacles to cultivating the virtues of this ethos can provide some guidance. This has been the primary goal of this lecture. It is my hope that through a more accurate understanding of the obstacles that we have analyzed, we can see a path of possibilities. And the first step is getting clear on the nature of these obstacles and problems along this broader life path. This begins with honest introspection about your own values, their sources, and what is keeping you from pursuing them. Engaging in brutal and regular Socratic dialogue with yourself and others can be very clarifying. Confronting your own pet fallacies and [cognitive biases](#) can also be revelatory. Ritualizing and normalizing these activities of self-discovery, with the goal of regularly admitting one's error in thought and action is one of the hardest and most necessary steps to moving forward.

In keeping with the elephant and rider metaphor, if we repurpose our cognitive capacities to help plan a course of living that encourages our elephants and shapes our paths, there is hope. Recall the work by Dan and [Chip Heath](#) on how to plan ahead to accomplish the changes that our rational mind believes are right. There is wisdom in their insights about how knowing what is right or even what we want to do is not generally enough to motivate our elephants to change. The motivation centers of our brain are still connected largely with our feelings and passions. Unfortunately, evolution has not yet rewired our brains so that we are most motivated to act through reason and evidence. Our elephants need to feel differently to act differently. Our elephants need to feel hope, experience rewards, and constant reassurance to succeed in making lasting changes. Committing to new experiences and new environments that have the potential to change our feelings is central to individual moral development. Behaviors can change when our situation changes. The following are a few suggestions for the types of paths that can be effective in guiding and encouraging meaningful moral change.

On a most immediate and practical level, committing to new behaviors that will help guide our elephants to cultivate the virtues of global citizenship must be done. Committing to traveling and directly experiencing the lives of those whose moral luck is much different than your own is a vital tool in connecting us all. [Mark Twain](#) makes this case most acutely, "Travel is fatal to prejudice, bigotry and narrow-mindedness, and many of our people need it sorely on these accounts.

Broad, wholesome, charitable views of men and things can not [*sic*] be acquired by vegetating in one little corner of the earth all one's lifetime."⁶⁵ This is one area where we can start with thinking globally and acting globally. Travel should begin in our own backyards. Within fifty miles of Chaffey College, there are opportunities to visit and break bread with people from virtually all nationalities, religions, and classes. I bring my ethics classes to a soup kitchen (operated by Chaffey College alumni) in East Hollywood every semester. Of all of the pedagogical methods that I use both in and out of the classroom, this is almost always the most significant for students. They regularly bring this up when I see them many years later, as an event that had a major impact on their lives. Seeing the transformation in students' outlooks on poverty and homelessness through direct interaction with affected populations is one the most rewarding parts of my work. Similarly, visiting local houses of worship is usually the thing that my religion students most remember from my classes. Learning another language (this hopefully involves a greater commitment than my regular re-downloading the [Duolingo](#) app) can connect us with other ways of thinking and living. For those of us monolingualists out there, the experience of struggling to communicate in another language can be very humbling. It can connect us with the experiences of so many (e.g. the aforementioned "climate refugees") who have to overcome differences in culture and language to survive. I once heard it said that when you hear someone speaking with an accent, you are seeing bravery! Whether through personal hardship or just personal interest, they are endeavoring to better themselves and to understand another world. Furthermore, engaging in works of literature and art can greatly assist us in active perspective taking. It connects us with the worlds of others. Bengali poet and social reformer, Rabindranath Tagore, developed an educational system that largely focused on the arts, as essential to cultivating virtues necessary for creating a better world. "For him, the primary role played by the arts was the cultivation of sympathy... The arts, in his view, promote both inner self-cultivation and responsiveness to others. The two typically develop in tandem, since one can hardly cherish in another what one has not explored in oneself"⁶⁶ It is the dual challenges of self-exploration and responsiveness to others that are often most difficult to motivate our nonrational elephants to pursue. After all, it is much easier, and even socially rewarding, to ridicule an immigrant for their accent rather than to see both their bravery and humanity. As we saw with QAnon, we solidify our identity and standing in our tribes the more we distance ourselves from others. This tribalism allows for (and arguably encourages) disgusting acts of inhumanity and bigotry, often carried out with a confident sense of self-righteousness! Inuring ourselves to the experiences and suffering of others is easy... it is our natural default. Cultivating compassion for others is costly.

Additional research by Jonathan Haidt on [moral foundations theory](#) provides another avenue to better understand the moral worlds of others and ourselves. This theory provides a framework for understanding the five or six core moral foundations. These foundations are: 1) Care/harm, 2) Fairness/cheating, 3) Loyalty/betrayal, 4) Authority/subversion, 5) Sanctity/degradation, and 6) Liberty/oppression⁶⁷ Within this framework, different individuals and differing cultures/tribes utilize these to varying degrees, both in general and as applied to particular cases and issues. Utilizing the analogy of moral taste buds, we each may have genetic and biological predispositions to prefer certain tastes, and we also cultivate them within cultural contexts and personal experiences. These foundations represent the range of options that evolutionary biology has laid before us,⁶⁸ that are motivating our elephants. Understanding our own foundations and recognizing those of others can help us know how best to assess our elephants' needs. And, if you are interested in exploring how this theory might relate to your own moral intuitions and reasoning, there are a handful of [tests and questionnaires](#) that moral foundations theorists have put together to help you understand and navigate your own moral matrix. In terms of working to connect with others despite the differences in moral orientation that are so often part of the tribal lines that divide us, this model can be extremely helpful.

⁶⁵ Mark Twain, *The Innocents Abroad* (Hartford, Conn: American Publishing Company, 1869; Project Gutenberg, 2006, updated 2018), Conclusion, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3176/3176-h/3176-h.htm>

⁶⁶ Martha Nussbaum, *Not For Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 104.

⁶⁷ Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 150-216. See <https://moralfoundations.org/> for a brief overview of each of these six foundations.

⁶⁸ And although he takes a decidedly more reason and evidence-based approach to understanding and assessing our moral systems, Sam Harris's, *The Moral Landscape* (New York: Free Press, 2010), offers another way of conceptualizing moral diversity (hence the "landscape" metaphor) within a broader moral framework that accounts for our options in the realm of morality.

As Haidt points out, we often find it exceedingly difficult to understand the moral intuitions and bolstering reasons from those outside of our group(s).⁶⁹ Coming to appreciate how others ground their ethical lives can help us to bridge the ethical and political gulfs that often feel intractable. Many recent studies are revealing that reframing moral positions and arguments, utilizing the moral foundations of those on the other side of an issue (rather than your own foundations), can be much more effective in changing people's views.⁷⁰ In one [recent study](#), researchers found that reframing environmental issues in terms of the more conservative moral foundations of purity/sanctity, rather than in terms of harm/care, largely eliminated the otherwise significant difference in mean pro-environmental attitudes between liberals and conservatives.⁷¹ In another study, liberals were found to be less supportive of Hillary Clinton after reading criticisms of her based on the fairness (liberal) foundation. This decrease in support was not nearly as significant after reading criticisms of her grounded in the loyalty (conservative) foundation.⁷²

In addition to the profound potential to build bridges between differing groups, it is my view that this research can have a meaningful effect on our ability to self-critically reflect on our own values. There is not yet much research on this particular application of moral foundations research, but recognizing the ways in which our own preferred moral foundations inform our moral judgements and guide the use of reason in defending them can be very enlightening. It is my hope that regular reflection on such matters can increase epistemic humility. Our ability to see the ways in which our own moral convictions and arguments often appeal to criteria that may not be central (or even relevant) to our ideological opponents, should give us some reservations in touting the rational and moral high ground on many issues. After all, we are driven by the same evolutionary mechanisms that drive both our initial moral intuitions, the deployment of our own press secretaries of reason in the compulsive defense of such intuitions.

⁶⁹ Jonathan Haidt has labeled this phenomenon, the 3rd principle of moral psychology: “*Morality binds and it blinds*” (Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*, 287).

⁷⁰ JG Voelkel and M. Feinberg, “Morally Reframed Arguments Can Affect Support for Political Candidates,” *Social Psychological and Personality Science* 9, no. 8 (2018): 917–24, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550617729408>.

⁷¹ Matthew Feinberg and Robb Willer. “The Moral Roots of Environmental Attitudes,” *Psychological Science* 24, no. 1 (2013): 56–62.

⁷² Voelkel and Feinberg, “Morally Reframed Arguments”.

BEST PRACTICES FOR CULTIVATING VIRTUE (2)

3) Practice radical compassion (starting with yourself)!

4) Give of your time (and your resources)! We can all do more.

- Motivate your elephant!
 - Develop new habits of compassion and giving.
 - Giving can be addicting.
- Shape the path!
 - Commit to practices that have the capacity to bring change.
 - Create opportunities that challenge you and increase curiosity.

5) Reread and practice #4!

6) Ritualize storytelling that valorizes ethical courage!

On a much more concrete level, the most morally impactful advice I can muster is merely to echo [Peter Singer's admonitions](#) to those of us living in the wealthier parts of the world to **simply give!** The amount of good that we can do with regular donations, big and small, is profound. There are a few organizations growing out of the [Effective Altruism](#) movement that focus on utilizing a data driven approach for doing the most good (saving lives) possible with all money donated. Oxford philosopher [Will MacAskill](#) makes a compelling case that this should be the most important moral imperative of all of our lives! If the goal of global citizenship is to commit to an ethos of caring about the suffering and lives of others, then the best way to fulfill such duties is to give to [charities](#) that are the most effective at saving and maintaining the lives of the most vulnerable across the globe. The immediate goals of a global citizen should then be to cultivate the virtues and habits that get us to give the most to such causes. And if this plea just caused your elephant to rear up a little, I challenge you to reflect a bit on why? Is it because this is really an unreasonable or unethical request? When I raise these sorts of claims in my classes, I see many students' inner KellyAnne Conways compulsively spring to their defenses. With a mixture of self-interest, meritocratic justification, and a deep dive into the reservoirs of motivated reasoning, we defend our inaction. And, if possible, we even offer a veneer of enlightened moral justification for our failure to act.

It is precisely these tendencies that we need to demystify, unpack, and work through. Now to be sure, there are many other things we can do to fulfill our duties to each other. But to make progress on all of them, we need to be brutally honest with ourselves about what really drives us. And we need to work on motivating our elephants through incentivizing new experiences, habits, and opening ourselves up to feeling compassion both for ourselves and for others. Returning again to MLK's sermon on the Good Samaritan, "On Being a Good Neighbor," we must all focus on cultivating universal, dangerous, and excessive altruism.⁷³ It seems like this is a good place to end this talk. I do not have all (or even many) of the answers, here. I just wanted to share my research and reflections on the types of things that might help us (or at least help me) do a better job of making this world a more just, equitable, and safe place for all of the world's inhabitants. We can do this!

As I mentioned at the beginning of this lecture, I wish that there was a magic red pill that we could all take to instantly

⁷³ King Jr., "On Being a Good Neighbor"

become our best selves: A pill that would help us to feel greater compassion for others. A pill that would take away the obstacles of our own mind and nature that keep us from seeing clearly and making meaningful ethical change. A pill that could cut through our evolutionary psychology and the tribalism that comes along with it. A pill that could make us impervious to the lure of conspiratorial thinking and the partisanship with which it is so often connected. And finally, a pill that could cure the American obsession with meritocratic thinking and the moral justifications for suffering that it engenders. I apologize for failing to deliver this type of remedy. I know that I could sure use one! But if the writings on moral change and cultivating virtue, from a variety of disciplines and religious traditions have shown us anything, it is that there are no shortcuts for developing the essential virtues. We just need to do the hard work!

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