

*To Public Choice seminar goers:* The draft material found here is for my presentation Sept. 7, 2016, but the paper is incomplete. In my presentation I will move forward, into ideas not found here. I will present the broad lines, to sketch the whole. – Daniel Klein

# Cohesionism

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*Abstract:* I posit an idea of social cohesion, the archetype of which is the ancestral band, and suggest that band-like social cohesion is natural to humans. Such social cohesion is a very special sort of experience of sympathy. Ngram evidence since 1700 indicates a decline in social cohesion. Modernity and liberalism have frustrated the yearning for social cohesion, and – apart from the governmentalization of social affairs – offer, instead, only open-society sympathies. Late modernity may be interpreted in terms of a struggle between cohesionism-cum-governmentalization and liberalism with its not-so-satisfying open-society sympathies. Open-society sympathies take three forms: (1) common-decency sympathy, instantiated even among strangers in respecting one another’s basic humanity, that is, in common decency; (2) associational sympathy, instantiated in myriad intersecting associations; and (3) allegorical humanist sympathy, experienced in pondering the serving of an allegorical and abstract universal benevolence. Each of the three kinds of open-society sympathy lacks qualities that cohesionism demands: supreme and definitive focalness and centrality (as symbolized by a totem or reification), encompassment of experience and sentiment, democratic participation and consensus, a sense of common knowledge, and a definitive sense of validation, the sense of a holy “we,” an organizational feeling of holy-we group action and cooperation. I suggest that some classical liberals, notably Adam Smith, may have downplayed the entrepreneurial dynamism of liberalism from the sense that such creative destruction displeases cohesionist bents and would turn people off from liberalism. In keeping with Hayek’s atavism thesis, I interpret modern collectivist politics as a reconditioning and reassertion of cohesionist mentalities and bents. I discuss implications and pose a number of challenges to classical liberals, libertarians, and conservatives.

It is not in that order, I am afraid, that we are to expect any extraordinary extension of, what is called, natural affection.

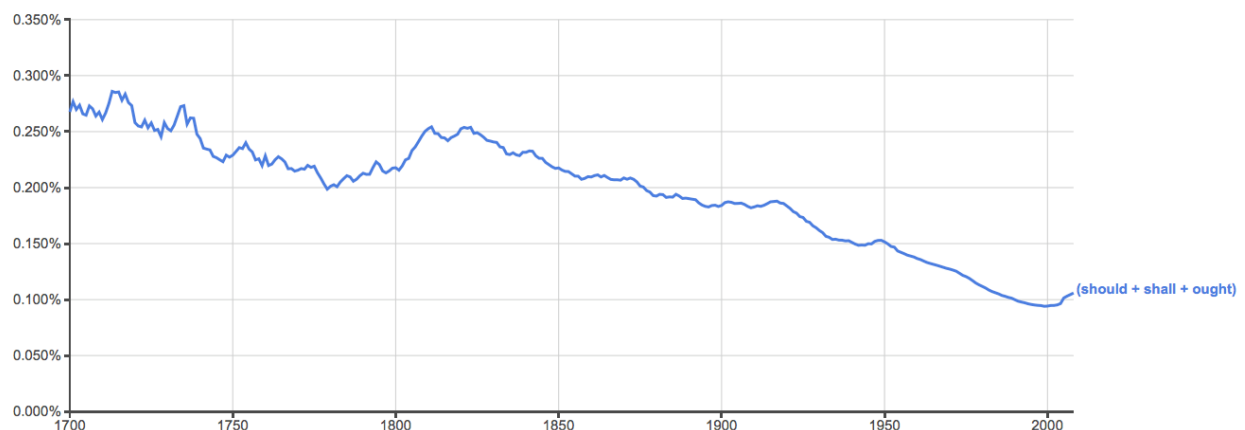
-- Adam Smith, TMS (223.13)

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<sup>1</sup> Acknowledgment: I thank John MacDhubhain for numerous discussions and his input and feedback.

Despite not having evidence to cite,<sup>2</sup> I claim that we use “should” and “ought” a lot more in speech, particularly one-to-one speech, than in published text. Speech, especially one-to-one, is communication under much surer assumptions of common understandings of the relevant lines of propriety, lines that suit the purposes, opportunities, and constraints of the situation. If my wife and I talk about our daughter’s experience in school yesterday, and I say “we should talk to the teacher,” there is the situation of my daughter in school, and there is the situation of my wife and I talking. There is the situation treated by the speech act, and the situation, or context, within which “we should talk to the teacher” is a move. In both senses, situational knowledge is usually much more particular and definite in speech than in published text. Indeed, for published text the reader is indefinite and open-ended; and, naturally, assumptions about what the reader knows about particular situations are much less sure. As regards my daughter’s experience in school yesterday, any text that I might publish about it leaves the reader knowing only what I report about it, and even then all the readers know is that *I reported* such-and-such. Their knowledge is meager—and their concern, more so. Correspondingly, in published text I am much more general and vague, and less likely to write “should.”

When intelligence or understanding about situations, about where the lines of propriety lie, are less common, discourses are less likely to use “should” and “ought.” Apply the principle to the 308-year graph from published texts shown in Figure 1, from Google’s Ngram viewer<sup>3</sup>:

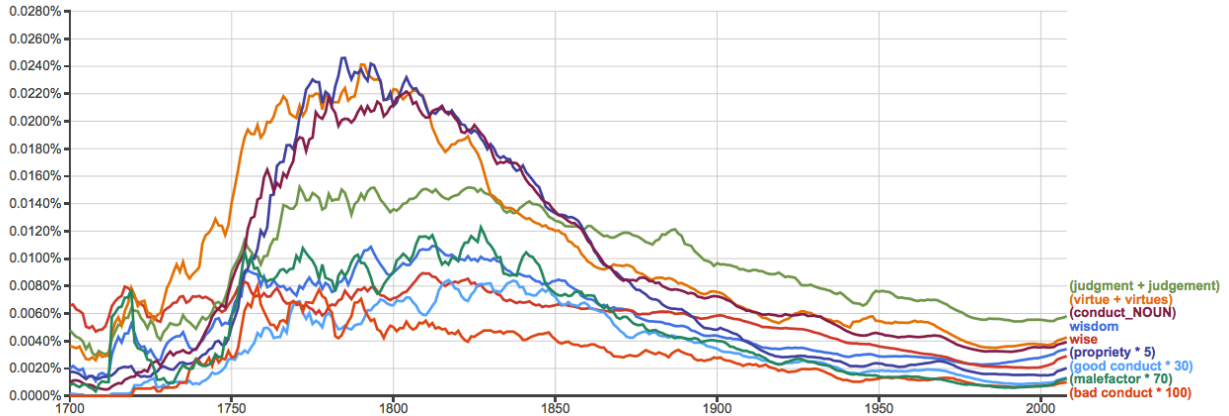


<sup>2</sup> If you know of evidence for the claim, please share it with me.

<sup>3</sup> Here as in the other figures I used the default 3-year smoothing, 1700-2008, case sensitive, English corpus, unless otherwise indicated.

I suggest that the decline shown reflects a decline in common understanding about the lines of propriety.

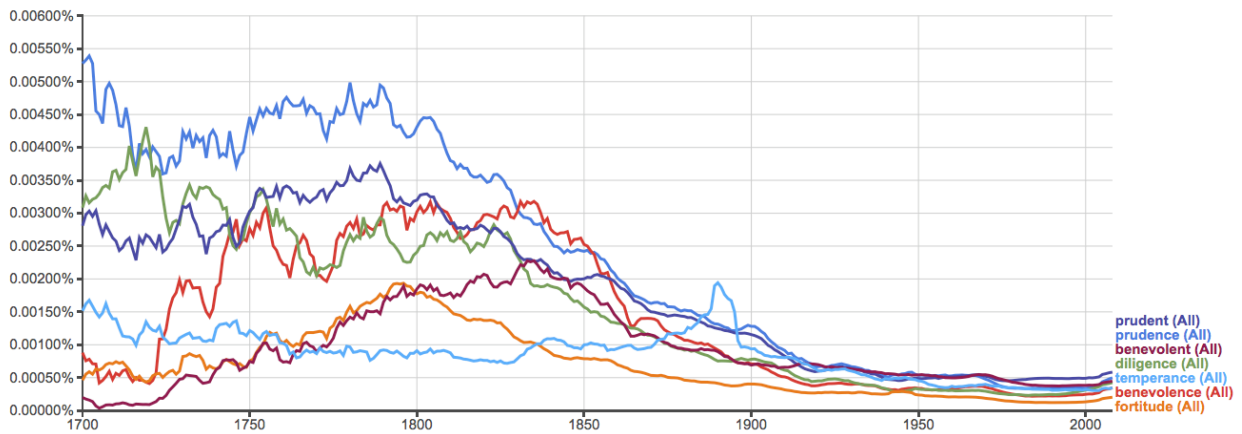
Figure 2 shows another set of terms that that are especially dependent on common understandings of the line of propriety:



Here we see a huge rise from 1700 to 1800. I'd like to suggest that the rise reflects a wave of a sort of moral philosophizing apt to use such terms. But from 1800, that wave is overtaken by the ongoing fragmentation and complexification of social and moral experience.

Talk of staple virtues presupposes common understandings of the lines of propriety.

Figure 3 shows that these have generally declined since 1700:



The foregoing figures are presented to drive home the idea – treated by myriad thinkers and scholars – that modernity, complexification, and fragmentation alter the moral conditions of human experience. Such developments have come fast and furious to a species whose genes are principally still those of the ancestral band.

Looking back over the past several hundred years, Karl Polanyi saw, first, locally centric moral economies: “[A]ll economic systems known to us up to the end of feudalism in Western Europe were organized...on the principles of reciprocity or redistribution, or householding... These principles were institutionalized with help of a social organization which...made use of the patterns of symmetry, centricity, and autarchy” (54-55). Next, he saw the rise of markets and of liberal principles, causing ceaseless turmoil, fragmentation, and moral and social disintegration:

- “Machine production in a commercial society involves...a transformation...of the natural and human substance of society into commodities” (42).
- “the dislocation caused by such devices must disjoint man’s relationships and threaten his natural habitat with annihilation” (42).
- “Economic liberalism was the organizing principle of a society engaged in creating a market system” (135).
- “[T]he cause of the degradation” is “the disintegration of the cultural environment of the victim...” (157).
- “[T]he immediate cause of [the victim’s] undoing...lies in the lethal injury to the institutions in which his social existence is embodied. The result is loss of self-respect and standards ...” (157).

Those last words, concerning the loss of “standards,” are what I mean by the loss of common understandings of the lines of propriety. When such lines are commonly known and shared, there is social cohesion. When lost, social cohesion declines—*discohesion*. Polanyi says that such decline brings a corresponding loss of self-respect.

Meanwhile, the fragmentation and ceaseless turmoil brought on a reaction:

- “Yet simultaneously a countermovement was on foot. ... [I]t was a reaction against a dislocation which attacked the fabric of society ...” (130).
- “The countermove against economic liberalism ... possessed all the unmistakable characteristics of a spontaneous reaction ...” (149).
- “social protection set in” (202).
- “Politically, the nation’s identity was established by the government; economically it was vested in the central bank” (205).

- “Our own interpretation of the double movement is, we find, borne out by the evidence. For if market economy was a threat to the human and natural components of the social fabric, as we insisted, what else would one expect than an urge on the part of a great variety of people to press for some sort of protection? This was what we found” (150).
- “Liberal writers like Spencer and Sumner, Mises and Lippmann offer an account of the double movement substantially similar to our own, but they put an entirely different interpretation on it. While in our view the concept of a self-regulating market was Utopian, and its progress was stopped by the realistic self-protection of society, in their view all protectionism was a mistake...” (141-42).
- According to the liberals, he says, “Western Europe was passing through a new Enlightenment and high amongst its bugbears ranked the ‘tribalistic’ concept of the nation, whose alleged sovereignty was to liberals an outcrop of parochial thinking” (203).

Although Polanyi’s story picks up with the early modern period, some of his remarks suggest a more primordial basis for the principle of centrality, as when he says: “The institutional pattern of centrality,...provides a track for the collection, storage, and redistribution of goods and services. The members of a hunting tribe usually deliver the game to the headman for redistribution...The economic system is, in effect, a mere function of social organization” (49).

The Western Civilization story I tell picks up with the end of the Upper Paleolithic, roughly 10,000 years ago, when we still lived in small bands of, say, 50 people, the moral and social experience that governed the selection of our genes. It is my understanding that, although now smarter, taller, and more lactose-tolerant, we remain Upper Paleolithic in measure large enough to warrant contemplation of atavisms rooted in our band nature.

The story broadly follows Adam Smith’s four-stage theory (hunters, shepherds, agriculture, commerce), and goes like this:

- Up to some 10,000 years ago we had lived a long time in small bands, which were highly egalitarian and in a sense democratic; anybody could kill anybody; we followed and gratified our instincts and penchants for strong, encompassing social cohesion. If you didn’t fit the program your genes didn’t survive.
- Folks hit upon shepherding and agriculture, creating more social hierarchy and, with agriculture, settlement and increasing specialization; social organization

transcended the band: tribes and nations formed; people traded more, and conquered and organized on larger scale. Religion and centric power were united.

- Pharaohs built pyramids, someone came up with zero, and Helen ran off with Paris.
- More years passed and Gutenberg invented the printing press, enabling an author to broadcast miscreancy and heresy.
- In the Reformation, theocrats and others vied for the ring of power, leading armies and mobs into slaughter.
- Fed up with theocratic and similar fanaticisms, Castelli, Grotius, and others suggested to a riven Europe: Hey, maybe the centric jural superior, the sovereign, the governor, instead of sanctifying, inculcating, regimenting, and enforcing the highest, most meaningful things in life, the totems and rituals of “effervescence” (Durkheim 1915), should sanctify, inculcate, regiment, and enforce the lowest, most basic, most grammatical rules of social coexistence, such as not messing with your neighbor’s stuff, and leave the highest things, notably religion, to private conscience, voluntary choice, and free competition. “The Minds of Men, now grown weary of Dissention, now are encouraged to hope for this” (Grotius 1625, 73).
- Liberal thinking developed, and in some places gained influence. In the eighteenth century, the British experience emerged as central. Island geography reduced vulnerability, reduced the sway of rationales for contravening the liberty principle, and reduced the need for standing armies. Island geography created conditions in which the emergence of a sense of the whole and a corresponding sense of national identity were less dependent on the governmentalization of social affairs. Under relatively liberal conditions, voluntary associations proved creative, not only in enterprise and commerce but in social exfoliation and beneficence, in clubs and organizations, exemplified by voluntarily funded schooling and the invention and organization of sports. Compared to their counterparts in other countries, thinkers in Britain had personal knowledge of a more liberal social experience, and their liberal teachings found a warmer reception. They were more able to relate liberal principles to actual social

existence, to the actually functioning lines of propriety; their discourse could better complete the ethical yin-yang between part and whole. Much more so than on the continent, in Britain liberal writers realized a position of cultural leadership and even cultural royalty— Adam Smith, most notably. Liberal practice proved rich and powerful, while island geography continued to help Britain withstand the destabilizing and discohering tendencies of liberal exfoliation.

- After 1776 the liberal ascent continued for a while. But reactionaries like Jean-Jacques Rousseau agonized over dis cohesion and irresponsibly excited irresponsible, atavistic appetites and instincts.
- By about a century later, for reasons including ones highlighted by Karl Polanyi, the rising generations turned against liberalism. Very quickly, liberal semantics and understanding were substantially undone. Latent band-rooted cohesionist urges, reconditioned to invented traditions and imagined communities and invoking democratic principles, rapidly found a new lease on life. Not just printed words, but sounds and images, what our instincts take as moral presence, enabled an illusory cohesion of national scale. Now, as Hayek tells in his atavism thesis, people forsook their liberal scruples and indulged once again in centrism, looking to government power, if not the particular administration in power, for cohesion, meaning, and validation. Governments organized mass indoctrination of the new cohesionism. There was an astonishing surge in the governmentalization of social affairs. Reconditioned cohesionist tendencies now dominated the culture and, as it were, engineered semantics to disarm liberal criticism and opposition.
- Despite cohesionist groupthink and indoctrination, the new cohesionism faced some measure of accountability. As the new cohesionism got really ugly, the Western Allies mobilized under freedom versus totalitarianism, and the theme continued in the Cold War. Cohesionism's bad results, as well as the coercive nature of its basis, became harder to hide. Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman stood up for liberalism; liberalism enjoyed some revitalization; the new cohesionism was checked.
- The new cohesionism became less impudent, more diffident; it retained some liberal conscience and intelligence. The mythos of democracy, of omni-lateral

consensus, or even consent, which plays a crucial role in social-democratic cohesionism, though illiberal in many of its tendencies, does at least check the cohesionist urge to quash free speech.

- Especially since 2000 there has been ever increasingly dissolution of the cultural pyramids, the focal brick-and-mortar commanding heights in culture and discourse. The gears and apparatus of governmentalization continue to domineer, but traditional cultural pyramids, such as academia, the mainstream media, and the government itself, command less credence: Few believe there is much wisdom at the apex.
- Now, every day, a thousand sparrows tweet, “But your measures bring bad results, and are coercive.” Those tweets keep liberal ideas alive and exert some accountability. But those liberal tweets mix in with millions of cohesionist tweets. The postwar liberal revitalization did not run deep. The circa-1900 semantic undoing of liberalism was never reversed. The undoing stuck. Since the end of WWII the main story has been that of social democracy practicing cohesionist indoctrination and incontinence, and social affairs becoming increasingly governmentalized, though of course some liberal movements have occurred, as well.
- The corruption of the cultural pyramids and the blizzard of criticism spell attenuation and dissolution of what Edward Shils called the central zone, the social and cultural zone of persons who bear a responsibility in exercising an enduring influence, however small, in the course of reform of government policy.<sup>4</sup> It is the central zone that, we hope, would consider and assess the criticism and guide reforms that actually correct errors. But without a functional central zone, which relates to and intersects with the apexes of cultural pyramids, the gears and apparatus of government are without intelligent guidance; there is little prospect of correction. People perceive fecklessness. The legitimacy of the cultural pyramids continues to falter, and they are less able to drown out and delegitimize the small but numerous and easily accessible tweets.
- “Right-wing” populism and nationalism is usually principally cohesionism, too.

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<sup>4</sup> See Shils 1972 (esp. chs. 4, 1, and 10).



- There is much ruin in a nation. Technology has become so powerful—more powerful all the time, I suspect—that, even with all the governmentalization, material conditions continue to improve, even if moral conditions do not.
- Today all countries face problems that arise, persist, and fester in large measure from domestic governmentalization. They also face problems that a nation-state can do little about, such as those involving terrorism, immigration, geopolitical belligerence, social and cultural fragmentation, and the dissolution of the central zone.

In Karl Polanyi's book *The Great Transformation*, “great transformation” signifies not merely the rise of dis cohesion, but especially the cohesionist reaction.<sup>5</sup> The expression seems to signify the entire arc, from the early-Modern moral economy to the present social democracy. The transformative arc is: (1) an initial cohesion; (2) dis cohesion; (3) a reaction to restore cohesion, a new cohesionism. It is a story of social existence finding its way back home and undergoing a great transformation in the process. It is a story of assimilating modern society to a hominess we feel in our bones.

The narrative arc here is similar. One difference is that the initial cohesion is not the early-Modern moral economy but the ancestral band. The story starts 10,000 years earlier.

Polanyi says that man is naturally fitted for the cohesion of the closed society, and is disintegrated, divided, dislocated, degraded, alienated by acephalous social forces in the open society, and so we need to give the social forces a head, a quarterback, team purpose and team intelligence, centrality, cooperation, an official distributive scheme, thereby rehabilitating cohesion. But in fashioning such an epic, it is crucial to add the ancestral band, a category that precedes the closed societies of recorded human history. We might as well start with the end of the Paleolithic, and the human characteristics emergent therefrom. Democratic socialism as conceived by Polanyi is protection of the stability and cohesion that are characteristic of the closed society. But I see cohesionism as rooted in penchants and mentalities fruitfully interpreted in terms of our instincts from the ancestral band. The hominess we feel in our bones is the ancestral band.

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<sup>5</sup> The two instances are at pp. 3, 227.

The new cohesionism, in my view, is atavistic and largely illusory. Social existence should not hope to find its way back home. It must get on in a new world and make a new home. Liberalism, too, must aspire to the central zone, join politics, and try to rule. But for liberalism cohesionism is more a condition of reality, a compromise, sometimes a coalition or strategy in the either-or of political reality; in a deeper sense, liberalism is about tamping down cohesionists penchants and bents.

My aim is to highlight cohesionism, not to deny other components of the historical epic, such as that Christianity's decline diminished the availability of a means to avoid cohesionism, or that a new faith in science aroused a new politics, or other angles. Nor do not I take time to acknowledge other explanations for undue statism. I ask that one reflect on how other theories dovetail with what is here.

To elaborate what I mean by *cohesion* and *cohesionism*, I start by formulating nine contrasts between cohesionism and liberalism. The nine contrasts help us understand the natural deep-seated yearnings that an open society and liberalism fail to satisfy, and the inchoate bents and mentalities that conduce to the new cohesionism. Afterward, I formulate three sorts of sympathy that an open society and liberalism can responsibly tout and suggest that those three sympathies cannot go far in gratifying cohesionist yearnings.

### **Nine Contrasts between Cohesionism and Liberalism**

Scholarship perhaps sustains the following generalizations about the ancestral band of say 20,000 years ago:

- We may think of it as consisting of several kin groups, say, 50 people in all.
- If there is an alpha male, he is, according to Christopher Boehm (1999, 2012), no dictator, more a first among equals, kind of like the leader of a motorcycle gang. There is multi-lateral resistance to abuse and bullying by the leader. Subgroups can choose to break off, or even kill the alpha. Perhaps the chief governing principle of this extremely simple little social order is consensus—democracy, in a sense. The alpha can lead only to the extent that the majority will follow his

lead. As Boehm (2012) puts it, in the band “nobody wants to be bossed around” (358).

- Still, status, stature, standing are important, as in a family. It is good to rub shoulders with the most powerful persons in in the band, to enjoy their favor. Evolution selected for a strong instinct to court and conciliate the powerful.
- Try to put yourself into the shoes of a member of an ancestral band, even though he didn’t have shoes. The selection of your genes depends on the survival of the band, and that depends on solidarity, unity, and well-coordinated action. Evolution selected for instincts toward enforcing conformity and pulling together. If you don’t fit in and pull together, you are smacked down or expelled.
- The larger mental system toward fellow in-groupers is an ethic of the good of the band, the whole, and thus sympathy and cooperation. Understandings of the good of the whole were cohesive, were coordinated, in proportion to the simplicity of the whole. At the start of this paper, I said that “should” and “ought” are used most often in simple social dyads, in one-to-one conversation. As groups or societies become less simple, that is, larger and more complex, cohesion declines. That is why, despite the power in the division of labor, bands remained so small.
- The mental system toward out-groupers is at best cautious and at worst hostile. Where danger is not perceived, out-groupers are regarded as others, with a callous indifference. Where danger is perceived, out-groupers are regarded with enmity and hostility. Humankind’s primeval nature is proclivity neither simply toward solidaric sympathy, nor simply savage brutality; evolution selected a human nature able to switch from one mode to the other.

The liberal economist Paul Rubin (2002) has developed descriptions of band mentalities, penchants, or instincts, including the following:

- Understanding in terms of anecdotes and stories about particular persons (Rubin 2002: 163). “If such a fate could befall him, it could befall any of the other 49 of us” (see p. 169). Every anecdote had oomph.
- No comprehension of human consequences on the modern scale (165-168).

- No appreciation of trade (17, 21).
- No conception of innovation or economic development (162).
- An understanding of resource access that, based on static understandings of given constraints, is limited to zero-sum, or strictly allocative, thinking (97).
- Instincts for sharing throughout the band (162).
- Envy and suspicion toward consuming more than one's share (111).
- A busybody instinct—since goofing off or impairing one's own health would impair the health of the band (140-148).
- A sense of group will or consensus (163). Collective decisions were impacted by the noise that one made (163).
- Hostility toward hierarchy, including any budding production hierarchy (106, 111).

I offer nine contrasts between cohesionism and liberalism, contrasts that dovetail with Rubin's fascination with the ancestral band. The nine contrasts concern: (1) the constituents of the highest whole; (2) knowledge; (3) validation; (4) encompassment in experience and sentiment; (5) social order; (6) cooperation; (7) intention heuristic; (8) the configuration of ownership; and (9) justice.

#### Contrast 1: The constituents of the highest whole

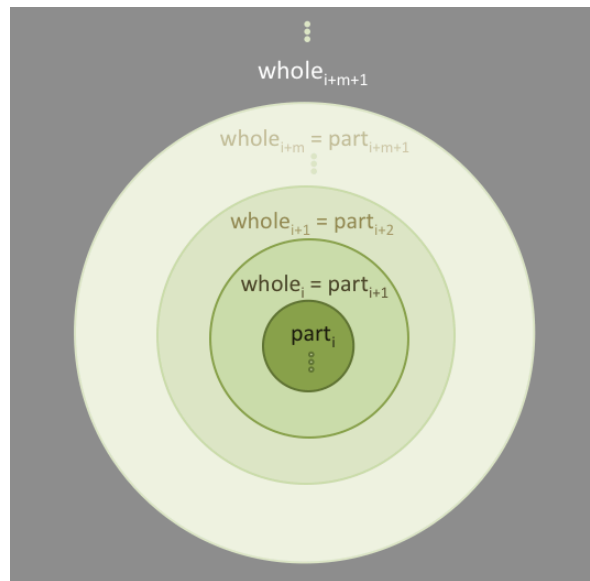
The agenda of human morality is to reform conduct so as to improve its service to a larger whole. We may call this principle *the holiness of the whole*. It wasn't until the 15<sup>th</sup> century that the noun *whole* was written with the *w*-. The words *holy* and *whole* came from common Nordic, Germanic, and Old English "hel-" and "hal-" roots, and both relate etymologically to *heal* and *health*.<sup>6</sup> Translate "the holiness of the whole" (use Google Translate) into any of the Nordic languages and note the commonality of "holiness" and "whole."

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<sup>6</sup> See entries in the Oxford English Dictionary, but the Online Etymological Dictionary suffices (<http://www.etymonline.com/>).

The holiness-of-the-whole principle involves a yin-yang of part/whole. It inheres in the most trifling decisions: At 8:00am, lingering in bed too long sacrifices the whole of one's morning to a more temporary part, snug in the sack.

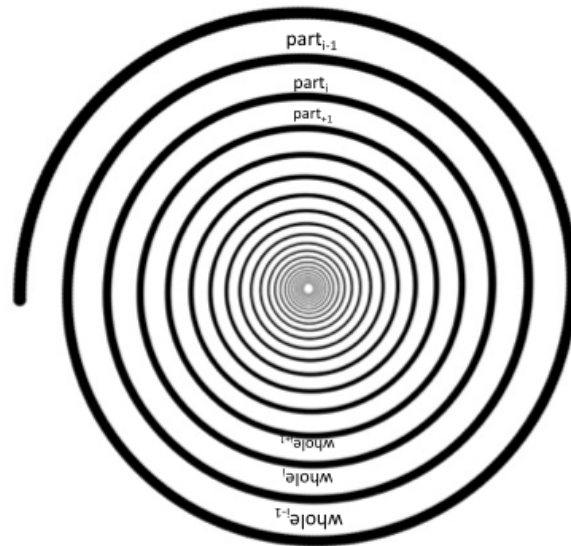
But does advancing the whole of one's morning serve the yet larger whole, the whole of one's day? Rising too early, one flags later in the day, or the next. Each whole seems to point to a yet larger whole, without end, as represented in the following figure:



Perhaps we specify a highest whole, such as “humankind, including all future generations.” Even that seems insufficient, since, all else equal, the health and wholeness of a turtle is something our morality also demands. When Smith (237.6) spoke of “all rational and sensible beings,” he didn’t specify whether that included turtles.

But the problem is more serious than whether to include turtles. Even if we put turtles aside, our notion of “humankind” must entail some notion of its health or wellbeing, and, there, our understandings and formulations are perennially unfinished – transcendent, some would say. It is in the nature of things that human wellbeing, human happiness, is never complete, never whole – unless human existence is extraordinarily static, and human reflection is minimal.

In the modern world we face the part/whole spiral terror. One of the facets of this multifaceted terror is that our morality has a highest whole only of a sort stupendously vast, complex, indeterminate, and contested:



I imagine that turtles or even dolphins or orangutans do not find existence as terrifying as we do. If we had a highest whole that was both more determinate – think of a terminus in the center of the spiral – , and that was much, much simpler than “humankind,” existence would be less terrifying. In that case, we’d have a much better chance of sharing understandings, of establishing common and fixed understandings, of (1) our highest whole, including what constitutes its health or wellbeing, and (2) what serves such wellbeing. Having more resolution at the terminus, we’d be better able to coordinate judgment regarding a simpler (outer) loop and judgment regarding a higher (inner) loop of the spiral, making our moral rules, our lines of propriety, regarding the loops of the spiral better coordinated throughout, more neatly integrated, down to the smallest moments. Like soldiers responding to reveille, we’d know better whether to linger in bed or get up and start the morning.

In the ancestral band, moral experience was less perplexing and less terrifying. The highest “we” was the band, we 50 persons. Practical understandings of the band’s wellbeing were, in comparison to our understandings of our highest whole today (“humankind”), remarkably simple and static. It was learned and inculcated chiefly by experience, by practice, by established routine and patterns of living. In the ancestral band, the constituents of the highest whole were determinate, even tangible, concrete, immanent, in a degree we can hardly conceive.

Those constituents were much more fixed and definite, and much more commonly understood. Such was moral experience in the ancestral band. I suggest that we naturally and instinctually yearn for such moral experience.

Such yearning is an impetus to cohesionism today. Cohesionism looks – however unconsciously, inchoately, self-deceptively – to reify a larger wholeness in the polity, and to institute and articulate that reification by governmentalizing social affairs. But I do not mean to suggest that, therefore, the polity, particularly the highest, the nation-state, is, in the cohesionist mentality, the highest whole. The cohesionist, like the liberal, may see humankind as the highest whole. But, still, the nation-state serves as a great whole. That there are yet higher wholes does not undo the greatness, the effervescence of the nation-state, a great “we,” a focal image, however illusory, of group action, cooperation, and shared experience. Imagine a god-like beholder of all humankind. She would see our nation-state as but a part of the much wider whole; but she would regard the good of that part as being, all else equal, constituent of the good of the whole. If every nation-state takes good care of itself, and in peaceful fashion, the whole community of nation-states is well taken care of, and she is pleased. The cohesionist looks to political community in the nation-state, but also affirms the holiness of the whole of humankind. If we think of cohesionism as revitalizing primeval mentalities by assimilating the nation-state to the ancestral band, we must recognize that such a parallel is not neat in every respect.

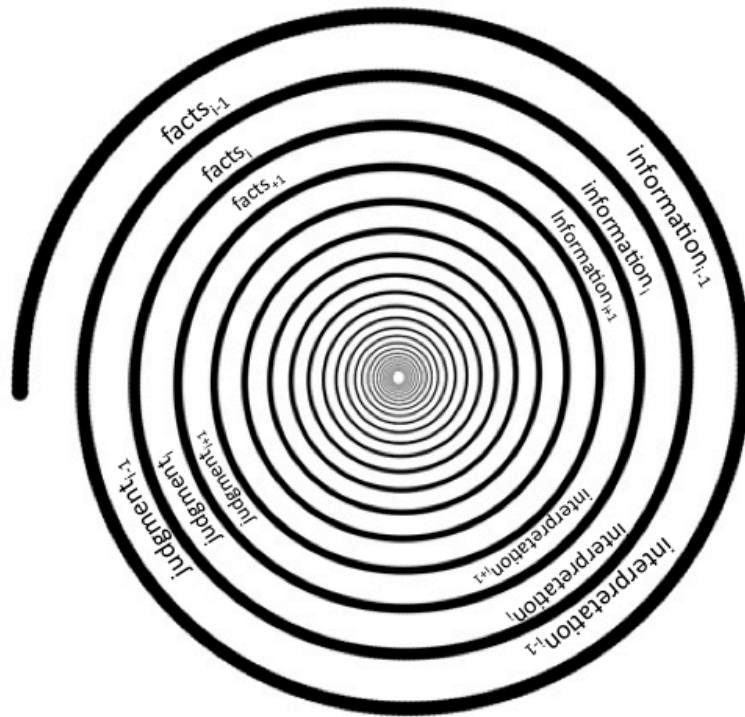
### Contrast 2: Knowledge

Suppose you are a traveler at an airport, sitting and waiting at the gate for boarding. You notice also waiting a celebrity you like. You have an impulse to approach him and to try to strike up a conversation. I believe that the impulse stems in part from our instincts from the ancestral band – “Since I know and like him, he knows and likes me.” The school of modern life teaches us to suppress the impulse.

Try to imagine yourself as the member of an ancestral band, you and 49 other people. Everyone who matters in your world, everyone who ethically counts, is someone you know well, for you spend much time together and privacy is minimal. And he or she knows you well, too. It is natural that someone to whom you feel any attachment should be regarded as a fellow with reciprocal feelings of personal attachment.

In the ancestral band your social world is, by modern standards, astoundingly simple and static. Dangers come and go and the weather changes, but there is not much change in the way the band survives and carries on. Everyone knows *the way things are*. Certain bits of information are private, such as how many nuts or berries you ingested while out gathering this morning. But interpretation of things within which information is understood and communicated is remarkably static and shared in common by all. By modern standards, knowledge in the ancestral band lacked interpretive depth; it was remarkably flat.

You have perhaps heard the saying: *Facts are theory-laden*. It's true. A fitting way to conceive of the recursivity that we are stuck with and terrified by is, again, a spiral, the spiral of knowledge:



Today we are dizzy before an interpretive abyss. Vying interpretations beckon us, entice us, challenge us, perplex us, reprimand us, and condemn us. New interpretations keep coming. We exercise judgment and carry on. If our knowledge spiral has an uppermost loop, a terminus, we are quite unsure of what that grand interpretation entails, and quite reluctant to explain its warrants.

Here, the situation of our band ancestors was enviable. Try to imagine how flat interpretation must have been. Individuals had little experience or knowledge of how other bands



did things; they lacked windows on other worlds. Moreover, an act of innovating, band entrepreneurship, as it were, would require not only imagination and vision, but means of projecting that vision by communicating it to the others. But language was extremely primitive. Without language, any different way of doing things, a way we might think of if we were transported back to the ancestral band, might simply be impractical because it could not be communicated; there would be no way to get from here to there. And for band-man himself, without language, he perhaps never could even conceive of the “there,” much less find a practicable way to lead the group there.

Game theorists have an idea of common knowledge: Not only does everyone know the list of players (including “nature”), the game tree and strategy spaces, the information sets, and the payoffs, but everyone knows that everyone knows those matters, and everyone knows that everyone knows, etc. The encompassing interpretation of all such matters is fixed and common. Information about one’s ingestion of berries out on the trail might be asymmetric, but *interpretation* is symmetric. It is the way things are.

Our real world is not one of common knowledge but disjointed knowledge. In our world interpretations are highly disjointed and indeterminate. But in the ancestral band, interpretation was highly symmetric among one another and through time. In the ancestral band, there was our way of doing things and it was common knowledge; there was not much else to think about. I think we have a primeval longing for an existence in which our highest (or widest, or deepest) interpretations are fixed, final, and shared by all.

I detect a symmetric-interpretation bent in many modes of cohesionism. The bent seem to long for, to promise, or to aspire to symmetric interpretation, an established understanding of the way things are, an understanding within which all retained interpretations are ancillary parts and that constitutes a definitive scheme within which knowledge of the world exists as information. Sometimes even cohesionists who teach the spiral of knowledge promise a sort of symmetric interpretation. John Dewey, for example, promised a taming of the *ways* things are: In the people’s coffeehouses, classrooms, and other halls of democracy, creative individuals will enjoy the dignity of inventing and airing interpretations, while a far-reaching governmentalization of social affairs validates the interpretive process and resolves any troublesome doubt about the way things are. Democracy magically joins myriad multivocal parts into a univocal whole.

### Contrast 3: Validation

We all depend on validations, rendered by validators, however imaginary, divine, or allegorical. Another terrifying facet of life is that we encounter the challenge: Does your validator have validation? And no matter how well we answer the challenge, it keeps coming back. I refrain from drawing the validator/challenge spiral, but again it is without any definite terminus.

And again the situation of our band ancestors was enviable. For most of band-man's decisions, the band's will, so to speak, perhaps led by alphas, was the highest validator. As Boehm (2001) puts it, "the band as a cohesive group of adults is in a position to speak with collective authority" (87). Only in decisions in which band-man considered going against that will would he need to look any higher, such as in a decision as to whether to leave the band or whether to resist, rebel, or revolt.

Cohesionism, it seems to me, longs for a final validator. And it tends to appeal to that longing. Under the right leadership, under the right spirit, the government, suitably re-staffed, would itself instantiate a supreme validator that proves sufficiently final for most matters. With the touch of the state, your life is validated; you need not fret any longer. Your contributions to the whole are appreciated and officially recognized. Your place, your belonging is secure. You are assured of your worth. You may enjoy without guilt the more personal pleasures allowed you; you are guilt-free.<sup>7</sup> The promise of a supreme or final validator may not always be advanced expressly, but I think it is there, perhaps only tacitly or inchoately.

So-called identity politics signals cohesionism. Traits that can be neither blameworthy nor praiseworthy agitate for validation. Band-man sought favor, standing, and security, not virtue. Wise pursuits of virtue do not look to government for validation.

### Contrast 4: Encompassment in experience and sentiment

Adam Smith posited a yearning for shared sentiment or sympathy: "nothing pleases us more than to observe in other men a fellow-feeling with all the emotions of our own breast." But finding fellow-feeling with one of the persons present is not the whole story. Smith continues: "nor are we ever so much shocked as by the appearance of the contrary" (Smith 1790, 13).

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<sup>7</sup> Allan Levite...

Furthermore, in any sort of gathering or assembly, as in a club, we, furthermore, yearn for the feeling *to encompass those gathered*, making a sort of club romance. David Hume expresses the point nicely when he writes: “A man who enters the *theatre*, is immediately struck with the view of so great a multitude, participating of one common amusement; and experiences, from their very aspect, a superior sensibility or disposition of being affected with every sentiment, which he shares with his fellow-creatures” (1751[1902], 222).

Thinking in terms of Hegelian “moments,” we may say that there is one moment of fellow-feeling with a parent or family member, and, next, there is the civil-society moment of the gathering at the theater, where the fellow-feeling encompasses the whole gathering. But that feeling concerns merely “one common amusement.” Moreover, the curtain falls, the theater lets out, and the theatergoers disband and traipse back to their separate homes and separate lives. What about a third moment, at which a much more enduring encompassment of sentiment, a more enduring cohesion, concerning much greater things, is had not merely among some temporary collection of theatergoers or members of some private club, but among the highest whole, among *the people*? What about encompassment of sentiment, and therefore of the experiences that engender and structure sentiment, at the level of the state, Hegel’s third and highest moment? I think that Hegel saw the state as the answer to that third level of yearning.

Contrast our situation today with that of band-man. Writing of primitive tribes, Emile Durkheim wonderfully elaborated the importance of encompassment in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. In the ritualized gatherings of the whole, society is translated to an emblematic, totemic being. In such universal gatherings, Durkheim says, people experience “effervescence.” “When they are once come together, a sort of electricity is formed by the collecting which quickly transports them to an extraordinary degree of exaltation” (215). Effervescence is a heightened sense of sacred being, which expresses itself in “co-operation and movements in unison,” notably chants, songs, and dance. “[I]t is in the midst of these effervescent social environments and out of this effervescence itself that the religious idea seems to be born” (218-219). Time and again, Durkheim signifies encompassment in communal effervescence, repeatedly writing “all,” “whole,” “in common,” “the centre,” and “unison.” The basic image is captured as follows: “[T]he totem is the flag of the clan ... Placed thus *in the centre* of the scene, it becomes representative. ... By definition, *it is common to all*. During the ceremony, it is the *centre of all regards*” (220, 221, italics added).

For band-man, encompassing experience and sentiment of the whole band was more or less continual. Unlike the theatergoer, he never really departed to his separate home and separate life. In the ancestral band, there were not so many levels or “moments.” As regards the three Hegelians moments, the second and the third were compressed into one. Even the first was close to the second. Just as band-man’s interpretive knowledge was remarkably flat, so was his selfhood. Our selfhood ranges over a great wilderness from an individuality to a vague, indeterminate highest whole. But band-man’s highest whole was present and immanent. Band-man knew not merely fellow-feeling, not merely encompassing fellow-feeling, but ongoing encompassment of fellow-feeling among *the* whole, among *the* people. He was at home while we are in the wild. I submit that we have a yearning for such definitive encompassing romance, *the people’s romance*. Perhaps the image or sense of its presence clicks on certain switches in our head. “In the midst of an assembly animated by a common passion, we become susceptible of acts and sentiments of which we are incapable when reduced to our own forces...” (Durkheim 1915, 209-210).

Cohesionism appeals to people’s hankering after the people’s romance. It promises more in that department, particularly by defending current areas of governmentalization from liberal challenges and by proposing to further governmentalize social affairs. By such means, cohesionism uses your tax dollars to generate the collective action that makes the narrative and the experience – like the performance on the stage. But it also, as it were, builds up the theater, gathers the audience, advertises the drama, and holds back competing theaters, as well as writes and publishes its own theater reviews, plants its agents in the audience, subsidizes theater tickets, and often even makes attendance at government-validated theaters compulsory (e.g., compulsory schooling). Again, the promise of an enhanced people’s romance might not be explicit, but is there in all forms of cohesionism.

#### Contrast 5: Social order

A liberal mind has grown comfortable seeing the social cosmos as proceeding on the basis of myriad decisions that are taken without central guidance or direction – in that sense, spontaneous. What’s more, it senses that such decision-making can conduce to orderliness in the social cosmos, toward social order. In one sense, a social cosmos marked by buildings with busted windows is one sort of order, features of which result from spontaneous decisions to

throw stones, just as a thoroughly shuffled deck of cards leaves the cards in some order, albeit “random.” But when spontaneous decision-making adheres to certain basic rules, there are regularities in the social cosmos, such as windows intact; there are tendencies toward social order in the positively valenced sense of “order.” A liberal mind has grown comfortable with the idea of spontaneous order.

Within the vast concatenation, pockets of activity are undertaken by organizations, but the liberal mind learns to check any tendency to see the social order, writ large, as an organizational affair or undertaking. Governments exhibit special features and play relatively large roles, but they too are but other organizations in a sea of actors; they do not make an organization of the polity, much less of humankind.

In discussions of the decline of classical liberalism, one of the many factors commonly cited is the growth of large organizations.<sup>8</sup> In exploring the “causes of the revival of the organizational thinking of the tribe,” Hayek says: “the growth of big enterprise and of the great administrative bureaucracies has brought it about that an ever increasing part of the people spend their whole working life as members of large organizations, and are led to think wholly in terms of the requirements of the organizational form of life” (1976, 134).

But, again, I am more inclined to relate the matter back to the ancestral band. In the context of the ancestral band, the social order was, for most practical purposes, highly organizational. Just as 50 people today may function as a business firm or a private club – an organization with leadership at the center, a structure of authority, a common mission, and a sense of cooperation and teamwork – the 50 people in the ancestral band functioned as an organization. And the band members never disbanded to their separate lives. The organization was 24-7; it enveloped their entire existence. They didn’t even have lockers or personal office space.

#### Contrast 6: Cooperation

The contrast between an organizational basis for social order and a spontaneous basis relates closely to a contrast concerning cooperation. If Jill and Fran cooperate, it means that both

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<sup>8</sup> Discussions that cite this as a factor include Schumpeter 1950, Hayek 1976, . . . Other notable discussions of the decline of liberalism which do not cite this fact in particular are . . .

have a mutual understanding, some shared experience, and shared sentiment, in one another's contributing to some improved (or better coordinated) concatenation of things. There is an element of common knowledge, an element of encompassing sentiment, an element of serving some common purpose, and an element of serving a larger whole of which the cooperators are constituent. Cooperation is teamwork.

In modern society, there are myriad moments of cooperation, and there are organizations that organize ongoing pockets of cooperation, but there is not cooperation writ large, at least not in a literal sense. "Cooperation, like solidarity, presupposes a large measure of agreement on ends as well as on methods employed in their pursuit. It makes sense in a small group whose members share particular habits, knowledge and beliefs about possibilities" (Hayek 1988, 19). The liberal mind has come to accept that the contours of the social cosmos, such as they are, are not the product of a literal cooperation.

But the social cosmos of the ancestral band was literal cooperation. "[M]an's instincts ... were adapted to life in the small roving bands or troops in which the human race and its immediate ancestors evolved during the few million years while the biological constitution of *homo sapiens* was being formed. These genetically inherited instincts served to steer the cooperation of the members of the troop, a cooperation that was, necessarily, a narrowly circumscribed interaction of fellows known to and trusted by one another" (Hayek 1988, 11-12).

Cohesionism plays to the hankering for a cooperation in the great whole, for the people's cooperation. The people's romance thrives on effervescent stories of the people cooperating, of us acting together, particularly of us taking care of us. It imagines such cooperation as emanating from the center, led by the people's leaders, the government.

Cohesionism exhibits jealousy towards competing pockets of cooperation. Until those pockets have been duly controlled by the center so as to assure their alignment with the good of the whole, "regulated," and, thus validated by the center, such non-centric sources of cooperation – not just production and commercial hierarchies (e.g., Wal-Mart) but also sources of cultural influence, independence, or power (e.g., private schools, the private automobile, guns) – are regarded as highly suspicious, if not nefarious.

#### Contrast 7: Intention Heuristic

We understand the social cosmos by way of constructed narratives involving intentions. We make up stories in which the observed events flow more or less directly from people's intentions. Meanwhile, the intentions ascribed to actors serve as a heuristic that shapes our perception and understanding of what happens, that shape "the observed events."

In simple social settings including the family, the club, church, or workplace, the decision maker is usually the one most motivated to ensure that his decisions will have the intended results, and consequently he is most motivated to either know himself what course of action will best serve his intentions or to search out and appoint an agent with such knowledge. In simple, nongovernmental settings it is natural to assume that a person usually achieves what he intends. If he fails to achieve what he intended, he may feel disappointment; if he comes to see that achieving it was much more costly than he had imagined, he may feel regret.

It is perhaps unsurprising that the intention heuristic would be extended to macro realms where it is not valid, particularly realms in which mis-extensions do not redound negatively on mis-extenders. Again our genes dispose us – unless corrected and tempered by civilization – to think that way because we come from a place where it was true even for the people's most macro behavior.

The ancestral band was like an extended family or an organization of 50 people. In such a simple society, intentions and results went together more. The leaders could indeed affect macro behavior. "Macro" was still very micro. Should the band work more (increase output)? Should it fortify its camp (invest in infrastructure)? Should it alter the distribution of work or of food? The patterns observed were in large measure the patterns that leadership had decided or at least ratified; macro patterns could be altered afresh by band consensus or leadership at the head of the band.

"The road to hell is paved with good intentions" is a saying we naturally associate with free-market economists. Coming from Friedrich Hayek, Milton Friedman, Thomas Sowell, or Walter Williams, the saying is another cliché. But it is harder to imagine John R. Commons, John Dewey, John Kenneth Galbraith, or John Rawls inveighing: "The road to hell is paved with good intentions." Cohesionists tend to attribute bad results to bad intentions, such as apathy, callousness, and greed. Indeed, cohesionists tend to overrate the prospect for greater consilience between results and intentions.

The flipside is that cohesionism tends not to see, or not to teach, that low intentions can produce good results. Adam Smith emphasized that the full woolen-coat producing process is not “the effect of any human wisdom, which foresees and intends that general opulence to which it gives occasion” (p.13). He emphasized that in exchange each party may not particularly intend the benefit he renders the other:

he intends only his own security; and by directing that industry in such a manner as its produce may be of the greatest value, he intends only his own gain, and he is in this, as in many other cases, led by an invisible hand to promote an end which was no part of his intention. Nor is it always the worse for the society that it was no part of it. By pursuing his own interest he frequently promotes that of the society more effectually than when he really intends to promote it. (pp. 14, 423).

Teaching to temper cohesionism, Smith made the point again and again. Of the grain dealer: “Without intending the interest of the people, he is necessarily led, by a regard to his own interest, to treat [the people], even in years of scarcity, pretty much in the same manner as the prudent master of a vessel is sometimes obliged to treat his crew” (525).

Another free-market trope is “the seen and the unseen.” Too often people see only certain results, and not the “unseen.” Such tendencies are said to militate toward governmentalization. Like Frédéric Bastiat before him and Henry Hazlitt after, A.V. Dicey (1914) wrote: “The beneficial effect of state intervention, especially in the form of legislation, is direct, immediate, and so to speak, visible while its evil effects are gradual and indirect and lying out of sight ... Hence the majority of mankind must almost of necessity look with undue favor upon governmental intervention” (257).

Jeffrey Friedman explains why: The chief determinant of what is seen is what is supposed to be intended.<sup>9</sup> Ascribed intentions define government actions and make certain results conspicuous. If we come to regard the government as “us,” and therefore naturally well-intentioned, the ascribed intention behind the system of banning all new drugs until individually permitted by the FDA is to protect people from unsafe and ineffective drugs, so that is what is seen. The suppression of drug development, the high cost of drugs that are developed, and so on, are not intended, and not seen. To help people see, liberal economists sometimes speak of “*the*

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<sup>9</sup> cite Friedman and [this](#)



*law of unintended consequences,*” that unintended consequences, too, flow from government action.

Do a thought experiment: Imagine that ISIS assumed control of the FDA, and that ISIS did exactly what the FDA currently does. Now how would Americans react? Obviously, the wicked ISIS is deliberately harming Americans by preventing lifesaving new drugs. The harms of banned-till-permitted would be obvious and decried. In our society, however, the government is not regarded as wicked. Many Americans will assent to the idea that, by and large, government is benevolent, and most that, at worst, it is unnecessarily bureaucratic and wasteful. Government officials seem to be ordinary people like you and me, and we don’t have wicked intentions. Their claim that they believe that what they do is good for society is usually sincere.

#### Contrast 8: The configuration of ownership

If we believe that Mary owns a hotel, we feel that neighbors, customers, employees, etc. ought to accord her an authority over the property that she owns, that there would be a wrongness in others’ messing with it, such as by breaking its windows. Even though such wrongness is only strongly presumptive, not absolute, it functions as a grammar-like rule, since, as Grotius, Hume, and Smith taught, in historical context, ownership evolves “precise and accurate” rules about what is property, who owns it, and what constitutes messing with it. As for rules regarding recourse, redress, restitution, and retribution after messing has occurred, those are much less precise and accurate, less grammar-like. But the main thing is that ownership broadcasts grammar-like sanctions against messing in the first place.

With such grammar-like rules of presumptive wrongness we may project the idea of ownership onto, say, chimpanzee behavior. As we describe their conduct we may impute chimpanzee ownership, even though they don’t have a word for ownership.

When we formulate and affirm our descriptions of some other community, we do well to know their historically evolved social grammar. But we do not dispose of ours. Our discourse is, after all, a move within our community, not theirs. When we discourse about a slave society, such as antebellum Maryland, no matter how complacently people in that society may have felt about slavery, no matter how matter-of-factly they spoke of “owning” slaves, we may be justified in saying they didn’t own slaves. Frederick Douglass did not acquire himself when he

attained freedom. He owned himself all along, and such ownership was perpetually trampled. Feeling that we have a better system of grammar, we may interpret the social grammar of 1850 Maryland in terms of our own, and criticize it accordingly.

The farther the society we describe is from our own, the trickier is the task of interpreting its grammar – such as it is. Suppose that, 20,000 years ago, one band successfully raids another band, killing and plundering. How are we to parse it? Who owns what, and what constitutes “messaging”? Also, what more is there to the story? Was the raid an *initiation* of coercion, or was it a reprisal to coercion initiated by the other band? Did the other band invade hunting grounds that in some sense the raiding band had owned?

I too would laugh, as though we parse coercion between coyote and lynx, except I suspect that instincts about wrong and right, and hence ownership, instincts rooted in the ancestral band, are atavistically affecting humankind’s politics today.

If I check into Mary’s hotel, we enter an agreement in which I am authorized to use some of her property within certain limits. If I order a taxicab ride to the airport, the taxicab company is obliged to use its property so as to deliver me to the airport. Indeed, we may say that contract or consent always involves ownership and property. A central principle of liberal grammar is that the person “Mary” is owned by the soul to which it adheres – the principle of self-ownership. At the very least, then, contract obliges the service provider to use property in her own person to fulfill the contract.

Let’s approach the ancestral band with the principle of self-ownership and its universality (sidestepping the Neanderthal issue), and focus on “domestic” policy. Suppose that 49 members of the band – including the alpha, to make matters simple – decide that the 50<sup>th</sup> member is a nebbish, and they cast him out and he promptly freezes to death or gets eaten by a bear. Have they initiated coercion against the nebbish? If we think of the band as a voluntary association, with contractual terms implying some sort of majority rule, subject to revision by group consensus, procedures known and expected from a quite universally shared experience of band life, it would seem that casting out the nebbish does not mess with his property nor violate any outstanding promise or contract. Like a business discontinuing its association with an employee, the band discontinues its association with the nebbish; neither case involves coercion. Likewise, the band’s not permitting a person to join the band would not be coercive.

If we feel that the band is wrong to cast out the nebbish, or to reject an application for membership, we make that case without maintaining that casting him out is coercive. That such band decisions are tantamount to a death sentence doesn't affect the logic. Something's not being coercive doesn't make it good or right, it just means that any badness of it pertains to other sorts of moral rules, sorts beyond the social grammar I employ here. There are plenty of bad novels with impeccable grammar.

What about the band's not allowing a band member to exit the band? That *is* coercive, unless such exiting was itself violation of a promise or contract. And likewise abducting an outsider against her will and forcing her to join to the band would be coercive.

Does the logic work the same way for the nation-state? I don't think so. Yes, the government's not allowing an innocent person to exit the country is coercive, and likewise for forcible abduction. But the other parallels come to conclusions contrary to those for the ancestral band. The government's not allowing someone into the country, and its casting someone out, I see as coercive, at least in the normal cases. I see immigration restrictions as the initiation of coercion.

But the undocumented immigrant has broken the rules. So isn't he, rather, the initiator of coercion? Isn't immigration enforcement, then, a *response* to a coercive deed? As I see it, the answer is no. Although such immigrants are undocumented, illegal, rule-breaking, and although such rules perhaps *should* be imposed and enforced, such immigrants don't break the rules that I have in mind when I talk "coercion," "ownership," "property," "contract," and "consent." Although I am agreeable to seeing the ancestral band as a voluntary association, I do not see a modern polity as a voluntary association. Cohesionists, however, do tend to see the modern polity as a voluntary association, if only tacitly or inchoately. It is my suspicion, once again, that they assimilate the nation-state to the ancestral band.

Economists who had signed a petition to raise the minimum wage were asked whether the minimum-wage law threatens physical aggression against employers (should they pay below the minimum wage). Only five percent replied with a firm yes. Most indicated that the law was not coercive in any significant sense. One way to interpret that view is that such respondents think of the polity as a voluntary association. If we checked into Mary's hotel, and Mary clearly communicated terms specifying a minimum wage (in this hotel, guests sometimes engage in labor agreements with one another), we would not consider such terms to be coercive. Likewise,

if Mary posts, “No Smoking,” we do not regard that as coercive. Such terms are part of the contract that we voluntarily accept at check-in. I think that that is how, if only tacitly or inchoately, a lot of people think about the polity and government laws like the minimum wage and those against smoking in private accommodations.

The contrast I wish to draw here might seem to be one that regards contract, specifically the status of “social contract.” But I think the matter is more fruitfully understood as a contrast regarding ownership. The contrast flows from different configurations of ownership. I reject “social contract” (at least in the strong sense of the term), but that rejection follows from a rejection of the configuration of ownership that social contract (in the strong sense) would seem to hang upon.

The ancestral band, despite all its violence, can be thought of as an extended family unto itself. Perhaps ownership did not extend much beyond self-ownership and immediate possessions. With just 50 people cohesively bound together, roaming and occupying places that are unowned, the band can be thought of as voluntary association. Band life was simple and definite enough to establish what the organization was, how it functioned, what its program was, whether one belonged, and whether one was living up to the program.

If one were to defend the polity-as-voluntary view, with the implication that the minimum wage law and immigration restrictions are not initiations of coercion, he might appeal to the reasoning I just invoked for the band, saying: National life establishes what the country is, how it functions, what the program is, whether one belongs, and whether one is living up to the program. He concedes that national life is not nearly as simple as in the band, that the program is less cohesive and well defined, and that living up to the program is more complicated, but those are simply ineluctable features of the modern world.

However, today, in place of profound immersion and cohesion, we have developed and rely on other markers, notably forms of property, that frame and contextualize our agreements. When we enter a restaurant and order dinner, we enter an agreement, an implicit contract. The land, the physical space, owned by the owner and leased to the lessor, frames the agreement: Yes, we do owe payment when the bill arrives. Social life proceeds within a nexus of property and agreements.

To this, the cohesionist might respond: That's correct. We have advanced beyond the ancestral band, and now have private ownership in land. But, still, all such ownership is enveloped in a social contract coextensive with the polity. By choosing to live within the polity one implicitly consents to that contract, just like checking into a hotel.

It seems to me that the most straightforward way to conceptualize the polity-as-voluntary view is to think of an extensive property that compasses within it all of the private property, including our own person. Just as our personal possessions remain ours while we occupy a room in Mary's hotel, our land, buildings, and personal possessions are ours while we occupy physical space within the polity. As for the extensive underlying property, we might think of it as a substratum of earth, lying below the surface and within the boundaries of the polity, and upon which our own soil and other stuff rest. The stuff is ours, but it all rests upon that extensive substratum. And as long as it does, its use is bound by rules of the substratum's owner, which is the people, the state (in the sense of the whole set of citizens of the polity). That owner's set of rules sets the terms of the contract that we implicitly agree to by occupying space supported by that substratum—again, like checking into a hotel. Layers of government—central, local—correspond to nested substrata, with the central or national substratum being deepest and compassing the local levels.

Such a substratum-ownership conceptualization of the polity-as-voluntary view is, nowadays, rarely articulated or openly affirmed. I wish it were. I think that it is much more cogent – in a sense, much truer – than the alternative sort of conceptualization for such view. That alternative is not to suppose any ownership of deep-lying dirt and earth, but rather to see only small-scale private ownership, with owners roaming and occupying unowned space rather like the ancestral band, and sustaining that, somehow, in the blooming buzzing hurly-burly disjointed world of experiences, interpretations, and moral outlooks, it is reasonable to see everyone as party to a super-multilateral contractual agreement. Critics of social contract theory, such as David Hume and Adam Smith, have elaborated many of the inconveniences of such a view. An earlier enemy of such a conceptualization, Robert Filmer, rather than, like Hume and Smith, rejecting the polity-as-voluntary view, sustained it but by affirming, instead, a substratum-ownership conceptualization in which the owner of the compassing substratum was the crown.

If I had to embrace one of the two conceptualizations of the polity-as-voluntary view, I'd embrace the substratum-ownership conceptualization, because it is based on a configuration of ownership that more neatly delivers the polity-as-voluntary view. Indeed, we can imagine a large group of investors buying up an island or swath of land and setting up something that resembles a country, and I, for one, would be hard-pressed to deny that its "national" rules are matters of voluntary agreement. Moreover, the idea of certain resources being owned collectively by the polity, even the American polity, is not unreasonable—how else would we think of the ownership of government-sector resources? But the alternative conceptualization—mass multilateral agreement—does not posit a specific configuration of ownership that delivers that view. It seems to be asserting a social contract out of thin air. For such reasons, I regard the polity-as-voluntary view as entailing the substratum-ownership idea, even though that entailment is hushed up and tabooed.

Accepting or rejecting the polity-as-voluntary view, then, comes down to a decision over what to affirm in the matter of the configuration of ownership. If one affirms the substratum-ownership configuration, then one would seem to be bound to accept the polity-as-voluntary view. But if one rejects the substratum-ownership configuration, maintaining, say, that "substrata" are unowned (which is my inclination) or that ownership extends *ad coelum*, then one may then reject it, as I do. In rejecting the polity-as-voluntary view, I reject the configuration of ownership that would be entailed by that view's most persuasive conceptualization.

The modern cohesivist, then, tends toward a view highly parallel to Upper Paleolithic cohesivism: The great whole of the nation, like the whole of the band, is a voluntary association; its rules are matters of consent, not coercion. The modern cohesivist sustains that view, if only inchoately, by the people's compassing substratum, or something to that effect. That is, the modern cohesivist configures ownership so as to make the people the highest owner. Any and all private property is only a subordinate ownership, at least as long as it remains within the polity. Call this *the collectivist configuration of ownership*.

Perhaps we can project a collectivist configuration of ownership back onto the ancestral band. Even if the band roamed around a lot, even if its sense of ownership was quite limited to immediate possession and occupation, it seems not unreasonable to think of their supposing a sort of temporary ownership of whatever area they happened to be occupying at the time (unless of course the area seemed to be owned by some other band). Any stranger who approached their

camp was like a trespasser. Thus, they had a collectivist configuration of ownership, but it moved with their movement. It followed them around, as it were. It is almost as though the band itself – the social organization – was a collective property, jointly owned by the band members, and delimited by the ground it occupied. On such reasoning we may say that the modern collectivist sense of the configuration of ownership relates to a band collectivist sense. Thus I say that an aspect of cohesionism, old and new, is a collectivist sense of the configuration of ownership.

A sign of cohesionism today is depreciating semantics affirming that rules like the minimum wage initiate coercion. Indeed, when it comes to the words *property, ownership, consent, contract, voluntary, coercion, privilege, freedom, liberty, justice*, and others, there are multitudinous semantic disagreements between cohesionists and liberals. It seems to me that such disagreements often relate to the configuration of ownership.

Deirdre McCloskey has aptly called the blade of the enrichment hockey stick the Great Enrichment. Tyler Cowen has aptly called the slowdown in GDP and measured productivity the Great Stagnation. The period of roughly 1880 to 1940 was one of great conceptual and semantic shifts. Karl Polanyi would perhaps have us understand it as the Great Transformation. Polanyi's focus is not change in worldview and semantics, however; it is the "spontaneous" rising of governmentalization, which extends well past 1940. We seek a term for the dramatic age of self-aware conceptual shifting, which takes place in the 1880-1940 window. After the civilizational crisis that resulted from the forsaking and collapse of liberalism, the ambitiousness of the movement moderates. Moreover, as Polanyi intended, the expression "the Great Transformation" lends itself to welcome. I prefer a term that prepares the mind for great remorse. As the 1880-1940 shifting relates, deeply and quite pervasively, to a shift from the liberal configuration of ownership to the collectivist configuration, I think it is apt to call it the Great Reconfiguration. Although the change was momentous, it has since the Second World War been repressed and sublimated, surrounded by denial and taboo, and on all sides. Many cohesionists, the more moderate ones, do not wish to fess up to it; a sign of which is their wish to sustain a sense of continuity back to classical liberalism, to claim Adam Smith, as though the presumption of liberty was suitable once but now, well, the conditions have changed, and so "liberalism" now is best served by other approaches in the realm of policy. The Great Reconfiguration idea is today, and has long been, obnoxious to the dominant political culture, especially in academia, making

liberals timid about it; moreover many liberals wish to downplay the extent to which liberalism had been forsaken and the weakness of its recovery since 1940. Today, the status of liberal concepts and semantics among the dominant political culture is pretty much the same as it was in 1940, but far below what it was in 1879. What happened between 1880 and 1940 was the Great Reconfiguration.

### Contrast 9: Justice

Within the collectivist-configuration-of-ownership view, it is not the case that the cohesionist therefore must regard the rules that emerge from the political process as just. Consider the hotel analogy. One might charge Mary of injustice in her control of the hotel, firstly, for going against agreed terms still in effect or outstanding; that is, one might charge her with breaking her own rules. Second, and more broadly, one might accuse her of misusing her own property, of making an unbecoming use of what is her own.

Adam Smith said that *distributive justice* “consists in...the becoming use of what is our own” (270.10). If we were to grant the collectivist configuration of ownership, then such a notion of justice would apply, not merely to issues of government resources like streets and parks, but to the government rules, like the minimum wage, attaching to the encompassing collective property. All such rules, elements of the social contract, become issues regarding the people’s making a becoming use of what is their own. On such understanding, a citizen – Bernie Sanders, say – may certainly maintain that some of the existing government rules are unjust, because such rules fail to make a becoming use of what is the people’s own. Just because the criticized rules are not coercive does not imply that they are distributively just. Such a notion of justice predicated on the collectivist configuration of ownership often seems to fit “justice” talk in cohesionist discourse.

Smith said that *commutative justice* “consists in abstaining from what is another’s” (269.10), or not messing with other people’s stuff. He said that commutative justice is unique among the virtues because its rules, and only its, are precise and accurate, or grammar-like, and from such uniqueness flowed other qualities very special to it.

Let’s apply the lens of commutative justice to the modern polity *on the collectivist configuration of ownership*. That is, let’s apply commutative justice within the modern



cohesionist worldview. First, in relations between citizens – relations among neighbors, buyers and sellers, coworkers, etc. – cohesionists apply and affirm commutative justice much as Adam Smith or any liberal would. The configurations of such private property are much the same, as are notions of messing. Cohesionism opposes theft, mugging, vandalism, etc., much as liberalism does.

When it comes to any of the thousands of government rules, like the minimum wage, that restrict voluntary agreements among private parties, regardless of whether the cohesionist regards them as just or unjust, he does not regard them as initiations of coercion, because all such private affairs are enclosed within the social contract. The cohesionist may object to certain restrictions, and favor liberalization of, say, marijuana or immigration. In Smith's justice terms, such objections would be ones of distributive justice.

A liberal view, which can, I think, be reasonably ascribed to Adam Smith, runs as follows: The government sector owns properties, such as streets, parks, etc., but it does not own some compassing substratum. Private owners are not guests or tenant at some polity-wide property. Yes, the government is a special sort of player, exercising a special sort of authority, and that authority is coextensive with the polity, but it does not make for polity-wide ownership. There is no people's ownership standing above all private ownership.

We need to see two kinds of jural relationships (this again fits Smith, I think). First, there is the relationship between jural equals, between you and your neighbors, coworkers, etc. Second, there is the relation between the jural superior and jural inferiors, or, between governor and governed. The grammar of commutative justice operates in each. In the equal-equal relationship, it says that one's initiating messing with another's stuff is a violation of commutative justice. In the superior-inferior relationship, it says that one's initiating messing with another's stuff is a violation of commutative justice. The jural superior institutionalizes violation of commutative justice.

One's not messing with other people's stuff has a flipside in others not messing with one's stuff. As regards the equal-equal relationship, Smith tended to call that flipside security: My home is secure from burglars. Hence we speak of home security, etc. As regards the superior-inferior relationships, Smith tended to call that flipside liberty (sometimes natural liberty). For example, speaking of certain laws that restricted which lines of trade a person may

enter, Smith says: “Both laws were evident violations of natural liberty, *and therefore unjust*” (530; italics added).

Now, Smith by no means saw commutative justice as the final word in justice. Indeed, those laws I just referred to, which Smith says were evident violation of natural liberty and therefore unjust, were *also*, Smith adds, undesirable – showing that, for Smith, the former does not necessarily imply the latter. Commutative justice must find its own warrants in further realms of judgment. Smith clearly made exceptions to the liberty principle, and such exceptions, too, must find their warrants in such further realms. Smith enumerates three senses of justice: commutative, distributive, and a third that he does not name but we may call estimative. Estimative justice concerns properly estimating an object and treating it accordingly. Smith affirms all three senses of justice, as do I.

In my view, the proper way to think about, say, a minimum-wage law is estimative justice. The object is the policy – affirming the policy, supporting the policy. What estimation of that object is just? One might decide that that object is worthy of such high estimation that one should contravene the liberty principle to pursue it, that the jural superior should institute and maintain it. Smith himself endorsed the status-quo ceilings on interest rates, for example, as well as restrictions on the issuance of small-denomination banknotes. In the latter case, he explicitly acknowledged that the policy was a violation of natural liberty.

Still, Smith clearly believed that the liberty principle ought to enjoy a presumption. The burden of proof ought to be on the one defending a contravention of the principle. Exceptions to the principle should be treated as exceptional, especially when, also, the exception went against the status quo (which, too, enjoys a certain presumption in Smith). We sustain and stand up for the presumption of liberty (an object worthy of high estimation) by formulating, selecting, and embracing certain core vocabulary, such as *liberty* and *freedom*, and in other semantic practices, such as “of its own accord,” used abundantly in *The Wealth of Nations*.<sup>10</sup> The vocabulary entails and affirms the configuration of ownership I have ascribed to Smith: Private ownership is not mere tenancy in the people’s hotel. When the government restricts voluntary choice, it contravenes commutative justice and its flipside, the liberty principle.

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<sup>10</sup> In the *Wealth of Nations*, Smith uses the expression “of its own accord” (or “of their own accord”) 28 times.

Liberals, then, affirm a configuration of ownership, upon which the terms (commutative) *justice* and *liberty* function as meaningful watchwords. Their “justice” talk is usually commutative justice *upon a liberal configuration of ownership*, and it has a plainness, simplicity, and perspicacity; it speaks of a concrete claim against messing, good against the world – or at least *pretty good*. But, if discourse proceeds, instead, on a configuration of ownership that is collectivist, such parapets of ownership are diminished, because above them is elevated a collective property. Private ownership, then, is not transgressed and attenuated, it is “regulated.”

When a liberal complains that a government intervention violates justice or liberty, he implicitly affirms the liberal configuration. Such complaints threaten the cohesionists’ worldview. Such complaints reject the configuration they believe in, if only tacitly or inchoately. They shrug off the complaints. For cohesionists, “justice” talk usually is distributive justice upon the collective configuration of ownership—the becoming use of what is the people’s own. Cohesionists tend to reject semantics that threaten belief in that configuration, and liberals tend to reject semantics that threaten belief in the liberal configuration.

Figure x summarizes the nine contrasts. The nine contrasts drawn above are not exhaustive. Others, too, could be drawn. Allow me a paragraph to each of two other topics.

Cohesionism	
sees/longs for...	<i>rather than...</i>
An determinate, immanent whole	an indeterminate, transcendent whole
Common knowledge	disjointed knowledge
A final validator	no final validator
The people’s romance	the three open-society sympathies
Society as an organization	society as spontaneous order
A vast cooperation	no literal vast cooperation
Consequences correspond to intentions	consequences do not correspond to intentions
The collectivist configuration of ownership	the liberal configuration of ownership
“Social justice” (distr. justice upon the	emphasis on commutative justice (upon

**Government is force.** One of the nice things about the aristocratic age was that central-zone players knew who they were, the responsibility was common knowledge, and, in Britain at least, they to some extent acted responsibly; numerous liberal writers have testified that liberalism was secured and ratified, to the extent that it was, only because there was such a structure of political rule. Another nice thing about the aristocratic age was that ordinary people could make no mistake about being governed by others, by the government. Ordinary people had no illusions about the superior-inferior jural relationship. That changed in the democratic age. Writing perhaps with France particularly in mind, Tocqueville foresaw a coming age in which people imagined themselves liberated from the superior-inferior jural relationship, believing “We are the government, and the government is us.” By virtue of the collectivist configuration of ownership, each citizen is a joint owner of the compassing substratum, and the government is the people’s voluntarily chosen set of club officers. Jurally speaking, now there is only the equal-equal relationship; we all live on voluntary terms in the great hotel (though of course sometimes people violate agreements, as do thieves and extortionists). With the Great Reconfiguration came a profound shift in how the ordinary person thinks about government. Rather than the jural dualism sustained in Smithian liberalism,<sup>11</sup> the social democratic mentality tends to be one of jural monism, as in the ancestral band. We are instinctually jural monists, civilization necessarily deranges that instinct, and, much as Tocqueville foresaw, the democratic age has given rise to a cognitively dissonant mythos that obfuscates and sublimates that derangement.

**Equality.** Equality has as many senses as there are important dimensions in which two things can be judged equal or unequal. For cohesionism, equality is central in two senses. One is

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<sup>11</sup> Incidentally, some liberals cherish jural-monist notions, either in wishing to see government in terms of Lockean political consent (with a central contractual term specifying the husbanding of natural liberty) or in an anarchistic way, seeing government as a jural equal, like a thief or extortionist. I feel that proper liberalism, Hume-Smith-Burke liberalism, accepts and proceeds on the clear presupposition of the dual jural relationships (superior-inferior, equal-equal). Hume offered a conventionalist theory of the authority and legitimacy of government, of jural-superiorhood, said that it parallels that for the authority of commutative justice, and thusly rejected that either rested on consent or contract. Smith and Burke followed him in rejecting political consent theory. In my view, liberalism’s formulations presuppose jural dualism. Where Larry Arnhart (2016, [link](#)), Paul Rubin (2002, 113, 116, 125, 133, 141ff), and others suggest that band-man was free, that liberalism corresponds to the ancestral band, etc., I’m inclined to say, well, I can agree that band-man was not subject to coercion by a governor, since there was no governor. But does that mean he was free? Jural-dualist concepts simply do not apply in a jural-monist world.

equality in ballot access, universal suffrage. Another is equality in condition, denominated in terms of food, wealth, income, opportunity, and so on. Both are plausibly rooted in the ancestral band, and both are carried to excessive lengths by cohesionists, atavistically. For liberalism, equality is less central. There is an equality in ethically mattering, in counting as part of the whole – again something Smith did much to advance and establish – but this sort of equality goes equally for both liberalism and cohesionism. Then there is equality in one’s claim to justice, equality before the law, but this too goes equally for both liberalism and cohesionism. Where liberalism espouses a sort of equality that expresses an important distinctiveness, it is equality in the sense of favoring that social affairs proceed principally upon the equal-equal jural relationship, rather than the superior-inferior jural relationship (all understood on the liberal configuration of ownership). The liberal wishes to reduce the role of the jural superior, thereby reducing our roles as jural inferiors, and in that sense she advocates equality. But this sort of equality is really just a repackaging of the central liberal theme: the presumption of liberty, the presumption against the governmentalization of social affairs. And it is a repackaging that does not add much to the more direct ways of expressing that theme. Thus, while certain senses of equality are central to the distinctiveness of cohesionism, we now live in an age in which no sense of equality is very central to the distinctiveness of liberalism.

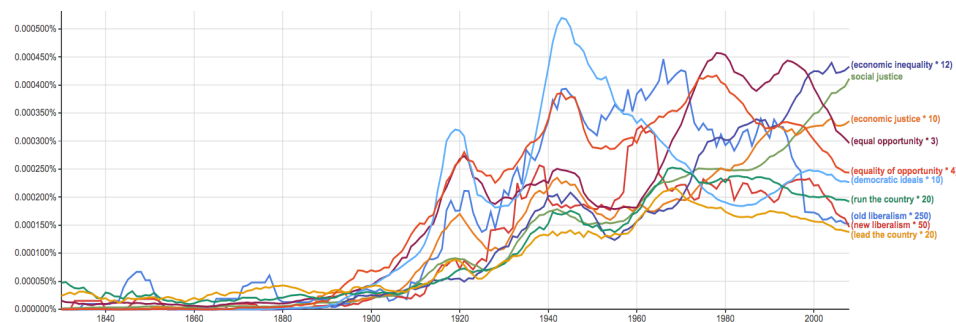
### **Some Thoughts on Making Our Formulation Persuasive**

I conjecture that cohesionism is a formulation useful for understanding our moral and political world, for understanding ourselves. To explore that usefulness and make it persuasive, there are a number of things that one would like to do if one were, say, writing a book on cohesionism, but that I don’t do here, except to offer now a bulleted list with brief remarks:

- As cohesionism as offered here is rooted in the ancestral band, we would like to know more of the research on the ancestral band and evolution. We would like to know more about how band existence feeds into what I have asserted to be inherited “penchants,” “bents,” “mentalities,” and “instincts.” Just how bravely can we spin tales based on genetic-memory sorts of premises? What are the

mechanisms of genetic memory? What is the meaning of “genetic memory”? Is the atavism thesis just a “just so” story?

- Pressing on nonetheless, we would like to say more about how the nine contrasts relate to one another. I believe that one could show that the cohesionist bents often relate strongly to one another, forming an interlocking, cohesive set of ideas and sentiments, a cohesive tendency in outlook, and that the same can be said for the liberal bents.
- We would like to interpret the texts of Rousseau, Marx, and other leading enemies of liberalism, to show how their patterns of thought line up with the nine salient aspects of cohesionism.
- We would like to show evidence for the Great Reconfiguration, making the case that the following figure – charting the following ngrams: new liberalism, old liberalism, social justice, economic justice, economic inequality, equal opportunity, equality of opportunity, democratic ideals, run the country, lead the country – is evidence of a sudden and dramatic change in thought and language.



For every one of those expressions, its currency in 1870 is insignificant, even nil, as compared with just 50 years later. Those terms and many others all reflect worldview changes relating to the Great Reconfiguration. We would like to explore texts from the period, evidencing semantic change and open controversy over semantics (as explored [here](#)).

- We would like to explore how affinitive social democracy was with socialism and fascism. As the social-democratic Barnard political scientist Sheri Berman candidly writes in her excellent book *The Primacy of Politics* (2006): “Although obviously differing in critical ways, fascism, national socialism, and social

democracy had important similarities that have not been fully appreciated. They all embraced the primacy of politics and touted their desire to use political power to reshape society and the economy. They all appealed to communal solidarity and the collective good. They all built modern, mass political organizations and presented themselves as ‘people’s parties’” (16).

- We would like to discuss how the horrors vindicated liberals and threw cohesionists back onto their heels, and tempering their creed into Fabianism, democratic socialism, and social democracy.
- We would like to explore the text of influential and inspirational figures during and since the Great Reconfiguration – such as Gustav Schmoller, Ferdinand Tönnies, Werner Sombart, Emile Durkheim, T.H. Green, Sidney Webb, George Bernard Shaw, L.T. Hobhouse, William James, Thorstein Veblen, Charles A. Beard, John Dewey, Karl Polanyi, Harold Laski, Paul Tillich, Gunnar Myrdal, John Rawls, and Noam Chomsky – to see whether we can trace elements of cohesionism in their moral and political writings.
- We would like to explore the political discourse of our own day, to see whether we can trace elements of cohesionism in the common formulations and opinions of pundits, politicians, and public intellectuals.
- We would like to connect to literature beginning with Tocqueville on the fragility of liberalism, rising governmentalization, and undue statism, literature extending up to recent research in moral and political psychology.

The ensuing section on the three open-society sympathies will help to elaborate cohesionism and perhaps to make more persuasive the formulation’s usefulness.

### **The Three Open-Society Sympathies**

We all agree that eating can be taken to excess and call that vice gluttony. We all agree that idleness can be taken to excess and call that vice sloth. We all agree that indulging (or surrendering to) social-cohesion-cum-governmentalization can be taken to excess; let’s call that

vice cohesionism. We may disagree on where to draw the line of “excess,” but we all agree that it lies somewhere.

[What is to come: The three open-society sympathies are (1) common-decency sympathy, (2) associational sympathy, and (3) allegorical humanist sympathy (I use “allegory” in a way that subsumes religion). I will point out that in the ancestral band (1), (2), and (3) were a single ball of social cohesion, there was no such separation between (1), (2), and (3). I will discuss how in today’s world we find great joy and fulfillment in the traversing of (1) and (2), and in the traversing of (2) and (3). By such traversing we make our life coherent. The point of all this is to size-up what the open-society sympathies can offer. Can we sell more people on them? Or will most people find them too unsatisfying, and opt for significant doses of cohesionism?]

A possible quote for allegorical humanist sympathy:

Bentham ([here](#)): “The work of Adam Smith is a treatise upon universal benevolence, because it has shown that commerce is equally advantageous for all nations—each one profiting in a different manner, according to its natural means; that nations are associates and not rivals in the grand social enterprise.”

## **Reflections for Liberals**

[Some points to come:

- The psychologizing offered here suggests that statisticians have motivations quite beyond what they articulate as their reasons. I think the same is true of liberals.
- Liberalism has long advertised the liberal plan as leaving the highest things outside of the direction and determination of the government, that liberalism leaves all higher-things options open to people to pursue by voluntary means. But such advertising is misleading. Liberalism does not advance all values.
- Adam Smith and others of the liberal age are sometimes criticized for being thin, or even clueless or wrongheaded, on innovation, entrepreneurship, market dynamism, and the potential for explosive economic growth. But maybe Smith knew more than he told, maybe he misdirected, precisely because most people



would not welcome such dynamism and rapid growth. Indeed, maybe the strongest argument for statism is that it chokes off the would-be torrent of economic prosperity. I don't think that argument is winning, because it proposes to ameliorate certain moral and cultural problems by governmentalization, which, though helping to solve the prosperity problem, produces worse moral and cultural problems, and leaves social affairs without functioning correction mechanisms – not just economic, but political, moral, and cultural.]

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