

Moral Choices IX

Making the choice, key words and our responses.

[Reflections based on J Haidt The Righteous Mind]

When the elephant leans the rider follows; this is called “affective priming” and was tested by scientists who measured the response time when pairs of words were shown to the subjects being tested. The first word in pairs will get the elephant to lean: so if it is a positive word, such as “flower” the emotional flash kicks in within 200 milliseconds, and lasts for about one second beyond that. If you see a second word within that one-second of feeling, and that word has the same affective response such as “sunshine” your mind responds extra quickly, and your elephant leans in the direction of the positive stimulus. However if the second word has a different affect such as “cancer” it will take about 250 milliseconds longer to respond because your mind has to undo the lean toward the positive “flower.” Of course advertisers have been using this trick for centuries. Associate your product with something positive and your elephant leans in that direction. Over a lifetime we acquire reactions that are instantaneous, and sets of words will inspire an automatic intuitive response. Consider this list of words: Clinton, Bush, flag, taxes, welfare, and pro-life. The researchers found that some words were incompatible for liberals such as pro-life and sunshine. While for conservatives Clinton and sunshine were incompatible. A partisan is made by having acquired the “right” set of intuitive reactions to hundreds of words and phrases, and your elephant knows exactly which way to lean in response to such words and ideas. You find yourself liking and trusting the people around you who lean in sync with you, and vice versa.

IHM Pray for us.

Fr. Jerry