Bridging the cultural divide in social discourse, Part 3: The challenges of practicing intellectual humility with deeply held political attitudes

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In this third of a five-article series in Open Access Government on the topic of intellectual humility (IH), Peter C. Hill explores why political attitudes have created a cultural divide that makes it difficult for many to be intellectually humble

In Parts 1 and 2 of this series 'Bridging the Cultural Divide In Social Discourse', I contended that an IH orientation is motivated by a desire for accuracy which, in turn, reflects an inclination to understand more than to persuade or convince. In so doing, one must acknowledge and take ownership of his or her limitations of knowledge and understanding and, in the process, will value the contribution of others, including what one might learn from those with differing perspectives.

An IH orientation will require a critical but equitable scrutiny of the reasons behind beliefs or opinions of both others and one's self, with a willingness to revise one's position should there be a convincing reason to do so.

Such even-handed reasoning may not be difficult, or even necessary, when the stakes are low, such as understanding why one might have different preferences from one's own (e.g., she actually likes her steak well-done) or why one might differ from one's own practices of conventional rules (e.g., he resists dressing up, even for a formal event). Once the stakes are raised, however, practicing IH becomes far more difficult and this is no more apparent than when one strongly holds moral beliefs on what is right or wrong, especially when such convictions reflect a perspective that is relevant to a person's identity.

Political attitudes as moral convictions

The psychologist Linda Skitka has observed, with empirical evidence, that once a moral concern becomes a strongly held conviction, it is, in contrast to mere preferences or conventions, something that is believed to apply to everyone (universality), is self-evident (objectivity), is held without regard to what others may believe (autonomy), is often held with an intensity of emotion (emotionality), and is highly motivating and justifying (self-justification). Importantly, it is frequently the case that such convictions are developed and subsequently held without much regard for even-handed rational processing, Such a recipe provides conditions in which people are less tolerant of differences of opinions and attitudes and creates a social distance from others who hold such differing viewpoints.

For many, political beliefs and opinions are identity-relevant and fall into the moral conviction category. Such moralized attitudes are particularly resistant to change and are, therefore, a contributor to the growing ideological divide found in many parts of the world – a divide that appears to be especially strong in democratic societies found in Western Europe and North America. It is highly unlikely that direct challenges, even if seemingly rational, to the moralized beliefs themselves will result in change, thus rendering impotent the motivation to persuade or convince.

Practicing IH, however, is not necessarily equivalent to changing one's political perspective and, as pointed out in Part 2 of this series, one who is politically humble may have good reason to maintain or even strengthen one's moral conviction. Thus, changing one's mind is not necessarily the key marker of IH. Rather, IH reflects a willingness to be open to revising one's perspective given new knowledge and feedback, even if critical, of one's political views.

Challenges to practicing intellectual humility

There are, however, strong headwinds to practicing IH in the political arena that undermines openness to attitude revision. First, one may fear discovering after careful and equitable scrutiny that she could be wrong on something important to her. Such discovery can undermine her sense of coherence and certainty that are otherwise reinforced by strongly held moral convictions. Certainty-driven motivations are heightened when associated with existentially significant issues and concerns that are often addressed in the world of politics. For example, after carefully considering both sides of the abortion question, one may fear that discovering credence in the opposing right-to-choose (or right-to-life) viewpoint may be morally disruptive. Fear of such disruptiveness may reflect feelings of personal inadequacy ("On what else could I be wrong?") and even self-integrity.

Second, moral convictions often result in in-group bias. Groups formed on the basis of moral convictions often powerfully reinforce one's perspective. Thus, it is not surprising that people tend to gravitate toward the like- minded in gathering information. Politics is especially vulnerable to an "us" versus "them" bias in part because grouping is highly salient (e.g., political party identification) and tangible ("this is what it means to be a Democrat"). Political identity often feeds a sense of belonging that helps shape our thinking about others both within and beyond our group. Members of the in- group are seen as a more varied collection of individuals while members of the out-group are viewed more homogenously. People tend to see in-group members as smarter and as having thought through their views better than out-group members. Thus, in-group members are judged with greater charity than are out-group members. For example, research has shown that the exact political position is judged more favorably when ostensibly written by a member of one's political party than when written by a member of an opposing party.

Third, the power of groups in shaping political attitudes often results in zero- sum thinking. That is, to the extent that one political viewpoint gains credence, the credibility of an opposing viewpoint is equally discounted. An underlying assumption of zero-sum

thinking as it applies to political attitudes is that interests are necessarily conflicted. Thus, one does not want to "give in" to another perspective for fear that it undermines one's existing meaning system. In turn, zero-sum thinking results in an inability to recognize similarities between one's own values and the values of others who hold a differing perspective and thus hinders bipartisan cooperation.

What about intellectual humility and religion?

Similar headwinds apply to practicing IH in the domain of religious beliefs, the topic of the fourth article in this five-part series. Though the challenges are formidable, we will discover in the final article that researchers, with funds provided by the John Templeton Foundation, are addressing the issues of how such challenges can be overcome.

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