

To maintain our moral purpose

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Unless humans reduce their emissions of green-house gases, and quickly, many people will die in famines and floods, and life for those who survive will be nasty, brutish, and short. Unless people practice safe sex and have easy access to drugs, AIDS will continue to ruin lives and impoverish nations. Unless we secure and extend a woman's right to choose, girls and women will lose their freedom to live as they wish, and some will lose their lives. Unless we change people's attitudes, lesbians and gays will continue to be victims of discrimination and violence. Unless we carefully control the possession of firearms, we and our children will not be safe from random slaughter or planned massacre.

When the stakes are as high as they are, can there be any good reason for governments or activists not to address the problem by using the most effective means at their disposal?

Effective means include mocking and demonizing opponents while valorizing the good guys and their views. They also include criminalizing the expression of dangerous views, and suppressing contrary or ambiguous evidence.

The most ineffective means, on the other hand, are evidence and argument, or so at least experience and research tell us. Evidence and argument are ineffective mainly because they call for reasoning. Reasoning is something we'd rather not do, for it requires attention and care, its results are always tentative and prone to be upset by new evidence or novel ideas, and its materials (the observations with which it begins; the premises and inferences of its arguments) are always open to question and challenge.

Worst of all, reasoning doesn't always lead us where we would like to go.

Psychologists tell us that while evidence and argument do sometimes change people's beliefs and attitudes, what dependably turns the trick is appeal to emotion, to our need to belong and to our fear of being ignored or ostracized. Sound views are simply the views held by attractive people, or so we feel. And we certainly don't want folks to lump us in with the bigoted losers.

Governments and activists, then, do well in their rhetoric and behaviour to paint their side brightly and the other side in dingy greys and browns.

They also do well to control the flow of information. When the task is to bring people to agree with you on the nature or severity of the problem, framing the issue your way and suppressing alternative views and inconvenient facts can be half the battle.

We see attempts to manipulate emotions and to control the discussion all the time. We can find many illuminating examples just by noticing what organized pro-choice groups, for instance, have been up to lately on university campuses. Disruptive protestors at the University

of Waterloo ridiculed Stephen Woodworth, who had been invited to campus to explain why he wants parliament to discuss the legal definition of a human being. Protestors at Saint Mary's shouted down Jose Ruba. Students' councils at Carleton University, Kwantlen University, and other schools have tried to ban pro-choice clubs or to deny them funding.

Defenders of these actions make the point that since the stakes are high, open and free advocacy and discussion is a luxury we cannot afford. Campus Women's Centres have often argued that because the equality and safety of women are guaranteed by the Charter of Rights, pro-life advocacy should be restricted under human rights or hate-propaganda legislation, as such advocacy puts equality and safety at risk. Indeed, even being exposed to pro-choice advocacy can be harmful; hearing that abortion stills a beating heart might be emotionally unsettling for women who have had abortions. In any case, to say that women should carry their pregnancies to term against their will denies to women their dignity and indicates to them just how precarious their status in society is, and that's offensive and threatening, and women should not have to tolerate offensive and threatening behaviour.

I mention organized pro-choice groups only to illustrate how some activists, rather than addressing the subject on the table, have instead tried to police people's attitudes and to control information and discussion.

For an example apart from abortion, consider university president Elizabeth Cannon's official assertion that Tom Flanagan's remarks about jailing people for viewing child pornography "absolutely do not represent the views of the University of Calgary." Protecting children from sexual assault is so important, President Cannon implies, that we must tar (not refute) any idea (and its sponsor) that could even conceivably lead to harm.

Now, any adequate response in favour always of open and free expression and discussion must admit the two points I made above. The first is that sometimes the stakes are extremely high. (HIV and AIDS policies in South Africa in the middle of the last decade resulted in over a quarter of a million needless deaths. Had President Thabo Mbeki's HIV-denialism been illegal, this calamity very well might not have occurred.) The second is that flattery, castigation, and control of the discussion are effective means of capturing hearts and minds, much more effective than evidence and argument are.

The argument that we—citizens, activists, governments—should forswear those means of serving our ends that are inconsistent with free and open discussion—even though those means are the most effective at hand—must begin by noting that we fail to respect each other as persons when we attempt to manipulate each other's attitudes. We treat each other with respect only when we presume that we are able to form our beliefs and values for ourselves on the basis of our own good reasons. If we care to interact with others on the basis of our autonomy and ability to judge for ourselves, we won't seek to manipulate them into believing what we want them to believe, even if what we want them to believe is the truth of the matter and it's important that they believe truly. We will limit ourselves to citing evidence and argument.

I've taken my title from a saying by the Stoic philosopher Epictetus, who died in AD 135. Epictetus taught that we should always serve a second purpose when we act, not just our first purpose. Our first purpose, of course, is whatever we want to accomplish: buy an orange, enjoy a day at the beach, help humanity to survive the coming ecological collapse. Our second purpose is our moral purpose. Our moral purpose is to serve our first purpose only in a way that expresses our status as free and equal people in community with other free and equal people. To maintain our moral purpose is, then, to guard jealously our identity as rational, autonomous agents, even as we strive to save the world.

