

Changing Your Mind Is Good, but Don't Cut Corners

Written by Bryan Caplan.

People rarely revise their beliefs on issues they care about. Even when confronted with strong counter-evidence, they usually manage to weasel out somehow. When you encounter someone who has revised his beliefs, therefore, it's tempting to conclude that he's highly reasonable. Apostates – people who abandoned a whole belief structure – smugly feed this temptation: “When the facts change, I change my mind. What do you do, sir?” As a serial apostate, I've often smugly fed this temptation myself.

When I listen to apostates, however, I'm usually struck by the flimsiness of their deconversion stories. Why exactly did they change their minds? A reasonable apostate would go through a process like:

1. I used to believe X, where X is something that at least sounds vaguely plausible.
2. But then I noticed a non-obvious but telling intellectual flaw in X.
3. I approached the best minds who believe X with my doubts, but none of them had a good response.
4. So I stopped believing X.

In practice, many apostasy stories discuss people rather than ideas: I had a falling-out with my fellow believers, so I stopped agreeing with them. But even the idea-centric stories sound more like:

1. I used to believe X, where X is something that sounds silly.
2. But then I noticed an obvious and telling intellectual flaw in X.
3. I ignored the flaw for a while.
4. Then I finally woke up and stopped believing X.

My point here is not that people shouldn't change their minds. They totally should. My point, rather, is that human irrationality is even more prevalent than it seems. Most people are too irrational to change their minds on anything important. But most people who change their minds on important issues nevertheless do so irrationally.

Political irrationality is ubiquitous. Most people irrationally cling to their political views; most of the rest irrationally *revise* their political views. This includes, of course, my fellow libertarians. I know plenty of unreasonable libertarians, but I also know plenty of “post-libertarians” who changed their minds for reasons no reasonable libertarian would accept.

Let's consider two case studies of libertarian apostasy I've seen first-hand.

1. Anti-immigration.

While there are plenty of thoughtful criticisms of fully open borders, libertarian apostates usually just latch onto a mainstream complaint: It's bad for low-skilled Americans, or "You can't have open borders and a welfare state," or "Immigrants will vote to turn the U.S. into a banana republic." You'd expect them to go through several layers of argument: "I know the standard libertarian reply, but that's incorrect because..." And you'd expect them to endorse the mildest restrictions required to address their concerns. But they almost never do. When libertarians turn against immigration, most become anti-immigration by *normal* standards, which is very anti-immigration indeed.

Some libertarians have even left me speechless with, "I believed in open borders until I realized that culture matters." I could say, "So until recently, you believed that culture *didn't* matter?" But what's the point? Culture obviously matters. Every libertarian I've met admits it. In fact, libertarians routinely discuss the need to change our culture in a libertarian direction. So how could the banal "insight" that "Culture matters" possibly lead a reasonable libertarian to rethink anything?

2. Pro-welfare-state.

Libertarians have a standard list of objections to the welfare state. Some - like opposition to universal programs and concern about disincentives - are very strong. But the radical objections are much more debatable. I can easily see someone with libertarian sympathies reluctantly and cautiously advocating a small welfare state.

But when libertarians change their minds, they usually go much further. Indeed, most apostates seem to *love* the welfare state. Before long, they're praising the wonders of Scandinavia, home of massive universal programs - and the massive taxes required to fund such programs. Isn't it great how Sweden provides a comprehensive safety net, so everyone feels secure? It's almost like the apostates have forgotten - or never knew - the standard libertarian arguments about the disincentives of the welfare state and the wastefulness of universal redistribution.

Of course, these generalizations don't apply to *all* post-libertarians; I disagree with Will Wilkinson's defense of the welfare state, but at least he's trying to meet his burden of proof. But the typical libertarian apostate is as intellectually disappointing as a former socialist who self-congratulates, "But then I learned that incentives matter." In both cases, I have to say: Your "realization" is well-known to every reasonable proponent of the view you've abandoned. Though I've often criticized people for their inability to fairly explain their opponents' views, it's far worse if you can't fairly explain views that were once your own.

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