

Moral Choices VII

Talk to their elephant.

[Reflections based on J Haidt The Righteous Mind]

The scenario I wrote about last week used a metaphor to describe our cognitive life as divided between hot emotion [the elephant] and cool reason [the rider]. As you may recall the rider only influences the elephant when the emotional response is challenged. When we have to make a moral choice we react with our emotions. For example here is a story that is designed to cause a moral choice: "Jennifer who works in a hospital pathology lab and is a vegetarian for moral reasons, thinks it is wrong to kill animals. But one night she has to dispose of a fresh human cadaver, and she thinks it a waste to throw away "perfectly edible flesh." So she cuts off a piece and takes it home, cooks and eats it. This should raise your elephant's disgust. Those who were quizzed had a strong moral response of condemnation, but when challenged people seemed to flail around throwing out reason after reason, but only rarely changing their minds. People make moral judgments immediately and emotionally. Reasoning after the judgment is made as a search for reasons to justify the judgment. This insight is not new, Philosopher David Hume [18 C British] wrote "And as reasoning is not the source, whence either disputant derives his tenets; it is in vain to expect that any logic, which speaks not to the affections, will ever engage him to embrace sounder principles." If you want to change a person's mind, you talk to their elephant. Dale Carnegie understood this in his classic book How to Win Friends and Influence People. He said "never say 'you're wrong!' Persuade by being friendly, smile and listen well. "Get the other person's point of view."

IHM Pray for us.

Fr. Jerry