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Reason and Rationality in the Post-Pandemic Era

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Reason and Rationality in the Post-Pandemic Era

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Abstract

      This paper investigates human reason's proper function and role in the post-pandemic era. Sections 1 and 2 analyze recent literature on Kahneman's dual processing theory and Hugo Mercier's and Dan Sperber's (M&S) interactionalist approach toward human reason. Kahneman's theory cannot explain how System 2 is still prone to make serious mistakes, and M&S provide a more plausible alternative: reasoning is all intuitive. Humans can intuit reasons for their beliefs and intuitions. But more importantly, reason is the metarepresentational ability to evaluate the strengths or weaknesses of reasons and arguments. Reason, through the process of evolution, is fundamentally used for *justification* and *argumentation.* Section 3 outlines that the individual can summon reason to justify an established moral intuition. Argumentation helps interlocutors self-reflect on political and moral beliefs, opinions, and intuitions, influencing people to change their minds.

      Section 4 introduces the internal cognitive limitations that accompany human reason and rationality: confirmation bias influences the individual reasoner to look for reasons to support their own intuitions and beliefs with little regard for the strength or reliability of those reasons. Reasoning in like-minded groups without dissenting opinions, called groupthink, gives off the impression of sound reasoning. However, this only exacerbates reason's flaws and limitations. Additionally, willful and strategic ignorance, i.e., ignoring certain aspects of reality on purpose, which is used as a coping and convenience mechanism, can lead to negative real-world consequences if used improperly or excessively. People who denied the existence of the Covid-19 virus, objected to the vaccine's efficacy, and doubted the results of the 2020 presidential election are topical examples of confirmation bias, groupthink, and willful or strategic ignorance influencing contemporary American society and politics. Section 5 identifies the MAGA movement's effect on public reason. Specifically, the movement's "Great American Utopia" mythology is used to justify radical political change and totalitarianism.

      Section 6 discusses how the internet, particularly social media, stifles the spread of knowledge and contributes to a decline of critical thinking in American society by exploiting reason's deficiencies. Accordingly, it also emphasizes how these exacerbated flaws negatively affected American culture during the Covid-19 pandemic and the 2020 US Presidential Election. Section 7 discusses possible solutions for improving public reasoning, such as focusing on epistemic virtues, vigilance, rules, and developing internet and social media navigation skills. The section also highlights how individuals, groups, and institutions can tailor human reason and rationality toward positive epistemological ends. Lastly, section 8 briefly refutes M&S and Johnathan Haidt's reductionist claims that individuals are only motivated to obtain knowledge and truth for self-interest and to improve their social reputation. Their premise severely undermines the possibility of trustworthy objective knowledge and neglects other motivating forces and the human emotional relationship towards knowledge and truth. By arguing that humans are solely motivated by their reputation, M&S and Haidt not only unsatisfactorily narrow the complexity of human experience but also subvert the audience's confidence in their theory with their own argument.

Acknowledgments

<u>INTRODUCTION</u>

In the late winter and early spring of 2020, incoming reports described a virus that had originated in Wuhan, China, spreading quickly through Asia. It reached and infected parts of Europe, such as Italy and Spain, eventually spreading to Kirkland, Washington, in the United States (US) around February 29th.[1] On March 11th, the World Health Organization announced that the spread of the virus, known as coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19), was now classified as a worldwide pandemic.[2] The US prepared for the potential surge of Covid-19 cases by requesting citizens to wear facemasks, practice social distancing, and continue school and work virtually. However, despite constant affirmation from medical professionals about the severity of Covid-19 and the health benefits of wearing facemasks and social distancing, some groups ignored them. Some individuals claimed that facemasks did not protect against the virus.[3] Others argued that wearing a mask caused the wearer to breathe toxic levels of carbon dioxide.[4] More alarming was when sections of the public reacted negatively toward the Covid-19 vaccine: rumors spread on the internet that it would alter DNA, make women infertile[5], and contains a microchip.[6]

Additionally, American politics intensified with the 2020 presidential election between incumbent Donald Trump and Joe Biden. Before the election results were counted, Trump was reported saying, "the only way we're going to lose this election is if the election is rigged."[7] Even after it was clear that Joe Biden won the election, Trump continued to fire back, writing on Twitter, "I WON THIS ELECTION, BY A LOT!"[8] His statements on social media later became extremely concerning when he wrote, "this Fake Election can no longer stand. Get moving Republicans," implying that US democracy was compromised and warranting extreme political action.[9] Many election fraud rumors spread across the internet and social media.[10] Eventually,

the retaliation toward the election results that Trump, top Republicans, and election fraud promoters wanted arrived on January 6th, 2021. After a speech by Donald Trump and his primary supporters, pro-Trump protestors stormed into the US Capitol building to attempt to overturn the election.[11]

The Covid-19 pandemic and the 2020 election are two recent instances where human reason and rationality appear to be significantly lacking. If humans are rational creatures, why do we act so irrationally sometimes? Furthermore, is the recent increase in irrationality and radicalism due to the internet and social media? If so, why? The overarching aim of this paper is to investigate the proper function and role of human reason and rationality in contemporary society, which some contemporaries have titled the *Post-Pandemic Era.* However, there are two sub-aims to achieve the primary: first, I intend to focus on illustrating and analyzing both the internal cognitive phenomena and the emerging external technological phenomena which appear to be at odds with traditional conceptions of human reason. Secondly, given these internal and external phenomena, I also intend to describe how individuals, groups, and institutions can tailor human reason and rationality toward positive epistemological ends.

I will attempt to achieve the aims of this paper by first analyzing recent literature on human cognition, exclusively on how it relates to reason. Daniel Kahneman's dual process theory and Hugo Mercier's and Dan Sperber's (M&S) interactionalist approach are exemplary cases of recent research on this subject. I will illustrate the main features of these two theories and compare them with one another. Furthermore, building upon these two cognitive theories, I will switch focus to more concrete issues and consider reason's role in American politics and morality. In doing this, I will focus on *The Righteous Mind* by social psychologist Jonathan Haidt. Second, after illustrating both cognitive theories and Haidt's analysis, I will outline the

internal cognitive limitations that accompany human reason and rationality that these scholars and others, such as Justin E. H. Smith and Renata Salecl, emphasize in their research and works. Ultimately, the evidence presented of the limitations of human rationality will lead to the rejection of the traditionalist view of reason, i.e., that reason solely guides the individual to make correct inferences to arrive at a true conclusion.

Third, I will emphasize how the internet, particularly social media, stifles the spread of knowledge and contributes to a decline of critical thinking in American society by exploiting reason's deficiencies. Accordingly, I will emphasize how these exacerbated flaws negatively affected American society during the Covid-19 pandemic and the 2020 US Presidential Election. Fourth, I will turn to briefly investigate solutions toward improving public reasoning, especially in the wake of the mass vaccine hesitancy during the Covid-19 Pandemic and the 2020 Presidential Election, which led to the deadly insurrection on the US Capitol. Reasoning improvements will include emphasizing epistemic virtues, vigilance, rules, and developing internet and social media navigation skills.

Fifth, I will briefly turn my attention towards pointing out fundamental objections against M&S's and Haidt's interactionalist theory. More precisely, I will reject their reductionist claim that individuals are only motivated to obtain knowledge and truth for self-interest and to improve their social reputation. Although improved reputation and self-interest can be a primary motivation for some to seek and share knowledge, their premise severely undermines the possibility of trustworthy objective knowledge and neglects the human emotional relationship towards knowledge and truth. To end, I will conclude that although there are obstacles in cognitive limitations and current technological challenges, it does not follow that truth and knowledge are impossible goals or that reason is hopelessly incapable of assisting individuals in

arriving at true conclusions. These epistemological challenges might mean that truth and knowledge do not come as easily as expected. They likely demand effortful cognitive and epistemological skills, habits, and virtues.

SECTION 1: HOW WE REASON

What exactly occurs when we reason? What makes it possible for creatures such as humans to make inferences to reach conclusions? In his well-known book, *Thinking Fast and Slow,* psychologist Daniel Kahneman offers his dual process theory to explain how reasoning works. Fundamentally, dual process theorists such as Kahneman categorize the human brain into two modes of thinking: System 1 and System 2.[12] System 1 is described as quick, automatic, unconscious, and involuntary, using "little or no effort" when performing cognitive actions.[13] Additionally, it produces "impressions, intuitions, intentions, and feelings."[14] System 1 is convenient when we need to make a quick decision. For example, someone sees a grizzly bear charging toward them. System 1 immediately tells them either to "run!", "flee!", "climb a tree!" or "get back to your car!". They do not need to deeply contemplate why they should run away from the bear. It would be counter-productive evolutionarily if humans had to consider thousands of daily choices. If this were the case, we would eventually all be devoured by bears or other predators. System 1 is beneficial because it is a great survival mechanism. It continuously monitors our surroundings and produces impressions so humans can act quickly in appropriate circumstances.[15]

On the other hand, System 2 is slow, conscious, meticulous, and dedicates more time and mental effort to complex problems or decisions. Additionally, System 2 is associated with "subjective experience of agency, choice, and concentration."[16] For example, filing taxes

requires a significant amount of cognitive labor.[*] Deciding what information individuals must write down on their tax forms demands additional cognitive efforts that System 2 can provide. Most importantly, dual process theorists claim that reason and rationality are attributes of System 2. In other words, if asked where logic and rationality occur in the mind, Kahneman would argue that these are products of System 2. It is the only system out of the two that "can follow rules, compare objects…and make deliberate choice between options."[17] However, it is essential to emphasize that these two systems do not work in isolation. Having different and complementary functions and responsibilities, they work together to make the human brain function as it does: System 1 obtains information from stimuli and "continuously generates suggestions for System 2."[18] System 2 then analyzes and filters the information obtained by System 1 and turns them into "beliefs and deliberate choices."[19] Additionally, when System 1 is overwhelmed by the cognitive demands of a particular activity, as Kahneman explains, "it calls on System 2 to support more detailed and specific processing that may solve the problem of the moment."[20] In short, Kahneman's System 1 and System 2 approach provides an illustrative and initially plausible theory of the function of reason.

But cognitive scientists Hugo Mercier and philosopher Dan Sperber (M&S) present serious objections towards Kahneman's theory. Specifically, they disagree that the mind can be divided into two systems of thinking, arguing that "there are many more than two mechanisms involved in human inference."[21] Rather than a dichotomy of conscious and unconscious activity, M&S argue that many empirical studies point towards a continuum of conscious activity for various cognitive acts: between instinctive perception, such as quickly stepping to the right to

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[*] This example was used by Daniel Kahneman on page 22 of *Thinking Fast and Slow*

avoid a collision with another person on the street, and a priori reasoning, i.e., reaching a conclusion by a line of abstract logical premises, M&S claim "there is a great variety of inferential processes…[which] involve greater or lesser degrees of awareness."[22] Furthermore, and probably most problematic for dual process theory, M&S point out that System 2 "can itself be a source of biases and even introduce errors where…[System 1]…had produced the correct judgement."[23] For example, a study was done where researchers asked participants to fill out a survey about moral positions. Once surveys were completed, researchers swapped and reversed participants' initial answers, unbeknownst to the participants. When researchers asked participants to justify the new written moral positions (switched from the participants' initial responses), researchers discovered that most participants justified a moral position contrary to the one they had initially written down.[24] In short, M&S argue that if dual process theorists conclude that reason can at least improve, refine, and better develop on the instinctive judgments of System 1, but also still falls victim to severe biases and cognitive errors which could reverse an initial correct System 1 judgement, then System 2 cannot be where reason and rationality solely occur. This legitimate objection raised by M&S leads back to the beginning of the inquiry: where and what is reason?

M&S provide an alternative account of human reason. As with human beings, M&S argue that animals can also make simple inferences, i.e., the ability to reach a conclusion by gaining evidence. For example, they highlight that ants can infer information from their "celestial compass…[and] odometer" which they use to conclude how far their nest is from their current location.[25] Humans can go a step further. What is unique about humans is that not only can they make use of these "empirical regularities,"[26] but they can also represent them in the mind, further evaluating, analyzing, and making judgments about them. These are phenomena

that humans can "think and talk about."[27] For instance, I know bees sting, which causes pain. On a basic instinctive level, I use the knowledge of this empirical regularity to avoid them whenever I can. However, I can also represent the physical image of a bee and the idea of bees themselves in my mind. Not only that, but I can also think about its representation: I can further take my produced bee representation and question if it accurately represents bees in the real world, essentially judging my own representation, which is a cognitive action that, at least for now, only humans can perform. Commenting on this, M&S write that as humans, we can "represent rocks and the idea of a rock, colors and color words, number and numerals, state of affairs (say, that it is raining) and representations of these states of affairs (the thought or the statement that it is raining)."[28] In sum, the mind's ability to "represent [a] representation"[29] and make judgments about them is fundamental to how humans reason and what makes them distinct from other animals. These abstract representations of representations are called *"metarepresentations."*[30]

This cognitive skill of producing metarepresentations is central to understanding how humans reason. Specifically, in contrast to dual process theory, M&S write that "*reasoning is not an alternative to intuitive inference; reasoning is a use of intuitive inferences about reasons.*"[31] In other words, there is no System 2 that evaluates or improves upon the intuitive inferences created by System 1. Instead, humans intuitively infer reasons for a particular intuition, belief, or opinion. As M&S write, reasoning "is the human capacity to intuitively recognize reasons."[32] Furthermore, they emphasize that "some of our metarepresentational intuitions are not just about our degree of confidence in our first-order intuitions but…they are about the *reasons* for these intuitions. "[33] For instance, using the same example above, in the same fashion of producing a metarepresentation of bees (a representation of the idea of bees), I am also capable of representing reasons (either good or bad) for my intuitions or beliefs. Secondly, not only can

humans use their cognitive metarepresentational abilities to infer reasons for their conclusions intuitively, but they can also evaluate the strength of reasons. M&S argue that "we have intuitions not only about our reasons for own intuitions but also about other people's reasons for their intuitions."[34] Again, Hugo Mercier, in one of his later books, *Not Born Yesterday*, makes this point even more explicit by writing that "reasoning gives you intuitions about the quality of arguments."[35]

To summarize, although Kahneman's dual process theory attempts to characterize reasoning as a fundamental property of System 2, he and other dual process theorists cannot explain why System 2 is prone to make serious mistakes. M&S provide a plausible alternative: rather than arguing that thinking is divided into two categories (System 1 and System 2), they argue that all thinking is intuitive, that is, all forms of thinking and thought processes come from System 1. Reasoning, then, is all intuitive: humans are able to intuit reasons for the beliefs and conclusions they have (especially moral and political ones, as discussed below). More importantly, and most crucial to this paper, reason is also the metarepresentational ability to evaluate the strengths or weaknesses of reasons and arguments, mainly the reasons and arguments of others.

<u>SECTION 2: JUSTIFICATION AND ARGUMENTATION</u>

One of the greatest and comical moments of the sitcom series Seinfeld is when one of the main characters, George Costanza, is at a children's birthday party. Upon detecting the smell of smoke, he is horrified to discover a small kitchen fire. In a panic, he races to the front door pushing children, the elderly, and the party's clown out of the way and onto the ground to reach the front door first. In the next scene, the party's guests, who are visibly and understandably furious that George would sacrifice their lives and the lives of children to allow for his own

escape, confront him. To save face, he argues that "what looked like pushing, what looked like knocking down, was a safety precaution."[36] He justifies his cowardice by claiming he "was trying to lead the way."[37] When asked why he pushed adults and children to the ground, he reasoned that he did so because "in a fire, you stay close to the ground."[38] Of course, no one, not even George himself, is convinced of his reasons or argument. Clearly, he used reasons to protect himself from public scrutiny and shame. Although the George Costanza fire example is perhaps silly, it highlights two fundamental functions of reason: reason often *helps to establish justifications*, and it is an *activity that humans do together.*

Understanding that reasoning is the ability to infer reasons through metarepresentational intuitions, M&S reject the individualistic approach of reason: the primary function of reason is not to "draw better inferences, acquire greater knowledge, and make better decisions"[39] for the individual reasoner. Instead, through evolutionary logic and experimental evidence, reason is aimed to justify and explain our intuitions, beliefs, or actions when circumstances require it. As M&S explain, "reasons… play a central role in the after-the-fact explanation and justification of our intuitions."[40] Using the George Costanza fire example, George was confronted by the party guests to explain his actions. When questioned about his motives, he reasoned retrospectively that he first needed to be the leader and, secondly, he was protecting everybody else by keeping them close to the ground. From this example, it is clear that George was providing reasons to justify his actions when the situation required him to do so (although most would question the strength and truthfulness of his reasons).

M&S emphasize that most reasoning occurs post hoc: individuals first have a conclusion and intuit reasons to support it later. Unlike George, who knew his actions were cowardly and his reasons weak, most people are convinced of the truthfulness of their intuitions, beliefs, or

opinions and can provide good reasons for them, or at least plausible ones. M&S point out that these post hoc justifications have social advantages. When individuals provide reasons, they establish their motivations and values as "normatively apt,"[41] attempting to portray their "mental states"[42] as the status quo or what is, or ought, to be considered normal. One fascinating example of this was provided during an experiment by Jonathan Haidt: subjects were asked if it was morally permissible for two related siblings to have protected sexual intercourse. Although the researchers in the experiment said that in the scenario no one was harmed and the siblings used contraceptives, the subjects nevertheless attempted to give reasons for their initial intuitions.[43] At the end of the experiment, Haidt boldly concluded that "moral reasoning [is] mostly just a post hoc search for reasons to justify the judgments people had already made."[44]

M&S argue that the purpose of post hoc justifications is to "achieve beneficial coordination by protecting and enhancing [one's] reputation and influencing the reputation of others."[45] Haidt later concurs in his work: "we reason to find the best possible reasons why *somebody else ought to join us* in our judgement."[46] Human reasoning is the medium by which individuals explain why they hold certain beliefs, opinions, or motivations for action(s). By way of a helpful analogy, reason can be imagined as a public relations department; it attempts to maintain a positive public image for the individual. M&S provide another helpful illustration by describing reason as a lawyer defending its client (the individual agent).[47] Haidt compares reason to the rider of an elephant. While the elephant, which represents the emotions and the "automatic processes"[48] of the mind, ultimately controls where to go and what to do, "the rider is skilled at fabricating post hoc explanations for whatever the elephant has just done."[49] To summarize the authors' point, one of reason's functions is to improve or maintain a positive reputation, i.e., it is

designed to help an individual appear intelligent, powerful, moral, virtuous, or, as George Costanza failed to portray himself, courageous in the face of danger.

Secondly, a more distinguished and optimistic element of reason is its "argumentative function"[50]: not only can humans use reason to justify their intuitions, but they also can evaluate and criticize others' reasons and arguments. Interestingly, although one's own reasoning capabilities are relatively superficial to assess their arguments critically, they are very good at identifying flaws or logical fallacies in others. M&S highlight that this argumentative function has an evolutionary purpose: humans in their contemporary environment are constantly confronted with questions such as "whom to believe?" and "what to believe?"[51] Fortunately, the argumentative function oversees "evaluating [arguments],"[52] i.e., it can indicate to reasoners which arguments are more likely valid and sound. In other words, apart from using reason to justify one's intuitions, individuals can also judge the strength of other arguments. For instance, person A, who is trying to be persuaded by person B to believe in X, will need to use reason to evaluate person B's argument(s) for why she ought to believe in X. In the aforementioned example where George used reason to justify his actions, the party guests also used their reasoning skills to evaluate his argument, which they unsurprisingly found to be heavily flawed and unconvincing. In short, the argumentative function helps reasoners evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of others' arguments, or counterarguments, to arrive at a true, or at least plausible, conclusion.

As previously mentioned, reason appears to be inadequate to evaluate its own arguments critically; it finds "quite superficial [and] weak reasons"[53] for its own intuitions or beliefs. Despite this, it can effectively evaluate, analyze, and criticize others' arguments. Haidt writes that as individual reasoners, "we are terrible at seeking evidence that challenges our own

beliefs…[but] we are quite good at finding errors in other people's beliefs."[54] If this is true, it seems to follow that reasoning is more tailored towards an interactionalist or cooperative function.[55] That is, *reasoning is an activity that individuals do together*. When reasoning is done in public, i.e., with individuals other than the lone reasoner, reasoning improves significantly. In groups, individuals can present arguments to one another. However, more importantly, they can also present counterarguments, pointing out the flaws and fallacies of arguments other than their own. This back-and-forth exchange of arguments, reasons, and counterarguments leads individual reasoners to continuously provide better reasons and improve their arguments for their interlocutors.

Additionally, the reasoner might abandon their initial intuition or belief altogether if other arguments and counterarguments prove to be convincing enough. Recent scholars agree that reasoning works well this way. Hugo Mercier writes, "argumentation is most efficient in the context of a small group discussions, with its back-and-forth of arguments and counterarguments."[56] M&S argue that "reason should make the best of the interactive nature of dialogue, refining justification and arguments with the help of the interlocutors' feedback."[57] Overall, as both M&S and Haidt emphasize in their works, the evidence of reason's weakness in properly evaluating its own arguments makes it difficult to support the conclusion that reason *solely* improves one's inferential process in an isolated setting. However, reason has proven to be effective in evaluating the reasons and arguments of others, leading to more refined and polished arguments through back-and-forth exchange of arguments and counterarguments. In other words, reasoning works best when it is done with others; it improves arguments, can change opinions, and increases knowledge.

SECTION 3: MORAL AND POLITICAL REASONING

Although discussing the nuances of reason, such as dual-processing theory, post hoc justification, and metarepresentation intuitive inference provide greater insight into the processes of reason, these theories and terms help very little with the practicalities of everyday reasoning. How does reasoning work in the world of politics? More fundamentally, does reason play a role in American political thinking? Moreover, can reason, as M&S have demonstrated, improve the American political condition when utilized appropriately? In the aftermath of the election of President Donald Trump, American politics has become increasingly polarized,[58] with Republicans and Democrats, the two majority parties in the US Congress, becoming more radical and refusing to compromise. Constituents of the two parties seem to fair no better: Americans have more negative views of the opposition party than Europeans, with these views increasing over the years.[59] What is happening in the American political mind regarding reason and rationality?

Jonathan Haidt's book "The Righteous Mind" tries to answer these questions. For the most part, politics and morality are viewed as interrelated. Haidt first argues that the concept of "moral" or "morality" is quite diverse globally. Although some moral philosophers have historically based their groundwork of moral theory on reducing suffering and maximizing pleasure or happiness,[60] his research suggests that "the moral domain [varies] across nations and social classes… [it also] extended well beyond issues of harm and fairness."[61] In other words, morality and moral reasoning in many societies depend partly on culture. Building upon M&S's argument that reason is often used to justify intuitions, Haidt argues that reason is used similarly with morals and politics, i.e., individuals use reason to justify their moral and political opinions. After many of his psychological experiments, he concluded that "moral reasoning was mostly

just a post hoc search for reasons to justify the judgments people had already made."[62] He concludes that moral and political reasoning, siding with the Scottish philosopher David Hume, is "often a servant of moral emotions."[63] Along the same lines as M&S, moral and political reasoning is the ability to use metarepresentational intuitive inference to identify good reasons to justify moral intuitions and beliefs that individuals have cultivated and acquired through various cultures and societies.

Unlike ethical theories such as utilitarianism and deontology, which classify morality on more or less narrow grounds, Haidt argues that humans appeal to various, in what he terms, "Moral Foundations"[64] or moral intuitions. For human beings, morality is more than just pleasures and pains or fulfilling one's duty; instead, it is pluralistic. Based on his research, Haidt identifies five moral foundations: first, the Care/Harm Foundation; second, the Fairness/Cheating Foundation; third, the Loyalty/Betrayal Foundation; fourth, the Authority/Subversion Foundation; and fifth, the Sanctity/Degradation Foundation.[65] In some way or another, people judge moral actions of themselves or others based on these moral foundations; it is, in a sense, the individual's "intuitional code" or "rulebook." Some might rightly doubt whether Haidt's moral foundation list encompasses all aspects of moral motives and philosophies. Additionally, his evidence and arguments appear to precariously promote a mix of moral subjectivity and cultural relativism, i.e., what is morally right depends on the moral agent's or culture's preferences. Nevertheless, he seems right in general that the concept of morality and moral intuitions among people is broad and diverse.

Moral intuition preferences consequently influence American politics and the political party platforms. Typical American political participants prefer different moral foundations depending on their culture, upbringing, experiences, and associated groups. In relating to the

dominating two American political parties, Haidt found that most conservatives are grounded in all five moral foundations,[66] whereas, on the other side of the political spectrum, Democrats valued the Care/Harm and Fairness/Cheating foundations more.[67] Like justifying basic intuitions with reason, political and moral reasoning work in the same way. Especially in the emotionally charged and heavily polarized world of contemporary American politics, people can become heavily drawn and anchored into their political and moral intuitions; reason, with its justification function, is fervent to take the role of the public relations department or hired attorney. However, just because people have strong intuitions about a specific moral or political belief, e.g., that abortion is a woman's right or unborn fetuses are protected under the US Constitution, it does not mean that minds cannot change. On the contrary, peoples' minds change all the time on issues due to reasons and arguments produced by reason's argumentative function. As M&S remarked, "argumentation should not only make [people] change their minds, it should make them change their mind for the best."[68]

When arguing and providing reasons to convince others of different moral and political beliefs, it is also essential to appeal to moral intuitions. As Haidt wrote, "if you want to change people's minds, you've got to talk to their [moral intuitions]."[69] In other words, although valid and sound arguments can do well to convince others, moral intuitions still strongly influence moral reasoning. Appealing to people's moral intuitions is essential in changing opinions on specific issues. Like basic reasoning, moral and political reasoning work in the same way: reason can be summoned by the individual reasoner to justify an established moral intuition (for example, increasing taxation on the wealthy based on fairness or the prohibition of abortions because of the intrinsic value or sacredness of the human body). Argumentation channeled through communication is a useful cognitive mechanism that helps us, and our interlocutors,

self-reflect on our political and moral beliefs, opinions, and intuitions. This process can eventually change political minds or refine arguments. However, if one wishes to succeed in changing a political mind, one must appeal to the intuitions to do so.

<p align="center">SECTION 4: INTERNAL PROBLEMS OF REASONS</p>

Plato famously concluded in *The Republic* that to achieve harmony within the soul it was necessary for reason to rule "since it is really wise and exercises foresight on behalf of the whole soul."[70] The French philosopher René Descartes argued that humans have a "faculty of judgement"[71] endowed by God, by which humans could "perceive the ideas about which [they] can make a judgement."[72] However, reason is not the "superpower" that previous philosophers had assumed. Indeed, Descartes himself was perplexed by this problem: if reason was given by God, which cannot contain any errors by virtue of God's nature, "where do [the] errors originate, then?"[73] Historian and philosopher of science Justine E. H. Smith argues that "logic—which has often been expected to serve as our great bulwark against unreason—is not only not safe from corruption; it is *particularly* prone to corruption by human passions and self-interest."[74] This section will examine the internal flaws of reason, specifically its systematic errors and susceptibility to corruption.

One of reason's functions previously outlined hints at one of its flaws: reason's justification role is biased towards the beliefs and opinions of the reasoner. This cognitive phenomenon is often called *confirmation bias*. Descartes may have detected confirmation bias early in his meditations. As he described it, mistakes of reason are due to the will extending "further than the understanding."[75] Without a complete understanding of a subject, the will attempts to apply itself towards "things that [it] does not understand," becoming "indifferent to those things" and later "deflected from what is true or good."[76] Fortunately, advances in

philosophy and cognitive science have clarified the cognitive issues that Descartes was getting

at. Describing confirmation bias, M&S state that "reasoning systematically works to find reasons

for our ideas and against ideas we oppose."[77] Smith also remarks that confirmation bias heavily

overshadows human rationality, writing that "we are plagued by rampant confirmation bias: the

systematic error of noticing, preferring, and selecting new information that reinforces what we

already believe."[78] In other words, human reasoning looks for reasons to support its own

intuitions and beliefs with little regard for the strength or reliability of those reasons, refuting the

traditional view that reason always leads to truth and true conclusions.

Unsurprisingly, confirmation bias also plays a massive role in how individuals morally

and politically reason. Political participants and parties have diverse moral intuitions they can tap

into, using reason to justify them. The reasons or information political participants find are often

relatively weak; they tend to "seek out and interpret new evidence in ways that confirm what

[they] already think."[79] For example, someone who believes the Covid-19 vaccine was

developed too fast and cannot be trusted[80] will be naturally pulled to seek information that

confirms this belief. Trump supporters who believed without a doubt that Donald Trump could

not have lost the 2020 presidential election will seek information that confirms this intuitive

belief. If widespread voter fraud is their justification, reason will latch onto it and find more

reasons and evidence of voter fraud (A survey conducted by Pew Research Center concluded that

among Trump voters, 40% reported saying he "definitely" won and another 36% said he

"probably" won the election[81]). Someone who believes abortion is morally wrong will be drawn

to information supporting their conclusion. Furthermore, they can make a political or legal

argument from their belief by finding certain information and legal scholarship arguing that the

US Constitution is utterly silent on the issue of abortion and is, therefore, an issue the states must

confront. Confirmation bias often peers its head in political affairs. As American politics becomes more polarized and political participants less willing to hear dissenting opinions,[82] confirmation bias becomes more influential, challenging to control, and, as events during January 6th, 2021, demonstrated, can lead to people acting out in violence against law enforcement, members of Congress, and democracy itself.[83] In cartesian terms, the unrestrained will, seeking to confirm its own beliefs before proper understanding, leads to miscalculated reasoning, erroneous conclusions, and sometimes disastrous results.

Remember, reason is often biased and lazy, i.e., it quickly accepts reasons for its conclusion while overlooking counterarguments. The isolated reasoner is often more susceptible to these two flaws. M&S and Haidt agree that reasoning performs poorly in isolated conditions; it can often lead to "grandiose and absurd conclusions."[84] M&S emphasize through their work that because reason "is biased… [and does] not carefully scrutinize [its] own reasons…[it] finds more and more arguments for [its] views."[85] American journalist Jonathan Rauch and author of the "The Constitution of Knowledge" adds, "we are quick to see others' biases but slow to see our own."[86] In other words, the isolated reasoner will tend to circularly find reasons for her argument while neglecting to entertain counterarguments, increasing her "confidence and [leading] her to extreme positions."[87] For example, CIA analyst Cindy L. Otis, referring to a fake news article claiming the 2016 presidential election would be rigged, remarked that Trump supporters "already believed Trump when he said the election would be rigged…[The] article simply provided the 'proof' they needed."[88] In other words, if a person suspects election tampering in the 2020 presidential election, she will likely be drawn toward information that supports her initial belief or intuition. She will become cemented in this belief without confronting accurate and verifiable information or counterarguments from others. Perhaps the

information she comes across and the reasons she forms conduces her to conclude that widespread voter fraud occurred during the 2020 election.

Reasoning with others significantly helps overcome these flaws. However, reasoning in an isolated group does not solve the problems that confirmation bias and cognitive laziness create; it most likely makes things worse. Rauch remarks that when small like-minded groups reason together, termed *groupthink*, "members believe they are checking with others and seeking good information, but actually they are repeating and amplifying each other's misapprehensions."[89] When like-minded groups form it becomes difficult to break the chain of lousy reasoning; as Rauch points out, "the cycle is difficult to arrest, because for individuals in the group, groupthink can be rational despite being wrong."[90] Additionally, M&S comment that groupthink, primarily through the internet, is linked to how conspiracy theories begin and flourish. They write, "some people…go online, discover pamphlets, find kindred spirits…alternative answers are found, and pointed questions turn into full-blown paranoia."[91]

Although groups who believe in false beliefs and conspiracies are not living, in a sense, a virtuous epistemic life, the ideas are relatively harmless. Smith points out that what is harmful is the belief that there are malicious institutions that obscure the "truth" to gain power and influence. These beliefs tremendously misrepresent the social and political world. As Smith remarks, "the greatest danger… is not that [conspiracy theories and false beliefs] will convince a young and easily influenced mind of [unorthodox beliefs] …but rather it will initiate the young mind into a picture of the world as one that is controlled by dark forces."[92] The belief that the earth is flat, the moon landing was faked, the Covid-19 vaccine contains tracking chips,[93] the 2020 presidential election was fraudulent, etc., are not in themselves dangerous. Rather, it is the underlying false belief that an institution(s) is attempting to cover up the truth for malicious ends.

This belief leads conspiracy theory believers to doubt conventional political or social methods, such as democratic elections or public discourse, as vehicles towards solutions since they are believed to be controlled and undermined by "dark forces."[94] Believers in conspiracy theories turn to alternative, often violent, methods of change. For instance, storming the US Capitol to coerce lawmakers to stall counting electoral votes or entering a pizzeria armed because online rumors claim the Clintons run a child sex ring in the basement[95] are recent examples of isolated group thinking becoming radical. In short, solitary reasoning, either by oneself or in a group, can often lead to wrong and dangerous conclusions.

Going beyond the psychological phenomena that frustrate the ideal image of reason, philosopher and sociologist Renata Salecl explores the complicated emotional relationship between humans and ignorance, specifically *strategic ignorance* as she terms it. Unlike "common ignorance," which is involuntary, strategic ignorance is voluntary. That is, individuals will ignorance purposively upon themselves. Examples of this could be willfully overlooking the dangers of driving a car or the uselessness of voting in certain elections; both ignorance actions could be used to overcome the fear of driving and political pessimism, respectively.† As Salecl argues, this ignorance is not necessarily harmful but can be good sometimes. She writes, "people often use denial and ignorance as useful strategies to deal with an inconvenient truth that does not fit their perception of reality or as tools to create a fantasy scenario…more pleasant and easier to bear."[96] She continues by remarking that "when people are in the grip of anxiety, ignorance is often, at least temporarily, an efficient defense."[97] In other words, willful ignorance

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† These two examples were provided by my committee member Professor Charlie Huenemann

can be a helpful coping and convenience mechanism for individuals when life becomes

challenging or a way to deal with traumatic memories.

As most philosophers are aware, excessive and unrestrained ignorance causes problems.

Explicitly, strategic ignorance played a part during the Covid-19 pandemic and the aftermath of

the 2020 presidential election. The pandemic shocked everyone worldwide as people saw their

social conventions and cultures become almost instantly dominated and replaced by social

distancing, online education and work, Zoom meetings, and wearing facemasks. Trump

supporters must have been emotionally distraught to learn that their candidate, their "commander

and chief," had lost the presidential bid to Joe Biden.

Whether strategically or involuntarily, ignorance influences peoples' reactions toward

unprecedented and controversial public issues. For example, during the pandemic, groups

refused to wear masks and receive the Covid-19 vaccine, fervently denying that Covid-19 was

dangerous or even existed.[98] Perhaps these individuals strategically ignored the traumatic effects

of Covid-19 as a method to conveniently continue their everyday pre-pandemic lives. In the

aftermath of the 2020 election, Republicans and Republican leaders, including Trump himself,

refused to acknowledge Biden as the winner. Again, perhaps the loss caused such upset and

significantly distressed Trump supporters that they strategically ignored the results and claimed

widespread voter fraud to cope with their unideal circumstance.[99] It is important to note that

during the past few years, due to Covid-19 and domestic political turmoil, people have become

more anxious, confused, worried, and scared for the future. Strategic ignorance, as Salecl

highlights, allows temporary psychological and emotional relief, allowing individuals to manage

distressful situations effectively. However, either strategically or involuntarily, rampant

ignorance only exacerbates problems.

What has lately baffled scholars is ignorance's recent wide acceptance among the American public. Both Smith and Salecl attentively remark that ignorance appears to bestow non-experts with unique authority to speak on subjects about which they have little knowledge or expertise. Smith comments that these non-experts or, as he calls them, "gate crashers…who make up in passion what they lack in knowledge"[100] attempt to attract and convince more individuals than professional experts. Salecl identifies recent political leaders, such as Donald Trump, who, in expressive Nietzschean terms, are *transvaluing ignorance,* i.e., turning it into a virtue from vice. She writes, "many of those who voted for [Trump] identified with his apparent lack of knowledge and his lack of shame about his ignorance, which they felt gave him an authenticity."[101] Smith characterizes this aspect of the Trump and Covid era as "the rise of opinions on all manner of subjects, forged and valued not in spite of but *because of* their ignorance."[102] Indeed, this era has seen some public sections increasingly embrace non-experts and amateurs based on ignorance while rejecting experts. Why is this?

Smith suggests ignorance-based movements, such as flat earth theory and anti-vax conspiracies, are a type of public protest against people in positions of power: it is an outright mass dissent by the uninformed American population against the educated, university professors, scholars, and professionals (medical professionals during the Covid-19 pandemic and election official during the 2020 election) who are viewed as dictating a reality which goes against others' known phenomenologies, i.e., individuals' subjective perspective of what they experience and know. Nobody enjoys being told they are wrong, especially when they are confident they are right. Smith captured this sentiment best when he wrote, "it is humanly difficult to be told by experts that our immediate experience is not what we think it is."[103] He suggests that these ignorance-embracing movements are an act of defiance toward the scientific community, which,

in the opposition's view, continues to disregard and deny their phenomenologies. For example, the flat-earth theory movement, Smith writes, "is a protest, against elite authorities telling us what we must believe."[104] Other examples include Americans who denied expert opinions of the severity of Covid-19 because they felt fine even though they contracted the virus. People who believed the 2020 election was fraudulent must have been convinced of their initial suspicions when Twitter users tweeted that election machines were not counting Republican ballots filled with Sharpie ink[105]— choosing to trust a random Twitter user than election officials.

These amateur embracing or expert skepticism movements have extensive real-world consequences. As Smith points out, "a rapid decline of public trust in expert authority [is] one of the key causes of the rise of the antivaccination movement."[106] Especially when vaccines can potentially save lives, this is highly problematic. For instance, despite no evidence of a link between vaccines and child autism,[107] a tweet by Trump said, "healthy young child goes to doctor, gets pumped with massive shot of many vaccines, doesn't feel good and changes – AUTISM. Many such cases!"[108] Additionally, national and global crises only exacerbate the problem by making non-experts more passionate and vocal about pressing issues. Mercier briefly remarks, "times of crisis are prone to rumormongering…because they make people curious about topics they had no interest in previously."[109] To summarize, the Trump/Covid era has seen a rise of public sections embracing amateurs who lack the knowledge and experience in certain subjects, such as during the Covid-19 pandemic and the 2020 election. Experts and institutions, on the other hand, despite their credentials, are pushed to the margins: Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health found that only "52% of Americans have a great deal of trust in CDC."[110] Even after two years, the Pew Research Center found that Republican party members' "trust in the nation's election system had eroded considerably."[111] Unfortunately, experts,

professionals, scholars, and institutions are unfairly viewed as untrustworthy and corrupt due to their elite status, government power positions, and public policy influence. It is important to note that the ignorance of individuals and the spread of wild rumors is nothing new in human society. As will be discussed later in more detail, what has changed is the emergence of the internet and social media which appear to incentivize the spread of rumors and lies more than ever before in history.

SECTION 5: AMERICAN MYSTICISM

Humans are fascinating storytellers and narrators. Imagination and creativity have resulted in artistic treasures, outstanding musical performances, breathtaking architecture, captivating literature, and cult movie classics (think of Picasso's Guernica painting, Mozart's Requiem Mass in D Minor, The Sagrada Familia Basilica in Barcelona, The Lord of the Rings books, and Star Wars movies and television shows). Apart from cognitive limitations such as biases and appeals toward ignorance, narratives and mythologies also play a role in human reason and help to "give meaning and orientation."[112] Indeed, one must not underestimate the current narratives and mythologies' influence on human motivations, notably their effects on American politics and governance.

Individuals constantly think of their lives, actions, and decisions through a narrative lens. Haidt mentions that these personal narratives are "saturated with morality,"[113] arguing that, in terms of political life, "narratives provide a bridge between a developing adolescent self and an adult political identity."[114] Republicans, as Haidt identifies, have a narrative that describes the United States as once the ideal governing society founded on principles such as natural rights, Christianity, free market economics, and original Constitutionalism. It was not until liberals, who "subverted…traditional American values"[115] such as God, faith, families, and capitalism, that

America began to decline in prestige. Now, the only way to restore America to its original "glorious" status is "to take [the] country back from those who sought to undermine it."[116]

Recently in American politics, Republicans have been promoting this type of narrative, known as *Make America Great Again* (MAGA), which gained recent popularity with the rise of Donald Trump. Fundamentally, the movement argues that in the past America was great, but not anymore; nevertheless, if we vote for the right people, we can make America great again (hence the movement's title).[117] This utopian American narrative is nothing new; it goes back to the era of the Greeks: Plato in *The Republic* attempted to advance his theory of aristocratic rule by creating the mythological narrative of the Athenian ideal state. Austrian-British philosopher Karl Popper, one of Plato's most outspoken critics and author of *The Open Society*, interpreted large sections of the platonic dialogues as aversions toward political change. Popper accuses Plato of attributing political change as "evil"[118] or "corruption or decay or degeneration,"[119] whereas political stability is good and "divine."[120] What, according to Plato, is the solution for political stability and stopping change? It is returning to the original and ideal state of government from nature. Popper describes Plato's solution as returning "back to the original state of our forefathers, the primitive state founded in accordance with human nature, and therefore stable; back to the tribal patriarchy of the time before the Fall, to the natural class rule of the wise few over the ignorant many."[121]

One difference between Plato's past idea state and the MAGA movement's mythology of the perfect American society is that the former is a lie crafted by the elites to justify their tyranny over the many, and the latter is a populist myth accompanied by the rise of Trump and other populist right-winged figures. Despite the difference, both create a mythological lie that life and society were stable and better in the past, and we must return to that ancient state in order to fix

our political problems. The parallels between Plato's ideal state and the MAGA movement's "Great American utopia" are evident: both can lead towards totalitarianism by the few or the many. In our current political environment, the MAGA masses are unsettled by America's changing and evolving political climate. They perceive that American society, politics, and government institutions have declined from their original prestige, reasoning that the solution must be not to correct or adapt government institutions but to *restore* them to their original design and status sometime around the Founding Era.

The problem with the MAGA movement's image of the past utopian United States is that it never existed and will never exist. In the same light as Plato's ideal state, the "Great America" is a mythological fantasy. Smith goes far as to label the MAGA movement's perfect American state as "Trumpian dreamtime."[122] Because that is all it will be, an intangible dream. The fact that the "Great America" does not exist is not itself a significant issue. Instead, the idea can act as a vehicle for anti-democratic and totalitarian regimes. Popper criticized Plato's utopian state as organically totalitarian. He writes, "I believe that Plato's political programme, far from being morally superior to totalitarianism, is fundamentally identical with it."[123] He further claims that Plato's idea of justice is also totalitarian based, stating that "Plato identifies justice with the principle of class rule and of class privilege."[124] As a further ridicule of Plato, Popper argues that the ancient philosopher's most famous work, *The Republic*, "is a conscious attempt to get the better of the equalitarian…and to re-establish the claims of tribalism by developing a totalitarian moral theory."[125] Along the same lines as Popper, Smith identifies the false hope and potential dangers that Donald Trump and the MAGA movement present. He writes that MAGA followers "do not think of themselves as enemies of American political tradition, but who on the contrary have sought to restore the greatness of it, which they feel has been lost or degraded."[126]

He continues, "it is a movement that gleefully rejects facts and arguments in favor of feelings."[127]

Because reason is often susceptible to intuitions and emotions, it is little wonder why the MAGA movement has succeeded in spreading its radical ideas; the movement is designed to appeal not to reason but to emotions. Notably, both Popper and Smith recognize the influence of narratives and mythologies on Athenian and American minds to justify tyranny, respectively. Haidt's analysis also shows that people often create self-narratives that support their moral and political intuitions. It is no coincidence that the MAGA mythology sits well with most Republican narratives; it does well to capture Republican intuitions and, eventually, potential voters. Nevertheless, the lure of MAGA and similar movements are dangerous, i.e., it disregards the use of careful reasoning in favor of impulsive emotions, exacerbating nostalgic desire for a mythological past; all signs, Smith concludes, toward a "complete breakdown of American democracy…[and] a form of insolent demagoguery."[128] To avoid the totalitarian fear Popper and Smith express, citizens must be vigilant in reasoning and critical thinking. As Popper judiciously counseled, "it rests with us to improve matters."[129] Philosophies and movements supported by elites or the masses, such as Plato's and MAGA, will come and go. They, as Popper warns, "may seek its heavenly city in the past or in the future; it may preach 'back to nature' or 'forward to a world of love and beauty'; but its appeal is always to our emotions rather than to reason."[130]

SECTION 6: REASON AND SOCIAL MEDIA

In 1986, American philosopher Harry G. Frankfurt wrote an influential paper titled *On Bullshit*, later converted into a short book in 2005. Frankfurt reflects on the concept of bullshit[‡] and how "there is so much [of it]" in American culture.[131] More fundamental to his project, he meticulously classifies the bullshitter and bullshit, differentiating the two from the liar and lies: the liar, despite his intentions of spreading falsehoods, "is inescapably concerned with truth-values."[132] That is, the liar, Frankfurt explains, for him to lie must know the truth as a necessary precondition. The lie itself, he emphasizes, "requires a degree of craftsmanship, in which the teller of the lie submits to objective constraints imposed by what he takes to be the truth."[133] Compared to the liar, the bullshitter, Frankfurt briefly remarks, "is neither on the side of the true nor on the side of the false. His eye is not on the facts at all…he just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose."[134] Bullshit, he concludes, "is just this lack of connection to a concern with truth—this indifference to how things really are."[135] In other words, bullshit is a statement(s) that can be either true, false, or half-truth, but its purpose is to help the bullshitter achieve its objective(s).

When Frankfurt wrote this essay, he understood the effects of bullshit and its potentially dangerous spread. However, it is unclear if he, or any other epistemologist of his era, could have foreseen how bullshit would exponentially spread and engulf the digital domain of the internet and social media. True, bullshit and lies have always existed in human culture as far back as the Egyptian empire.[136] However, never in history has humanity had the ability to send and receive information (either true or false) at unimaginable speeds and in large quantities. The question is:

[‡] Frankfurt uses the term "bullshit" throughout his work. I understand that some readers might find this language offensive. However, it is necessary to adopt this word of Frankfurt's terminology in this paper for the sake of consistency and clarity.

how do the internet and social media affect how we reason and make decisions? Is the digital age exacerbating flaws in reasoning, such as confirmation bias? And are the internet and social media now places where bullshitters run amok?

M&S have extensively remarked through their work that reason performs poorly in isolation, either by oneself or in a group. As they explained, "put a bunch of people together and ask them to talk about something they agree on, and some will come out with stronger beliefs. Racists become more racists, egalitarians more egalitarian."[137] It is also clear from previous discussions that argumentation within like-minded groups will not solve the problem of poor reasoning (see section 4). M&S, again, state that "when like-minded people argue, all they do is provide each other with new reasons supporting already held beliefs…[they] can be victims of belief polarization, overconfidence, and belief perseverance."[138] In other words, when people with similar intuitions and beliefs come together, it will be challenging for the group to reason well and self-evaluate its arguments and reasons. This phenomenon is important to note because the internet and social media have recently appeared to be the perfect terrain for similar groups, created through algorithms, who support and further cement their already-held intuitions and beliefs. They have the illusion of reasoning well and being rational when in fact they are not. In previous years, scholars and researchers have noticed this trend taking shape on social media platforms.

Many scholars argue that through sophisticated algorithms, social media can organize social media users based on what they click or tap on, delivering the information they are more likely to be receptive to and guiding them toward like-minded digital groups. Haidt referenced a study that found politically engaged Twitter users "are disproportionately exposed to like-minded information and that information reaches like-minded users more quickly."[139] He also

noticed social media changes from 2009 to 2012, allowing people to "spread rumors and half-truths more quickly, and they could more readily sort themselves into homogenous tribes."[140] Rauch also reaches the same conclusion. He first comments that social media is "assisted by automated software which watches every click and learns how to trigger us."[141] As Rauch later concludes, "a system like that can push us away from comparing notes with others who see reality differently."[142]

On top of that, many studies suggest that social media increase polarization and create echo chambers, i.e., online environments where users interact with information and arguments that reinforce their own.[143] A research article for the Journal of Computational Social Science found that "social influence and rewiring appear to provide synergistic conditions for the rapid formation of completely segregated and polarized echo chambers."[144] The article later concluded that "the results…suggest that the proliferation of online echo chambers may be an inevitable outcome of basic cognitive and social processes facilitated by social media."[145] Researchers from Yonsei University discovered that "social media's capacity for information personalization may contribute to heightened level of extremism—thus further increasing online political polarization."[146] Additionally, they found that "politicians with extreme political ideologies had more Twitter followers."[147] Moreover, a collaborative university study also found that "users online tend to prefer information adhering to their worldviews, ignore dissenting information, and form polarized groups around shared narratives."[148] Overall, evidence suggests that social media is causing internet users to be algorithmically organized into groups who think the same. If this is the case, it leaves little room to doubt if social media stifles reasoning and critical thinking: reason and critical thinking work better when individuals interact and collaborate with others who do not share the same beliefs, allowing a healthy exchange of arguments and

counterarguments (see section 2). Social media eliminates this interaction and perpetuates radicalism by creating online polarized echo chambers.

A collection of scholars has vocally argued that social media act as a vehicle for spreading lies and bullshit throughout many digital platforms, sowing institutional distrust and increasing political polarization to unseen levels. In a recent article written for *The Atlantic*, Haidt depicts social media as a place where trolls, political radicals, and, most recently, Russian agents can quickly spread misinformation and disinformation. He describes the situation "as if the [social media] platforms had passed out a billion little dart guns."[149] Smith also shares similar concerns, commenting that internet trolls might be a new form of irrational movement similar to dadaism, "sowing discord, disrupting the business-as-usual of rule-governed civil discourse." [150] Rauch describes the methods employed by these groups as "troll epistemology—a disaggregated, digitized, and often demented form of disinformation."[151] He later states that their online actions "could make it difficult to distinguish fact from fiction, to distinguish experts from imposters, to know the provenance of information, to assess what others do and do not believe, to know whom (or what) one is interacting with."[152]

Troll epistemology, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic, has become most problematic among anti-vaccine conspiracy promoters who spread false and half-true information about vaccines. Vaccine conspiracy theories are a social media-wide problem: technical research manager at Stanford Internet Observatory, Renée DiResta, writes that "anti-vaccine misinformation is prevalent on all major social platforms." [153] She further highlights from her research that "despite the fact that real-world numbers of anti-vaccine proponents are still a small minority, on social media they appear to hold the majority viewpoint."[154] In short, individuals who were, or still are, hesitant to vaccinate against Covid-19 might have come across

anti-vaccination conspiracies on social media, reinforcing their apprehensions or outright hostility toward the Covid-19 vaccines or vaccines in general. What is tragic about the spread of the online anti-vaccine movement is that vaccines are incredibly beneficial; they enhance immunity and protect the body from deadly diseases.[155] So many curable individuals were lost during the pandemic due to the erroneous belief that vaccines were harmful or unnecessary. The messages and bullshit on social media often perpetuated this belief and contributed to the death toll.

The enormous amount of lies and bullshit these groups spread eats away at the public trust, making individuals, as Rauch coins the term, *epistemically helpless,[156]* i.e., "the inability to know where to turn for truth."[157] Along with this same line of thought and providing recent examples of epistemic helplessness, Otis remarks that during the 2016 presidential election, fake news and bullshit "eroded public trust in the real news media and made people question whether truth really existed."[158] Furthermore, she continues, "many calculated that it was safer not to trust anything they heard or read than to believe something and find out later it was wrong."[159] Additionally, Russian interference in American politics is a unique case study of bullshit spreading: Otis comments that Russian intelligence agencies utilized social media in 2014 to cover up a missile attack on Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 by spreading fake news and bullshit.[160] As Otis describes the Russian strategy, Russia did not need to fabricate irrefutable lies, "they just needed to create enough confusion to make people question the truth and ultimately allow Russia to get away with it."[161]

Regarding US domestic worries, Haidt comments that Russian intelligence agencies used social media in 2013 "to fabricate, exaggerate, or simply promote stories that would increase Americans' hatred of one another and distrust of their institutions."[162] Otis also remarks that in

2017 the CIA released a declassified document revealing that Russia's President, Vladimir Putin, "directed an operation to influence the [2016] election…, undermine the public's faith in US democratic process…and to help get Trump elected…[through] social media, and fake news."[163] Domestically, Rauch argues that Donald Trump adopted the Russian bullshit method during his presidency to attack the media. In an interview with Trump's former adviser, Steve Bannon said that the way to deal with the media is "to flood the zone with shit."[164] Many people saw Trump, again, flood "the zone with shit" when he lost the 2020 election. Rauch remarks that Trump "filed a blizzard of spurious lawsuits to overturn the election—knowing that despite losing every case in court, [he] could succeed at spreading doubt."[165] Like the Russians, the now-former president and his team spread bullshit and half-truths on social media to plant doubt in American minds about the 2020 election results to curry support from his followers and cling to power. The country waits in anticipation to see what Trump and his team will do leading up to the 2024 election.[166]

In summary, the examples of bullshit from Russia and Trump show that it is dangerous; the internet and social media are digital areas where it can flourish and spreads to individuals faster than ever before. It also creates a severe epistemic and political problem for people seeking reliable information and truth to make good decisions and judgments (e.g., should I take a vaccine? Are my country's elections fair? Should I vote for this candidate in the next election? etc.) The signs of a good democracy are *informed and politically active* citizens. When citizens are not informed, democracy erodes. But worst of all, reliable information, truths, sound arguments, and convincing evidence are saturated and overwhelmed by bullshit, causing epistemic agents to feel helpless and hopeless, leading them to believe that knowledge and truth are entirely subjective or unattainable. For some, it might mean that reasoning is a wasteful

effort: since nearly any reason, evidence, or argument can be found on the internet to "prove" an intuition or belief, what is the point in reasoning and argumentation?

SECTION 7: SOLUTIONS TO REASON BETTER

Karl Popper shrewdly said that democracy "cannot provide reason. The question of the intellectual and moral standard of its citizens is to a large degree a personal problem."[167] Smith adds to Popper's diagnosis by writing that we cannot be preoccupied with the hope of restoring a "version of the past that only grows the more mythological, the further it recedes."[168] The best democratic citizens can do, Smith continues, is "navigate [their] way through the short term,"[169] suggesting that "rationality…[is] to be exemplified in the virtues of prudence and humility."[170] But, as outlined before, it was agreed that sound reasoning requires more than isolated virtuous individuals. We need to communicate and interact with others. True, as M&S again emphasize, our reasoning abilities and the strength of our arguments improve significantly when reason "makes the best of the interactive nature of dialogue, refining justifications and arguments with the help of the interlocutors' feedback."[171] However, although exposing oneself to different opinions and arguments through interaction with diverse people and groups could be considered a virtuous action, suggesting that the practice of intellectual virtues entirely depends on group interaction, it nevertheless still requires some inner courage and humility from the individual agent to seek out other opinions that criticize and challenge their own. Ultimately, as both epistemic agents and members of democratic societies, it depends on us to improve critical thinking and ensure a peaceful democracy.

Despite cognitive limitations and social media's exacerbated effects, there are things we can do to reason better. Firstly, we can use reason in the way that it evolved, that is, as an interactionalist and argumentative tool for exchanging, evaluating, refining, and eventually

formulating good arguments and arriving at true conclusions. Reason's argumentation function allows the exchange and evaluation of arguments. If circumstances are good, i.e., the reasoning group is diverse enough, weak arguments will be thrown out with better ones taking their place, and so on. M&S describe argumentation as a mechanism to narrow down solid and persuasive arguments and reliable information. They write that "the argumentative use of reason helps genuine information cross the bottleneck…in the social flow of information."[172] They also add that "in the right interactive context, reason works. It allows people to change each other's minds so they end up endorsing better beliefs and making better decisions."[173] Haidt also shares this optimistic sentiment about moral and political reasoning, commenting that interactional reasoning can sometimes influence our strong intuitions. He writes, "the main way that we change our minds on moral issues is by interacting with other people."[174] Rauch goes further with this idea: he points out that contemporary society contains *institutions* that, on a larger scale, collect data, create hypotheses, and formulate arguments (think of the medical associations, academic journals, universities, news outlets, and government agencies). Just like individual reasoners, institutions can also argue with one another, identifying mistakes, fallacies, or biases. As Rauch remarks, when institutions share and evaluate one another's data, hypotheses, and propositions, "the mistakes are weeded out, what remains standing on any given day is knowledge."[175]

Many examples of reasoning work well in group settings. One famous example is how the US Supreme Court made a landmark decision in the *O'Connor v. Donaldson* case: in 1971, Kenneth Donaldson had been "involuntarily confined"[176] in a Florida mental institution for fifteen years, depriving "him of his constitutional right to liberty."[177] The Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals ordered a remedy for the damages. The Court's opinion also made explicit that the novel

"right to treatment"[178] was at issue and should be recognized. The case reached the Supreme Court in 1974, with Justice Warren E. Burger as the Chief Justice. After oral arguments and conferences, the Chief assigned himself the case per Supreme Court tradition and procedure.[179] Mainly, Justice Burger wanted to author the opinion to ensure the concept of right-to-treatment was beaten "to a bloody pulp,"[180] ensuring that the idea was securely discarded from the lower courts. He and his clerks made sure to be thorough in their legal reasoning by considering every possible argument.[181]

The Chief's circulated draft opinion was not received well by the other members of the Court. Most read the opinion as denying "all protections for the mentally ill."[182] Numerous court clerks feared that Burger was "trying to screw the mentally ill."[183] Justice Potter Stewart was "weary"[184] when he finished reading Burger's draft, considering it another "untamed piece of work."[185] Justice Lewis Powell too "did not like the Chief's *Donaldson* draft."[186] Justice Byron White also "agreed that the Chief's draft was unacceptable."[187] Nearly all justices concurred that they could not join the Chief's opinion and that revisions, or an entirely new opinion, were necessary. Justice Stewart decided to write a dissent, one that was shorter and more straightforward. Not wanting to create a new area of American jurisprudence by recognizing a right-to-treatment, Stewart's dissent focused on protecting and restoring the liberty of the mentally ill "by treatment."[188] The other justices accepted Stewart's dissent as they found it more legally sound and correctly built upon Court precedent. Eventually, Stewart's dissent earned enough votes from the other members of the Court and became the final majority opinion.

In contrast with the George Costanza party example in the previous section, the Burger Court shows that interactive reasoning can lead to better arguments and conclusions. This example is fitting because it first demonstrates that intelligent and successful individuals, even a

Supreme Court Justice, are at risk of poor reasoning and argumentation. This instance in American legal history is not to claim that Chief Justice Burger was not an intelligent interpreter and arbiter of American law; quite the contrary, he had impressive credentials and experience. Nevertheless, this example does appear to support M&S and Haidt's theory, at least to some degree, that intuitions and biases can influence our reasoning capabilities. For instance, Burger believed that the US Constitution did not protect the concept of right-to-treatment and attempted to reason why this was the case. Second, arguing with others works and leads to better arguments and conclusions: the other members of the Court, with a view separate from Burger, spotted flaws, mistakes, and the potential legal and political ramifications of his initial draft opinion. Observing Burger's legal errors, Justice Stewart was able to write a more polished opinion that was more legally sound, coherent, and generally accepted by the other members (even Burger joined the majority but concurred in judgment[189]). Third, reasoning, either poorly or correctly, has practical consequences. In the Burger Court case, interactive legal reasoning was the difference between the mentally ill not having special constitutional rights and having rights recognized by the Constitution. Although most individuals seldom have to make judgments that establish legal precedents and can affect the lives of millions, people nevertheless make decisions that can still impact other individuals and institutions around them. As a rule, it will be beneficial in the long run to use reason properly, i.e., with other people and groups to reveal biases, inconsistencies, and questionable information to make the best decision possible.

One of the main aims of the internet is to obtain reliable information and to seek persuasive reasons and arguments. In other words, seeking *knowledge* and *truth* is why people use the internet. However, online bullshit, trolls, political radicals, and foreign adversaries make that goal more difficult. In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle extensively discusses another

challenging goal humans try to achieve: eudaimonia, i.e., happiness, the happy life, the ability to live well, or the flourishing life. The ancient philosopher explains how individuals can achieve eudaimonia through practicing and developing virtues (e.g., courage, temperance, wisdom, prudence, etc.). Regarding the internet and its overwhelming amounts of information, I argue that internet users can adopt an Aristotelian mindset to *live a good online life* by "virtuously" navigating the internet and social media and practicing virtues in the epistemic and intellectual fields.

Haidt, M&S, and others skeptical of the existence of virtues would be against the idea of cognitive or moral progress through virtuous activities. Haidt argues that human thinking and rationality are only grounded by intuitions and emotions, causing the agent to have little to no autonomy over moral thinking and rationality. I disagree. First, if Haidt's social psychological theory is correct, then, as British philosopher Julia Annas identified, objecting to his argument, "it equally creates a problem for the existence of practical skill."[190] If virtues, akin to practical skills, do not exist, it would be impossible for "skilled dancers, computer programmers, car mechanics, pianists and translators"[191] to develop their talent and expertise. And the idea that there are experts and skilled people is one that "we are not lightly going to give up."[192] Second, if moral thinking and intuitions are developed primarily through one's society and culture, how can people have different concepts of morality when they get older? Annas remarks that the claim of culture solely determining conceptions of morality is "strikingly false to our experience."[193] She emphasizes that "as we age it is obvious to us that the conceptions we have now of modesty, generosity and many other virtues are not those we grew up with."[194] In contrast with M&S and Haidt, she also argues that learning about virtues makes isolated (moral) reasoning possible. She writes, "sometimes people revise their understanding of what it is to be cruel, kind and so on

simply through individual reflection."[195] To summarize, given these reasons and objections

towards M&S and Haidt provided by Annas, I believe that epistemic virtues are possible in the

same way moral ones are. Furthermore, internet users can learn to habituate themselves and

apply epistemic virtues to their online lives.

Richard Heersmink, a philosopher at Tilburg University, has written substantially on

epistemic virtues. He notes that when epistemic agents practice and develop "epistemic

virtues,"[196] the "likelihood of knowledge acquisition [increases]."[197] He categorizes epistemic

virtues into three groups, each contributing to the agent's learning process, and are "cognitive

character traits that are truth-conducive and minimalise error."[198] First, "curiosity, intellectual

autonomy and intellectual humility"[199] are virtues that help the online user become motivated to

ask questions and desire to understand; these are necessary virtues that, in a sense, help kickstart

the knowledge acquisition process. Second, "attentiveness, intellectual carefulness and

intellectual thoroughness"[200] keep the "learning process on the right track."[201] They help the

online user avoid distractions, clickbait, fake news, and bullshit. Third, "open-mindedness,

intellectual courage and intellectual tenacity"[202] help overcome common cognitive limitations

such as confirmation bias and mental laziness. These virtues assist the agent in having the

courage to express their ideas and arguments, being willing to listen to others, and, if necessary,

changing their beliefs when better arguments and evidence are presented. Practicing and

developing epistemic virtues can help online users adapt to the challenges of the internet and

social media in public epistemology. Heersmink writes, "if we know how to use the internet in

an epistemically virtuous way, then…we gain more than we lose in terms of epistemic goods."[203]

In Aristotelian terms, when individuals adopt and habituate epistemic virtues in their online

lives, they can live a good, flourishing, well-informed, and epistemically responsible life, often resulting in knowledge and truth both online and offline.

Apart from using argumentation and developing epistemic virtues, there are practical and collaborative methods that individuals, groups, and institutions can use to enhance proper scientific research and critical thinking. Particularly Rauch argues that, just as there is a US Constitution that sets the explicit rules for a peaceful and democratic government and society (at least that is what it should do), there is another unwritten constitution that establishes "a shared understanding that there are right and wrong ways to make knowledge."[204] He calls this verbal document the *Constitution of Knowledge.* The two "core rules" of his constitution are, first, "the fallibilist rule" and the "empirical rule."[205] The fallibilist rule states that a "*statement is established as knowledge only if it can be debunked, in principle, and only insofar as it withstands attempts to debunk it."*[206] Something can count as knowledge only if subject to scrutiny, i.e., others can try to disprove the hypothesis, theory, or idea. It is a rule emphasizing that no one or any belief is free from being evaluated and checked by others. Second, the empirical rule states that the "*method used to check* [a statement] *gives the same result regardless of the identity of the checker, and regardless of the source of the statement."*[207] In other words, when scientists or scholars use a method to gain knowledge, the process must be accessible to others, allowing multiple repeats of experiments. For example, if person A claims, "combining vinegar and baking soda creates a chemical reaction," persons B, C, D, etc., can have access to the method that resulted in person A's claim (they can go to the store and purchase vinegar and baking soda, and put them together). These two rules of Rauch's Constitution of Knowledge claim that "no authority or activist can legitimately shut down inquiry or debate."[208]: personal revelations from God or a message from "Q" in the QAnon

conspiracy theory are excluded from Rauch's Constitution of knowledge. These rules force all information, statements, arguments, and hypotheses to come under scientific scrutiny, allowing a peaceful and prudent method to determine what is knowledge and what needs to be discarded.

Otis also provides valuable advice for people navigating the internet and social media who encounter fake news. She counsels that users be mindful of their biases before navigating the internet, making "sure [they] don't fall for fake news because of them."[209] However, more practically, she offers helpful advice on how one can spot fake news by utilizing a variety of methods: paying attention to the text and style of the headline,[210] double checking the URL, looking at the date of the article or post, investigating the source(s), watching for spelling mistakes or poor grammar, browsing the web to see if major news networks are reporting on the same issue, identifying who is reporting the news, looking where the information came from, self-reflecting on if there is more to the new report or story, and visiting fact-checking websites.[211] Otis provides chapters worth of advice and skills for online users, such as paying attention to how polls are conducted,[212] evaluating the reliability of online photos or images,[213] learning to spot fake social media accounts,[214] and keeping emotions under control.[215] The vital idea to take away from Otis is that despite the challenges and obstacles the internet and social media create, there are ways to confront them. Humans are surprisingly adaptive and resilient. Like Heersmink's epistemic virtues, developing practical online navigation and fake news detecting skills takes time, effort, and practice. In short, habituating epistemic virtues, adhering to knowledge acquisition rules, and developing fake news-detecting skills are all things we can do to fight against disinformation, misinformation, fake news, and bullshit. They help overcome epistemic helplessness.

SECTION 8: OBJECTIONS TO M&S AND HAIDT

Although M&S and Haidt argue that reasoning is a post hoc cognitive activity that helps justify and persuade others, a few objections must be addressed. First, as M&S and Haidt argue, it is clear that many instances of reasoning are post hoc. This claim seems especially true when people think about morality and politics: culture and experience shape an individual's beliefs and intuitions, later using reason to justify them. However, on the other hand, there are instances where humans can use normative reason, i.e., reason is applied to reach conclusions not previously held by the reasoner. Thinking and reasoning in the purely abstract, such as mathematics or logic, requires reasoners to reach conclusions through established terms and premises regardless of the reasoner's beliefs or intuitions, e.g., 1+1=2; if p then q; p; therefore q. A reasoner must use normative reasoning when provided with mathematical or logical terms and concepts without an answer or conclusion.

Even certain moral philosophies require normative reasoning. For instance, utilitarianism argues that from accepting the fundamental premise that suffering is bad and pleasure is good, morality becomes merely a mathematical problem, i.e., which action will promote the greatest amount of happiness? Pushing against Haidt's moral theory, utilitarian thinking is clearly moral reasoning that occurs normatively rather than post hoc. Additionally, referring to the example of Chief Justice Burger, it isn't entirely clear that the Justice reasoned post hoc. It is plausible that he reasoned normatively by identifying facts, legal doctrines, and court precedents to reach an inevitable conclusion. The issue, however, was that he constructed a faulty argument through incorrect assumptions and poor reasoning.[§] Furthermore, Haidt disagrees that normative

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[§] These two objections were brought up by my Capstone Mentor Dr. Rachel Robison-Greene

reasoning is applied to reach moral or political judgments. However, at the same time, his research and evidence obtained from psychological experiments led him to change his mind and conclude that it is better to be a conservative since conservatives capture all moral considerations, according to him. Haidt, previously a liberal, seems to be reasoning and justifying *normatively* to reach a political conclusion, contrary to his argument that moral reasoning is post hoc.[**]

Second, M&S and Haidt argue that reason is used, in part, to maintain or improve one's reputation in society and to convince others why they ought to join an intuition or belief. However, I argue that this thought severely undermines the possibility of objective knowledge: if everyone, in a sense, is out for themselves to improve their social standing, why not communicate information that convinces most people without it being necessarily factual or objective? M&S respond to this objection by writing, "people get the good reputation they care about when they are *seen* [emphasis added] as reliable sources of information…reasons people invoke should be recognized by others as *representing* [emphasis added] objective reasons."[216] However, this does not do away with the objection. It is not necessarily objective knowledge that improves reputation and convinces more individuals; instead, it is information that is *represented* as objective. In other words, to enhance social status, a person only needs to convey information that seems objective enough to the person's audience. For example, when information was getting out that smoking was bad for one's health in the mid-1900s, one of the biggest tobacco companies, Big Tobacco, invested and created its own research committee, which, unsurprisingly, released scientific studies that conveyed that smoking was not dangerous at all.[217] As Otis highlighted in this story, the studies released *seemed* objective enough to convince

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[**] This objection was brought up by my Honors Committee Member Dr. Charlie Huenemann

people to continue smoking.[218] It seems fair to ask if, like Big Tobacco, major academic journals or academics such as M&S and Haidt publish *seemingly* objective articles and books to maintain academic or professional status.

Furthermore, I find it difficult to explain how scientists and academics acquire reliable knowledge if only self-interest motivates them. For instance, did M&S and Haidt publish their works because they wanted to look smart in front of their peers or make money by selling their books? If so, why advocate an idea of self-interested rationality that undermines and puts into question their entire epistemological and moral theories? Scientists and academic professionals have multiple motivating forces influencing them and their research. For example, research funding, time limits, employment, etc., are valid motivating forces leading one toward research. As Philosopher Laura Candiotto remarked, "there are different reasons which make us strive for getting to the truth."[219] As for myself, as I am writing this paper, I must complete it before the end of the semester, I also hope to impress certain professors with it, and perhaps I will submit this project as part of a graduate school application. All these reasons motivate me to work on and complete this project. However, these reasons were insufficient to get me started on this significant project (it would be beyond difficult to write more than fifty pages on a topic I had no interest in). These motivations and similar ones like them are not sufficient to lead others to establish truth and knowledge. There must be other motivating forces, such as authenticity, contemplation, curiosity, enthusiasm for research, admiration for a subject, and intellectual excitement. More importantly, Candiotto argues that recognizing knowledge's intrinsic value is "the prime driving force which activates the [research or academic] process."[220] In short, like myself and other college students and professionals in academia, we have many motivations for conducting research. Recognizing the intrinsic value of knowledge and understanding the world

better than before are the primary ones that begin the scientific and academic inquiry. By arguing that humans are solely motivated by their reputation, M&S and Haidt not only unsatisfactorily narrow the complexity of human experience but also subvert their audience's confidence in themselves with their argument.

It is true that most scholars and academics, at least to some level, do care and value objective knowledge, not solely for their benefit. Frankfurt remarks that perhaps we are motivated by our natural love and excitement towards truth and knowledge and that we are drawn to these because they help us become our authentic selves. He remarks that the sentiments we receive from learning about the world and ourselves "is a feeling of the enlargement of one's power to live, and to continue living, in accord with one's most authentic nature."[221] Because truth shapes us to become our authentic selves, as Frankfurt concludes, "we cannot help loving truth."[222] Philosopher Peter Kirschenmann argues that although knowledge can have instrumental value, he highlights that "it is the contemplation of what is known…which can have intrinsic value."[223] Candiotto also adds that the emotional relations towards truth, such as curiosity and enthusiasm, "help the epistemic agent to focus on a topic…[contributing] on making the truth a value for the epistemic agent."[224] In short, self-interest motivation is not enough to influence the epistemic agent to seek and share knowledge and truth. In contrast with M&S and Haidt, many philosophers argue that additional underlying motivational forces must exist to begin the process beyond self-justification and persuasion. Without these other epistemic motivations, objective knowledge and truth are impossible goals.

Third, a purely self-interested motivational framework only works in the abstract. M&S and Haidt do not mention in their arguments the effect of death; neither do they address the repercussions that awareness of one's temporary mortality has on reason and making deliberate

choices. From a death perspective, improving one's reputation appears meaningless and valueless since reputation and possession of material goods eventually must end with death. Smith captured this thought when he wrote, "this constant improvement in one's own lot cannot possibly last forever… this brute fact inevitably conditions our choices, and influences what it is to be rational in a way that the most simple models of human agency, those that are most often deployed in economics and rational-choice theory, fail to comprehend."[225] In other words, the fact that most of us know we will die undermines rational choice and self-interest theories. This self-awareness of our own demise makes us recognize that some things are more important than looking good in front of others. It is entirely possible that finding and sharing truth and knowledge is one of those things.

<div align="center">CONCLUSION</div>

In conclusion, human reasoning and rationality is a complex phenomenon. Kahneman's dual processing theory provided an illustrative and initially plausible theory. However, M&S objected that the mind could be divided into more than two parts and argued that System 2 can be a source of error in reasoning and judgment. They also provided an alternative account of how reasoning works, emphasizing that human reason is possible due to the mind's ability to produce metarepresentations. Reasoning, they concluded, is the cognitive ability to intuit reasons for beliefs, intuitions, and opinions and evaluate the strengths or weaknesses of other reasons or arguments. They further pointed out that reasoning has two functions: first, to justify post hoc one's intuitions, beliefs, or actions. This justification helps enhance reputation, establish social norms, coordinate with others, and establish expectations. Second, the argumentative function is designed to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of others' arguments or counterarguments, indicating to reasoners which views are more likely valid and sound. Both the justification and

the argumentation functions suggest that reasoning is tailored towards an interactionalist or cooperative role rather than assisting the isolated reasoner to reach true conclusions.

As with basic reasoning, moral and political reasoning is also the ability to use metarepresentational intuitive inference to justify intuitions and beliefs cultivated and acquired through various cultures, group interactions, and experiences. Haidt emphasized that people's moral intuitions go beyond pleasure and pain, capturing other ethical considerations such as care, fairness, loyalty, authority, and sanctity. He concurred with M&S that moral reasoning is often post hoc; people already develop moral and political intuitions and use reason to justify them. This fact does not mean that people's minds cannot change. On the contrary, they change all the time on issues due to reasons and arguments produced by reason's argumentative function. However, as Haidt stressed, if one wishes to succeed in changing a political mind, one must appeal to intuitions.

The fundamental flaw of reason is that it is highly susceptible to confirmation bias: it looks for reasons to support its own intuitions and beliefs with little regard for the strength or reliability of other reasons. Confirmation bias also plays a role in how individuals politically reason. The reasons or information political participants find are often relatively weak and tend to support already-held beliefs such as skepticism of vaccines or election integrity. Often this bias leads to miscalculations and erroneous conclusions. The isolated reasoner is often more susceptible to confirmation bias and general mental laziness. Although groups can help overcome this limitation, reasoning in a group with a commonly shared belief or intuition only worsens reasoning. Another internal cognitive issue that Salecl highlighted was willful and strategic ignorance. This type of ignorance, as Salecl stressed, could be a helpful coping or convenience mechanism for individuals when life becomes challenging or complex. Especially

with recent current events, people have become more anxious, confused, worried, and scared for the future. Strategic ignorance allows temporary phycological and emotional relief. However, either strategically or involuntarily, ignorance that goes unchecked can exacerbate problems.

Observers of the Covid/Trump era have seen sections of the public increasingly embrace non-expert and amateur voices who base their authority on ignorance rather than expertise. Smith suggested this new movement is a protest against people in positions of power who are seen as dictating a controversial or undesirable reality to the uninformed public. These amateur embracing movements can have extensive real-world consequences, such as spreading false information that the Covid-19 vaccine is unsafe or sowing doubt into the integrity of the US election process. Moreover, the emotional influence of narratives and mysticism in American society has also proven to alter how individuals reason and make rational choices. Specifically, the rise of the MAGA movement reinforces radical republican intuitions and beliefs that the US is a fallen state, pushing further a narrative that it must be restored, by force if necessary, to its original status.

More pressing for contemporary scholars is that the internet and social media organize people into online echo chambers, severing the critical interaction between people with diverse beliefs and perpetuating radicalism. Beyond creating these echo chambers, social media also acts as a vehicle for spreading lies and bullshit throughout many digital platforms, sowing institutional distrust and increasing political polarization to unimaginable levels. Information, truths, sound argument, and convincing evidence are overwhelmed by the enormous amount of lies and bullshit that amateurs, trolls, political radicals, and Russian agents spread all over the internet. This online spread slowly eats away at the public trust, making individuals feel epistemically helpless and leading some to conclude that knowledge and truth are entirely

subjective or unattainable. However, despite cognitive limitations and social media's exacerbated effects, we can use reason to our benefit as an interactionalist and argumentative tool for exchanging, evaluating, refining, and eventually formulating good arguments and arriving at true conclusions. Rauch emphasized that apart from argumentation, individuals and institutions must also follow clear and established epistemic rules, such as the fallibilist and empirical rules, which permits a peaceful and prudent method to determine what counts as knowledge. Heersmink's solution, on the other hand, emphasized that reasoning and critical thinking skill could further improve when individuals adopt and habituate epistemic virtues as they navigate the web. Lastly, Otis added that although the internet and social media create unprecedented fake news challenges, there are practical methods that internet users can practice to avoid and detect misinformation, disinformation, fake news, and bullshit.

Finally, I briefly objected to M&S and Haidt's claim that all reasoning is solely to justify beliefs and intuitions post hoc. I pointed out that, in some instances, reasoning must be done normatively or in isolation, such as in mathematics or logic. In some cases, normative moral reasoning also seemed possible such as with utilitarianism. I also emphasized that if reasoning is only to maintain or improve one's reputation and persuade others, it severely undermines the possibility of objective knowledge since everyone is out for themselves to improve their social standing. I particularly highlighted the difficulties of how objective knowledge is possible with only selfish motivating evolutionary inclinations. By outlining other philosophers' thoughts and arguments, I concluded that there must be additional epistemic motivational forces such as authenticity, contemplation, curiosity, and enthusiasm; without them to motivate the epistemic agent, objective knowledge and truth are impossible goals. Furthermore, because humans are aware of death, improving one's reputation at some point in life becomes meaningless and

valueless since reputation and possession of material goods eventually must end with death. Self-awareness of our own demise makes us recognize that some things are more important than looking good in front of others.

Reason is not at all what the Ancient Greeks thought it was or what it could potentially be. The reality is that reasoning is flawed, and its limitations bind its abilities. Recent scholars have outlined the cognitive limitations and current technological challenges of the internet and social media. Nevertheless, it is possible to reason and argue well or achieve truth and knowledge. These new epistemological challenges humanity faces mean that truth and knowledge do not come as quickly as expected if they ever did before. The path to truth and understanding demands effortful cognitive prowess and epistemological skills, habits, and virtues. Although lingering questions remain on how social media will continue to evolve and shape society, as well as how future generations should be educated on developing epistemic virtues, cognitive self-awareness, and internet navigations skills, we are now perhaps more cognizant of reason's abilities and the dangers that the internet and social media pose to prepare for the future.

<u>Reflection</u>

My Honors Capstone Project was one of the most eye-opening and challenging experiences I participated in at Utah State University. Writing a significant philosophy paper was one of the main goals I wanted to achieve before ending my undergraduate; my Honors Capstone project was a great vehicle to accomplish this goal. Apart from completing my goal of submitting my first academic and research work, I was also able to connect and work closely with faculty members, such as my Honors Mentor and Committee Member: having the opportunity to meet weekly with them to discuss my research and other philosophical topics was an opportunity that helped me better to analyze both my research topic and arguments more acutely. In short, my Capstone Project was a fantastic opportunity that academically challenged me and helped me expand my overall experience at USU.

Overall, the capstone project substantially improved my overall education experience. USU's Philosophy courses assist students in understanding the fundamentals of different philosophical theories surrounding ethics, metaphysics, epistemology, and aesthetics through lectures and assigned paper exercises. However, completing the final Capstone project added to everything I learned in my previous philosophy courses, allowing me to choose and dive deep into research on a topic that I was particularly passionate about (rationality, public epistemology, and value theory). Because I got to select my research topic, I felt more interested in conducting research, analyzing relevant literature, and writing the thesis overall. Additionally, I think completing the Honors Capstone gave me a sample of what research in Graduate School would be like. Again, it added more to my undergraduate educational experience by allowing me to conduct my personal research project on top of my typical class schedule.

Apart from completing the project, my Honors Capstone was a great opportunity to develop meaningful relationships with my mentor and committee member. The meetings I had with Professor Rachel Robison-Greene every other week were an opportunity not only to ask questions about topics in my research and how to improve my research skills, but it was also an opportunity to get to know her research interests and what she was currently researching and questioning in the philosophical sphere. I recall talking about one of the books in my research with her. We both found out that we disagreed with the author's arguments and conclusion, leading us to spend most of our time pointing out what was wrong with the author's theory. Additionally, sitting down with Professor Charlie Huenemann every week also helped me better understand the arguments of the authors of my literature text. We would spend most of the time discussing what the authors were attempting to prove or explain, analyzing their views, and attempting to find if they were correct or if there were possible counterarguments we could discover. Again, meeting with Professor Huenemann helped me refine ideas for my Honors Capstone Project, aided me in understanding my authors' arguments better, and developed a student-professor relationship outside the classroom.

Throughout my Honors Capstone Project, I was continuously empowered to work intensely within the major. Regarding the philosophy major, there is little that one needs regarding materials or lab access to conduct research. All I needed to work on research was a computer and access to the USU library. Nevertheless, I got to profoundly investigate the fundamentals and genesis of human rationality, ethical thinking, and the value of knowledge (value theory). Unlike traditional philosophy courses, where students are assigned a textbook and have little time to dedicate to the subject, I had both the capacity and the access I needed

(through USU Library) to dive deep into philosophy subjects that I was interested in, such as human rationality in the post-pandemic era, how human reason reacts to social media and the Make America Great Again narrative's mystical effect on American voters. Again, I would never have had this opportunity in a regular classroom lecture or without access to library materials.

Through my work and guidance from faculty, I created a paper that discussed philosophy and politics (however, the paper for the majority focused on philosophy). It was exciting to first lay down a human rationality theory at the beginning of the paper, explaining how human reason works based on its justification and argumentation functions, and then apply this theory to contemporary American politics and political thinking. Additionally, I found it very interesting to read and analyze academics from different areas of study and how they related to one another. For example, I discovered that both Karl Popper and Justin E.H. Smith were concerned with how mysticism affects human rationality and democratic societies. The philosopher Julia Annas disagreed with Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist, about the possibility of virtue and virtue development. Both are experts in their different fields of study, and it was fascinating to see various scholars with diverse backgrounds and worldviews evaluating others' arguments and theories. In short, working on this final paper allowed me to combine fields of study (philosophy, political theory, and political science), getting a wider breadth of understanding of how the two are related and how they could be used to understand better contemporary America rationality and society beyond the Covid-19 Pandemic.

To conclude, researching, writing, and revising my Honors Capstone Project has broadened my view in various fields of study, contributed to refining my university experience, and encouraged me to research something I am passionate about. Although my Honors Capstone is a project that I am proud of and enjoyed discussing it with professors, there were still times that I regretted joining the Honors Program and even considered quitting. I think a majority of Honors students have moments where they question joining the Honors Program or working on a Capstone Project (adding additional workload to their busy class schedule is not fun at times). Despite the research challenges and adding to my class and homework schedule, the Capstone gave me a healthy challenge that stretched me academically and introduced me to graduate-level research practice, something few USU students can experience and practice during their undergraduate studies.

<u>Author Biography</u>

Jordan Schwanke was raised in Highland, Utah, and resides in Logan, Utah. He is enrolled at Utah State University pursuing a Bachelor of Arts degree in philosophy and political science. In addition, he completed his Spanish minor while attending the University of Vigo in Spain, studying Spanish, Spanish culture, Galician, and linguistics. From 2015 to 2017, Jordan lived in Spain as a religious missionary for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, teaching his church's doctrine and providing free English classes in Madrid, Valladolid, and Vigo. Jordan has excelled in his university studies. He has maintained a 3.97 GPA, joined the Honors Program, is a member of both the Phi Sigma Tau and Pi Sigma Alpha Honors Societies, was named the USU Philosophy Student of the Year in 2022, was awarded the Nathan D. Alder Pre-Law Scholarship, and was a recipient of the Mehdi Heravi Endowed Scholarship for Philosophy. Moreover, as an Undergraduate Research Fellow, he is primarily involved with research. His interests include epistemology, philosophy of mind, ethics, the United States Supreme Court, and American law.

While attending school, Jordan gained teaching experience as a teacher's assistant for ethics and social ethics courses, helping students understand complex philosophical concepts while assisting professors with grading, student relationships, and writing assistance. Jordan was first exposed to public service while interning for Salt Lake City Mayor Mendenall's Office. There, Jordan specifically worked with the Community Outreach team by communicating with constituents, assisting with events or projects, and researching Utah's homeless policies. He also interned for the Utah Governor's Office under the Cox administration. Working with Constituent Services and Correspondence, he mainly assisted with organizing constituent mail, responding to constituents, formatting and writing official letters from the Governor's Office, conducting policy research, and communicating with constituents about state policy. During the Spring of 2023, he also interned for Congressman Blake Moore's Office (UT-01), gaining valuable experience at the federal level by helping with constituent correspondence; policy research on healthcare, housing, tax, and China; and government office administration.

After completing his undergraduate, Jordan plans to seek more career opportunities in public policy or law before he either continues toward his master's degree or attends law school. Although his formal education in philosophy will end with his undergraduate, he still has goals of continuing individual study and being part of the philosophy community.

Apart from school and work, Jordan loves to participate in USU's curling class and the Cache Valley Stone Society curling league. He also loves to spend time and go on walks with his sister's dog Ruby.

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