

Appeasing Robin Hanson's Critics

Appeasement is greatly underrated. As I've explained before:

Didn't the Munich Agreement prove for all time that appeasement doesn't work? Hardly. Despite its well-hyped failures, appeasement is an incredibly effective social strategy for dealing with the unreasonable and the unjust... also known as 90% of mankind. Whenever someone makes bizarre demands upon me, my default is not to argue. Instead, I weigh the cost of compliance. If that cost is small - and it usually is - I let the babies have their way. If you bump into me in the grocery store, I say "Sorry."

Doesn't that open the floodgates to additional demands? Not in my experience. One symbolic gesture is enough to placate most of the unpleasant characters I encounter. After my concession, we usually go our separate ways. And even when I repeatedly interact with the same unreasonable, unjust person, at least my appeasement makes it hard for them to imagine that they have to get back at me for my past wrongs.

Despite their scorn, almost everyone knows that appeasement works. How do I know this? Because everyone appeases to cope with social realities. Recall your day. Did you experience some unreasonable, unjust treatment? Probably. If so, did you escalate the conflict until reason and justice prevailed? Probably not. Why not? Because it would be a Pyrrhic victory, likely to leave you unemployed and alone.

But I have to confess: When Twitter lashed out at Robin Hanson last week for asking a perfectly reasonable question, my emotional reaction was, "These people cannot be appeased! We must not yield a single inch to this mob!" And it wasn't hard to construct a superficially solid argument to support this emotional reaction. Namely:

1. Robin's question was reasonable.

2. His tone was not only polite, but friendly.

3. Virtually everyone who knows Robin personally vouches for his sincerity and kindness. Several (including me) were happy to publicize this information.

4. His critics' main reaction was still personal abuse, condemnation, publicly "taking offense," etc.

5. Faced with people so unfair and so unreasonable, isn't escalation the only viable option?

Could I be wrong about (1), (2), (3), or (4)? I doubt it. But on reflection, there is so much that (5) is missing.

First and foremost, it forgets about the *audience*. In any debate, you're officially talking to your opponents, but it's quixotic to imagine you're going to persuade them. In reality, you're trying to persuade spectators. And as the story of Jesus so famously reveals, calmly enduring abuse, returning good for ill, looks good to spectators. I don't know how many people Robin persuaded, but he would have persuaded far fewer if he lost his cool and treated his opponents the way they treated him.

Second, the argument against appeasement ignores long-run persuasion. You're not going to persuade people when they're upset. But eventually, many people will calm down. Once they do, they're more likely to reconsider their original position if you acted nobly throughout.

Third, long-run persuasion is especially important in the face of a moral panic - and the social justice movement seems a prime example. In such situations, (a) many people are only upset because other people are upset, and (b) many current abusers will eventually find themselves among the abused (as in "The revolution devours its young.") I would not be surprised if some of Robin's more prominent critics eventually find themselves on the wrong side of "their side." By appeasing these critics today, returning good for ill, you raise the likelihood that when they're unfairly treated, they'll consider the possibility that they treated others unfairly in the past.

If that ever happens, I'll welcome them with open arms. Knowing Robin, he'll do the same. Appeasement is far from fool-proof, but commitment to it really does pay off.

P.S. Wouldn't *real* appeasement just be to lie, "What I fool I was, you're absolutely right" - or just to remain silent in the first place? The answer, of course, is that appeasement is a continuum. When I say appeasement is overrated, I'm not claiming that you should go to the endpoint.