

What Can We Do about Hate?

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I pass the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh every day, on my way to and from work. Yesterday, a gun-wielding assailant entered the synagogue and murdered 11 participants in a Shabbat service, shattering the peace of the richly multiethnic community of Squirrel Hill. The killer had posted messages online expressing his hatred of Jews and immigrants. Here was the full horror of hate, in my own neighborhood.

There is a temptation to dismiss the seemingly endless hate crimes we have endured in recent times as the work of isolated psychopaths. But we all know this is a mistake, because we all know about the rising tide of hatred that underlies these acts. We just don't know what to do about it.

From my perspective, the fundamental problem is not pathology but twisted thinking. Racist ideology is not merely something concocted after the fact to rationalize visceral impulses. It plays an active role in the formation of hatred. The way we think has consequences. One need only open a history book to learn how it has determined the fate of nations. A similar development is unfolding before our eyes.

Look at the material posted on hate websites, if you can stand it, and you will find a cesspool of logical fallacies and manufactured "facts." These are essential to sustaining the movement. A huge portion of our brain is the prefrontal cortex, the part that does our reasoning, and it must be satisfied. It must have a rationale for what we are doing if we are to proceed. Clever ideologues are happy to meet this need with talking points and specious arguments. Millions listen to them every day.

We may be shocked that friends and relatives we thought were good people could take this stuff seriously. But maybe the problem is not bad character, but bad thinking. We all get confused and make mistakes at times. The remedy is to straighten out our thinking and correct the mistakes. Emotions and biases may resist the effort, but the prefrontal cortex can take control. That is why it exists.

One might expect, then, that the first step to opposing hatred would be a concerted effort to expose muddled ideology to the light of day, to distinguish the true from the false, and to call out logical fallacies. Instead, we find ourselves in a post-truth age, when "alternative facts" substitute for real facts, and there are no consequences for habitual lying as long as one's followers want to believe the lies. It is an ideal environment for hatred to thrive.

I see this as the latest development in a gradual retreat from rationality, spanning several decades. There are multiple causes, but none is more fundamental than what has been happening in ethics. Ethics deals with the most basic of practical issues: how we conduct ourselves. Yet in both popular culture and academic discussion, we have seen a slow but steady abandonment of ethical reasoning.

In popular culture, we tend to see ethics as a matter of personal values or individual preferences. I have my opinion, you have your opinion, and that's it. Besides, we shouldn't "impose our values" on others. Let's just live and let live.

In the academic realm, skepticism is even deeper, egged on by nihilist elements in the postmodernist and cultural studies movements. Text, we are told, is neither true nor false but only a reflection of the cultural and political environment. Skepticism about ethics is particularly widespread. Many of my academic colleagues are convinced that while rational inquiry is possible in their fields, there can be no objectivity in ethics. Even philosophers tend to dismiss "normative ethics" as lowbrow and unworthy of publication in the best journals.

Popular acceptance of ethical relativism may have been motivated by a legitimate desire to respect diverse viewpoints in a multicultural society. However, the purpose of ethics is not to impose values on others. It is precisely the opposite: to reach rational *consensus* on how we should behave, so we can live together on the same planet.

Obtaining objectivity and consensus in ethics requires hard intellectual work, but no more so than in physics. Fortunately, tools exist for this purpose, developed by thinkers every bit as smart as Einstein. Few people, even few academics, know that these tools exist. It's no wonder that practically everybody views rigorous ethical argument as impossible: only a tiny fraction of one percent of the population has ever seen such a thing. I didn't see it until I was in graduate school. Given this state of affairs, how effective are we going to be at refuting racist ideology?

Yes, some people will reject reason no matter what. Yet some people reject vaccines, and we develop them anyway. Medical science is widely accepted because it provides a rational framework that can take the place of superstition. We can expect little progress in ethics unless we have a similar rational framework to supplant twisted ideology. The ethical nihilism and skepticism we too often profess is not going to do the job.

Our first maneuver in the fight against hate, then, must be a rejection of anti-intellectualism in ethics. We must build a conceptual framework and vocabulary that allows us to address ethical issues. We must learn how to state a valid argument and spot the flaws in an invalid one. I have every confidence that if we put our heads together, we can do this. As part of my small contribution to the effort, I developed a blog that illustrates ethical reasoning, ethicaldecisions.net.

Humans are basically rational creatures, because we have had to be rational to survive. Our prefrontal cortex evolved for this purpose. We must now reach a rational consensus on what is ethical. In today's crowded world, our survival depends on it.