

The Tribalism Trap: Overcoming Political Polarization in an Age of Outrage

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Abstract: Humans evolved in tight-knit tribes, fostering group loyalty, strong social identities, and suspicion of threatening outsiders. These tribal tendencies—shaped by natural and cultural selection—once served survival but now often misfire in modern, digitally connected societies. This chapter explores how tribal instincts combine with social media, partisan news, divisive ideologies, and related factors to tempt us toward vices like dogmatism, arrogance, and incivility. By integrating insights from moral psychology, social epistemology, and polarization research, the chapter offers a path forward that combines shaping one’s media environment and patterns of thought to promote virtues of humility and civility. The language of virtue is particularly helpful for integrating individual and structural solutions to the tribalism trap.

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Unlike snow leopards, orangutans, and numerous other mammals, humans are deeply social creatures who evolved in tight-knit groups. For hundreds of thousands of years, our ancestors formed tribes that competed against one another. The group that sticks together survives together—and, importantly, produces offspring. It’s no wonder we naturally value traits like loyalty, compassion, and trust that tend to be reserved more for members of one’s inner circle (Haidt 2012; Greene 2013). As natural selection instilled preferences for group allegiance and social status, humans also developed moral and religious systems that further reinforced these tendencies through strong cultural identities (Henrich 2015; Kumar & Campbell 2022), which have also been the basis of war and other tribal conflicts.

These groupish tendencies aren’t fixed or “hard-wired” and they can be virtuous in certain contexts. Loyalty can bind group members together to yield monumental feats of cooperation (Hammond & Axelrod 2006). Us-vs-Them thinking can be useful in the “environment of evolutionary adaptedness,” when aggressive groups competed for scarce resources in the Pleistocene. As humans have become more prosperous and peaceful, their moral

circles have expanded to include universal human rights and even some consideration for non-human animals (Buchanan & Powell 2018; Kumar & Campbell 2022).

In modern societies, however, tribal tendencies can become vices and incite culture wars. Certain cultural and political groups have become more tribalistic as personalized media has fragmented voters into echo chambers and social media algorithms amplify contempt and distrust of opposing coalitions. There is, it seems, an evolutionary mismatch between human psychology and modern ecology. The problem is similar to how obesity and Type 2 diabetes soar in some wealthy nations: while powerful desires for salt, sugar, and fat help humans flourish in the wild, they become maladaptive when addictive calorie-dense foods are affordable and plentiful (Bateson et al. 2004). Likewise, the *tribalism trap* is the temptation to let our modern milieu inflame tribal instincts into excess, transforming loyalty and moral conviction into incivility and arrogance.

Is such tribalism inevitable? Prominent theories imply that it's either an ingrained feature of human nature or unavoidable in modern societies connected by divisive algorithms and ideologies. But this chapter argues otherwise. We start with research on political polarization and put it in the context of eroding virtues, which suggests a way forward that doesn't rely on banning the internet or going back to a pre-industrial age. Compassion, respect, and intellectual humility can (and should) be developed in the modern world with a combination of altering one's media environment and improving one's patterns of thought to promote virtues of civility and humility. Just as we can exercise temperance in the glistening aisles of the grocery store, it's possible to be humble and civil while consuming news from the internet and staying connected with others on social media.

Polarization Problems

Let's start by clarifying tribalism, with its inherently negative connotations. While loyalty is a virtue, *tribalism* involves excessive in-group favoritism, out-group hostility, and a tendency to prioritize group identity over impartial judgment. Some tribes are defined by their location on a map or genetic makeup, but our focus will be on groups defined by moral or political ideologies, which form an intellectual tribe. Rallying with one's political teammates and dunking on opponents feels just as good as scoring points on the basketball court, but politics isn't a game, even if our modern world presents it as one. Such tribalism involves not only moral vices, such as callousness and incivility, but also intellectual vices, such as arrogance and dogmatism (Cassam 2019). We'll assume these are problematic and ask how we can avoid them in modern societies amid algorithms and norms that make tribalism so appetizing.

Drawing moral conclusions from evolutionary mismatch is difficult. Some ethicists have argued ambitiously that the foundations of human morality are now completely outdated and should be jettisoned in favor of more utilitarian systems that simply calculate which actions and policies will promote the greater good (Singer 2005; Greene 2013). Yet such sweeping arguments, which ask us to abandon fundamental moral commitments to individual rights, face formidable challenges (see e.g. Kumar & May 2019; May & Baker 2026). A much less

controversial conclusion is that tribal tendencies in modern societies have led to dogmatism, callousness, and other traits widely considered vices by our own lights.

We'll focus on how tribalism arises in contemporary forms of political polarization rising in various countries, especially in the United States. Social scientists have studied polarization extensively in recent decades (e.g., Klein 2020; Talisse 2019; Kleinfeld 2023), and they've come to identify two main forms. *Ideological polarization* involves more extreme political views, which have become more common among politicians and the most politically engaged citizens. Among the general electorate, we find more *affective polarization*: animosity toward people with opposing political identities, often accompanied by negative stereotypes and prejudice. Research suggests that many supporters of America's two major political parties hold fairly similar views about public policy, yet increasingly despise the opposing political party and its members (Mason 2018; see Figure 15.1). In recent decades, partisans who strongly identify with the major parties are particularly inclined to view the other side as dishonest, immoral, unintelligent, and close-minded (Pew 2022).

Figure 15.1

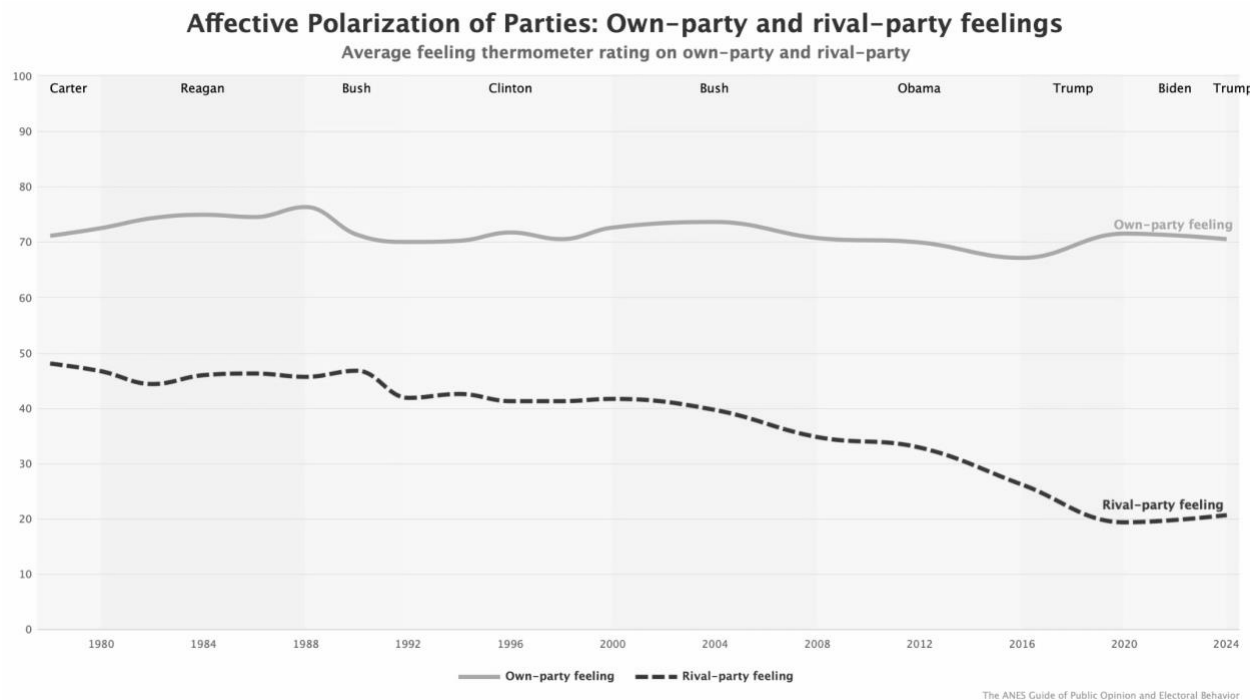


Figure x.1: Average feeling thermometer ratings of own party and rival party, 1980–2024.

Source: American National Election Studies (electionstudies.org)

The two forms of polarization are connected in many people, particularly the most politically engaged. If you dislike and distrust people on the other side, you'll come to find their worldview even more wrongheaded, their information sources even less reliable. Negative feelings can then lead to adopting more extreme viewpoints that lie even further from the people whose moral views you despise. (Of course, this is the generic "you." You, dear reader, might be

intellectually humble, charitable, civil, compassionate toward political opponents, and more. If so, read the second person as referring to other readers who, like myself, aren't so virtuous.)

Some of this is *rational*, at least in a narrow sense of the term. Humans are not cold robots designed to dispassionately reason alone. We are deeply social animals who evolved to reason with others who display mutual trust and respect—attitudes that evolved long ago to help humans cooperate and learn from one another (Kumar & Campbell 2022). Moreover, as many philosophers have come to recognize in social epistemology, no one person can be an expert on every topic. We all must rely on others as sources of information. And it can be quite reasonable to rely on information from those you trust, which may well be those in your echo chamber, not the apparent fools outside of it (Rini 2017; Levy 2022). If you espouse the liberal worldview propounded by Democrats, it's understandable to dismiss a climate skeptic, just as it makes little sense for a staunch conservative to defer to a Marxist economist. However, even if in some sense rational or understandable, it's not virtuous to let oneself become trapped in an echo chamber that distorts one's view of opponents. Intellectual humility requires the skill of recognizing and avoiding conditions ripe for dogmatism and incivility, especially in the face of widespread disagreement.

The problem of polarization isn't just a matter of isolated feelings and ideas; these have consequences for personal relationships, elections, public policy, and democracy. Polarization has led people to lose friends and family over politics (Jurkowitz & Mitchell 2020; Savage 2021). During an interview with *The New York Times*, one Republican voter mentioned that her support of Donald Trump has led to losing “two friendships of over 20 years,” which she described as “heartbreaking” (America in Focus 2025). It's easier than ever for people to consume partisan media and interact with like-minded others on the internet, forming echo chambers in which contrary opinions and sources are actively discredited (Nguyen 2020). Increasingly, Americans don't even want to live near people with opposing views and so move to more politically homogenous neighborhoods (Kaysen & Singer 2024). Animosity and misunderstanding result in less compromise, less cooperation, and less functional democratic systems. In the worst cases, tribalism fuels extremism, political violence, profound distrust, and ruthless retribution, which undermines the shared narratives and faith in institutions required to hold democracies together (e.g., Sullivan 2017; Sunstein 2017; Buchanan 2020; Haidt 2022).

Some forms of political polarization are certainly healthy. We do need citizens to have moral convictions in politics and to hash out their differences. Abolitionists and civil rights leaders were passionate and once considered both polarizing and extreme (Sunstein 2017: 86). The problem of tribalism, however, isn't the passionate expression of unconventional views. It's when politics is invariably viewed as a battle between good and evil that requires contempt for the enemy and profound distrust toward political opponents—not just the worst politicians but everyone within the coalition, including fellow citizens who throw their vote away to the “dark side.” Such attitudes weren't prominent features of the civil rights movement. Indeed, fervent tribalism of this sort may be restricted to certain segments of society today, like the most

politically engaged. Even so, our question is whether such polarization can be curbed where it exists in problematic forms.

Consider some examples of tribalism in action. Certain issues are so politicized that being a good member of the Left or the Right requires a particular stance—what Dan Williams (2022) calls *identity-defining beliefs*. A number of possibilities from contemporary politics come to mind, including views on: immigration; affirmative action and DEI; defunding the police in the wake of the Black Lives Matter protests; mass shootings and gun control; mask mandates and school closures during the COVID-19 pandemic; and the lab-leak theory about its origins. Politically engaged readers will readily recognize the party lines on these issues. But let's dwell on climate change, which has become a highly politicized issue in many parts of the world.

Whether humans are significantly contributing to global warming is a largely scientific question, even if what to do about it is a moral one. Yet there are partisan views on the science that have impeded productive approaches to the issue. Republicans have largely disregarded scientific consensus and denied that there is an urgent threat, while Democrats have tended to catastrophize, arguably exaggerating the problem and sometimes misrepresenting the science (Heath 2025). There is a palpable sense that to be a good liberal or progressive is to view climate change as an existential threat, while good conservatives see it as largely overblown.

Identity-defining beliefs can be revealed by imagining a group member breaking ranks. Ezra Klein (2020) considers what would happen if Sean Hannity, a prominent conservative on Fox News, decided that climate change was a serious threat to humanity and publicized this change in view:

He would lose friendships, viewers, and money. He could ultimately lose his job. And along the way he would cause himself immense personal pain as he systematically alienated his closest political and professional allies. The world would have to update its understanding of who Sean Hannity is and what he believes, and so, too, would Sean Hannity. Changing your identity is a psychologically and socially brutal process. (Klein 2020: 95-96)

This is a human, not a conservative, phenomenon. I once attended a sustainability workshop with dozens of other academics, where one of the most exuberant and inspiring presentations was about how we urgently need to stop burning fossil fuels and “electrify everything!” During the break, while everyone was chatting in the courtyard, one audience member expressed concern that the talk was so one-sided. He was curious about the perspective of those who think we don't need to move completely and immediately away from fossil fuels. Everyone around him shot back with anger, ridiculing the opposing view as not worth any airtime and appalling to even bring up. Although I'm personally in favor of moving away from fossil fuels, this smacked of tribalism on the Left.

The indignant defense of one's identity-defining beliefs is perfectly natural. Once a belief becomes central to one's identity, reasoning kicks in to defend it, regardless of one's political

leanings (Clark et al. 2019; Williams 2023c; Ditto et al. 2025). And identity groups even reward rationalizations that support the party line (Williams 2023b). These are arguably forms of motivated reasoning, in which one's evaluation of information and arguments is shaped by one's goals and desires, such as maintaining status within a valued group (May 2018a; Williams 2022).

Motivated reasoning isn't necessarily toxic. Even scientists are motivated to defend their pet theories or produce findings that garner social status (May 2021). Sometimes biases lead to questionable research practices, but other times moral values help scientists dig more deeply into questions that others ignore (Anderson 2004). Under the right conditions, biased reasoning can lead to knowledge when multiple viewpoints are put into respectful dialog to yield a marketplace of ideas (Mercier & Sperber 2017). Tribalism, on the other hand, yields dogmatism and echo chambers, along with incivility and contempt that shuts down productive dialog and cooperation.

Contrast the coordinated effort to repair the ozone layer in the earth's stratosphere. Scientists discovered in the 1970s that chemicals used in aerosols and refrigeration (CFCs) were depleting the ozone layer that protects the planet from ultraviolet radiation. By 1987, an international treaty—the Montreal Protocol—phased out these damaging substances. Now the ozone layer has already recovered substantially, with a full recovery expected within this century (Chu 2025). Healthy disagreement heals the ozone layer; tribalism produces climate change culture wars.

To be fair, the comparison isn't perfect. Banning a chemical used in a relatively small number of products is much easier (and less contentious) than completely reshaping how energy is used and created. Even so, political tribalism hasn't only cropped up over fossil fuel bans or taxes on carbon emissions but even the development of more sustainable sources of power, such as wind turbines and solar panels. Humanity's response to climate change could have been closer to the ozone crisis. Despite disagreements about the Montreal Protocol, we came together to discern the facts and collaborated to achieve a common goal. That was back in the 80s, one might say, before so much political polarization. So what changed?

Potential Causes

Solutions to the problem of polarization require understanding its causes. Most analyses focus on *structural features* of modern society, such as new information technology and shifting political norms. Some are more credible or more powerful causes than others, so let's briefly examine prominent contenders.

A natural thought is that *economic downturns* trigger exclusionary tribal instincts. Allen Buchanan and Rachel Powell (2018) have argued that humans are naturally inclusive and trustworthy but that the perception of scarcity and disease makes us more tribalistic. Tribalism is an “adaptively plastic” trait, similar to how water fleas can grow armor or spines when threatened by predators. Although Buchanan and Powell don't purport to explain political polarization, perhaps events like the 2008 Global Financial Crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 have triggered more tribalism. Changes in the economy are probably a factor (isn't it always?), but this doesn't quite capture how polarization began to increase well before this

century. It also doesn't explain why other major economic crises of the previous century didn't result in present levels of polarization within societies.

Some theorists point instead to divisive *ideologies* that foment tribalism and degrade political discourse. White nationalism, critical race theory, and cancel culture have been charged with pitting racial, ethnic and moral tribes against one another in a war of good versus evil (Buchanan 2020; Mounk 2023; Lukianoff & Schlott 2023). These ideas, propounded by influential people and institutions, find their way into individual minds and breed distrust and disdain toward out-groups. Although this explanation might better fit the timeline of increased political polarization, divisive ideologies could be more a consequence of polarization than a cause. In the absence of growing contempt for political opponents, such ideologies would struggle to gain acceptance. At the very least, there are other prominent factors to consider.

One common theory is that the internet and social media platforms have facilitated the spread of *misinformation* about politically charged issues, from vaccine mandates to climate change. Perhaps believing more outlandish claims results in more extreme political views and animosity toward those who disagree. There is some evidence that misinformation is a problem within some circles (Sunstein 2017), but much of this has been overblown and supported by flawed research (Williams 2023a). Some people do certainly believe outright lies, speculative claims, and dubious conspiracy theories, but these aren't common enough to explain the increase in problems of polarization. Most people aren't that gullible (Mercier 2020), and many simply report outlandish beliefs to signal group identity or bad-mouth opponents (Hannon 2021; Funkhouser 2022). When many Trump supporters said that his inauguration crowd was larger than Barack Obama's, it's more likely that these loyalists were signaling political allegiance than accepting obvious falsehoods (or hallucinating).

What's more plausible is that *modern media* has radically changed the way people consume and discuss political information. Humans evolved in small groups of people whom they know personally and interact with face-to-face. Email, text, and video calls can wonderfully connect distant family and friends, but they aren't the best medium for communicating subtle thoughts about emotionally-charged topics (even with the addition of emojis). Social media platforms, in particular, tend to prop up and perpetuate echo chambers with algorithms that supercharge hostility and serve up content that tantalizes one's biases (Sunstein 2017; Klein 2020; Haidt 2022). With social media being free for users, the business model called for products that keep users on the platform so they can be shown the advertisements that pay the bills. Even just introducing "like" buttons and algorithmic news feeds incentivized the creation of inflammatory posts and comments that go viral or otherwise spur engagement, particularly about divisive issues. In the past decade, consumption of news from social media has increased around the world. In 2013, only 23% of Americans reported using social media platforms as a source of news; now it's 54% (Graves & Jenkins 2025). While more than social media is to blame for political dysfunction and irrationality, it has arguably contributed to affective polarization.

Prior changes to *political institutions* also play a role. Back in the 1980s, for example, American political parties became more ideologically homogeneous, politicians spent less time

socializing with members of opposing political parties, and the death of the Fairness Doctrine meant that news outlets didn't need to present both sides of controversial issues. As Klein (2020) has put it, these kinds of changes to political institutions and norms have led people to develop strong "mega-identities" tied to political parties and surrounding ideologies (see also Buchanan 2020). As broad ideologies become a strong part of one's identity, human nature breeds mistrust of non-members and defense of the group against intellectual attacks. Combined with increasingly isolated media echo chambers, it's no wonder citizens become more polarized, both in their views and their feelings toward opponents.

Potential Solutions

No one factor is the cause of political polarization. Rather, there are many contributing factors, just as with any complex social phenomenon—from the decline in teen mental health to the rise in drug overdoses. Many of these contributing factors are features of political and media systems, and so it seems "the problem is structural," as Jonathan Haidt (2022) puts it. Many theorists have accordingly called for policies that prevent partisan media, homogenous political parties, and divisive ideologies from turning natural tendencies into tribalism. Allen Buchanan represents this view when declaring with emphasis: "*an effective response to tribalism must be institutional*" (2020: 248; see also Sauer 2019). Klein similarly urges us to "zoom out from the individuals to better see interlocking systems that surround them" (Klein 2020: XVI).

However, political systems are hard to change, as are the products of big tech companies—especially when nations are polarized and mired in gridlock. Reforms and regulations have been few and minimal, and the business models of media platforms are well entrenched. Newspapers and other legacy media companies have already collapsed, and the ones still standing are losing subscribers to more personalized media provided by YouTube, TikTok, and other platforms apparently designed to keep users engaged and enraged. It seems there's no going back to the days of bipartisan media and ideologically diverse political parties.

It would certainly help for our social environments to change. Politicians, policy makers, and tech companies should absolutely consider relevant reforms. Yet we shouldn't focus solely on these sources of political polarization. Individuals can and should engage in the project of self-improvement to combat tribalism in their own lives. Indeed, as with all forms of social change, individual and structural factors are deeply linked (Brownstein et al. 2025). Political systems won't change unless voters demand cooperation over animosity; divisive ideologies won't lose ground unless people recognize and recoil from them; social media companies won't develop new business models or healthier platforms if consumers keep using current versions of these products. Conversely, improving political systems and tech products won't cure tribalism if individuals remain too lazy to see past groupthink or overcome the appetite for political junk food (which Klein does recognize, if not emphasize).

Individuals aren't completely blameless because they aren't powerless. We have some responsibility to cultivate civility, open-mindedness, and similar virtues, even when it's difficult (Vallor 2016; Cassam 2019). Citizens can support and vote for politicians who unite rather than

divide. They can get more involved in local politics (Klein 2020), rather than national politics, which increasingly feels like a drama-filled reality show—*The Real Politicians of Washington DC*, as Tim Urban (2023) describes America’s series.

There are limits to these particular strategies. As the political system incentivizes dividers, there are few, if any, uniters to support. National debates increasingly influence local politics (think immigration, tariffs, transgender athletes), and many people have now befriended or moved next to mostly co-partisans. It’s hard to distance yourself from the drama of national politics if most of your friends and neighbors are fellow liberals or conservatives (or libertarians or transhumanists or what have you).

Perhaps we should talk less about politics and increase non-political interactions with members of other political tribes, as Robert Talisse (2019) recommends. Conservatives should play soccer with progressives; democratic socialists should go hunting with populists. As you befriend those with other viewpoints, you can learn to like them, thereby reducing your animosity and promoting a culture of collaboration and cooperation across party lines. However, it’s hard to see how this can happen if we talk about politics less. You may like Joey who is a Trump supporter, but you can still find his political stance idiotic and appalling while admiring his jump shot. Indeed, the development of cancel culture and constraints on free speech have already made it more difficult to talk politics with others (Lukianoff & Schlott 2023; Corvino 2024). Trust and respect require mutual understanding.

And there is still the concern that algorithms and personalized news sources will reinforce echo chambers amid these friendships. Haidt (2022) maintains that social media has been a major cause of polarization, particularly in America, by incentivizing conflict and empowering trolls and provocateurs. Of course, completely ditching social media is easier said than done. If you want to see photos of your child at camp or at soccer practice, you probably need an Instagram account. If you want to keep up with your hiking group or old friends back home, you might need to scroll through Facebook.

Some people get news from sources other than social media, such as news apps, TV programs, podcasts, and even radio stations. We could follow the counsel of philosophers who urge individuals to diversify their media diets (Worsnip 2018). Perhaps if we consume partisan media from all sides, we can escape our echo chamber. However, as C. Thi Nguyen (2020) points out, mere exposure to alternative viewpoints doesn’t guarantee any change in one’s views or feelings toward the other side. Many liberals who watch Fox News are liable to develop *more* animosity toward the Right and adopt views even further to the Left. Echo chambers are propped up more by distrust of opponents, and disdain for them, than by ignorance of their views. As Nguyen puts it, other relevant voices are not merely “excluded through omission” but “actively discredited” simply because they represent opposing viewpoints.

Nguyen argues that escaping an echo chamber may require a complete *social-epistemic reboot*. Unlike Descartes during his meditations, you needn’t distrust your senses or the testimony of others. You must, however, throw out all your previous beliefs about who is and isn’t a trustworthy source and start anew, unbiased by ideologies. Any such reboot is, as Nguyen

acknowledges, extremely difficult if not literally impossible. Although a handful of former neo-Nazis and conspiracy theorists have done it, wholesale reboots are especially difficult to pull off in a world of fragmented and personalized media, algorithms designed to promote extremity, and political mega-identities.

So can we escape tribalism in the modern world? Each of the prominent solutions to political polarization has limitations, but it's unfair to only consider each in isolation. A multi-pronged approach would recommend making the changes together: minimize your social media presence, diversify your news sources, support politicians who aim to unite while distancing yourself from the drama of politics, *and* befriend people who have different viewpoints (while talking to them occasionally about politics). There are many environmental and psychological barriers, to be sure. The trick is not a wholesale reboot, but an Aristotelian approach to modifying one's environment, patterns of thought, and interactions with others. In short: ecological control, humility, and civility.

Ecological Control

Let's start with feasible changes to one's media environment. You could, for example, diversify your media diet while being intentional about the amount of political media you consume, such as switching off notifications for apps that tend to yield unproductive exchanges or other engagement. That doesn't require abandoning all beliefs about who is trustworthy, but it's the start of a healthier relationship to politics.

A useful model can be found in other attempts to navigate the mismatch between our hominid brains and modern technology. As Cal Newport conceives it, *digital minimalism* is "a philosophy of technology use in which you focus your online time on a small number of carefully selected and optimized activities that strongly support things you value" (Newport 2019: 28). Applied to politics, this would mean choosing to minimize one's exposure to news and social media that foments tribalism. As with digital minimalism, the goal is not necessarily to abstain from political media entirely but to only allow in what's psychologically and morally healthy for you—what promotes virtues, not vices.

Maintaining some digital presence doesn't necessitate tribalism. Take the case of Megan Phelps-Roper, once a devoted member of the Westboro Baptist Church in Kansas—a group notorious for its hateful denunciations of homosexuality and for picketing the funerals of fallen soldiers regarded as fighting for a morally corrupt nation. Phelps-Roper (2019) describes her dramatic move to leave this fiercely tribal church as resulting from respectful and humble conversations with critics on the social media site Twitter, where individuals responded to her inflammatory posts not with outrage, but with patient and thoughtful engagement. They asked, politely, how she interprets the Bible and whether passages were inconsistent with Westboro's actions and worldview. Eventually, her online conversations didn't just change her mind about the church; she became less vitriolic and more understanding of intellectual opponents.

Phelps-Roper is proof that breaking out of a powerful echo chamber is possible without a wholesale reboot. Of course, Twitter (now X) is usually a hotbed of political tribalism, so she

was lucky to encounter alternative viewpoints from people who challenged her with genuine compassion and respect. Better to shape one's environment to ensure these results more reliably, which typically requires fewer online interactions. As sociologist Sherry Turkle (2015) argues, face-to-face conversation is where we learn to listen and empathize, and where we can feel most heard and understood. Indeed, Phelps-Roper's transition didn't become fully complete until she met some of her critics in person and they became friends—one of whom she eventually fell in love with and married.

Altering one's media environment to help promote one's values amounts to exercising agency to indirectly shape one's habits. The digital minimalist is like the healthnut who keeps junk food out of the house. Sure, she could try to use willpower in the moment to overcome the temptation to eat candy and chips, but that's not very effective. Instead, she can indirectly minimize the cravings by removing cues from her immediate environment. Exerting such "ecological control" (Clark 2007) is similar to the niche construction found throughout the animal kingdom. Humans, with our relatively small teeth and weak jaws, have developed external scaffolding for digestion—pots, pans, and fires—to essentially pre-digest our food (Sterelny 2010). The same tactic works for changes in attitude or belief. Long ago, Blaise Pascal recommended that doubters cultivate a belief in God by going to church, performing the rituals, and surrounding oneself with theists. Shaping one's beliefs and values invariably involves such *social* niche construction.

Ecological control is powerful, but so are the habits that underlie tribalism. Once one has already built a strong moral and political identity, it's easy to take it offline into real-life interactions with others. Dogmatism, callousness, and incivility can remain for a conservative who deletes his social media accounts, plays soccer with liberals, and reads *The New York Times*. It's all too easy to dismiss and seethe while reading or listening to alternative viewpoints. We need the right motivations, feelings, and thought patterns—key elements of virtue, as emphasized by ancient thinkers from Aristotle to Confucius (Vallor 2016; Hursthouse & Pettigrove 2023). Shaping one's environment can help improve thoughts and feelings, but it's not necessarily sufficient.

Part of the problem is that social environments involve other people, many of whom are leaning into tribalism. It's easy to heed Pascal's advice to join and emulate Christians; harder to avoid Us-versus-Them thinking when it pervades the culture. Improving one's intellectual environment is thus something of a collective action problem, where other people's decisions shape your own incentives. So we have to approach social niche construction with strategies for productively interacting with people viewed as outsiders, especially when their tribalism is activated. Phelps-Roper arguably came to Twitter with genuine intellectual curiosity, as did her interlocutors. Part of the solution is to cultivate habits of humility and civility, which encourage others to reciprocate.

Humility

A core component of intellectual humility is recognizing one's own limitations (Whitcomb et al. 2017). When it comes to the tribalism of ethics and politics, a considerable limitation is “my-side bias”—the tendency to defend the views of one's own tribe while discrediting the opposition (Mercier & Sperber 2017). My-side bias, arguably a form of motivated reasoning, is what makes it possible for a conservative journalist to dig deeply into claims about a Democratic president's purported scandal while Left-leaning journalists hardly report it (or vice versa). Journalists, voters, and other inquirers might aspire to objectivity, and the best of us can get somewhat close, but it's psychologically impossible to completely and permanently remove the glasses that filter one's perception of reality.

Fortunately, intellectual humility requires no such feat. Virtuous reasoners simply seek to recognize their biases, even if they can't eliminate them completely. Of course, recognition isn't enough. Just as the courageous go beyond recognizing their fear to overcoming it, the intellectually humble try to minimize their biases and cultivate an openness to being mistaken. But how?

A useful distinction between two mindsets is drawn by Julia Galef (2021). Our default is the *soldier mindset*, which seeks to fortify one's viewpoint and defend it against attack. This defensive posture is useful in some contexts, such as the courtroom, when one is duty bound to defend a client. However, in politics we're aiming to seek the truth—to determine whether climate change is an existential threat, whether a presidential candidate sexually assaulted a staffer, whether school closures during a pandemic do more harm than good, and so on. The soldier mindset is great for coming up with arguments, but defensiveness can too easily lead to dubious rationalizations and blind one to inconvenient truths. Especially amid political polarization, we should be wary of aiming primarily to defend the tribe.

There is an alternative, however. The *scout mindset* prioritizes seeking the truth and following the evidence where it leads. Rather than engage in wishful thinking and other forms of biased reasoning, scouts fully recognize that their preconceived notions could be wrong. Rather than adopting the soldier's defensive posture and feeling pained at the thought of being wrong, scouts welcome correction, even revel in it. A conservative scout would rather play devil's advocate than sit around with her friends talking about how awful the Democrats are. A liberal scout doesn't reluctantly read conservative magazines or listen to libertarian podcasts, out of a sense of duty, but rather does so out of genuine curiosity. That doesn't mean one must enjoy or seek out patently lazy reasoning or non-sequiturs. The scout mindset demands only that one read and listen charitably, searching for the best versions of alternative viewpoints on the controversy at hand.

Of course, most of us think we're already adopting the scout mindset; it's only those fools on the other side who engage in wishful thinking and posturing to protect their precious identity. That, of course, falls short of intellectual humility by failing to recognize one's own limitations. True scouts appreciate what Kathryn Schulz (2011) says about being wrong: *it feels just like being right*.

There are dangers to being too humble. It's not virtuous to give credence to seriously outlandish views or crackpot theories (Fantl 2018; Levy 2023). As the saying goes, it's good to keep an open mind, but not so open that your brain falls out. Nor is it virtuous to become apathetic toward injustice and public policy (Hannon & Kidd 2024), or to give up on loyalty and group allegiances (Faria, Anomaly, & Willy 2024).

However, intellectual humility doesn't require a lack of conviction, changing your mind, taking seriously every position in logical space, or giving up your values and identities. It just requires appreciating one's limitations enough to be open to persuasion on controversial issues, just as a president preparing to drop a bomb should be open to hearing the rationale for alternative courses of action (Rini 2018). We should similarly be open to considering opposing points of view about contentious issues in ethics and politics, if only to better understand, to reduce animosity, and to work with others toward shared goals (Táíwò 2020). Our tribal tendencies are only objectionable when they veer into tribalism.

Let's consider a specific example of someone who exhibits intellectual humility without sacrificing her identity or passion for politics. Mónica Guzmán (2022) was shocked to find that her parents, both Mexican immigrants, voted for Trump in 2016 (and then again in 2020). On election night in 2016, when even Republicans seemed surprised that Trump won, Guzmán felt America's democracy was broken. She called her parents and explained her fears and dismay. Her mother listened and then explained her own perspective. In Mexico, she and many others firmly believed their votes didn't count, that the system was rigged. Guzmán's mother explained why she felt democracy was working: people voted and this man, this underdog, won. *La democracia jaló, Mónica. Yo voté, y jaló*. "Democracy worked, Mónica. I voted, and it worked" (Guzmán 2022: 60). Guzmán, whose deep love for her mother prompted genuine curiosity and humility, writes: "I never thought of it that way." That bit of insight—and others like it—have helped her avoid political tribalism. Despite being a leading expert in crossing political divides, Guzmán still counts herself as a progressive, though she has plenty of conservative friends.

Rather than requiring a change in belief or identity, intellectual humility can often change your interlocutor's mind. The people who engaged politely, respectfully, and sincerely with Phelps-Roper could only do so if they thought they might learn something from her about why she believes what she does. By engaging open-mindedly, they didn't change their minds about the hateful teachings of the Westboro Baptist Church. Instead, they encouraged Phelps-Roper to also let down her defenses so they could explore the issue together. Humility requires only a willingness to acknowledge one's shortcomings and minimize their influence. Maybe someone changes their mind, maybe not. Either way, tribalism is mitigated, if not fully extinguished.

Civility

Close relationships, like that of a mother and daughter, often bring with them humility and respectful disagreement. This is the truth in recommendations, like Talisse's, to build civic friendships with people in one's community who don't share the same politics. If we're to learn about the origins and nuances of someone's viewpoints, however, we must be able to talk to

them about these differences. Yet talking politics activates relevant identities and the soldier mindset to protect them. So another crucial step to escaping echo chambers involves changing the ways we interact with others—family, friends, and strangers. A scout mindset is a fine starting place for sifting through the news, but it can be ineffective in conversation with others, coming off as cold and distant if executed poorly.

Civility, or something close to it, is a good candidate for the missing piece. As ancient Chinese philosophers and cultures around the world have found, civility is a social glue that binds us together while its absence divides (Olberding 2019). It provides the conditions for active listening and mutual understanding. After all, you're not going to listen or open up to someone who acts as though she despises or distrusts you (May 2023; Kumar & May forthcoming). Controlled studies have confirmed that respectful dialogue is necessary for reducing polarization about contemporary moral issues. In a set of landmark field studies using trained political canvassers who talk with hundreds of voters on their doorsteps, researchers have found that the key is to share a personal story and approach the topic in a non-judgmental, respectful manner (Broockman & Kalla 2016; Kalla & Broockman 2023). These approaches have been found to slightly but durably reduce prejudice against immigrants and transgender people. More to the point, even if voters don't change their minds about policy issues, they open up and listen to the other side.

A shining example of this approach can be found in Daryl Davis, a Black jazz musician who regularly maintains mutual respect with the seemingly unreachable: members of the KKK. Davis simply treats these Klan members like people and talks to them about their lives, their families, and race, too. The Klan members come to like Davis and hear him out; they often change their minds about racial separation and superiority, too. Famously, Davis convinced Roger Kelly, among others, to leave the Klan (Davis 2017). In 1996, Kelly told CNN, "We don't agree on everything, but at least [Daryl] respects me to sit down and listen to me, and I respect him to sit down and listen to him." Indeed, Davis and Kelly became friends, a process Davis has repeated many times with other Klan members. Part of his strategy is to keep in mind their common humanity. Every person, he says, wants five things: to be loved, to be respected, to be heard, to be treated fairly, and for their family to be safe and happy (TED Interview 2024). That may go beyond mere civility, but the point is that one's comportment, choice of words, and demeanor can transform a tense exchange into a productive dialog, perhaps even a friendship and a conversion.

Of course, members of marginalized groups aren't responsible for befriending or convincing bigots. Some people really don't deserve one's trust or respect (Zamalin 2022). But tribalism exaggerates the size of that group, and Davis's example demonstrates the power of respect to defuse affective polarization. Some ideologies and their proponents do warrant anger, as well (Srinivasan 2018; Cherry 2021). Yet civility and respectful dialog preclude only contempt, not anger (Brooks 2019; May 2023). As with any friendship, Davis occasionally expresses anger, irritation, and frustration toward his racist friends.

Of course, people of opposing moral tribes can communicate respect toward others without really having any. Civility can be a thin veneer while contempt lies underneath. Nevertheless, civility provides the conditions for genuine respect and goodwill to develop. As Colin Marshall (2026) puts it, a good starting point is to simply *make your warmth obvious*. Warmth communicates that you're not a threat, which lowers defenses and promotes a scout mindset. In contrast, consider how some pro-life activists display images of aborted fetuses in public. While shock and disgust might garner attention, the tactic often backfires with supporters of abortion and those on the fence (May 2018b). Not only is this a dubious approach to persuasion, but it also makes vivid the importance of carefully packaging one's message to promote goodwill and ultimately respect, where appropriate.

Attempts to persuade while talking politics can be disrespectful, even when done warmly. Political persuasion can amount to communicating that someone's most fundamental values, beliefs, and identity, need changing (Tsai 2014; Marshall 2025). Aggressive atheists display this kind of disrespect when communicating to Christians, Muslims, and other theists that their beliefs are delusions and that their cultural identities are pointless.

Yet political dialogue can be aimed at persuasion if one is likewise open to being persuaded oneself, which exhibits *mutual* respect. That means Daryl Davis has to be open to members of the KKK making some valid points, at least about their own experiences and concerns. And Phelps-Roper's interlocutors had to take her hateful views seriously. Only then are all parties exhibiting genuine respect (Rini 2018), not merely paying lip service to it. Rather than make one vulnerable to toxic ideas, being open to persuasion promotes mutual understanding and depolarizes interlocutors even if no one fully changes their mind.

Conclusion

Human nature makes tribalism particularly tempting in the modern world. Much like devouring fried foods and pastries, it's pleasurable to affirm one's political beliefs or ridicule opponents for their seeming ignorance or irrationality. However, just as we can and should eat more wholesome foods despite the availability of junk, we can and should consume less partisan media and develop healthier approaches to discussing controversial moral issues. The analogy isn't perfect, as food choices might not be as socially determined as one's moral and political beliefs (though see May & Kumar 2023). Nevertheless, the comparison illustrates how individual decisions can overcome and reshape one's conditions.

Virtue cultivation provides a useful framework for integrating relevant individual and structural changes. Traits and habits are, after all, shaped not only by one's own intentions but also by one's environment. Here again the analogy to temperance is fitting. Eating healthier requires the right environment (no junk food in the house, access to fresh produce) in addition to the right patterns of thought and behavior (acquire cooking skills, adopt a dietary philosophy, recognize and defuse rationalizations). Similarly, combating tribalism requires a combination of strategies to change one's environment, thoughts, and behavior—through e.g. digital minimalism, humility, and civility. Importantly, these habits are infectious: examples like Daryl

Davis illustrate how treating others with respect encourages reciprocation, leading to a virtuous shift in the social dynamic.

Overcoming the excesses of tribalism ultimately requires other virtues as well. When our tribe crosses a line, for example, we need the *courage* to get up in arms about it, rather than concoct justifications. Doing so risks social sanctions—often the most feared punishment for communal creatures like ourselves. Yet, as Aristotle would emphasize, we’re also rational animals who seek the truth and genuine reasons for our beliefs. While leaning on our communities for safety, meaning, and knowledge, we can also resist dogmatism, arrogance, and incivility.

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