

The Peace of Mind in Probabilistic Thinking

I'm a big believer in agnosticism. (See what I did there?)

There are so many things that don't require a strong opinion or position, and don't warrant dying.

It's very stressful to be confronted with questions and claims about culture, physics, politics, psychology, health, economics, history, ethics, aesthetics, and philosophy and feel the need to have a clear answer. Especially when answers immediately get interpreted as sides and you'll get lumped in with some tribal collective blob and be associated with whatever bundle of biases they may have, real or imagined. It's like behind every possibility lurks a mob shouting, "Are you with us or against us?!"

This is bad for curiosity, learning, and fun.

Besides having fewer opinions and focusing on individuals instead of collectives, another way I've found relief from relentless pressure to pick is to think in probabilities instead of binaries.

"Do you think eating gluten is bad for you?" is the kind of question that makes you feel a bit uneasy. You know about the weird tribes in this debate and don't want to be in them. Still, maybe you're interested in the topic for yourself or as a general curiosity. If you're not content with, "I don't know", try assigning probability.

"I think there's a high probability that too much gluten is one cause of my digestive problems" is way more relaxing. You don't have to give up the examination. You don't have to stay out of the conversation entirely. But you distance yourself from binary conclusions and tribes, individualize your opinion, and leave open the possibility that your sliding scale of probability can change with more information.

You can't fake it though. If deep down you're a hard-liner (which is not all bad in every situation, just very, very dangerous), pretending to be probabilistic to seem sophisticated will only make you more stressed. If you can begin to unwind the reactive need to pick a yes/no and assign probabilities, you will find a release of tension and an expansion of curiosity. You may even be able to read Twitter debates with a smile instead of rage!