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Sacred cows make for bitter feasts

When everyone insists on being right, debates harden. Understanding outcomes, not just principles, may be the only way through today's polarised world

It feels increasingly difficult nowadays to avoid righteousness; or, worse, self-righteousness. We are constantly being told what to do by those who supposedly have seen the light. For example, I was recently scolded by a colleague for suggesting that my own employer should aim to hire the best people, regardless of their sex or race. I was struck by the confidence that this person felt in instructing me on what I should value; it felt high-handed and uninformed.

Of course, there is a difference between righteousness and self-righteousness (though the slippery slope between them is short and steep). The advantage of righteousness is that it is justified, as in the case of a zealot who opens people's minds to the possibility that they are prejudiced. By contrast, lecturing a stranger on how to weigh the trade-off between merit and equity strikes me as self-righteous.

Why is there so much of this behaviour today? To address that question, we need to understand what makes people so sure of themselves. The answer may be a little surprising: Self-righteousness comes from judging the world by the perceived correctness of actions rather than by the quality of outcomes.

Do you really understand the issue at hand?

Consider tariffs. To evaluate the issue objectively, one must understand the causes of trade, trade imbalances, and their effects. In other words, one must frame the issue 'consequentially'. Presumably, the goal of a tariff policy is to produce beneficial outcomes. But that can be accomplished only by understanding why people trade and how to create conditions for the kind of trade you want. You must think about how the world works and how to tweak it to produce the outcomes you desire.

This may seem obvious, but successful execution requires a deep understanding of difficult economic questions. Once you begin trying to understand how trade works, you discover how complicated it is. Everyone is always looking for the best deal by guessing what everyone else is willing to buy and sell. Will imposing a 25 per cent tariff on Canada cause Canadians to meet your demands, or will it drive them into a corner? This isn't a question about what you value. It's a question about how the world works. A good consequentialist analysis will try to deliver an objective answer.

Owing to this complexity, consequentialist perspectives are shockingly rare among politicians and the public. People tend to adopt a much simpler one, seeing issues in terms of sacred values with which a given action either does or does not accord. Thus, instead of looking at the causes and consequences of trade, the Trump administration focuses on a particular action, as if tariffs are, by virtue of their righteousness, some kind of cure-all. The framing of the issue plays the same role as a religious dictate. It is a core belief, in this case based on little more than the faith of one man.

If one's position on trade can be determined by sacred values, imagine the role such values play on issues like concealed-carry permits for firearms, abortion, assisted suicide or religion in education. Framing issues in terms of sacred values makes them seem simple, but only because it avoids all the hard analytical work needed to link consequences to causes.

Psychologists have shown that this perspective makes people more intransigent and less likely to compromise. Violations of sacred values cause outrage to the point that people will take actions to purify themselves (as with self-flagellation) and to right the perceived wrong. Sacred-value frames are thus a recipe for hostility, polarisation and conflict. Because sacred values are inherently personal, they force the conversation to be about individual faith-based commitments that can brook no dissent, deepening the sense of opposition and corralling people into distinct identity groups.

Before asserting self-righteous claims about someone else's opinions or actions, think about their end goal.

By contrast, it is quite hard to be self-righteous when adopting a consequentialist frame. Discussions of causes and consequences are not only difficult; they require attention to detail, recognition of real-world complexities and humility about what you don't know. It is less about yourself and more about the issue, because such conversations leave no cognitive or emotional space for indignation. Yankees and

> Red Sox fans can have a conversation about strategy and statistics. But as soon as one side starts cheering for its team, there's little that the other side can do but cheer for its own.

The problem with certainty is that it is rarely justified. Issues that elicit strong disagreement tend to be complicated. Offering an informed argument about trade policy requires an enormous amount of expertise, and even experts disagree (at least about the details; even advocates of tariffs agree that Trump's implementation of the policy has been suboptimal).

People simply do not know how little they know. We live under the illusion that we have a better understanding of how things work than we actually do. Strong opinions demand justification. The conviction that America should impose tariffs just because you like tariffs, or because they are good for you personally, doesn't cut it. Strong preferences give people strong convictions, but they will not persuade those who do not share them — nor should they.

So, before asserting self-righteous claims about someone else's opinions or actions, think about their end goal. What consequences are they trying to achieve? In small matters, like how to interact with the people around us, and large ones, like how to strengthen the economy, thinking in these terms can open persuasive lines of argument. Perhaps more importantly, it would force us to stop talking past one another.

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