

# Polarization and the Political Mind

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Political polarization increasingly confronts the American political landscape. The phrase typically implies that two dominant opinions are expressed on a public policy issue—if there are multiple deviating opinions, they are ultimately categorized under one of the two opinions—and are irreconcilable, resulting in a stalemate.

When all aspects of American life are scrutinized along partisan lines, it is often concluded that American society suffers from widespread polarization. This assumption is prevalent in all sectors of our culture, and this prevalence prompted my research on the “political mind.”

I will expand on this simple analysis and argue that unresolvable polarization in American life is not inevitable. This requires developing the idea of a political mind in tandem with recent research on affective and ideological polarization. I argue that political knowledge is comprised of both empirical and moral perception and propose a way of injecting political substance into public dialogue instead of relying on partisan reasoning.

To lay the preliminary groundwork, it might be helpful to contrast moral perception with sensory perception. With regard to the latter, there is (1) a universal endowment of a sensory faculty and (2) a similarity of the faculty’s evaluative function in epistemic agents. There is generally no polarization, so to speak, on this issue of sensory perception because there is only one dominant opinion.

Regarding (1) and (2), political disagreements arise because (2) is not a fulfilled condition. Our evaluative faculties, with respect to political knowledge, do

not operate similarly in all human beings. All political observers, from blue-collar workers to US senators, are endowed with a rational, moral (as opposed to sensory) faculty. My primary premise in the development of a “political mind” claims that the evaluative function (or operation) of this faculty is differentiated according to individual experience. There are not objective, unanimous normative conclusions on public policy issues.

Political epistemology has not received adequate attention. It seems to be hidden in moral philosophy, moral epistemology, political philosophy, and perhaps the social sciences. Political epistemology is then an integrative subdiscipline drawing on each discipline. I will not endeavor to envision the substantive development of political epistemology as a discipline, but the concept of a political mind falls under the category.

A political epistemology framework is uniquely suited to address political polarization. This report will examine political philosopher John Rawls and moral epistemologist Robert Audi in addition to research published by multiple political scientists mentioned in the literature review. Rawls’ writings enhance traditional social contract theory by conceiving of “principles of justice for the basic structure of society.”<sup>1</sup>

I am most interested in Rawls’ contributions to public dialogue, rationality, and individual deliberation. He claims that “persons whose judgments are in reflective equilibrium” reach unanimous agreement on the principles of justice.<sup>2</sup> Internal evaluation and its public manifestation are significant in the political mind and, I will argue, integral to polarization.

Audi is not concerned with the content of moral language or the social contract, but rather with how we acquire moral sentiments. He defines moral perception as a “perceptual response to injustice”<sup>3</sup> characterized by a “phenomenal sense . . . of the moral character of the act.”<sup>4</sup> Audi’s model of moral perception is crucial to understanding how observers—in this case, members of a political community—might “see” moral phenomena. Audi, in conversation with Rawls, considers moral phenomenology alongside rational deliberation in a group’s evaluative practices. My account of a political mind argues for a cognitive constitution comprised of rational deliberation, moral evaluation, and moral perception.

The term “polarization” has appeared in political discourse with an increasing frequency over the past several decades. It reflects a notion of some sort of divide in the United States, but the object, nature, and cause of polarization are not clear. The term typically refers to the dichotomization of the American public square that has culminated in extreme partisanship. Political opinion and policy preferences congregate at either end of the ideological spectrum. Sociologists, psychologists, and political scientists have studied this separation. Voting and survey data provide evidence of increasing polarization, and several hypotheses have emerged to explain them.

A summary below focuses on the literature published in the past five years that addresses the object, nature, and cause of polarization. I then develop an account of political epistemology that aims to unravel the labyrinth of polarization by analyzing political perception, the role of emotion in politics, and the substance of politics.

Taken together, these analyses support a final synthesis that American political polarization indicates not the hyper-politicization of the public square, but rather a facade of politicization. Abating polarization necessitates properly developing a political mind characterized by perception of political events and facts, flexible patterns of reasoning, a responsible embrace of emotional reactions to experiences in a political community, and a looser ideological identity.

## Literature Review

Sociological empirical data and research on political polarization aims, in part, to discover the object of polarization. This requires a layered answer, especially since many aspects of American culture appear to be experiencing rapid change. The research seeks to determine what specific components of American political life underwent binary clustering. Three main hypotheses have been proposed: affective evaluations, ideological evaluations, and social identities.

The first hypothesis locates the problem in people’s increasingly negative feelings and judgments regarding the opposing political party or its members and representatives. The second locates it in a split in policy preferences and the gradual formation of two contrasting sets of policy preferences motivated by ideologies that demand policy preferences consistent with their worldviews. The third hypothesis locates the problem in the tendency to associate with one of the two major American political parties.

These are not necessarily mutually exclusive hypotheses. Jon Rogowski and Joseph Sutherland suggest the presence of both affective and ideological polarization.<sup>5</sup> This lends the idea that affective and ideological divergences are symbiotic; as two separate objects of polarization, each reinforces the other. Matthew Levendusky, however, asserts the primacy of affective polarization.<sup>6</sup> Affective polarization emphasizes in-group and out-group dynamics enveloped by social identities. Similarly, social identity polarization can be considered alongside ideological polarization, since party membership is likely to determine which ideological platform one leans toward.

Researchers also examine which groups experience polarization. In most views, such as Levendusky’s, the public is the subject of affective polarization as members of one party view members of the other in a negative light.<sup>7</sup> Steven Webster and Alan Abramowitz similarly argue that the public is the subject of both affective and ideological polarization. Not only do party members negatively evaluate members of the opposite party, but they also perceive a growing distance between the ideological evaluations of each party and drift toward their party’s policy set.<sup>8</sup>

Bryan McLaughlin and others argue that the public targets party leaders and candidates in its evaluations.<sup>9</sup> In this view, a member of a party does not hold negative feelings toward a fellow citizen who is a member of the other party, but rather negatively evaluates the other party's leaders and candidates. Lastly, Rogowski and Sutherland propose that polarization in the public simply reflects congressional polarization among politicians.<sup>10</sup>

Researchers have also sought to understand polarization's cause. The research in this area draws on the categories of ideology and social identity. Webster and Abramowitz suggest that while both ideological evaluations and affective evaluations are the objects of polarization, the former is more fundamental and a causal factor in producing the latter.<sup>11</sup> In this view, the sharper you perceive an ideological difference, the less charitable you will evaluate the "other." This leads to affective polarizations manifested in political discourse.

Troy Gibson and Christopher Hare articulate an alternative causal explanation by appealing to differences in moral-epistemological commitments.<sup>12</sup> They identify the philosophical roots of polarization and three basic moral epistemologies that drive division. This argument does not claim that different moral values lead to increased polarization. Rather, it suggests that ideological evaluation, not affective evaluation, is influenced by how one understands moral values to be known.

A third causal theory, argued by Matthew Luttig, locates the cause of polarization in psychology. Partisan identity, a type of social identity, appeals to individuals who desire closure and certainty.<sup>13</sup> In this view, political parties provide like-minded communities that give rise to a sense of cognitive security. Self-selection into these parties drives polarization.

The nature of polarization can be investigated in various ways. Some scholars seek to provide a typology of the phenomenon and draw distinctions between its varieties. One such account, authored by Aaron Bramson and others, proposes nine classifications of polarization: spread, dispersion, coverage, regionalization, community fracturing, distinctness, group divergence, group consensus, and size parity.<sup>14</sup>

This comprehensive approach conveys the sheer complexity of US polarization.

As referenced earlier, polarization is often viewed through the lens of social psychology. Proponents of affective polarization favor conflict theory; Levendusky uses the common ingroup identity model<sup>15</sup> and McLaughlin's study employs the language of in-group and out-group dynamics and analyzes specific emotions.<sup>16</sup>

Others rely less on social psychology models and emphasize instead the widening abyss in ideological thinking. Webster and Abramowitz understand ideological divergence as both the cause of polarization and its rational basis.<sup>17</sup> Lastly, a minority view focuses on the individual as polarization's origin, suggesting that prejudiced cognitive personality tendencies amplify polarization between groups.<sup>18</sup>

This is not an exhaustive summary of the literature on US polarization. However, the chosen sample gives a sense of trends in the research and the points of disagreement among researchers. Additionally, the recency of most articles cited suggests the direction of polarization theory. Affective polarization dominates the current literature, with a few alternative conclusions scattered throughout.

Lastly, my research does not strictly belong to political science, but I hope this representative sample of recent research can be integrated with my philosophical method. Several articles convey concern about the future of US politics given its current trajectory; this is where formal philosophy may be able to aid the conclusions suggested by social scientists.

Voting behavior and survey results can reveal much and perhaps predict future voting patterns, but philosophical reasoning penetrates deeper into the phenomenon of polarization. It does not dismiss the findings of social science, but rather builds on them. I therefore use social science research in my conceptual analysis of polarization.

## Evaluative Faculty of Political Minds

My analysis begins by addressing the hermeneutics of political knowledge. In this section, I encourage

flexibility in our evaluative mindsets in public dialogue and policy creation. A minor shortcoming of political science, as opposed to political philosophy, is its interpretive myopia. I suspect this evaluative arrest, the struggle to assign value, is a side effect of necessary research standards—principles established to avoid bias and misuse of gathered data. The hesitance to offer conclusions beyond those implied by the direct evidence may stunt public policy deliberation and creation.

The objective mindset may also tacitly strengthen polarization. Evaluating political events and facts, in my account, requires a degree of open-mindedness. However, objectivity and its focus on hard facts are traditionally understood to render a single or few interpretations. An abyss separates fact-finding and problem-solving mindsets. This section seeks to bridge that gap.

**Categories of Perception.** The fact-oriented mindset might be described as that which contains passive empirical knowledge. “Passive” describes the effect of experience on a subject. “Empirical” is a broad term and could describe any information obtained through sensory perception.

For the sake of simplicity, I will divide “empirical” knowledge into direct perception and secondhand perception. Secondhand perception is obtained through reported experience; this type of empirical knowledge relies on another person’s direct perception. For political subjects—citizens—much of political knowledge is secondhand perception from the media. Journalists have a massive amount of direct perceptual knowledge of political events. The other group privy to direct knowledge would be the actors themselves—politicians and public servants.

Secondhand perception, then, is the prevalent epistemic channel in modern democratic societies. The information age reduced the time between a political event and reporting it. Live television and video recordings have also perhaps changed the distribution of direct and secondhand perception.

This distinction between direct and secondhand perception is important conceptually, because the way a person perceives facts may affect their

interpretation. However, the distinction does not suggest that one type of empirical perception contains more epistemic warrant than the other with respect to political events; neither is more justified.

The key conceptual point that I am proposing is this: The content of empirical political knowledge lacks properties that induce action. Propositional knowledge drawn empirically from political perception is merely descriptive and lacks evaluative content. These descriptions are passive; facts absent interpretation are useless from a policy standpoint.

My claim, then, is that we are not compelled to act until moral knowledge attaches itself to empirical knowledge. Put differently, moral evaluation activates empirical knowledge from its passive state. So how does the content of moral knowledge differ from that of empirical knowledge? The most obvious difference is that the former is not ascertained through sensory perception. As Audi wrote, “Moral properties are not easily conceived as observable, in what seems the most elementary way: No sensory phenomenal representation is possible for them.”<sup>19</sup>

Moral perception accompanies political perception—the latter needs the former for interpretation—but moral perception also takes place in a different paradigm. Audi further describes it as “phenomenally integrated with a suitable ordinary perception of the properties on which injustice is consequential.”<sup>20</sup> Moral perception relies on empirical perception, but it still relies on a non-sensory, intellectual evaluation.

**Flexible Teleology of Moral Knowledge.** Another main difference I posit is that moral knowledge contains goals, whereas empirical knowledge does not. In other words, normative propositions suggest action because they aim at a goal. Moral knowledge offers direction to the passivity of empirical knowledge. Furthermore, it seems that in the political mind, empirical propositions and moral propositions are mutually dependent. Without evaluation, perceived political facts and events are epistemic bystanders. Without perceptual objects, moral propositions have nothing to evaluate; they are useless if they cannot be assigned to a political fact or event.

This symbiosis is not true of all objects of knowledge. I am concerned solely with political epistemology. I intend to develop the idea that living in a democratic society and perceiving political facts and events changes how one thinks about the purpose or telos of such a society. This latter point alludes to moral knowledge with the mention of an end. However, it also implies that moral knowledge is dynamic due to its relationship with political phenomena.

While I am specifically referring to political experience, others have commented similarly on experience in general that “as our experiences multiply and become more sophisticated, the tinges and shades of value also multiply and become more sophisticated.”<sup>21</sup> Political epistemology is uniquely amorphous due to the malleability of a democracy’s telos—there are no fixed ends in the long run.

The notion that moral knowledge might change over time may be an unsettling suggestion implying a lack of principle or moral commitment. Two preliminary clarifications should be made before delving into my account of what I call the “evaluative faculty” in human cognition.

First, I am not arguing that the content of moral knowledge changes day-to-day. With respect to political epistemology, the content of moral knowledge—the end of a political community and its common good—must be stable through time if it is to be treated credibly. Second, although I would not view political epistemology as theoretically friendly to deontology, this does not mean that it is incompatible with moral principles or rules. Even if the teleological content of moral knowledge changes, many normative claims can remain the same despite the community’s adaptive common good. For example, the evaluation that it is wrong to murder innocent civilians would likely hold in most teleological contexts.

**Heterogeneity of Political Minds.** A key point to develop on my account is “individuation,” the notion that the evaluative faculty of every individual in a democratic society is heterogeneous. Individuation is amplified with regard to political epistemology. If perception of political facts and events influences moral perception, then the heterogeneity of evaluative

functioning will become more obvious, given that people’s exposure to political phenomena varies.

I differ with Audi on this point of heterogeneity. While he obviously would not dispute that epistemic agents are subject to different political experiences, he does not think experiential differences challenge moral knowledge’s objectivity. He writes, “The position on perceptual moral knowledge defended here might be called a phenomenological reliabilism. It enables us to ground the possibility of a major kind of ethical objectivity.”<sup>22</sup> Although I think moral perception phenomenologically imbues itself within political perceptions, I do not take there to be discoverable moral properties in every perception. My idea of individuation allows for differences in moral knowledge, not merely moral perception.

Audi grants the possibility of heterogeneous moral perception due to “perceptual sensitivity”<sup>23</sup> and “perspectival disparity.”<sup>24</sup> However, for him, this does not change the status of moral knowledge. He writes that “disagreement over prima facie moral appraisal is very different from disagreement over final appraisal,”<sup>25</sup> which seemingly implies that in the final evaluation, epistemic agents will recognize the same moral properties. Heterogeneity of both political experience and moral perception gives rise to a unique pattern of reasoning in each member of the community, reasoning that integrates political knowledge and moral knowledge.

My account does not await a “final appraisal” or Rawlsian homogenous reflective equilibrium to deliver objective moral knowledge; it grants that moral knowledge molds to individual experience. To quote Hilary Putnam, “The idea that it should be the task of philosophy to deliver an ex cathedra resolution of all our moral disagreements is absurd.”<sup>26</sup> This moral knowledge is also more grounded in practical rationality; its substance is not composed of simple perception of moral properties, but perception of teleology.

Putnam summarizes John Dewey’s thinking on rationality as such: “For him ‘inquiry’ in the widest sense, that is human dealings with problematical situations, involves incessant reconsideration of both means *and* ends; it is not the case that each person’s

goals are cast in concrete.”<sup>27</sup> I agree with Dewey; an epistemic agent’s political mind, developed through the operation of their evaluative faculty, recognizes both the right and the good—and changes to each. Moreover, the perception and reflection filtered through this faculty embody the constant process that sometimes reveals new moral ends and different appraisals of right.

**Political Facts and Events.** To complete this account of such an evaluative faculty, it should be established what I take to be a political fact or event. A political fact is the most basic perceptual object. Ascertained empirically, it is characterized by passivity and brevity. It corresponds to the societal state of affairs in a country, is assented to by rational agents with proper cognitive functioning, and may reflect the past or present. Statistical data provided by a government agency would fall under this category and are probably the most relevant example.

Political events, by contrast, are the actions of the citizenry, legislative bodies, judiciaries, the president, or the military. Examples include elections, court decisions, military operations, and impeachment hearings. Political facts can be drawn from past political events. For example, a confirmation hearing is a political event, but the statement “Brett Kavanaugh is a Supreme Court justice” is a concluding fact resulting from the event.

A political phenomenon, a type of inferential knowledge, is distinct from both political facts and political events. It is empirically rooted but perceived more indirectly. Perceiving political phenomena involves synthesizing political facts and events, but they are still locatable as empirical objects in political society. The most pertinent example is the subject of the second half of this report: polarization.

### Emotion in the Political Mind

Political epistemology investigates the relationship between perception of political facts or events and moral perception. The notion that our moral perceptions react to exposure to new political perceptions

challenges the idea, tracing back to Plato’s *Republic*, that the affective nature must not infiltrate the workings of the rational nature in the political community. This line of thought claims that emotion and desire infect the operation of one’s reason and, furthermore, reason must be the responsible overseer.

Putnam traces the “fact-value” dichotomy to David Hume, describing it as “foundational for classical empiricism as well for its twentieth-century daughter, logical positivism.”<sup>28</sup> Policymakers are determined to think above the fray in an objective manner. That is, moral knowledge escapes subjectivity, and all our political facts can be adjusted to objective ends. We can assume that an individual might have interpreted a situation or acted differently if he or she had been in a different circumstance with a different set of knowledge. We recognize that different experiences give rise to different evaluations. As Putnam points out about the pragmatist position, “Value and normativity permeate all of experience.”<sup>29</sup>

My central argument in this section is that one’s rational nature need not be immune to the affective nature; reason does not need to be purified of emotion because emotion may be indicative of one’s values. Reason may perform the formal evaluative analysis, but it cannot perform evaluative attribution. Thus, I am simply suggesting that cognitive separation is unnecessary; reason operates just as, if not more, efficiently with emotion as it does without.

**Pride of Place.** The first implication of such an argument is that perceiving political facts and events appeals to our affections. It arouses emotion. In the age of the nation-state, citizens are attached to their countries. This perhaps even extends to the local level; in addition to national pride, one may have state or hometown pride. I do not wish to give a complete analysis of pride, but it seems to be a felt emotion—a description of human attachment to a particular time and space.

I will note two things about pride in political community and its role in the political mind. First, pride for one’s country, state, or local community does not necessarily have the same criteria as person-oriented pride. In person-oriented pride, the emotion is a

reaction to a person's preceding actions or accomplishments. Additionally, when another person is the object of pride, the emotion can be displaced by counteractive emotions. Embarrassing actions may lead to shame, an emotion hard to hold with pride.

The second point is that pride of place is not an isolated emotion in a political community. In contrast with person-oriented pride, it is not necessarily the result of preceding actions. There must certainly be an awareness of national history and grappling with past errors, but pride of place runs deeper than the simple sum of historical knowledge. Instead, other emotions may result from it. This notion complicates the traditional understanding of pride and is where my brief analysis deserves more attention. I concisely summarize the implications.

If pride of place is a "productive emotion," emotions that derive from this pride also have their own respective objects. Of course, the place in question could remain the object of the entire family of emotions, but one could say the objects of secondary emotions are other persons. This possibility opens the door for complex ways in which perception of political facts and events appeal to one's affective nature. It perhaps most importantly allows room for counteractive emotions, such as shame, anger, and disappointment, to be directed at actors in the political community while preserving national or local pride.

Recent research using data from the American National Election Studies suggests that counteractive emotions can encourage further reflection. "Emotions that violate expectations . . . increase deliberative reasoning and reduce partisan-cue taking."<sup>30</sup> This research conducted on partisanship can be adapted to my model of locational pride. If national pride were taken as the expectation, then positive secondary emotions would strengthen the primary emotion and attachment to place. However, imagine news breaks of blatant discrimination based on sex in several respectable congressional offices. Scandals give rise to negative secondary emotions; national, state, or local pride is challenged. In other words, the expectation of confirming national pride is violated by unfair congressional practices.

This study suggests that "violating emotions"<sup>31</sup> may lead to reevaluating primary emotions or dispositions. Pride of place is not an isolated emotion, but it does receive a level of protection due to its status as a primary emotion in the political mind. Negative secondary emotions hopefully do not cause abandonment of national pride, but instead refine the concept in light of new political perceptions.

**Embracing Affectivity.** Humans are, for better or worse, emotionally attached to the places we inhabit. It is nonsensical, then, to ignore our affective nature when we set out to discuss or establish policies that will regulate our lives in these places. Why, in the name of objectivity, would we ignore our attachment to place when discussing the qualitative good in that place? Putnam bluntly answers:

For one thing, it is much easier to say, "that's a value judgment," meaning "that's just a matter of subjective preference," than to do what Socrates tried to teach us: to examine who we are and what our deepest convictions are and hold those convictions are and hold those convictions up to the searching test of reflective examination.<sup>32</sup>

Noticing the relationship between political perception and our affective nature is one method to examine "who we are." I have proposed that pride is a primary emotional locus that gives rise to secondary emotions. These secondary emotions could fall anywhere on the spectrum of human emotion; they will not necessarily give rise to favorable moral evaluations.

I will now place this brief account of place-related emotions into the larger framework of political epistemology. It follows from my account of national pride that perception of political facts and events will generate secondary emotions that reflect one's attachment to place but have fellow citizens and politicians or public servants as emotional objects.

I would take these two points further by suggesting that they also mirror the teleological structure of a political community. This claim assumes "pride for place" insinuates that a rational agent would desire and seek the good of that place. That is, a goal of the

political community is its common good. Moreover, the presence of secondary emotions that find their object in other members of the political community implies that the good of a place will involve seeking the good of its inhabitants. The good of a community necessarily considers the goods of its members.

### **The Improbability of Teleological Consensus.**

Concern may arise regarding reconciling pride of place and identification of the common good. The most common objection asks how a pluralistic society will come to a unified agreement on the common good. I hope that the earlier section on the evaluative faculty of political minds, together with the later section on political perception and polarization, demonstrate that I am not suggesting an objective, unchanging common good. Conceiving of the common good requires active perception and reflection across time; heterogeneity inherent in pluralistic society guards against an immutable evaluation of the common good.

A less common, but more legitimate, objection questions the possibility of pride of place in individuals belonging to historically marginalized groups: Can national pride be cultivated in an African American whose ancestors were excluded from the political community?

This objection recognizes that even though pride of place is more teleology-oriented than directly person-oriented, it still pertains to personal identity. Levendusky suggests that a stronger sense of national identity can overwhelm partisan identity and abate affective polarization. “Priming American identity makes subjects view the opposing party more positively due to a process of recategorization.”<sup>33</sup> National identity might then overcome personal identity and go hand in hand with national pride. Levendusky pushes the role of national identity by drawing on the common ingroup identity model, arguing that when national identity becomes “most salient” identity, it “will be the one that shapes how people perceive the political world.”<sup>34</sup>

With national pride, however, the salience of a group identity—partisan, national, or otherwise—may not be desirable. My account of a pride for place

is not necessarily informed by a sense of “identity of place,” because it is conceivable that there are residents in these spaces who do not feel a strong sense of belonging. At the very least, marginalized members in a political community may reasonably experience a degree of separation from the community because of their historical exclusion from it. While Levendusky may be right that national identity can be emphasized over party identity for the benefit of the country, he does not account for the possibility that emphasis on national identity glazes over personal identity as well.

I would discourage linking national pride, which I take as a teleological emotion grounded in a place’s past and present, with national identity. While it can be flexible, identity also contains fundamental components that are inflexible—which could undermine my proposed dynamic, adjustable evaluation of the common good. In response to the objection, the experience of marginalization, whether historical or current, that could reasonably become entrenched in one’s identity can and should be brought to the table.

Pride of place allows for counteractive secondary emotions without taking away the teleological outlook of national pride—a cognitive dissonance of sorts. Marginalized individuals expressing negative emotions may even be conducive to a fair evaluation of the common good. In other words, a member of a political community does not necessarily have to hold to the notion of national pride to contribute to its teleological outlook. Pride of place may not be possible for some until a country comes to terms with its past moral errors and deviations from the common good.

Political epistemology suggests that we incorporate our affective nature into our political minds—our ways of reasoning about life in society. The primary emotion of pride and the secondary emotions produced when perceiving political facts and events indicate what one values. In other words, our emotional reaction to political perception is an evaluative measure; it gives shape to the perceived passive knowledge. To be clear, emotional content does not define moral content. I noted earlier that moral knowledge induces action because it contains ends to be sought after. The secondary emotions experienced in political

perception may indicate whether an action is conducive to achieving a political community's ends.

These emotions do not necessarily reveal why an action is right or wrong. This key point underscores the limits of emotion in moral evaluation. However, it also shows that emotion cannot be ignored in moral thought, because it kick-starts our evaluative mechanism. I argued for an understanding of national pride as an ingrained emotion that grounds our desire for the good of our places and developed a multifunctioning classification of secondary emotions deriving from pride of place.

The first function draws on the idea that the derived emotions have people—fellow citizens—as objects, meaning that the secondary emotions tie the good of a place to the good of those who live there. The second function focuses on ensuring the community's good; the emotional reaction to a political perception offers a preliminary evaluation of whether an action serves to achieve the good.

**Summary of Analyses.** Emotion alone cannot provide moral knowledge, but I doubt that the good can be discovered in objective analysis. I return to political perception and the question of what can facts and events tell us about the good of a community and its members. This is the trickiest, yet most significant, conceptual point to articulate. My argument maintains that a relation between the awareness of a political community's telos and political perception gives rise to the malleability of a cognitive evaluative faculty. My main contention is that patterns of reasoning are not irreversibly cemented, but grounded in human experience—not merely emotional experience—accumulated over time.

Considering the diversity of experience in one's lifetime and among individuals, it follows that patterns of reasoning differ from one person to the next and an individual's patterns of reasoning evolve over time. The notion of individuation developed earlier provides a way of thinking about the good of political community.

The affective infiltrates the rational in an individual's political mind. Beyond an immediate emotional reaction, political perceptions can penetrate

to the core of one's dispositions and attitudes, so much so that one may be compelled to reconsider the good. Political epistemology is opposed to the rational-affective dichotomy *and* the fact-value dichotomy. Such stark contrasts stunt public deliberation. Putnam echoes a similar sentiment, noting, "The worst thing about the fact/value dichotomy is that in practice it functions as a discussion-stopper, and not just a discussion-stopper, but a thought-stopper."<sup>35</sup>

Political experience invites one to reflect on how actions pertaining to the community will affect it. Moral evaluation requires intellectual reflection, but they both require a reference to experience and our affective nature. Intellectual reflection is a form of analysis, but it is not objective. Reflection in the political mind considers and depends on the singularity of political experience.

This concludes the groundwork on political epistemology. The following sections look at the oft-perceived political phenomenon of political polarization. I develop a conceptual account of political polarization and discuss Rawls regarding the deliberation in a political community.

## Rawls, Rationality, and Political Substance

Thus far, political epistemology has been described as the collision between passive empirical knowledge and active moral knowledge. Moral evaluation remains at the center of the political realm. A malleable evaluative faculty implies a moral entailment of the political, as political thought and discourse cannot escape their moral equivalents. Political epistemology involves the cognitive acts of gathering political facts, whether directly or indirectly, and attributing value based on our empirical perceptions.

Phenomenologically, these acts are inseparable. We are epistemic integrators and appraisers. The unique facet of my proposed "evaluative faculty" is that we are not interpreting the facts by using an immutable stock of moral principles, but rather our political experiences over time change the way we ascribe value. Moral entailment of the political is not an intentional philosophical choice to *include* the

political realm in moral thought, but rather a natural circumstance of human nature and social relations.

It is possible, however, to intentionally exclude the political from the moral. In a liberal society, many scholars have argued, there exists a kind of moral pluralism. If value-oriented thought is permitted in public policy discussion, the reasoning goes, then discussion will be stunted, because a plurality of values involves irreconcilable interests. This was Rawls' belief and what led to his famous "original position," in which particular knowledge is not permitted to be known by members determining the principles of justice. I will not focus on the original position in this section, but rather some of the surrounding Rawlsian ideas.

**Rawls' Conceptual Contributions.** In *A Theory of Justice* and *Political Liberalism*, Rawls offers intriguing notions of rationality, reason, and their manifestations in the private and public realms. Rawls reconciles both interests and pluralism by proposing a thought experiment in which "parties" of the social contract "do not know certain kinds of particular facts," including their socioeconomic statuses, IQs, and ethical systems.<sup>36</sup> Those in what he calls the "original position," however, do have access to "general facts about human society," such as economic and psychological theory.<sup>37</sup> The parties deliberate to produce "principles of justice for the basic structure of society."<sup>38</sup>

I do not seek to discuss Rawls' goal, but rather the conditions he puts in place to achieve this goal—specifically the characteristics of the deliberative body. The first, reflective equilibrium addresses the issue of moral pluralism. "This state is one reached after a person has weighed various proposed conceptions," Rawls states, "and he has either revised his judgments to accord with one of them or held fast to his initial conviction."<sup>39</sup>

I revise this idea in later sections, but note that Rawls understands reflective equilibrium to be established using general knowledge only. The stability of oscillating conceptions of justice is gained through knowledge about economic models, psychological theory, basic knowledge about society's state of affairs,

and the like, *not* via ethical assumptions. He draws an even stronger contrast in *Political Liberalism*, saying that there is a "dualism in political liberalism between the point of view of the political conceptions and the many points of view of comprehensive [religious, philosophical, and moral] doctrines."<sup>40</sup> Clearly, there is a divorce between objective political rationale and value-based rationale of "comprehensive doctrines," and even the word "doctrine" implies a value system.

The second characteristic of Rawls' deliberative body is the rationality of the members. Without particular knowledge of one's socioeconomic position and moral beliefs, the teleology of each individual becomes abstracted in form. "They assume that they normally prefer more primary social goods rather than less."<sup>41</sup> The pursuit of primary social goods, which Rawls says includes protection of liberties and increased opportunities, is thus the desire that drives each deliberative party. Each epistemic agent is rational insofar as he "follows the plan which will satisfy more of his desires rather than less, and which has the greater chance of being successfully executed."<sup>42</sup>

Rawls corroborates this view in *Political Liberalism*, where he offers the following definition of individual rationality:

The rational applies to how these ends and interests are adopted and affirmed, as well as to how they are given priority. It also applies to the choice of means . . . to adopt the most effective means to ends.<sup>43</sup>

Further underscoring the absence of ethical assumptions in the original position, Rawls continues, "What rational agents lack is the particular form of moral sensibility that underlies the desire to engage in fair cooperation."<sup>44</sup>

This point leads to his interesting distinction between private rationality and public reason. Public reason is the third characteristic of the Rawlsian deliberative body. It provides what private rationality lacks: a simulacrum of morality. He writes, "The reasonable is an element of the idea of society as a system of fair cooperation and that its fair terms be reasonable for all to accept is part of its idea of reciprocity."<sup>45</sup>

Ethical assumptions in public reason are contingent on reciprocal considerations. Mutual trust is imperative. The evaluative faculty of an epistemic agent in the original position does not have much to evaluate with such a stark boundary drawn between reason and rationality. The extent of judgments pertains to the acquisition of “primary goods” and perception of reciprocity on the part of others.

**Epistemic Confusion.** With this Rawlsian outline in mind, the first claim is that a fundamental epistemic confusion underlies political polarization. This does not imply that political polarization is a misperception. Rather, the epistemic confusion lies in a non-perception, an evaluation that ignores the surrounding political facts and events.

Americans are bad political observers. “Politicization” often carries a negative connotation, as if the issues inherent in a political community can or should be “depoliticized.” This aversion toward polarization and preference for “depoliticizing” national discourse misses the problem. Depoliticization will not remedy political polarization because using “political” in the concept of polarization is misplaced.

Polarization is not the result of hypercharged political content. Rather, it is characterized by a lack of political substance buttressed by non-perception and dominance of ideologies. An epistemic agent in a political community isn’t fully using their political mind unless they embrace political perception.

Ignorance of or inattention to the facts and events around them hinders an observer’s evaluative faculty. Evaluations still lodge in the mind of the epistemic agent, however. Without operating their political perception properly, an agent’s evaluations latch onto no real object. Political polarization contains unattached evaluation with no anchor in political perception. A tentative solution, then, may be something like “re-politicization.”

The political mind, as I argued, requires both empirical perception and moral perception. But there is a reciprocal relation between the two forms of perception. Experience of political facts and events influences the way we appraise our empirical observations, and our method of evaluation

influences future perceptions. As time extends, each individual in the political community undergoes an ever-evolving pattern of reasoning with regard to the relevant political phenomena.

The political mind is dynamic and not static. The dynamic quality of a citizen’s evaluative faculty reflects their attentive presence to their political environment. This implies that the conditions for human rationality change in a human community; social contexts affect what constitutes practical rationale.

**Objections to Rawls.** This is Rawls’ mistake in *A Theory of Justice* and *Political Liberalism*: He assumes that the conditions of rationality are immutable in every time and place. Although he never mentions polarization, it seems to be the phenomenon from which he develops the original position. He posits that virtues, specifically the principles of justice, must be developed without reference to personal values. Rawls writes that “there is no way to get beyond a plurality of principles” when conceiving of political virtues.<sup>46</sup>

The classical view of rationality, that members in the political community all seek their own good, underlies Rawls’ thinking. For him, the good amounts to accruing social advantages. People’s values will differ depending on particular positions since gaining social advantages depends on race, gender, income, and more. Rawls writes, “If we cannot explain how these weights [of priority] are to be determined by reasonable ethical criteria, the means of rational discussion have come to an end.”<sup>47</sup> Moral pluralism precludes the possibility of rational discourse in the public square; the best Rawls hopes for is public reason.<sup>48</sup> The rationality of political discourse, then, requires ignorance of one’s value system or, as Rawls states it, one’s conception of the good.

This understanding of human rationality persists in *Political Liberalism* with a slight amendment. He writes, “The rational . . . applies to a single, unified agent with the powers of judgment and deliberation in seeking ends and interests peculiarly its own.”<sup>49</sup> However, Rawls adds that people’s interests “are not always interests in benefits to themselves. Every interest is an interest of a self, but not every interest is in benefits to the self that has it.”<sup>50</sup>

This understanding of rationality could be consistent with the original position. Without particular knowledge, members of a political community can be concerned for each other's interests, since direct self-interest would be indeterminable. However, this understanding is problematic for Rawls. A person in the original position *can* be concerned with the direct interests of another, since they can know their particular circumstances. All considered interests result from imagining being in many particular positions; this is Rawls' definition of the impartial spectator's "capacity for sympathetic identification" in *A Theory of Justice*.<sup>51</sup>

Whether sympathetic identification entails considering another's benefits or the benefits of a particular position if you were to occupy it is unclear. The latter explanation challenges Rawls' understanding of rationality, yet is implied by his characterization of the sympathetic capacity as imagining oneself "in the place of each person."<sup>52</sup>

A truly rational self in the original position therefore cannot have any interest except those that benefit itself, even if that self is a hypothetical construct. For my argument, then, possessing a rational political mind does not merely entail having empathy for another's interests. I hold to the traditional understanding of rationality as the pursuit of one's ends. One achieves genuine sympathy in the political community by aligning another's interests with your own or recognizing that concern for another's interests entails disregarding your own.

In the latter sense, the political mind could involve a certain degree of irrationality—seeking the good of another in ways that may directly conflict with achieving your own goals. Put differently, empathy grounded in recognition of perspectival difference *and* active de-prioritization of self-interest comprise an ideal political mind. This view, one of either mutual benefits—aligned interests—or practical irrationality, further suggests an approach to "re-politicization" in which matured political minds can contribute to abating polarization.

## Abating Polarization Through Re-Politicization

Phenomenologically, I have suggested that public dialogue riddled with polarized evaluations lacks political substance. This is not to say that it is theoretically irrational. If ideological thinking underlies affective polarization, then there is a rational foundation. Furthermore, if the emotional component of affective polarization contains in itself tacit moral evaluations, then the rationality of polarization is all the more buttressed. Rather, the political substance at present might be best understood as an "inelastic rationality" of sorts.

This is the risk when ideology serves as one's political epistemic foundation. I have stated throughout that the political community aims to pursue the common good of its members. It follows that political discourse will involve deliberating the common good.

Polarization clearly renders productive public dialogue a difficult mountain to climb, but it might seem that if it *is* rational at its core, then dialogue is possible. However, the dogma of ideologies demands loyalty from members, and the hearing of arguments from opposing views will be largely ineffectual. The inelastic rationale undergirding ideological structures succeeds in establishing uncompromising worldviews but undermines dialogue in the political community.

In short, mere rational deliberation is not a viable solution. Competing dogmas fill public dialogue, and any proper solution to polarization requires cutting through ideological reasoning and restoring elasticity to public reason. Re-politicization may sound counterintuitive, but politicization in my account involves a renewed investment in the common good, so restoring political substance will involve reorienting political minds away from partisan-based social identities.

In other words, public deliberation and dialogue are essential to resolve polarization in the US, but the solution is not merely to talk to those you disagree with or reluctantly compromise. Polarization begins at the individual cognitive level, and its reduction will most likely begin at this level too. Re-politicization contains two premises: looser ideological identity and volitional political perception.

The final section expands on these two ideas and responds to objections.

**Revisiting Political Perception.** I will begin with the latter premise. Political perception is the crux of an active political mind, as it exposes the individual to the situations of others in the political community and cognitively primes one to consider the common good. Exposure to another's circumstance will likely lead to comparing it with your own experience or others' circumstances. This is precisely what Rawls sought to avoid with the original position and deduction of the principles of justice, because it was assumed that awareness of both one's situation *and* others' situations would inevitably lead to promoting individual good only. He thought the epistemic agent would always seek a societal structure from which they benefit the most, without regard for others.

The hiddenness of the original position abates this problem by developing a selfish empathy. Rawls' thought experiment does not cultivate considering others' needs; it encourages considering yourself in all socioeconomic positions. Rawls assumes the inescapability of self-interest, and in *A Theory of Justice*, he constructs a conception of right based on an abstract form of self-advantageous pursuits. This is also the foundation of the Rawlsian reflective equilibrium, a state of perpetual revision of one's beliefs in light of new concepts achieved by a dialogue between possible selves.

Because of the veil of ignorance, the original position erases perspectival boundaries since the epistemic agent must assume all possible perspectives *and* assume them in the first person. The process of the original position happens at an individual level, but all members of society in this position repeat the conclusions because the knowledge, rational capacities, and decision-making method—rational choice—are the same for each member. Thus, the results of reflective equilibrium are replicated across the board, and according to Rawls, benevolence, the promotion of and desire for another's good,<sup>53</sup> results.

Clearly, my focus is not the same as Rawls' of establishing the principles of justice, but there are philosophical connections. Rawls' account does

not entertain polarization, ideological or affective, because the original position unequivocally precludes disagreement of any sort; his response to pluralism is abstracted ignorance. The reality of polarization and pluralism may serve as a reminder of the importance of nonideal theory, but I am not suggesting that there is nothing to be learned from Rawls. He too holds that for the "basic structure" of society to be grounded in justice, a change of mindset must occur.<sup>54</sup>

The nature of this change is where I depart from Rawls; abating polarization need not depend on reducing individuals to rational machines or masking competing value sets through a veil of ignorance.

My account of political perception offers a foil to the Rawlsian veil. It maintains the same high standards of rational capacities—my account preserves a version of reflective equilibrium—but also grants a positive estimation of affective capacities and underscores perspectival distinctness. Recognizing situational disparity between one's own self and another's does not obstruct reflective equilibrium, because a properly functioning political mind does not shirk the good of another in favor of itself. The notion of the common good is an automatic stabilizer in healthy political minds and may always involve tension with self-interest.

In addition to providing the conditions for a reflective equilibrium, in which an initial evaluation of the common good is reevaluated in light of exposure to the situations of others in a political community, political perception also creates the grounds for affective equilibrium. Cultivated in tandem with reflective equilibrium, affective equilibrium describes a state in which an initial affective evaluation of another is rehashed following new exposures to another's political experiences.

The two equilibriums comprise a two-pronged response to two common understandings of polarization. The object of reflective equilibrium—what must constantly be readjusted as political perception increases at the individual cognitive level and experiences change over time in the political community—is the common good. Reflective equilibrium is a countermeasure against the inelasticity of ideological reasoning. Political perception enables agility in one's

theoretical reason, especially with regard to the common good. The dynamic relationship between fact and value is also represented in my account.

Political perception, the exposure to the socioeconomic situation of another and recognition of it as distinct from one's own, brings facts to the table that are then integrated into a valuation of the common good. Unlike Rawls' notion of reflective equilibrium, the resulting conclusions will differ among individuals. Individual equilibrium does not equal societal equilibrium. (A process of meta-reflective equilibrium may be necessary but will not be discussed here.) The structure of theoretical reason is unique to each member of society. Although every person possesses similar rational capacities, the use of such capacities is influenced by the political perception of the epistemic agent.

On the other hand, the object of affective equilibrium is the conception of other persons; the affective evaluation of another is what is readjusted in light of political perception. This is intended to counteract the tendency to form unfavorable judgments about members of the opposite party.

The relationship between the cognitive processes of reflective equilibrium and affective equilibrium parallels the relationship between the rational and affective nature. If one process takes place in the foreground, the other continues in the background—and vice versa.

Permitting perception of political facts, events, and the experiences of others in the political community to seep into one's cognitive patterns is one proposed way to restore political substance to public dialogue. In my account, reflective equilibrium and affective equilibrium serve as the epistemic basis of deliberation rather than ideological thinking. Benevolence and considering the good of others are outcomes of this line of thought, but unlike in Rawls' vision, where these outcomes obtain despite the epistemic agent's awareness of situational disparity and perspectival distinctiveness, the political mind is enhanced because of the presence of such factors.

**Loosened Ideological Identity.** The second premise of re-politicization is the loosening of ideological

identity. Loosened ideological identity does not encourage abandoning political or social groups, but rather warns against association for the sake of epistemic provision. Indeed, most of this report has emphasized the need to prioritize the common good to diminish polarization. Commitment to a political community cannot involve blind allegiance to the value set of a subgroup if it threatens the well-being of the community.

Loosening social identity in the context of party membership is an individual cognitive act that resists conformity to inelastic ideologies. The desire to be a part of a political party clearly reflects a human need for belonging, but it also creates circumstances in which social alienation constitutes social identity. The belongingness of ideological identity is founded on stark boundaries—loyalty for in-group members and exclusionary conduct toward out-group members.

Returning to Rawls, a redeemable quality of the original position is that the lack of particular knowledge, such as situational disparities and perspectival distinctiveness, staves off coalition formation, so the principles of justice do not serve group interests. My urge above to maintain particular knowledge so that political minds might be sharpened through political perception opens up the possibility of subgroups developing in a political community.

Acknowledging pluralism and recognizing differences certainly may accentuate the desire for an epistemic provider and social belongingness *if* it is assumed that belongingness can take place only in an environment of the like-minded and similarly situated. Thus, social identity becomes the conduit of what Luttig calls “epistemic certainty.”<sup>55</sup> He writes that political parties in the US are “very much like those homogenous or entitative groups recognized in social psychology as effectives of psychological certainty.”<sup>56</sup> Loosening ideological identity fights such assumptions and resists the need for certainty.

My argument does not advocate banning Rawlsian coalitions, social subgroups, or political parties, however. Instead, it draws attention to the dangers involved in grounding one's identity in an ideology for the sake of epistemic certainty. Although it may

be the dogmatic component of ideology that makes it attractive to the epistemic agent, it also provides ideologues with an inflexible hermeneutic. Ideas are reappraised only insofar as they conform to the value set of an ideology and pursue epistemic certainty; new political perceptions do not influence one's patterns of reasoning.

In one sense, loosening ideological identity distinguishes the pursuit of truth and the pursuit of certainty. The former reassesses ideas in perpetuity to deepen understanding. The latter reflects what Luttig describes as the "need for closure"<sup>57</sup> in a "prejudiced personality."<sup>58</sup>

Relinquishing epistemic certainty is risky, because it involves exchanging epistemic security for epistemic tension; a flourishing political mind does not seek psychological comfort. It is helpful to reconceive of belongingness so it avoids entrenching a sense of social belonging in undeviating agreement with the group. Such a conception of belonging requires a nuanced sense of the social self in which selfhood does not congregate around a set of group ideas, but focuses on the role of the group in encouraging intellectual formation and responsibility.

Thus, surrendering ideological identity need not result in leaving the group if belonging or membership is not conditional on conformity to ideology. An individual can remain in a group, hopefully maintain a sense of belonging, and practice what John Inazu calls epistemic humility, "the idea that our lack of certainty in or proof about our views should lead us to a more humble posture in our engagement with others."<sup>59</sup> The dialectic between epistemic certainty and humility is the breeding ground for reflective equilibrium.

Luttig's study also suggests that epistemic certainty may initially attract one to join a political party, but the attraction eventually becomes the group itself and not its values. "Many engaged respondents are strong partisans because their psychological needs and motivations predispose them to be prejudiced in favor of in-groups and against out-groups."<sup>60</sup>

This ostensibly indicates that epistemic certainty is gained merely through conformity without an evaluative or rational basis. This does not pose a problem for my claims above about ideological identity and

supports my baseline premise that public discourse lacks political substance. Luttig's conclusions are unique because they imply ideological polarization grounded in human affectivity. He writes, "Democrats and Republicans are divided on the basis of an ideologically vacuous 'us' versus 'them' mindset. Partisan polarization in America is largely a conflict of groups, not of values."<sup>61</sup>

If this is so, party membership and ideological identity in the US may not be epistemically stable. Luttig's study implies that ideological polarization may be a bit of a smoke screen—nurtured not by an authentic commitment to a worldview, but by a false commitment for the sake of belonging. This may, in return, make loosening ideological identity smoother if, from the start, an individual is not as tightly bound to group values as to the group itself.

## Conclusion

Rawls' concern about coalition development is legitimate, because interest groups can act as an obstacle to fair governance. But his concern also reflects the legitimate assumption that humans have a proclivity for strong social associations. Rawls' account of political deliberation recognizes the less-than-admirable motives of human nature to pursue self-interest and join groups that accrue further advantages. But it severely underestimates the human propensity for goodness and reduces deliberative capabilities to mechanisms of pure reason. Restoring political substance in public dialogue entails rejecting the Rawlsian premises of restricted knowledge and prevention of group formation.

My account of the political mind is not compatible with detached, contemplative rationality and does not view political reality as an obstacle to careful discernment in policymaking. Political perception and existing groups are encouraged alongside individual cognitive reformation against the pull of psychological certainty.

Political substance is not equanimous with the common good, but it is best understood as the perpetual reflection on a society's common good. If

cultivating political substance is understood as a process of re-politicization wherein basic societal structures are considered in light of sociopolitical realities, then the original position could be considered a process of de-politicization wherein discernment about basic structures is external to society.

In my account of the political mind, the three Rawlsian characteristics of reflective equilibrium, rationality, and public reason or dialogue are both enriched and individuated through political perception. The common good involves diachronic integration and reappraisal; it does not remain static through time. A society does not find unity in mutual trust conditioned by expectations of reciprocity, but in trust conditioned by agile political minds that recognize the intertwined futures of each citizen and resist isolated focus on the future of a single self.

Patrick Deneen has written on the surrender to self-interest in modern society in what he calls the

degradation of citizenship. He claims that liberalism has gradually led to a view of government institutions as a “beneficent entity that supports limitless provision of material goods and untrammled expansion of private identity.”<sup>62</sup>

The section above suggests that private identity is often entrenched in a group membership chosen for the sake of belongingness, but Deneen’s sentiment nevertheless reflects the crowding out of investment in the common good. The political mind is a volitional cognitive reorientation toward the common good and, as I have said, may require a measure of private irrationality against one’s telos. This cognitive reorientation may be called the restoration of citizenship. Developing the political mind and returning to an inflated sense of citizenship in the political community creates the grounds for restoring political substance in public discourse.

# Notes

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