

Criticizing an Idea (20170529)

Alonzo Fyfe

Every time there is a terrorist attack in the west involving a Muslim (and virtually any time there is a terrorist attack in the west, as many assume until it is proved otherwise that a Muslim was involved), an old war of words flares up anew.

On the one side, we have the Islamophobes – the bigots who use the emotional reaction to a tragic event to sell hatred and fear of the dread “other”.

On the other side, we have apologists for Islam (many of whom are not Muslim) who treat criticism of Islam as a crime far worse than that of setting off a bomb at a public gathering – who, indeed, target their wrath at the former while giving the latter a pass.

Both types of people exist. There are anti-Islamic bigots, and there are those who have adopted the view that scarcely anything on the planet deserves more criticism than the criticism of another person’s religion. However, for the most part, there are the cartoonish oversimplification of opposing views that are too common in public debate. I want to look at the intellectually serious side of this debate.

In the discussion that follows I will be focusing mostly on “Islamophobia”. However, my arguments will be just as applicable to criticisms between Democrats and Republicans and political movements such as the political activities of Bernie Sanders and his followers.

Affleck vs Harris

A much-discussed example of this dispute erupted on the show “Bill Maher: News Hour” in an exchange between the actor Ben Affleck and former Republican Party chair Michael Steele on the one hand, and Maher and guest author Sam Harris on the other.

RealClearPolitics has a video clip of the exchange and a partial transcript of the exchange.¹ The partial transcript, I would argue, does not include the most important part of the discussion for my purposes, which occurred at the beginning of the dispute.

In this exchange, Harris and Maher sought to defend the practice of criticizing Islam when they did it. They admitted that there is such a thing as bigotry against Muslims and that this was a bad thing, but that their form of criticism of Islam was not a bad thing.

HARRIS: The crucial point of confusion is that we have been sold this meme of Islamophobia where every criticism of the doctrine of Islam gets conflated with bigotry towards Muslims as people. That is intellectually ridiculous.

AFFLECK: Are you the person who understands the officially codified doctrine of Islam?

¹ RealClearPolitics, “Bill Maher and Ben Affleck on Islam”, http://www.realclearpolitics.com/video/2014/10/03/bill_maher_vs_ben_affleck_on_islam_mafia_that_will_fuckin_g_kill_you_if_you_say_the_wrong_thing.html, accessed 05/26/2017.

HARRIS: I am actually well educated on this topic.

AFFLECK: You're saying that Islamophobia is not a real thing.

MAHER: It's not a real thing when we do it.

HARRIS: I am not denying that certain people are biased against Muslims as people, and that's a problem. But . . .

AFFLECK: It's gross. It's racist. It's like saying you're a "shifty Jew".

The matter under dispute is on the question of when criticism of Islam is legitimate, and when is it not?

We should start by recognizing that nobody is saying here that there is no such thing as bigotry against Muslims and that this is a problem. Nobody is saying that it is wrong to criticize an idea or philosophy. The point under contention here is: How do we tell the difference? How can we determine whether a point of criticism is of the form like, "He's a shifty Jew", and of the form equivalent to criticizing the Nazi ideology?

It would be useful to know the difference.

In this exchange, I am going to side with Affleck. The forms of criticism that Maher and Harris engage in are bigoted. It is, as they say, legitimate to criticize an idea. However, there are rules behind the proper criticism of an idea. Maher's and Harris' protests to the contrary, they violate their rules. Maher could use the defense that, "It's not [Islamophobia] when we do it," only if he and Harris alter the form of their criticism in some crucial ways.

Criticizing Act Utilitarianism

Almost everything I write involves the criticism of ideas. I have criticized act utilitarianism, Objectivism, moral nihilism, moral relativism, emotivism, moral realism (in one sense of the term), to name a few. There are certain rules to the criticizing of an idea.

The first rule is that the criticism of an idea requires criticizing that which is a defining characteristic of that idea. It involves criticizing that without which one would not qualify as the holder of an idea.

Let us take act-utilitarianism as an example.

Act utilitarianism is a moral philosophy that holds that the right action is the act that produces the most utility. Utility, in turn, is measured in some theories as pleasure minus pain. In others utility is measured in terms of happiness minus unhappiness.

I object to this theory.

However, for my criticism to count as a criticism of act-utilitarianism, and not a criticism of act-utilitarians as people, then my criticism must be aimed at that which defines a person as an act-utilitarian. I must criticize that, without which, a person would not be counted as an act-utilitarian. In other words, my criticism counts as a criticism of act-utilitarianism only if I was arguing that the proposition, "the right action is the action that produces the most utility" is false.

Let us assume that Jeremy, who calls himself an act-utilitarian, blows up a building. He leaves behind a manifesto that says that he did this because he believed that this would bring about the most utility. Would it be legitimate to use this as a criticism of act-utilitarianism? Is it the case that I can hold act-utilitarianism itself responsible for his action?

The fact is, people performing terrorist acts and defending their action in act-utilitarian terms is not rare. This would apply to anybody claiming to act for the greater good – where good can be understood in terms of utility. Yet, we do not have people such as Harris going on television claiming that utilitarians are the bane of our existence. If somebody were to try, we would dismiss their criticism as irrelevant. Here, we recognize a person who commits a terrorist act and who claims to be an act-utilitarian from a criticism of act-utilitarianism itself.

In fact, a plausible reading of Harris' own views suggests that he is, in fact, an act-utilitarian. Harris may be understood as saying that the right act is the act that promotes the greatest well-being of conscious creatures. He has argued in defense of torture on these grounds. I do not think that he has been asked, but consistency seems to require that he would argue for blowing up an airplane if that is the act that maximizes utility. He may have a hard time arguing against the legitimacy of blowing up a convention center where a number of what he might consider fundamentalist Muslim leaders has assembled.

The point is, to count as a criticism of act-utilitarianism, it is not sufficient that Jeremy blew up a building and that he claims to have done so in the name of bringing about the greatest happiness for the greatest number. It must also be the case that blowing up the building in fact produced the greatest good for the greatest number. In other words, Jeremy cannot be mistaken about what utilitarianism requires of him. If Jeremy is mistaken, then the act-utilitarianism can correctly respond, "The problem is not with act-utilitarianism. Act-utilitarianism actually says that the action is wrong. The problem is that Jeremy made a mistake and performed some action that does not, in fact, maximize happiness."

In fact, this is exactly how moral philosophers present criticisms of act-utilitarianism. They do not need to wait for a real Jeremy to detonate a real bomb. The critics of act-utilitarianism merely need to invent scenarios where act-utilitarianism will command an imaginary Jeremy to perform some act that must, it seems, be considered wrong.

For example, let us imagine that Jeremy is a doctor in a hospital where there are five patients each of whom would die without the transplant. Two need kidneys, one needs a heart, and two need a lung. A healthy patient comes into Jeremy's office for a physical, and Jeremy discovers that this person would be a viable donor for these five patients. Jeremy weighs the life of this one healthy patient against the lives of the five whom he could save, concludes that five lives are better than one, kills the healthy patient, and distributes his blood and four organs among the others.

The fact that act-utilitarianism would command Jeremy to kill this patient (and to do so cheerfully) is seen as a criticism of act-utilitarianism.

Another commonly used example involves torture. Is it permissible to torture a prisoner to get him to reveal the location of a bomb that would kill a large number of children? The act-utilitarian says, "go ahead – and there would be even more utility if the torturer were to enjoy it". Now, let us assume that this particular person is willing to endure his own pain. However, he has a child of his own whose welfare he cares about greatly. Would it be permissible to torture this man's young child to get him to

reveal the information? Again, the act-utilitarian would be forced to say, “Yes, and it would be better if he enjoyed it.” This provides a legitimate criticism of act-utilitarianism.

In both of these cases, a criticism of act-utilitarianism involves creating a scenario where some objectionable implication follows necessarily from the ideas of the theory being criticized. The act-utilitarian is forced into a choice. She must either accept the claim that the doctor may – in fact, must – kill the healthy patient and use his organs to save the five, or give up act-utilitarianism. She must either accept torturing the prisoner’s child to get him to talk and enjoying it, or give up act-utilitarianism.

This is the essence of criticizing an idea.

By analogy, for Harris and Maher to be involved in a legitimate criticism of Islam as an idea, they must show some necessary implications of Islam such that, if one were to reject these implications, then they would no longer be a Muslim.

This is where Affleck’s question, “Are you the person who understands the officially codified doctrine of Islam?” lands a telling blow. For each of the things that Harris and Maher want to call a criticism of Islam – if it is, in fact, a criticism of Islam – it must be the case that the implication necessarily follows from being a Muslim. It is a “criticism of Islam” only if those being criticized are forced to choose between accepting this objectionable conclusion or to cease to be a Muslim.

Yet, Harris and Maher both admit that it is possible to reject the criticism and to continue to be a Muslim. Harris tries to bring some statistical arguments into the debate as if they support his view.

HARRIS: . . . To give you one point of contact: 78% of British Muslims think that the Danish cartoonist should have been prosecuted. 78%.

This is an admission that it is possible to be a British Muslim and to believe that the Danish cartoonist should not be prosecuted. But if this is the case, then it is wrong to say that Harris and Maher are criticizing Islam.

This gets into a central point of contention. Affleck accuses Maher and Harris of bigotry since they are making derogatory overgeneralizations about all Muslims. He paints their comments as derogatory and unfair when applied to Muslims who do not happen to share the attitudes that Maher and Harris are condemning. Maher and Harris respond to this by saying that they are not claiming that all Muslims are guilty of these wrongs. They admit that some Muslims are not guilty of these wrongs. Yet, they still claim that they are making legitimate criticisms of Islam.

In making these claims, Maher and Harris are contradicting themselves. It follows from the claim that one is criticizing Islam that anybody who denies the implication is not a Muslim. Thus, the criticism applies to all Muslims – or, at least, to all Muslims who properly understand what the term “Muslim” means. They then deny that their criticism applies to all Muslims – which, by necessity, implies that their criticism is not a criticism of Islam.

Both Maher and Harris are atheists, so they may find the following example illuminating.

Let us assume that a particularly violent form of Marxism breaks out among atheists, or that many of them adopt the attitude that without God everything is permissible. Or let us assume that they adopt the attitude that religion is such a bane of human existence that religious people should be rounded up

and executed to end this contagion. Or a version of Ayn Rand Objectivism goes through the atheist community whereby they take up arms against the state – assassinating political leaders, blowing up government buildings, and who consider the recipients of government aid programs fair game.

Let us say that 78% of the atheists in a country adopt this view. They do not necessarily engage in these actions, but they see the actions as legitimate.

Harris and Maher, I wager, would object that it would not be proper to use this as a criticism of atheism. Whether or not they would make this objection, as a matter of fact, they should make this objection, because it would be a legitimate response. An objection to the views and activities of those involved in this movement would not be a legitimate criticism of atheism because being a supporter of this movement is not a part of what it means to be an atheist. To make a legitimate criticism of atheism, one must criticize what it means to be an atheist. And if one is criticizing what it means to be an atheist, one is offering a criticism whereby, if the criticism is sound, one is going to have to give up being an atheist.

Against this, Maher and Harris may respond that there is a difference here in that Muslims, unlike atheists or act-utilitarians – get their moral commands from scripture which call for these objectionable actions. Atheists and act-utilitarians have no scripture commanding them to do these evil things.

Again, this is not entirely accurate. Some Muslims are getting these ideas from a particular interpretation of scripture. However, it remains an open question as to whether that interpretation is correct. Recall, in the above example, the statistics suggest that 78% of Muslims believe that the scripture commands or recommends the punishment of the Danish cartoonists; 22% do not. To say that the punishment of the Danish cartoonists come from scripture is to say that the 78% are correct. From this it follows that the 22% are incorrect – that their interpretation of scripture is mistaken. Furthermore, their mistake prevents them from being “true Muslims”. Once they acquired a more accurate interpretation of scripture – the interpretation of the 78% - they will realize that they must choose either between punishing the Danish cartoonists or being a Muslim.

To go back to the analogy to atheism, if a talk show host and his guest were to decry that the actions of the 78% of the atheist community who had become violent Marxists, moral nihilists, social Darwinists, or whatever was an objection to atheism, the guest who responded that this was bigotry – that it was disgusting – that it unfairly tarnished those atheists who rejected this view – would be perfectly accurate.

The Impossible Standard

In presenting this view in discussions, I am often confronted with the objection that this represents an impossible standard. I am, in effect, saying that a criticism can only be legitimately called the criticism of an idea if it is something that those who hold the idea agree on unanimously. Since there is nothing that the holders of any idea agree on unanimously, there can be no such thing as legitimate criticism.

I have already shown that this response draws a false conclusion since I have given examples of objecting to ideas. I have shown to object to act-utilitarianism. In addition, a legitimate objection to atheism would take the form of criticizing the idea that the proposition, “there is at least one god,” is false or almost certainly false. This type of criticism is not only possible, but is quite common.

The fact is that the standard that I am suggesting is not one of 100% agreement. A group of atheists might be in unanimous agreement that an increase in the minimum wage will reduce the number of jobs

available for disadvantaged workers. However, a criticism of this view would not count as a criticism of atheism. This is because beliefs about the economic effects of an increased minimum wage have nothing to do with atheism.

It is not “100% agreement” that one is looking for in making a legitimate criticism of another view. It is “that which defines a person as being somebody who holds that view’. It is not the mere fact that act-utilitarians are in 100% agreement with the proposition that the right act is the act that creates the most utility that makes criticism of this belief a legitimate criticism of act-utilitarian. It is the fact that this belief defines what it means to be an act-utilitarian.

Similarly, a legitimate criticism of atheism attacks what it means to believe that the proposition, “The proposition that at least one god exists is false or almost certainly false,” is true.

By analogy, a legitimate attack on Islam is an attack on what it means to be a Muslim such that, if the attack is successful, those who embrace its conclusions would no longer be Muslims. It is wholly inconsistent with the idea that one can accept the conclusion and yet still be a Muslim.

Rather than being “an impossible standard”, this standard of debate is “business as usual” in academic circles. Pick up any article or book in academic philosophy or any other field, and you will discover the criticism of ideas. These criticisms of ideas do not fall into the realm of “criticism of people” (other than the criticism that those who hold those ideas are in error) because they conform to “the impossible standard” identified here. They limit their criticism of X-ism to criticism of what means to be an X-ist and, from this, work to show that X-ism is a mistaken belief. People who find this to be an impossible standard simply need more practice.

A Practical Consideration

Harris, Maher, and their defenders may be interested in disputing my claim that they are contradicting themselves – denying that they are, at the same time, saying that their criticisms apply to all people properly called “Muslim” and denying that they are applying their criticisms to all people properly called “Muslim”, they have paid a significant cost in ignoring this distinction.

As they have experienced time and time again, when they ignore this distinction they are accused of bigotry (and rightfully so). This accusation has merit. We need to consider how it is that Harris and Maher can make and repeat this contradiction, suffering repeated and renewed accusations of bigotry, and not see what they are doing.

The conversation then turns away from what they want to talk about to the question of whether they are or are not bigots. If, instead, they were to recognize this contradiction and avoid it, then the conversation would not be on whether or not they were bigots, but on promoting the liberal values that they seek to defend. A plausible answer is that they do not wish to admit their own bigotry – even to themselves. To preserve self-respect, they wish to see this as a case in which their opponents such as myself, through stupidity or malevolence, deny the truth in what they say. They do not wish the charge of bigotry to be true, so they turn a blind eye to the evidence.

I will have more to say on the question of how to avoid charges of bigotry in cases such as these. . . or what can be stated more precisely as the question of how to criticize ideas more accurately and without bigotry . . . towards the end of this paper. At this point, I merely wish to point out that Maher and Harris

are spending a great deal of time defending themselves of charges of bigotry that could be spent doing other things – particularly given the fact that they are, in fact, guilty of bigotry.

The sooner they get the idea that “this is a criticism of Islam” implies “this is a criticism of every person who can legitimately be called a Muslim,” and thus stop making this claim when the implication is false, the sooner they can deflect these charges of bigotry and get to the job of actually defending their liberal values.

Protecting Liberal Values – Freedom of Speech

In defending their actions, Harris and Maher accuse their critics of a failure to defend traditional liberal values such as freedom of speech and the rights of women.

MAHER: Liberals need to stand up for liberal principles. This is what I said on last week's show. Obviously, I got a lot of hate for it. But all I am saying is that liberal principles like freedom of speech, freedom to practice any religion you want without fear of violence, freedom to leave a religion, equality for women, equality for minorities including homosexuals. These are liberal principles that liberals applaud for. But then when you say, in the Muslim world, this is what's lacking, then they get upset.

HARRIS: Liberals have really failed on the subject of theocracy. They will criticize white theocracy. They will criticize Christians. They will still get agitated over the abortion clinic bombing that happened in 1984. But when you want to talk about the treatment of women and homosexuals and free thinkers and public intellectuals in the Muslim world, I would argue that liberals have failed us.

I would like to look at this issue in the light of one of those issues, the right to freedom of speech.

I take the right to freedom of speech to be a right to engage in communicative actions such as speaking, writing without fear of violence or threats of violence. Those who threaten to respond to mere words or other forms of communication with violence violate a basic human right. We have reason to condemn and, in fact, even to punish those who respond to words or who try to control what is said and written with violence.

This includes a condemnation of any Muslim who threatens or practices violence as a way of criticizing what is said about Muslims or Islam.

According to Maher and Harris, criticizing them for their hatred and bigotry involves a failure on my part to stand up for this principle. Somehow, I cannot consistently defend this principle and reject to the ways in which they criticize Islam.

From the perspective that I am reviewing in this article, there are two wrongs here. There is the wrong of responding to words and other forms of communicative actions (e.g., the Danish cartoons) with violence. I assert that this is wrong and that there is good reason to condemn and to punish any who would respond to communicative actions in this way. The government should reject any and all calls to respond with violence itself, and should seek to identify and punish anybody who plots violence in response to communicative actions.

The other wrong is the wrong of promoting hatred towards individuals within a group merely in virtue of their membership within that group. Note that I have not called for violence to be used against Maher and Harris for their words – and, indeed, I would condemn any who did so. However, I do reserve the right to criticize and condemn them (which are my own words and communicative actions) for using a form of argument that makes derogatory overgeneralizations about a group in a way that promotes fear and hatred of all of its members.

Note that I accuse Maher and Harris of this wrong in virtue of the fact that their claim that these criticisms are criticisms of Islam implies that everybody who deserves the name Muslim (everybody who properly understands what it means to be a Muslim) shares this characteristic that they criticize. Though Maher and Harris may, in the next breath, assert that their criticisms apply to all Muslims, this does not change the fact that their words do carry this implication. Their denial is like a person who, after claiming that Mike was a bachelor, says in the next breath that they are certainly not to be understood as saying that Mike is unmarried.

Faced with two wrongs, it is certainly proper to focus attention on one of those wrongs at one time, and on another of those wrongs at another time. I am not being inconsistent if, when encountering a person who threatens violence in response to communicative actions, that I condemn the person who does so. While, at a different time, when confronted with a person who is promoting fear and hatred by making derogatory overgeneralizations, I condemn that person for those actions. There is no sense to the argument that, to properly defend the right to freedom of speech, I must remain silent about infractions to the rule against using derogatory overgeneralizations to promote fear and hatred of particular groups.

When I criticize those who would use or threaten violence as a response to communicative actions, the target of my criticism is not Muslims or Islam. To make them my target fails in two respects. First, I would be condemning people who are not guilty of the wrong that I am targeting – those Muslims who object to violence or threats of violence as a response to communicative actions. Second, I would be ignoring people who are not Muslims who also share the attitude that violence or threats of violence are a legitimate response to communicative actions. I would be telling atheists, Christians, and others who may also advocate violence in response to communicative actions that, since they are not Muslim, then my criticism of Islamic violations of freedom of speech do not apply to them.

To avoid these errors, I direct my attention to those who would use violence or threats of violence in response to communicative actions. In this way, I automatically target all Muslims who would respond with violence or threats of violence, and let all Muslims who would condemn actions of this type off the hook. At the same time, my condemnation will also apply to any non-Muslim who would respond to communicative actions with violence or threats of violence. They would not be let off the hook simply because they happened not to be Muslim.

Harris and Maher seem to believe that if anybody criticizes their claims about Islam, then they must not be sacrificing their liberal values. The argument says, in effect, “I am here defending the right to freedom of speech. You are attacking me. Therefore, you are failing to defend the right to freedom of speech.”

This is a common type of attitude to take – a rhetorical trick that aims to turn “criticism of me” into an act of treason against something the individual is claiming to try to defend. This is similar to Trump

saying that, since he is trying to make America great again, anybody who criticizes Trump is opposed to making America great again. The implication from the criticism of a person to the criticism of that person's stated goals is invalid. Sometimes, the criticism is grounded on the belief that person criticized is not, in fact, legitimately or effectively pursuing those goals.

One way in which I work to defend both of these liberal values – the opposition to bigotry expressed through derogatory overgeneralizations, and the right to freedom of speech – would be found in this criticism of Harris and Maher. Though I condemn them of making derogatory overgeneralizations, I do not call for the use of violence against them. The only legitimate response to words is other words – in this case, a reasoned argument that aims to demonstrate that they have made an error. The error is their failure to recognize that a statement of the form, “This is a criticism of Islam” implies “This is a criticism of all people properly called ‘Muslim’.”

Policing the Group

Another area where this bigotry comes out is in the claim that Muslims are morally responsible for policing other Muslims. The claim is that “it is your fault” that there are radical Muslims.

If such an obligation existed, then what defines the group(s) that an individual has an obligation to police?

Does a redhead have an obligation to police all red-headed people? Do left-handers have an obligation to police all who are left handed? Should the terrorist activities of somebody born on January 18 be used as a reason to condemn all people born on January 18 for their failure to “police” the activities of this one individual? Are atheists responsible for the crimes of Stalin? Are people who wear a mustache responsible for the crimes of Hitler? Are oriental people responsible for the crimes of Pol Pot?

Are white males responsible for the crimes of the Wall Street bankers who brought about the Great Recession?

If the moderates are morally responsible for the crimes of extremists, then does it not also follow that the extremists get credit for the moderation of the moderates? Why does this responsibility only flow one way?

The concept of “policing” is simply one way in which an individual can turn the wrong actions of a few people within a group that they do not like into a reason to hate everybody in the group. To feed that hatred, it helps to think that everybody in the target group is guilty of some wrong or infraction that makes them deserve that hatred. “Policing” provides a way of conceiving of everybody in the target group as guilty – so it serves the bigot's ends perfectly.

Question of Religious Tolerance

We still need to address a question of religious tolerance that people tend to ignore – I suspect due to the fact that they do not want to confront the answer.

Consider the following syllogism.

(Premise 1) A religion that calls for the extermination of the Jews, atheists, homosexuals, apostates, Danish cartoonists, or some similar group is a religion that cannot be tolerated.

(Premise 2) X is a religion that calls for the extermination of the Jews, atheists, homosexuals, apostates, Danish cartoonists, or some similar group.

(Conclusion-a) Therefore, X is a religion that cannot be tolerated.

This syllogism establishes the possibility of an intolerable religion. We pride ourselves on religious tolerance. However, religious tolerance does not imply that all religions must necessarily be tolerated. A person cannot command automatic respect for his or her beliefs merely by shouting, "This is my religion." If the religion as a component such as those listed above, then that would be an intolerable religion. Religious tolerance has its limits.

Something needs to be said about what it means to be an intolerable religion. This does not mean passing laws against merely asserting the religion's beliefs and announcing that one is a member of that religion. These mere communicative actions are still defended under the right to freedom of speech.

However, it does mean that the religion and those who hold it warrant no respect or deference. It is not legitimate to say, "I believe on religious grounds that the Jews should be exterminated, and you are duty-bound to respect my beliefs."

No . . . I am not.

Given the possibility of intolerable religions, it also follows that if Islam is a religion that calls for the extermination of any member of these four groups (and others – this is an illustrative list, not an exhaustive list), then Islam is an intolerable religion. If somebody were to argue that this is a demand of Islam it does not follow that, "Therefore, Islam is an intolerable religion." However, it does follow that, "If what you say is true, then Islam is an intolerable religion – so you had better give some serious thought to the question of whether or not it is true."

It is a bit dangerous to admit that there are intolerable religions. There are a number of people aching for an opportunity to point to some religion they do not like and say, "There's one."

However, this verdict goes hand-in-hand with the principle I argued for above that the criticism of a religion is only legitimate if it is criticism of that which defines a person a member of that religion. It must argue that there is a trait without which one could not be properly said to belong to the religion that is being criticized. If one can make the case that what defines an individual as being a member of a religion is that one must support (for example) the extermination of Jews, atheists, homosexuals, and the like, then one has made the case that the individual is a member of an intolerable religion. However, arguing that it is the case that this type of intolerance is a defining characteristic of a religion can usually be shown to be its own form bigotry.

[Against the Use of Group Terms in Criticism](#)

I would like to add a personal note to this discussion.

As a general rule, I make it a point never to use group names in criticism unless what I am criticizing is that which defines a person as a member of a group. I will state that I am criticizing act-utilitarians when I criticize the view that the right act is the act that maximizes utility. I will state that I am criticizing moral emotivism when I criticize the view that moral statements are emotional utterances – effectively grunts

of approval or disapproval of that which the agent is morally evaluating. That is because, in these cases, the object of criticism is that which identifies a person as a member of the group being criticized.

However, I make it a point never to criticize “liberals”, “conservatives”, “Muslims”, “Christians”, “Atheists”, “Europeans”, “China”, “Republicans”, “Democrats”, “blacks”, “Latinos”, or the like under a group name.

To begin with, all criticism of this type always starts in error – with a false premise that all members of the named group think alike and that I am going to declare not only what they agree on, but assert that they all agree on something that is worthy of condemnation.

One can raise the objection that when people use terms such as this, everybody “knows” that the criticism is not meant to apply to everybody in the group.

Perhaps people do know this on an intellectual level. However, I fear that they do not process the criticism in this way. The effect of such statements on the emotions is to promote a fear and hatred against all members of the target group based on the condemnation of a segment of that group. If somebody hears somebody say that Mexicans are rapists, that person may be able to intellectually respond with the acknowledgement that certainly it is not the case that all Mexicans are rapists. He may admit that some Mexicans are good people. However, the statement still gets processed in a way that promotes a fear and hatred of all Mexicans. It takes the response that one would naturally have towards “rapists” and applies that same response to “Mexican”. Thus, it becomes the root cause of a great deal of implicit and explicit biases against Mexicans in this example, and against “members of the target group” in general.

These types of statements are rare in academic discussion simply because they tend to be – quite simply – inaccurate. They are vague and imprecise at best, and simply false most of the time.

They tend to be commonly used in less formal discussions. However, I would argue that they are popular in informal discussion precisely because of their usefulness in rallying “us” tribes against “them” tribes. Political parties trying to unite their base against a rival have reasons to draw upon the tendency of their brain to process claims about “Democrats” and “Republicans” in terms of an “us” tribe having wisdom and virtue, against a “them” tribe filled with villainy and stupidity. Similarly, criticism of Atheists, Christians, and Muslims also aim to unite an “us” group in our common hatred, fear, and contempt for a group of “them”.

This has been an easy rule to follow. In some cases, I can make replace an inaccurate derogatory overgeneralization with a truthful claim simply by adding an appropriate modifier such as “most”, “some”, or “according to a Gallop poll, 78%.” By making this simple change, my accusations no longer carry the false implication that they apply to all members of the target group – they apply to most, some, or (according to a Gallop poll), 78% of the target group.

Another way of avoiding this problem is by directing comments directly against a particular individual or document. In this essay, I have criticized the views of Bill Maher and Sam Harris. I have criticized neither atheists nor liberals – even though both Maher and Harris self-identify with both groups. By criticizing the statements of a specific set of claims, my criticisms automatically apply to everybody who agrees with the ideas that I criticize, regardless of their group affiliations. In this case, my criticisms apply to anybody who shares Maher’s and Harris’ form of argument against Islam – and anybody who

participates and supports those types of claims. At the same time, my comments automatically avoid targeting anybody who rejects their form of argument – even if they also happen to be atheists or liberals.

Of course, a third way to avoid making statements of this type is simply not to make them. I simply do not post or write an article that condemns whole groups – unless that criticism actually does apply to whatever it is that identifies a person as a member of that group. I do criticize act-utilitarians. However, I only do so by attacking the proposition that the right act is the act that maximizes utility. I do not criticize act-utilitarians on the basis of some accident concerning what most act-utilitarians believe. In other words, when I criticize what act-utilitarians believe is criticism of a belief that makes them an act-utilitarians, and that would prevent them from being act-utilitarians if they were to give up that belief.