

Irrational and Negligent

What's wrong with your intellectual opponents? One of the most popular answers is that they're "stupid and evil." Most of the thinkers I respect go out of their way to disavow this facile answer. Indeed, most of the thinkers I respect go out of their way to praise their opponents' intelligence and virtue. They don't merely opine, "We can disagree without being disagreeable." They put those who disagree with them on a pedestal.

My respect notwithstanding, this seems odd. If your opponents are so great, *why are they still your opponents?* If you're right, why haven't your arguments caused them to change their minds? If they're right, why haven't their arguments caused you to change yours? On reflection, Robin Hanson is right to insist that "disagreement is disrespect." After all, if you *really* held another thinker in the highest esteem, you would trust their judgment over your own.

What then do I think is wrong with my intellectual opponents? With rare exceptions, I deny that they're stupid. Indeed, I think that many of my intellectual opponents are clearly smarter than me. Paul Krugman and George Borjas swiftly come to mind. Nor do I think they're evil. A few trolls aside, my opponents are doing what they believe to be right. So where do they do wrong?

First, while they're not stupid, they're usually *irrational*. They let their emotions sway their judgments. They indulge in hyperbole. They take the values of their society for granted. They don't bet.

Second, while they're not evil, they are *negligent*. It doesn't take a genius to figure out that thinkers should stay calm, measure their words, question their society's values, and put their money where their mouths are. But my intellectual opponents still routinely fail to abide by these norms. The beliefs for which they're known are largely wrong because poor intellectual self-discipline normally lead to error.

Now you could ask, "Doesn't the same critique apply to your intellectual allies, too?" The answer, sadly, is yes. Most of my allies are irrational and negligent, too. If they're right about controversial issues, they're usually right for the wrong reasons.* How can they be right when their intellectual methods are so poor? Simple: They got lucky. That's why they're so rare.

The toughest challenge, though, is: "Doesn't the same critique apply to Bryan himself?" My response: I ruminate on my own irrationality every day. When I write, I weigh each sentence for accuracy. I live the **Betting Norm**. Taken together, this seems sufficient to clear me from the charge of negligence. Full rationality, in contrast, is such a high bar I

don't think I perfectly meet it. The best I can say for myself is that when I fall short of full rationality, it's rarely for lack of trying.

Still, there's always room for improvement.

* I do think that my *closest* intellectual allies – people who broadly share my arguments as well as my conclusions – are markedly better. But that's a tiny crowd.