

The Thinking – Feeling Duality

Excerpt from *The Hand That Rocks the World*, by David Shackleton

Currently, the most influential and widespread imbalance in society is around thinking/feeling. This duality is fundamental, and a central concern of this book, since it relates to the process by which we decide what is true in our lives and in the world. If we have a bias towards thinking, then we determine what is so by considering evidence and following deductions and inferences towards conclusions. If we have a bias towards feeling, then we judge what is true by what feels right, what fits best with our “gut feel” about life and the world. This latter imbalance in favor of feeling is the dominant psychic dysfunction of our time, so common that it is practically invisible, regarded as completely normal. Most people don’t realize that thinking is a learned skill, and that having thoughts about things, which everybody does, is no more thinking than hacking at a piece of wood is sculpture or carpentry. One has to learn how to sculpt and to build, and one has to learn how to think.

However, we don’t have to learn how to feel. How we feel about the world presents itself immediately as life goes along, and feels both right and complete, so the fact that one lacks something, the fact that the feeling could be mistaken needs to be deduced from other evidence, and doing so means losing that feeling of complete rightness, at least for a time while one contemplates the possibility that it could be an error. Most people simply refuse to do this, or even to recognize any need for it, until life gives them so much trouble that they begin questioning their basic ideas. For many, probably most, they do not get to this point before death intervenes. Feeling is so powerful, it often overwhelms the psyche, and the certainty that one is completely right needs no more support or confirmation than the feeling of rightness that presents itself ready made and deeply compelling.

For evidence of this one-sided pattern as the basic mode of human psychic interaction these days, consider the three things that everybody knows there is little point discussing – sport, politics and religion. Why is that? Why can’t we have a reasonable discussion about these things? I think we know that it is because we are basically not rational, i.e., reasonable – which means, in practice, willing to discover that we are wrong about these issues. In the past I have asked Mormons or Jehovah’s Witnesses who came to my door whether there was anything that I could say, any argument that I could make, that might convince them that they were wrong in their beliefs. All told me proudly that there is no such argument, that they know what is true by unshakable faith. They have, it would seem, insulated themselves from reason, indeed from reality. If they are mistaken, they cannot discover it because they will not allow themselves to consider the possibility of error.

What is acknowledged by the religious is often just as true, though unacknowledged, in sports and politics. It is the feeling of rightness that provides the conviction that one is right, and that allows one to simply dismiss any argument to the contrary. Contrary arguments are dismissed on the grounds that they don’t feel right, don’t feel true, and this is the sole and solitary test of truth for that large majority of us who have a strong bias towards feeling. So let us examine how good a test this is. How well does feeling work in knowing what is true?

Let’s start with falling in love. Most of us have experienced this overwhelming human feeling, and it is clearly a form of delicious insanity. Love songs and poems often contain hyperbole insisting that love will last for ever, will never change. Yet we are surrounded by evidence that this is not true – the divorce rate, for starters. What is going on? Clearly we mistake intensity for longevity. The love experience is

such an intense feeling that we conclude it *must* last for ever. We *feel* it to be true. How could something so deep, so powerful, be ephemeral? ¹

Yet it is. It changes, it passes. Do we go back and learn from our error, realize how mistaken we were? Not usually. We prefer to hold onto the magic memory of that feeling, to believe that it was true, just that the *lover* has changed, they are not the same person we fell in love with. We prefer not to learn from experience, or rather, we learn the wrong lessons. The power of feeling, the intensity, and the pleasure we gain from feeling right and wise and knowing what is true, leads us to sacrifice real truth for its image, for what feels true.

The falling in love feeling achieves its intensity by being augmented with a host of brain chemicals, dopamine and other drugs dispensed from the body's inner pharmacy. But what of other feelings of rightness, those associated with sports or politics or religion, or just those supporting our worldview? How do they achieve their power to insulate us from reality, to make us deny and dismiss all evidence that they are mistaken?

The psychological answer is "cognitive dissonance". What does that mean in ordinary language? It means that discovering that we are wrong about something is distressful. It hurts. It is embarrassing, it is upsetting, it usually means that we discover we have done harm to others in the past when we acted on our false beliefs, and it always means that we have to revise our picture of reality, our psychic maps. All of these things are difficult, indeed painful to do or even to contemplate. And the longer we have left it since we last made a revision to our worldview, the greater all of these stresses will be and the less practice we will have at tolerating the pain and finding our way through it. For many people, the task becomes impossible in practice and they become completely stuck, deeply wedded to falsehood and determined to defend it to the end.

So we witness the almost universal spectacle of people arguing with each other about what is true in some area, where each side is convinced that they are right and cannot understand why the other side doesn't get what they are saying, doesn't see the truth the way that they do. Read any internet comments page and you will see this in spades. Each side believes as they do because it feels right to them. They present thoughts about their beliefs – sometimes evidence, more usually just repeated assertions of their beliefs. After all, that's enough to convince them – the feeling of rightness that they experience when they hear their own assertions is all that it takes for them to know that they are true. Why doesn't the other person see the obvious? They don't see it, of course, because they don't get the same feelings when they hear the assertions. Rather, they get opposite feelings, feelings of wrongness. People resort to flaming, to personal accusations in these situations because it is so frustrating – one is so sure of one's rightness, because of one's feeling of rightness, that it is clear that the other person must be an idiot, or worse, a subversive of some kind, not to agree with you.

Of course, exactly the same is going on for the other party. There is no possibility of one side convincing the other because each is insulated from reality by their attachment to their personal image of reality, the only image that gives them the feeling of rightness that they need. There is no way that reason can contradict such feelings, since the feelings simply tell us that the reasoning is faulty. Thus we see a proliferation of interest groups, where people with corresponding feelings about what is true align themselves together. The liberal left is one such group; the conservative right another.

There is experimental evidence that confirms the current primacy of feeling. In his book *The Righteous Mind*, psychologist Jonathan Haidt relates how he presented experimental subjects with stories in which something disturbing or disgusting was done, such as eating a deceased family pet or cutting up the

¹ "Love may start out as a good feeling, but to love someone long-term is an act of the will." - [Elizabeth George, One-Minute Inspirations for Women.](#)

national flag, but in which no one was harmed. The subjects of his experiments reliably judged that the action was morally wrong, but didn't know why because they couldn't identify a victim. He found that

“... even when subjects recognized that their victim claims were bogus, they still refused to say that the act was ok. Instead, they kept searching for another victim. They said things like, ‘I know it’s wrong, but I just can’t think of a reason why.’ ... These subjects were reasoning. They were working quite hard at reasoning. But it was not reasoning in search of truth, it was reasoning in support of their emotional reactions. It was reasoning as described by the philosopher David Hume, who wrote in 1739 that ‘reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them.’ⁱ I had found evidence for Hume’s claim. I had found that moral reasoning was often a servant of moral emotions, and this was a challenge to the rationalist approach that dominated moral psychology.”ⁱⁱ

Where do these feelings come from that provide us such certainty about what is right, what is true? Let us consider a thought experiment. You are walking in your home town, and you see a close friend exit a nearby shop. The friend looks right at you but does not say hello, does not acknowledge you in any way before turning away and hurrying down the street. How could your friend be so thoughtless, to ignore you completely? Perhaps you feel affronted, insulted at your friend’s avoidance of you. Perhaps you feel guilty; you must have done something to offend your friend. These feelings arrive ready made, they show up instantly.

You go into the store that your friend was in. The owner recognizes you and says, “You just missed your friend. She had a cell phone call while she was here; her daughter was in a motor accident.” Instantly your feelings change; now you understand your friend’s behavior and feel compassion for her distress and your earlier feeling of offense vanishes as if it had never existed.

It is clear from such thought experiments that feelings do not come from nowhere; they are built upon our beliefs about a situation, the *meaning* that we give it. They change as soon as our beliefs change. Accurate beliefs give rise to appropriate feelings, like your compassion for your friend. Inaccurate beliefs give rise to inappropriate feelings, like your initial offense at your friend’s behavior. Our feelings of rightness or wrongness about what is so are the same – they arise instantly to confirm a description that agrees with our worldview, or to deny one that contradicts it. It’s no more complicated than that. Yet most of this process is unconscious, invisible to us. You weren’t aware of forming your beliefs, for instance your assumptions about the causes of your friend’s behavior in the thought experiment above; it happened instantly and automatically.

What this means in practice is that our worldview actively defends itself from discovering error, by making any statements that contradict it feel instantly wrong to us. If we wish to know whether our worldview contains error, we must tolerate the feelings of wrongness in the knowledge that those feelings might be inappropriate, might be quite wrong themselves. Whether something feels right or wrong to us is not a measure of objective or subjective truth, it is a measure only of how well it aligns with and supports the assumptions we have made, what we already believe.²

A story from my own life illustrates this. At some point in my childhood, I came across the word “mised” in a book. Not knowing how it was pronounced, I made a wrong assumption. I assumed it was the past tense of a verb I hadn’t met before, the verb “to misle,” pronounced *myzell*, which from the context must mean something like ‘to confuse, to lead astray.’ I spent the next few years innocently holding a wrong belief about this word, not knowing that the word I believed in didn’t actually exist. Of course, my wrong belief gave rise automatically to wrong feelings. The fact that I never once encountered “misle” in the present tense didn’t tip me off to my error, since I wasn’t looking to check myself about this.

² “Is it how it feels to do the right things? Because it sucks!” — [Susan Vaught, *Big Fat Manifesto*](#).

Even today, years after I discovered and corrected my error, the word “misle” still feels right to me, still has the resonance of a real English word in my mind. It was a little piece of meaning construction that was uniquely my own creation – but it *felt* just as valid to me as all of the other words that *are* objectively real.

It’s hard to really get just how arbitrary these feelings are, how they can be completely wrong and untrue. They *feel* real, and that feeling is compelling, difficult to doubt. Yet, if we are to discover what is genuinely, really true, we must question such feelings, and doing so begins with recognizing their fallibility.

What could provide the motivation for this arduous process of going against feeling? For some people, it is an accumulation of life problems that finally provides the conviction that something must be wrong, that something new must be tried. For others, there is a point reached when they become ready and eager for a greater level of truth in their lives. But whether it is desperation or determination, it comes down to just one thing: what do we really want? Do we want to know what is really true, or do we want to keep a set of reassuring lies that *feel* true, while telling ourselves the cover story that we want truth?

For me, a major change in what I wanted occurred during my relationship with my second wife. Throughout my childhood, my mother had used shame to manipulate me into doing what she wanted, into being a ‘good boy.’ A result of this was that, as an adult, I still needed the key woman in my life to affirm me, to reassure me that I was a worthy man, a good man. Having married my first wife because she was unlike my mother, I now began to live with a woman who was exactly like my mother (though I didn’t see it at the time). She alternately shamed and affirmed me, and I was addicted to the pleasure I felt in the moments when she acknowledged that I was right and worthy, or she forgave me and validated me again. I was dependent on her for this sense of personal worth as a man, but I didn’t recognize the reality of this dependence, nor did I see how I was a co-creator of the pattern of rejection and reunion that we danced again and again.

We argued frequently and intensely, she accusing me of being responsible for what was wrong in our relationship, and I accusing her. I was sure that I was right, all of my arguments felt completely righteous to me, and I thought that if she would ever just listen to what I was saying and take it in, all of our problems would be solved. But it didn’t happen that way. One time, in an argument, she said something about me that I didn’t have a ready answer for. I don’t remember what it was, but for the first time I found myself considering that she could have a point. It was a brand new experience, and not a pleasant one. I was not used to considering that I could be wrong.

I took to walking around our neighborhood of east Ottawa in the evenings after work, and as I walked I tried to work out what in our complex relationship was my responsibility and what was hers. What were the boundaries between her and me, where was I truly guilty and where not? It took some weeks of nightly solitary walks for me to get clear on the major divisions of responsibility between us, but they did come clear to me. As I discovered my own areas of guilt and looked at my past behaviors with some shame, I acknowledged my guilt to her and apologized for my behavior and for my self-righteousness in previously denying it. There was pain in it, in falling off my pedestal and owning up to guilt, but there was also a sense of something sacred in it, something real and true and powerful. However, the core of my dysfunction, my need for her affirmation, her good opinion of me for me to feel ok about myself, still hadn’t been touched.

That came to a head during a vacation to the Maritime Provinces. We were travelling in my truck, and she accused and shamed me relentlessly, for hours. I would argue, but eventually I would break down in tears and could not drive any more. I would get out and sit on the side of the road and cry until I recovered, then get back in and drive some more, and the pattern would repeat. It culminated in a night in a motor camp when neither of us slept at all. She spent the whole night analyzing my every behavior

since we had met, and showing me how I had been totally wrong in every way, while she had been entirely the innocent victim.

That evening, I chose to surrender, to cease to argue at all and to look instead for every bit of truth that I could find in her words. I decided to try to see myself through her eyes and to convict myself in every case where it could be done. I don't know why I made that choice, but it was, in hindsight, the most powerful thing I have ever done. In my total humility I became utterly and completely safe for her, and she shared her most intimate judgments and fears of me. I used none of it to judge her, but only to see myself more clearly. In that place and at that time, I surrendered totally to the feminine, to her power to convict me and shame me and judge me unworthy, and I ceased trying to defend myself from her judgments.

I have never suffered worse psychic pain before or since as I did that night. In my humility I accepted my guilt as accused, and apologized and asked for her forgiveness. I think that if she could have met me in that place at all, could have owned any of her projections and her need for innocent victimhood, we might have begun to build a real and honest relationship. But she did not and instead continued to see me as entirely guilty and herself as blameless. Within a month, the distortions and one-sidedness of her perceptions about me became apparent to me, and I returned to balance, to the truth that we both were guilty, and both innocent.

The effect of that ordeal was to heal the deepest part of the shame wound my mother had inflicted on me. By ceasing to defend myself from the accusations of guilt and shame, I was able for the first time to really look at what they said about me. For the first time, I had taken them seriously and considered whether they were true. I let them in and I discovered, to my surprise, that they weren't true. I had guilt, indeed, I had dysfunctional behavior patterns, but I wasn't shameful, I wasn't unworthy as a man. I was, in fact, a good man, one who cared greatly about others and about doing what was right.

What a gift that was! I had been tested in a total shame attack from my intimate partner, and I had survived. More than survived – for the first time I had allowed myself to cease defending my innocence and actually examine the question, put it to the test. Fearing the worst, fearing that I would convict myself, I actually discovered the best, that my fear of unworthiness was a false fear.

The point I want to draw from this is that as long as we deny and oppose the ideas of others when they suggest that we are wrong, we can learn nothing from them. And we have the most to learn exactly where we defend most vigorously. The wise policy is to ignore the feeling that others are wrong in the knowledge that *it*, the feeling could be wrong, and to look carefully for whatever truth can be found in their ideas, especially their ideas about us. The essence of this careful looking is that we seek ways that the other's ideas could be *true*, rather than the more usual, and much easier, search for ways to refute them. This change of attitude is the key to discovering truth. If the ideas of others are found to be wrong after careful examination (and they often will be), we will have lost nothing but a little time. But then we will *know* that they are wrong based on evidence, rather than just assuming it because of our feelings about them. But if we find that they are right, then we will have learned something important and can correct our error. We will be closer to wisdom.

This is, in fact, the description of how to discover truth that was offered in chapter one. By “holding the question open” while simultaneously examining all ideas with careful, critical thinking, by including ourselves and our potential biases in the question and examining those as well, we are in fact integrating two sets of dualistic opposites; the opposites of open-mindedness and critical judgment, and the opposites of self and other. In a word, we are behaving wisely, and that is why this is the most powerful approach available for the pursuit of truth.

i Hume 1969/1739-40, p.462.

ii Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind; Why Good People are Divided by Politics and Religion*, Pantheon Books, NY, 2012, p14-15.