

Why I Seek Converts

I recently Tweeted:

I don't want to crush, humiliate, frighten, silence, irritate, defeat, discredit, demoralize, delegitimize, depress, frustrate, or ostracize my intellectual opponents. I want to convert them and be friends.

— Bryan Caplan (@bryan_caplan) November 11, 2018

The first sentence won wide acclaim, but the second sentence provoked much criticism. Why do I want to “convert” my intellectual opponents rather than *learn* from them?

I have several partial answers:

1. Of course I want to learn from them. But eventually, I finish learning. As a rule, we still disagree. Once we reach that stage, we can drop the subject – or I can try to convert them to my view. Yes, I could reconsider the possibility that they’re right and I’m wrong. Eventually, however, I finish reconsidering – and we still disagree.

2. Doesn’t this reveal enormous arrogance on my part? Well, you could say that anyone who publicly defends a controversial view is enormously arrogant. The subtext, after all, is “I’m right and almost everyone else is wrong.” On the other hand, if you don’t consider your judgment on the topics where you publicly speak to be exceptionally good, *why are you speaking?* Most people who seek converts don’t deserve them. But if you do deserve them, why wouldn’t you seek them?

3. I don’t start calling someone an “intellectual opponent” until after I’ve heard what they have to say and learned whatever I can from them. Indeed, a good working definition of an intellectual opponent is, “Someone who disagrees with you who has very little to teach you.” If that’s where you find yourself, you again face two paths: agree to disagree... or try to convert them.

Final point: You don’t have to imagine you’re infallible to responsibly seek converts. You just need to think that your knowledge and judgment are better than those of your audience for the topics under discussion.