

# Krikorian's "Category Error"

During our last debate, an audience member asked Mark Krikorian if his arguments for restricting immigration of foreigners were also arguments for restricting the child-bearing of natives. You might think that Mark would insist that native babies are somehow *better* than foreign adults. How hard could it possibly be to craft such an argument? However, Mark adamantly refused to compare the worths of different kinds of people. Instead, he informed the questioner that his question was based on a "category error."

In so doing, Mark signaled high IQ, because smart people love to announce that someone has made a "category error." But precisely what *is* a category error? Here's a standard definition:

*To show that a category mistake has been committed one must typically show that once the phenomenon in question is properly understood, it becomes clear that the claim being made about it could not possibly be true.*

Here's a more detailed discussion:

*Category mistakes are sentences such as 'The number two is blue', 'The theory of relativity is eating breakfast', or 'Green ideas sleep furiously'. Such sentences are striking in that they are highly odd or infelicitous, and moreover infelicitous in a distinctive sort of way. For example, they seem to be infelicitous in a different way to merely trivially false sentences such as '2+2=5' or obviously ungrammatical strings such as 'The ran this'.*

Which raises a big question: How could the audience member's perfectly intelligible question possibly be a "category error"?! If you say, "We should restrict immigration because immigrants burden taxpayers," what on Earth is wrong with responding, "In that case, should we restrict child-bearing if babies burden taxpayers?" The answer, of course, is: **Nothing at all.** Not only is the latter question in the same "category" as the former question; it is *the* textbook way to check the logic of Mark's position. And it starkly reveals the inadequacy of Mark's original argument. Whatever your views on immigration, Mark definitely needs to assert something like, "We should restrict immigration because

immigrants burden taxpayers *and* only natives are entitled to burden taxpayers.”

This in turn shifts the argument over to the fundamental question: What is morally permissible to do to foreigners but not natives – and why? Which recalls a previous Krikorian-Caplan dialogue. I asked Mark: “*Suppose you can either save one American or  $x$  foreigners. How big does  $x$  have to be before you save the foreigners?*” And Mark responded:

*Another meaningless hypothetical.*

Not only is this a meaningful question; it gets to the heart of what Mark needs to formulate a coherent position on immigration. I’m confident that Mark, as an avowed Christian, thinks we have no right to murder or enslave foreigners. And an avowed restrictionist, Mark clearly thinks we have a right to prohibit foreigners from domestic labor and residential markets – even though plenty of natives are eager to trade with them. Why, though, does Mark draw the line there? While it is rhetorically convenient for him to dodge the question by calling it a “category error” or “meaningless,” he intellectually doesn’t have a leg to stand on.

So why not face the question instead of stonewalling? I stand by my previous explanation: Mark thinks like a politician, not a truth-seeker. To make his position intellectually credible, he’d have to say, “Foreigners’ welfare is of near-zero value.” Unfortunately for him, this sounds terrible – and like most politicians, Mark hates to utter anything that sounds terrible. Occasionally bullet-biting is essential for truth, but it’s bad for winning popularity contests.

I’m never nervous when I debate Mark; he has good manners and reminds me of my dad. In contrast, I would be quite nervous even to be in the same room as a white nationalist. They seem like sociopaths. In terms of intellectual rigor, however, leading white nationalists far exceed Mark. I naturally think they’re deeply wrong. Still, if you want to construct an airtight argument for immigration restriction, your best bet is to build on the twin premises that (a) almost all immigrants are inferior to natives, and (b) the well-being of these inferior people is of little worth.