

Meeting Our “Enemies” Where They Are

The Advantage of Understanding Your Adversary’s Arguments

BY ANDREW COOPER-SANSONE

THEY MARCH, TWENTY OR SO STRONG, SPILLING grotesque, hate-filled rhetoric into the streets. Multicolored picket signs remind all passersby that a fiery eternity awaits them after death if they do not fear god’s wrath. Always protesting with a clear purpose, from funerals of mass shooting victims, to fallen soldiers, and pop icons, they deliberately scrape the exposed nerves of grieving families and friends of the deceased.¹ These protestors remind artists, musicians, soldiers, homosexuals, apostates, and anyone who finds fault with their position that, by their mere existence, they are testing an angry god.

Sweaty-faced with terror struck eyes, he sits in front of a green screen that reads Infowars. He jumps frantically from one conspiracy theory to another, never giving any indication that he could be mistaken. He assumes that anything covered by the mainstream media is an attempt to control its viewers’ minds in order to implement a terrifying political agenda. He has thus claimed that during the 2016 presidential election, the mainstream media wanted to cover up the fact that Hillary Clinton is “an abject, psychopathic, demon from Hell that as soon as she gets into power is going to try to destroy the planet.” In fact, in nearly the same breath he suggests that Barack Obama too is a literal demon in disguise, all supported by information Jones obtained from “high up folks.”² This is a man whose Youtube channel, before recently being banned by the company, had roughly 2 million subscribers.

With black masks concealing their identities, one member of the group reads emphatically from a script. A hostage sits in a chair, bound by ropes, awaiting the gruesome fate he has come to accept. The audience watches helplessly through a screen as the group makes good on their promise and brutally executes an innocent man.

The question that inevitably arises when faced with people who will commit these sorts of wrongs is why? What is the reason behind these outrageous

acts? The Christian fundamentalist group known as the Westboro Baptist Church (WBC), the internet talk show host and conspiracy theorist Alex Jones, and extremist Islamist terrorists have something in common: *they believe what they say*. This fact of course extends to all manner of religious extremists, woo-peddlers, and even many medical quacks. Many of us see that this type of sincerity is at play, but we don’t necessarily recognize why that is, or what the implications of it might be. Here I want to go further and suggest that it is not simply that they believe, but rather that *they have no choice but to believe in the madness* running through their minds. They did not choose to be who they are, nor to live the lives they have, and in a very important sense, these people are victims of their own brains.

Understandably, many of us do not want to see it that way. We would rather have it that being evil (or a useful pawn for evil people) is a choice borne of libertarian free will. It is far simpler to see your ideological enemies as evildoers who revel in their malicious acts, than it is to recognize them as human beings who are unlucky to have lived the lives they have. If we hope to win these enemies over, we cannot start the conversation from a place of condescension or pure judgment; instead, we must meet them where they are, as ugly a place as that may be. And if we want to succeed in building a better world, we must convince some significant fraction of them that they are wrong, and this can only be done if we cultivate a compassionate understanding for how they have become the people, and sometimes the monsters, we see before us.

Belief and the Software of the Brain

The idea that something can have an internal logical consistency, yet still be ultimately incorrect, aides us in understanding why people commit acts which, from the outside, appear totally insane or carelessly immoral. If you believe, along with characters like

Alex Jones, that there is a group of powerful elites attempting to control the minds and opinions of the masses through carefully orchestrated propaganda disseminated by the mainstream media, then even the most ridiculous conclusions (including Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama being actual demons in disguise) are on the table, so long as they are coming from the mouths of trusted sources outside of the mainstream. Similarly, if you believe that after your death God will torture you endlessly, with no chance of respite simply for romantically loving someone of the same sex, you suddenly become responsible for the eternal suffering of all the homosexuals you did not at least attempt to convert to God's way. So through that warped lens, it makes perfect sense to spend all your time, money, and energy explaining with as much clarity and volume as possible, as the WBC does, that "god hates fags." And if you think that there is no better way to serve the creator of the universe and help secure your place in heaven than to violently eliminate infidels, apostates, and Muslims who do not subscribe to the "proper" interpretation of their religion, as extremist Islamist terrorists do, then the internal logic of such a vile act speaks for itself. The validity of this concept stretches to many categories of crazy things that people do based on their beliefs, which are deemed so undoubtedly true, so clearly logical in their own right, that they easily lead the believer to act upon them.

This phenomenon is akin to a computer program installed in the brain that systematically alters that individual's cognitive strategy for reasoning. To be clear, we all have such software packages running on the hardware of our brains, many of them quite beneficial to our species: from heuristics and rules of thumb, to our ability to communicate using a particular set of arbitrary sounds and symbols (a language), to our understanding of mathematics, to the scientific method, and beyond. The problem is that unfounded belief can represent an especially pernicious class of neural software. Someone under the control of one of these programs is very often acting logically, but the parameters within which they do so are entirely unnatural and surreptitiously, if not explicitly, wicked. In the case of religion, these constraints are often in the form of restrictions on what questions can and cannot be asked. This means that certain doctrines are non-negotiable so they must be believed and followed without dispute. In the case of the hyperactive conspiracy theorist, these cognitive constraints might be structured as the idea that all major world events are probably the result of powerful people deviously working in the background to convince

the masses to conform to a more controllable way of being. So while someone under the spell of these belief systems may have the capacity to reason effectively, this capacity is undermined by the problematic constraints created by the neural software running their mind. There is no doubt that other socio-cultural variables are at play and these certainly contribute to why anyone acts the way they do, but sincere belief is an extremely powerful algorithm for producing specific behaviors in the world.

We too often perceive positions with which we disagree, be they political, moral, or metaphysical, not as the result of improper functioning of a thinking machine in the heads of those holding such positions, but instead as a result of that thinking machine being fundamentally different from our own. The neural program analogy is useful in understanding this distinction, in that it points to the fact that we could all be doing equally crazy things if we were unfortunate enough to have a particular program running in our heads. In retrospect, we can see how the backwards beliefs once held by persons like Islamist turned Muslim reformer, Maajid Nawaz, and pastor turned secular activist, Dan Barker, were the products of their unchosen life experiences and realizations. However, we do not see that this applies to everyone who is still believing such backwards things. In fact, even the examples of morally abhorrent behavior by the groups mentioned above should be viewed with compassion because they too are people trying to make sense of their world in the only way they know how.

This is not to say that we are all equally good or bad, but rather to acknowledge the point that we all have the potential to turn out one way or the other. Taking this view seriously means that even a truly evil person is, in many ways, a victim of circumstance. It would make things much simpler if these people were just being dishonest about their views, rather than the uncomfortable truth that they are honestly assessing their perception of reality. The truth is that they are unlucky to believe what they do, to have such a skewed view of how things work, but we cannot stop there because simply recognizing this will do nothing to stop it. To truly make a difference, we have to find an optimal strategy for deprogramming this insanity, given that such insanity is more often than not, entirely sincere. And in the above examples of Maajid Nawaz and Dan Barker, minds can be changed and lives turned around for the better.

Free Will and the Nature of Evil

There is a vast collection of philosophical literature stemming from debates regarding the reality or

illusion of free will, and the subsequent implications for moral responsibility. We need not dive into these arguments here, but recognize that whether or not free will is real (I personally believe it is fundamentally an illusion), as individuals we are not responsible for everything that makes us who we are and how we think. The fact is that none of us chose our biology or our parents. We probably had no say in where we grew up, nor the people we happened to meet there. We did not choose to be exposed to the literature or media which helped shape our personal philosophies, and we certainly did not decide exactly how that information would affect us.

This common thread of a lack of control over our own identity is the seed of true compassion, and once planted, such compassion quickly grows into uncomfortable places. To realize that the worst in our societies—the violent psychopaths, serial killers, sadists, and the like—are essentially victims of chance is to see that this could be one's own fate given the right circumstances. However, it also suggests that there may be a way of fixing these individuals. It is not unreasonable to speculate that, given sufficiently advanced understanding and technological tools, we could physically alter the brains of evil people and thereby greatly reduce the probability of future evil being committed. Whether or not a future scenario of that kind is ultimately desirable is not what I am after. The point is that *compassion*, defined as *the drive to change things for the better spurred by the recognition of suffering or misfortune in another*, is a much more useful state of mind than unbound anger or depression. Dwelling in these and other negative states will only bring frustration and a desire for vengeance. If we can recognize that most evil is a result of regular people acting on extremely misguided thought processes, and that those thought processes are made possible by forces over which those people had no control, then we can begin to figure out how best to prevent that type of evil from arising in the future.

Toward an Optimal Strategy of Reprogramming

If you have ever participated in a heated debate you know that you are quite unlikely to convince your immediate adversaries that they are wrong. We all know that screaming matches, overly snide comments, and uncharitable caricatures are only going to add fuel to an unnecessary fire. Disagreements may get unavoidably heated, but making the effort to cool down and actually listen is key to making progress.

Psychological evidence regarding cognitive biases shows that, when confronted with uncomfortable

truths, people tend to dig their heels in even if they are on less than solid footing.^{3,4} Similarly, we also know from work in psychology that we tend to get distracted by strong emotions when arguing with others about moral matters,⁵ so deliberately throwing fuel on these types of fires during a debate is bound to blow up in our faces. The alternative? We need to create an atmosphere of friendly disagreement wherein we honestly want to know what the other person thinks and why. A disrespectful assault on what a person perceives as utterly central to their identity is going to fail most of the time. As noted by the professional negotiator, Daniel Shapiro, we must acknowledge a person's deeply held beliefs and what part these beliefs play in a person's perception of their own identity.⁶ Such recognition brings us closer to "the other" in a way that has the potential to open dialogue.

How many times have we in the atheist or skeptical community cringed after being told that we cannot possibly believe that morality is real if we do not believe that God is real? If the religious person on the other end of that claim took enough time to listen to what we have to say about matters of right and wrong, although they might still disagree with our stance, they could come to see how misguided they initially were. Given a long and honest enough conversation, they could understand our thought process and recognize that we are not just opportunistic, hedonistic, evildoers with no sense of right and wrong, but instead people very much like them who also wish to pursue an ethical life. Minds can change radically, opinions can shift dramatically, and societies can evolve given the right circumstances. The question is, how do we make these things happen for the better? What is the best strategy? My answer begins with compassion for our enemies. We need not pity nor condescend to them, but see them as potentially valuable individuals with some mixture of characteristics which, if pointed in the right direction, might make the world a better place to live.

The philosopher, Daniel Dennett, has noted that there is "simply no polite way to tell people they've dedicated their lives to an illusion."⁷ So perhaps we don't need to be polite, but we don't need to be nasty either. I think Dennett would concede that there are better and worse, or more effective and less effective, ways of suggesting such a thing. I claim that a compassionate view of someone's deepest held beliefs is an effective starting point. Starting with compassionate understanding can lead us to ask incisive questions in a way that actually has a chance of impacting the listener's view. If we see someone with whom we disagree not as stupid, but instead as being under the

control of a set of beliefs, we can respectfully point out places where their logic does not make sense to us. We can make the debate less threatening, and therefore less apt to producing the emotions which so often render such discussions counterproductive. We must also be patient, because big changes of mind are unlikely to occur after a single conversation. The value of a single conversation lies not in the illusion that we will always succeed in convincing our enemy, but rather in the fact that we can sow or nurture the seeds of change.

We must recognize that most people take an attack on their beliefs as an attack on their identity, and they react with defensive maneuvers, denial, or counterattacks. So it is not that we should be any less harsh on illogical and dangerous beliefs, but we must find a good strategy for actually confronting those beliefs effectively. By definition, this must be a strategy that avoids greater division. The fact is that people will turn away, dig in their heels, and simply stop listening if our only strategy is to make them feel stupid. We are far more likely to succeed in changing the minds of our opponents if we can lead them to question their belief systems, and thus begin the process of change from within. What exactly can we do to bring about such self-questioning? The following are three basic steps that can help in this regard. We will refer to them as “what,” “why,” and “why not.”

First, the “what” should address the fact that you know what their argument is. Here, you should attempt to “steel-man” your opponent’s argument (i.e., the opposite of straw-manning: be able to articulate the argument as well or better than they can) to show that you are listening and comprehending what they are saying.

Next, the “why” strategy should address your opponents core beliefs, or intuitions, which lead them to accept and espouse the particular belief that you find irrational or indefensible. In the case of conspiracists, this might be a deep-seated distrust of powerful entities, especially governments. With religiously based arguments, the core belief might be something like “there must be a just order to things” or “someone must have created the universe.” These core beliefs are frequently tied to some aspect of a person’s perceived identity, and at bottom these aspects can be quite laudable. For example, conspiracists very often see themselves in a similar light as skeptics, in that they recognize the problems with appeals to authority and the importance of evidence; and religious folks often have a deep desire to live ethical lives. Respecting this connection can bring into focus the mechanism responsible for the irrational belief(s) in question.

Finally, the crucial strategy is the “why not,” or the attempt to show your opponent that, while they can still keep their identity, their irrational belief is flawed in critical ways that they themselves should recognize as such. For instance, in the hard case of arguing with the likes of Alex Jones, one might point out that, while he seems to discount anything said by the mainstream media, he will take as fact whatever his “trusted sources” say. Indicating that this conflicts with the aspect of his identity which values assessing claims by the weight of the evidence, rather than by the source of the claim may help attenuate some of his irrational discounting of everything reported by the media. With regard to even more consequential cases, such as with harmful fundamentalists, like members of the WBC and jihadist organizations, one might explain how their behavior is completely antithetical to their core value of doing good. It could also be asked in these cases why, if God is great, would he insist on causing so much suffering in his name?

In the face of true evil, these suggestions may seem trite, but it is important to remember that these small seeds of truth must be planted and, though their growth may be slow or indeed may never happen for some individuals, continual exposure can cause them to thrive in the minds of others. Big changes rarely happen in a single moment. More often, small changes gradually lay the foundation for big changes to reach their tipping point. Focusing our energy on producing these small changes will therefore build the framework required for such tipping points to occur. **S**

REFERENCES

1. Yan, M. 2018. “10 Craziest Westboro Baptist Church Protests Ever.” <https://bit.ly/2CgDi2Z>
2. Klein, E. 2016. “Trump Ally Alex Jones Thinks Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton are Literally Demons from Hell.” <https://www.vox.com/policy-and-politics/2016/10/10/13233338/alex-jones-trump-clinton-demon>
3. Nickerson, R. S. 1998. “Confirmation Bias: A Ubiquitous Phenomenon In Many Guises.” *Review of General Psychology*, 2(2), 175.
4. Jonas, E., Schulz-Hardt, S., Frey, D., and Thelen, N. 2001. “Confirmation bias in Sequential Information Search After Preliminary Decisions: An Expansion of Dissonance Theoretical Research on Selective Exposure to Information.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 80(4), 557.
5. Haidt, J. 2001. “The Emotional Dog and Its Rational Tail: A Social Intuitionist Approach to Moral Judgment.” *Psychological Review*, 108(4), 814.
6. Shapiro, D. 2017. *Negotiating the Nonnegotiable: How to Resolve Your Most Emotionally Charged Conflicts*. Penguin.
7. Schuessler, J. 2013. “Philosophy That Stirs the Waters.” <https://nyti.ms/2PyBJiE>