

The New York Times
Opinionator

JANUARY 18, 2012, 6:46 PM

How to Argue About Politics

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As a philosophy professor, I spend much of my time thinking about the arguments put forward by professional philosophers. As a citizen (and an occasional columnist for [The Stone](#)), I also spend lots of time thinking about the arguments put forward by Democrats and Republicans on currently disputed political issues. Of course, there are differences in logical sophistication and complexity between the philosophical and the political arguments. But, allowing that popular political arguments require shortcuts from full academic rigor, there is not, I think, that much difference between the logical acumen of politicians and philosophers.

But there is one respect in which philosophers' arguments are far superior to those of politicians. To be taken seriously, a philosophical argument has to begin from a thorough understanding of an opponent's' position and formulate the position so that it is as plausible and attractive as possible. Politicians, by contrast, typically load the dice by attacking the weakest versions of their opponents' views they can find.

Envisioning a 'charitable' but rigorous approach to political debate.

We could greatly improve the quality of our political debates if we simply held to the philosophers' rule of understanding and charitably formulating our opponents' views. To illustrate my point, consider how Democrats might approach the core conservative position that almost all the current Republican presidential candidates endorse. (Ron Paul's libertarianism separates him from the core on some key points.) The candidates' disagreements are typically not about whether the conservative position is correct but about which of them most sincerely and consistently holds it.

This core conservative position consists of a set of canonical views on government, economics and religion/ethics. On government, the candidates think there should be much less of it, particularly less regulation of business, less support for social welfare programs and less control of ordinary citizens' lives. Economically, their goal is to balance the budget, pay off public debt, lower taxes and support the efforts of businesses to increase their profits and thereby generate new jobs. They also see it as crucial to support traditional Christianity and to endorse its ethical views, particularly on matters of sexuality, especially opposition to abortion and to same-sex marriage.

Why might a sensible person be sympathetic to these sorts of views? It helps to see them as based on a general picture of the strengths of our nation and the dangers to its flourishing. The strengths are our free enterprise system and our religious/ethical heritage of hard work, individual responsibility and adherence to traditional moral standards. The working of the free enterprise system generates sufficient wealth to allow almost everyone to have at least an adequate standard of living and also produces innovations that continually improve that standard. Of course, there will be people who, because of bad luck or their own moral failings, wind up deprived of basic human goods. The primary remedy for this should be the charitable instincts of fellow-citizens living a life of Christian faith, which is also the source of human fulfillment, beyond mere material prosperity

On this Republican view, there are two great internal dangers to our

way of life. First, there are forces such as secularism and relativism that threaten our basic ethical values. Second, there is the perhaps well-intentioned but deeply wrong belief that governmental planning and regulation can significantly improve on our free enterprise system as a way of providing for our material needs. On the contrary, major interventions almost always make things much worse. Maintaining the integrity of our ethical values and of our free enterprise system are the keys to solving almost all of our problems.

Given this sort of sympathetic formulation of the conservative position, critics can still find ample grounds for disagreement. The formulation identifies several key assumptions that opponents may well question: that, left to itself, the free market will not cause unacceptable hardship for large numbers of people; that substantial government intervention almost always leads to bad results; that Christian ethics—especially with the conservative emphasis on sexuality—is the best code of moral behavior. But our sympathetic formulation allows an even more effective way of criticizing the conservative position: not by arguing against its key assumptions but by arguing that those very assumptions lead to contradictions.

In particular, there is a basic tension between the two main elements of the conservative view: Christian ethical values and the free enterprise system.

Christian morality is a matter of love for others and self-sacrifice on their behalf. A market economy assumes that all agents (employers, workers, buyers, sellers) act in their own selfish interests. The problem is evident in the New Testament's unease with the wealthy and sympathy for the poor; see, for example, Matthew 13: 22, Mark 10: 23-25 and James 5: 1-3.

The standard response to this sort of moral objection is that the “invisible hand” of the market produces public goods out of private selfishness. If we all act for our own selfish ends, there will be far more material goods for us to share than there would be otherwise. But this is a utilitarian argument; that is, one that judges actions as

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moral because they increase our material happiness. Christian morality, however, denies that moral good and evil depend on what maximizes such happiness. Christian love and self-sacrifice, in particular, are moral goods in their own right, regardless of their consequences. Conversely, conservative Christian morality would not allow homosexuality or same-sex marriage, even if it turned out that doing so would increase material happiness.

I am not proposing this line of argument as a decisive refutation of the views held by the current Republican presidential candidates. But it is, I maintain, an argument based on a sympathetic analysis of those views and requires a serious response from people who hold them. It is not the end of a fruitful discussion of our political differences, but it could be the beginning.

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