Criticizing an Idea (20170805)[1]

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[1] This paper has benefitted significantly from a long exchange with Lance Bush.

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Introduction

Every time there is a terrorist attack in the west involving a Muslim perpetrator (and virtually any time there is a terrorist attack in the west regardless of the religion of the perpetrator, since many people immediately assume it was a Muslim), a war of words erupts pitting "islamophobia" against "a defense of western values".

On the one side, people such as Sam Harris claim that "Islam is the motherlode of bad ideas" and the bad ideas that lead to terrorism are among them. The terrorist act is taken as further evidence that we need to "do something" about Islam. Many of the people on this side of the debate argue that those who fail to take this threat seriously are at least partially responsible for the carnage. They, at least, can be blamed for their failure to do anything to prevent, and for excusing and coddling those who provide the fertile grounds where terrorist ideas can grow.

On the other side, there are those who call these kinds of ideas "Islamophobic" – or bigoted against Muslims. Yes, terrorism is a bad thing and we have reason to do something about it, but that "something" does not involve taking a huge group of people – many of whom would never consider an act of terrorism – and saying, "They are the enemy!" Derogatory overgeneralizations of this type are the hallmark of bigotry – and bigotry is its own moral crime.

In fact, one can be against bigotry and against terrorism at the same time. In fact, one can take a stand against bigotry as a way of taking a stand against one of the causes of terrorism, since it is the injustice of bigotry that inspires some people to become terrorists.

I want to take a look at these two attitudes and try to get an idea of how to measure one against the other. My hope is to find where the truths lie and where there are fictions that we can throw out. Where is the line that separates "protecting liberal values" from "Islamophobia"?

In undertaking this project, I am going to be paying particular attention to an on-air disagreement that took place on HBO's "Real Time with Bill Maher." This disagreement contained within it much of that which lies at the core of this debate. Specifically, I would like to examine the Affleck vs. Harris debate and see if we can pull anything out of it that will help to identify when a set of claims involves "defending liberal values" and when they become bigoted hate-mongering.

My focus in this argument is going to be on a distinction between bigoted claims and "criticizing an idea". Harris, Maher, and many of their followers defend their actions as "criticizing an idea" – which is perfectly legitimate. They interpret their critics as saying that it is wrong to criticize an idea – that it is prejudiced or bigoted. They answer this by pointing out that this leads to the absurd idea that it is immoral to criticize the Nazi or the KKK.

The point that I will argue for is that there is a difference between properly and improperly criticizing an idea. When an idea is criticized improperly, the activity is indistinguishable from bigotry. When Harris and Maher "criticize an idea," they violate these rules in ways that are indistinguishable from bigotry.

The results will be applicable not only to the issue of "Islamophobia". They will be applicable to any dispute involving two or more groups of individuals – the Israeli and the Palestinians, the Democrats vs. the Republicans, the immigrants vs. the nativists, and the people versus the establishment.

Affleck vs Harris

A much-discussed example of the dispute between "Islamophobia" and "defending western values" is a shouting match that took place on *Real Time,* a talk show on HBO hosted by Bill Maher on September 26, 2014. [2] This dispute erupted between Maher and author Sam Harris on the one side and actor Ben Affleck with some support from former Republican Party chair Michael Steele on the other.

I find this to be a particularly useful example for two reasons.

First, it was a public discussion that, in turn, went viral on social media. Consequently, it was widely discussed, with people lining up in defense of each side. Consequently, it comes with a lot of commentary and criticism.

Second, it contains representations of the ideas that I wish to discuss. Even though the participants were not academic philosophers they quite naturally latched onto the most important ideas in this discussion.

In this exchange, Harris and Mahar sought to defend what they called the practice of criticizing Islam – which they thought that others found objectionable. They admitted that there is such a thing as bigotry against Muslims and that this was a bad thing. However, as Maher asserted, the criticism of Islam was not bigotry when it was carried out by the likes of Maher and Harris.

> *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?*
>
> *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 . . .*

[2] 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_fucking_kill_you_if_you_say_the_wrong_thing.html, accessed 05/26/2017. This transcript contains some editing to focus on the relevant facts.

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

Since these were not the prepared remarks of scholars engaged in an intellectual debate, some of the language was imprecise. Many of those who commented on this debate jumped on misspoken phrases or poorly articulated ideas to score rhetorical points. Those commenters did not raise anything substantive, nor did they contribute to a better understanding of the issues. In fact, they cluttered the discussion with trivialities and irrelevancies. In this discussion, I will be showing no interest in (or patience with) these types of activities. They are, in more than one sense, sophomoric.

Both sides of the debate became the victims of this type of sophistry.

For example, against Affleck's claim that Harris's remarks were "racist", many people had fun asserting that Islam is not a race – and often doing so in a smug and self-righteous tone. In contrast to those wanting to score rhetorical points, somebody interested in the actual issues under debate would have noted that Affleck's point can be easily made by using the term "bigoted" instead of "racist" and, that since Affleck was speaking off the top of his head it was easy to understand how he could have said the latter when he meant the former.

So, instead of trying to score rhetorical points, I will suggest we change Affleck's wording to an accusation of bigotry, rather than racism. This bigotry is not to be found in the criticism of certain dangerous and destructive beliefs. It is to be found in attributing those beliefs to – and thereby promoting hatred of – people who do not hold those beliefs. Properly understood, Affleck asserted that that there are a great many innocent people called Muslims and that Harris and Maher, with their careless use of language, were making them the illegitimate objects of fear and hatred.

Maher's comment that "it's not [Islamophobia] when we do it" became the focus of unfair criticism on the other side. The favored interpretation of the sophists and demagogues is that Maher was saying "exactly the same activity that would be considered bigoted when it came from others is not bigoted when we do it."

This is not a fair interpretation Maher's remark. He can better be understood as saying, "Yes, there are anti-Muslim bigots. However, we are not doing the same thing they are doing. We are engaged in the perfectly legitimate activity of criticizing an idea. We are not even talking about people. We are talking about the difference between good and bad ideas."

If somebody came to this article hoping to see some vindication for this kind of sophistry – looking for something that gives confirmation and comfort to verbal sophistry – they will be disappointed. I have no intention of saddling Maher with the absurd claim that he and Harris have a special license to practice bigotry without criticism. Nor am I going to saddle Affleck with the absurd idea that Islam is a race. Instead, I am going to look at the solid defensible claims they likely intended to make and may have expressed imprecisely.

Before moving on, I want to make a short diversion to note that there is probably some truth to the idea that anti-Muslim bigotry is, in many cases, racist. Racism towards dark skinned people may motivate people to seek a way of expressing their sentiment of dislike in a more socially acceptable way. Conceiving of their emotional reaction to dark skinned people as an emotional reaction to terrorists gives it a cloak of legitimacy. In this way, some racists may dislike Islam for the same reason they dislike jazz music. They associate the activity with a race and their dislike for the race stains their perception of

the activity. At least some Islamophobia is racist. However, for the purposes of this discussion, the broader and more general term of bigotry is more applicable.

On a more just interpretation, Affleck interprets Harris and Maher as promoting an unjustified hatred of innocent people in virtue of those people being Muslim. Harris and Maher are asserting that they are involved in the legitimate activity of criticizing an idea. That is the distinction that interests me here.

This central issue here is, "What counts as an instance of legitimate criticism of an idea, and at counts as unjustly promoting the hatred and denigration of people?" In the next section I will use the criticism of act-utilitarianism to draw out some of the elements of criticizing an idea.

Criticizing an Idea: The Act Utilitarianism Example

Almost everything that I write is a criticism of an idea.

I have criticized act-utilitarianism, Objectivism, moral nihilism, moral relativism, emotivism, and moral realism (in one sense of the term), to name a few. In fact, in this paper, I am engaged in the practice of criticizing an idea. I am criticizing an idea put forth by Harris and Maher that their actions do not count as promoting unjustified hatred of innocent people. On this matter, I am going to be siding with Affleck in saying that Maher and Harris are actually engaging in the illegitimate criticism of a group of people in a manner properly labeled "bigotry". However, later in this article, I will show how they could go about criticizing an idea, and do it in a way that avoids the accusation of bigotry.

We are assuming that Maher and Harris are seeking to perform legitimate criticism. Legitimate criticism follows particular rules. Harris and Maher did not follow these rules. Consequently, they did not engage in legitimate criticism of an idea. This opens up the possibility that Affleck was right – they were actually engaged in the illegitimate criticism of a people wrapped in a cloak of "criticism of an idea" to give it an appearance of legitimacy.

Primarily, criticism of an idea requires criticizing that which is a defining characteristic of that idea. It involves criticizing that which qualifies a person as a holder of that idea. If what Harris and Maher was engaged in is criticism of Islam, then they were engaged in a criticism of that which defines a person as Muslim – ideas, without which, the targets of that criticism could not be said to be followers of Islam.

I would like to illustrate this point by looking at the act of criticizing act-utilitarianism moral theory.

Before I get started, I want to note that this is not a paper on act-utilitarianism. I will be demonstrating what certain attacks against act-utilitarianism look like. However, it is not my purpose to evaluate act-utilitarian as a theory. I will be looking at how certain criticisms of act-utilitarianism are made and how they illustrate the requirements of legitimate criticism. The primary criticism is that for criticism to count as criticism of an idea it must attack a defining characteristic of that idea. It must be an attack on something such that, if one shows that the attack is successful, then one would have to give up being a holder of the idea being attacked.

Act-utilitarianism is a moral philosophy that holds that the right action is the act that produces the most utility. Utility, on one version of the theory, is measured as total pleasure minus pain. In another popular version, utility is measured in terms of happiness minus unhappiness. What exactly counts as utility will not be relevant to my argument.

I think it is important to admit that when I am engaged in criticism of act-utilitarianism I am also criticizing act-utilitarians. Criticizing an idea implies criticizing the people who hold that idea. At the very least I am saying that they are mistaken in their beliefs. However, when those beliefs constitute a moral ideology, a claim that they are mistaken implies that they are doing wrong when they think they are doing right. If they are following a mistaken moral ideology, then they are sometimes behaving immorally. It implies that act utilitarians, insofar as they are consistent act utilitiarians, or bad people.

In fact, criticism of act-utilitarianism implies that it would be better, all things considered, if no act-utilitarians exist. It is a call for act-utilitarians to abandon their beliefs and adopt a better set. This implication that no act-utilitarians should exist does not imply gas chambers and firing squads. One can still adopt the principle that act-utilitarians cease to exist in virtue of seeing the error of their ways and giving up act-utilitarianism. Yet, to criticize act-utilitarianism is to say that this should happen.

The fact that criticism of act-utilitarianism necessarily carries with it an implied criticism of certain people does not prevent the criticism of act-utilitarianism from being a legitimate activity, when it is carried out correctly. It is not wrong to criticize people – such as bullies, liars, bigots, thieves, swindlers, rapists, sophists, murderers, and terrorists – even when they think they are acting rightly.

It is common for those who claim to criticize an idea to deny this link – to assert that they can criticize the core beliefs of an individual without criticizing the individual who has those as his core beliefs. I view this as a convenient social fiction having no place in reality.

Having established what act-utilitarianism is and what criticism implies, it is time to look at how one can legitimately criticize act-utilitarianism.

For my claim that I am criticizing act-utilitarianism to even be true, it must be the case that I am criticizing a defining characteristic of act-utilitarianism. That is to say, if I am actually criticizing act-utilitarianism itself, then I am criticizing that which defines a person as an act-utilitarian. If what I am attacking is not a defining characteristic of act-utilitarianism – if it is not that which defines a person as an act-utilitarian – then I would not only be making a false claim about act-utilitarianism (asserting that it claims something it does not actually claim), I would be guilty of wrongly criticizing act-utilitarians.

Let us assume that Jeremy walks into a building – a corporate headquarters, a government building, a church – and blows himself up along with several dozen people. The criminal investigation following the crime reveals that Jeremy was a strict act-utilitarian. His writings showed a sincere commitment to the idea that the right act is the act that produces the best consequences, and the belief that blowing up whatever it is he blow up would produce the best consequences. Certainly, Jeremy wrote, there would be some short-term or immediate suffering from his actions, but it is all for the greater good. The ends justify the means.

When these facts are announced, we can imagine some talk-show host and his guests asserting that act-utilitarianism itself is to blame, and we must unify in our opposition to act-utilitarianism, that act-utilitarianism is a well-spring of bad ideas.

Yet, we can see that this response is premature. At this point, other act-utilitarians can still respond that Jeremy was wrong to think that blowing up the building was the right thing to do. They can assert that the fault is not in act-utilitarian moral theory, but in Jeremy himself. Jeremy was wrong to believe that blowing up the building would bring about the greatest overall utility. If this is the case, then act-

utilitarianism can answer, “There is nothing wrong with act-utilitarianism itself. The problem existed in Jeremy’s application of act-utilitarianism. He falsely believed that act-utilitarianism commanded him to do something it did not, in fact, command him to do. In fact, Jeremy drew the false conclusion that act-utilitarianism commanded him to do something that act-utilitarianism actually prohibited him from doing. Thus, act-utilitarianism is innocent. Jeremy’s act cannot be used to mount a legitimate criticism of this moral theory.”

In other words, one more thing has to be true before we can legitimately use Jeremy’s act as a criticism of act-utilitarianism. Not only must it be the case that Jeremy was an act-utilitarian and acted for what he thought were act-utilitarian reasons, it must also be the case that Jeremy understanding of the requirements of act-utilitarianism correctly.

In claiming that Jeremy's act of blowing up the building represents a legitimate reason to criticize act-utilitarianism, one is also claiming that Jeremy has a – or, more precisely, "the" – correct understanding of the requirements of act-utilitarianism in this context. This carries the further implication that any self-described act-utilitarian who disagrees with Jeremy on this matter must have a flawed understanding of act-utilitarianism. In fact, we would be justified in concluding that they were not act-utilitarians as well, but only (mistakenly) thought they were.

In fact, this is exactly how moral philosophers present criticisms of act-utilitarianism – except, they do not need to wait until a real act-utilitarian blows up a real building. When it comes to criticizing act-utilitarianism, a hypothetical Jeremy blowing up a hypothetical building as a result of correctly applying act-utilitarianism is good enough.

In an example used against act-utilitarianism, Jeremy is a doctor with five patients that will die unless they get an organ transplant. A healthy patient walks into Jeremy's office for a physical, and Jeremy recognizes that she would be a perfect donor for his five patients. Two will each get a lung, two will get a kidney, and the last would get the healthy patient's heart. Yet, the doctor who killed this healthy patient to save five lives would be doing something wrong. Act-utilitarianism leads people to perform immoral acts, and this is given as a reason to reject act-utilitarianism.

All we need in our criticism of act-utilitarianism is a hypothetical doctor willing to cut up a healthy patient to use her organs to save five sick people, each in need of an organ, and we have our legitimate criticism.

In another famous example, Jeremy is standing on a footbridge over a trolley track as a runaway trolley races down the track. The runaway trolley is about to run over five workers who do not see it coming and who cannot be warned. However, Jeremy can prevent that tragedy by pushing a particularly large person standing next to him off the footbridge and onto the track – stopping the trolley. Act-utilitarianism calls for pushing the man, thus killing him. However, many have a strong sense that what act-utilitarian commands is immoral. Consequently, we are told that we should give up act-utilitarianism in favor of a theory that can account for the actual wrongness of pushing the large man in front of the train.

A third example used in the criticism of act-utilitarianism involves torture. In this example, there is a person who knows the location of a bomb that, if it goes off, will kill a great deal of information. To help focus on the strictly utilitarian aspects, imagine that the prisoner has nothing to do with placing the

bomb. Instead, he came across the information by accident. To keep him quiet, the terrorists have kidnapped his wife and threaten to torture and kill her if he talks. The authorities wanting the information from him knows that he will endure great pain to protect his wife. However, they have the prisoner's daughter, and the interrogators know that the prisoner would be hard pressed to endure her suffering. Act-utilitarianism suggests that they torture the young child until her father gives up the information. Moreover, being act-utilitarians, they should torture the child gleefully since this adds to increase overall utility. This uncomfortable conclusion – like the others – gives us reason to reject act-utilitarianism.

Note that these criticisms of act-utilitarianism are also criticisms of act-utilitarians. An act-utilitarian, according to these criticisms, is somebody who would (a) kill the healthy patient to harvest her organs, (b) push the large man in front of the runaway trolley, and (c) gleefully torture the young child. If we hold that these actions are, in fact, morally wrong and those who would do such a thing are deserving of moral condemnation, then to be an act-utilitarian is to be somebody potentially deserving of condemnation.

In 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 the prisoner to talk and to do so gleefully or give up act-utilitarianism.

This is the essence of criticizing and idea. The statement, "I am criticizing idea I" is the claim, "I am criticizing an essential aspect if I-ism. I am criticizing that which defines a person as an I-ist. The moral I-ists to whom my claim does not apply are those who do not understand I-ism."

Criticizing an Idea: The Atheism Example

I have illustrated the principles of criticizing an idea by looking at the criticism of act-utilitarianism. There, I argued that the criticism of an idea entails criticism of that which defines a person as somebody who holds the idea. If one's criticism is sound, people are given a choice either to be the targets of that criticism or to give up the idea being criticized.

By implication, if Harris and Maher are criticizing the idea of Islam, then they are giving Muslims a choice. The Muslim either chooses to be the target of that criticism, or that person must give up on Islam and cease being a Muslim.

I can illustrate these same points using another target that Harris and Maher might be particularly interested in. Both individuals are atheists. So, let us look at what is required for a criticism to count as a criticism of atheism, as opposed to the criticism of somebody who happens to be an atheist (e.g., a criticism of Maher and Harris).

Let us assume that a particularly violent form of Marxism becomes popular among atheists, or that a substantial portion of atheists embrace a form of moral nihilism that says that, without God, everything is permissible. Alternatively, we could assume that a substantial portion of atheists 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 substantial number of atheists could adopt a version of Objectivism that has them acting totally selfishly – willing to kill hundreds of millions of people (e.g., through

greenhouse gas emissions and other pollutants) for the sake of adding a few dollars to the corporate bottom line.

Indeed, let us say that 78% of atheists adopt one of these views - whichever view listed above that the reader can imagine influencing 78% of atheists.

Even if 78% of atheists were to join this anti-theist or anarcho-capitalist or Marxist rebellion that included acts of violence indistinguishable from terrorism, I would expect that Harris and Maher would assert that it would be illegitimate to use these statistics to mount a criticism of atheism. Instead, I would expect them to argue that this criticism is misplaced. To count as a legitimate criticism of atheism, one must be criticizing that which is a defining characteristic of atheism – the belief that there certainly or almost certainly is no god.

Even if I am mistaken in thinking that Harris and Maher would give this defense, I would argue that they would be right to do so. Unless one is criticizing the defining characteristic of atheism, one is not mounting a legitimate criticism of atheism. Instead, one is presenting their audience with a form of bigoted sophistry – trying to promote an emotional hatred of atheists by linking them to something people have good reason to hate, but which is only accidentally associated with atheism.

The defenders of atheism from this type of attack would (and should) argue that atheism does not entail violent Marxism, libertarianism, or moral nihilism. Consequently, a criticism of any of those ideas, however well founded, is not a criticism of atheism. To count as a legitimate criticism of atheism, the immoral activity must be derived from atheism. This is not true in the case of the relationship between Marxism and Social Darwinism (for example) on the one hand and atheism on the other.

My argument here is that what is true of criticizing act-utilitarianism and of criticizing atheism is also true of criticizing Islam.

Criticizing an Idea: Application to Islam

Now that we have a notion of what it means to criticize an idea, let us apply it to the dispute between Affleck, Maher, and Harris.

Maher and Harris defended their activities as "criticizing an idea." At the same time, they denied that they were making claims that were true of all Muslims – or true of all Muslims who understood the true demands of Islam.

> *Affleck: Or how about the more than a billion people who aren't fanatical, who don't punish women, who just want to go to school, [applause] have some sandwiches, pray five times a day—*
>
> *Maher: Wait a second.*
>
> *Affleck: —and don't do any of the things that you're saying all Muslims [do]*
>
> *Harris: Okay I'm not, wait, wait, wait, wait.*
>
> *Affleck: That is stereotyping.*
>
> *Harris: I'm not saying all Muslims believe that.*

> *Affleck: You are taking a few bad things and you're painting a br—the whole religion with that same brush.*

As the example concerning the criticism of act-utilitarianism shows, if Maher and Harris were truly involved in criticizing the idea of Islam, than the claim that they were not "painting a whole religion with that same brush" is false. What it means to criticize an idea is to criticize that which defines a person as a member of the group being criticized. What it means to criticize an idea is to say, "either this criticism applies to you, or you do not really understand the ideas of the group you claim to belong to."

In this specific case, the claim that one is criticizing Islam is comparable to saying, "If you call yourself a Muslim then, either this criticism applies to you, or you do not understand Islam."

Both Maher and Harris denied that their criticisms apply to all Muslims. However, this claim, when put up against the claim that they were criticizing Islam, means that they were contradicting themselves. Their claim that they are criticizing Islam but that their criticism does not apply to all Muslims is like saying, "Yes, I said Patrick is a bachelor, but I am not saying he is not married." The answer to Harris and Maher is, "Yes, in fact, you are – for that is the meaning of the term."

This contradiction explains why Maher and Harris get the reaction they do – that they are bigots, and that they are promoting hatred against all Muslims regardless of their individual qualities. This is because, when they use the terms they use, many in their audience look at the meanings of these terms in English and their implications and recognize that they are criticizing that which defines a person as a member of the group Muslim. On recognizing the plain meanings of these terms, they draw the legitimate inference that Harris and Maher are promoting a hatred and denigration of people, many of whom are innocent of the charges leveled against them. They correctly protest that this is a bigoted attitude.

When Harris, Maher, and their defenders claim that they are not bigoted because they are not applying their criticism to all Muslims, the correct challenge to this defense is, "Actually, you are doing just that. It is curious that you do not recognize what you are doing, but that does not change the fact of what you are doing. This implication is built into the meaning of the words you use. In saying that this is a criticism of Islam you are literally saying that this is a criticism of that which makes a person a Muslim. You are saying that if these criticisms do not apply to a given person, then that person has a flawed understanding of Islam and is not actually a Muslim."

Let me present this argument another way.

First, I want to argue that if somebody asserts a claim that is true, then – except under special circumstances – there can be no justification for offense or a charge of bigotry. If somebody is offended by a true statement, then the problem rests with the person who is offended, not with the person who made the true statement. There are exceptions or special circumstances. A person who promised to keep a secret, who then reveals the secret, can be condemned even though he makes a true statement. The same is true of the person who gives military secrets to the enemy or corporate secrets to a competitor, or who reveals an embarrassing truth for the purpose of doing harm to another. These are all truths that somebody, for one reason or another, may have reasons to keep secret – to keep private. However, in general, a person can make a true statement without worrying about offense.

Second, I want to argue that when somebody makes a false claim or makes a mistake, we have reason to ask, “Why did she make that mistake?” The mistake has a cause, and that cause may well be found in the character of the person who made the mistake. This is particularly true in light of the fact that people are sometimes seduced into error by their sentiments. This means that there will be cases where the best explanation for a person’s mistake is that she was seduced into the mistake by her sentiments. This gives us an opportunity to examine those sentiments. If those sentiments are indicative of a poor moral character (e.g., a disposition to believe the worst about members of some group), we may condemn the individual for that poor moral character.

So, the relevant questions to ask are: Did Harris and Maher make a mistake? If the answer is ‘yes’, then did they do so in a way that indicates a poor moral character (e.g., a disposition to believe the worst of a group of people)?

The principle I have illustrated here using act-utilitarianism as an example is that the claim that one is criticizing an idea is the claim that one is criticizing a defining characteristic of that ideology – something that everybody who follows that ideology must accept. A criticism of act-utilitarianism is a criticism of that which defines a person as an act-utilitarian.

Harris asserts that P (P = "X is a criticism of Islam"). P implies Q (Q = Any person to whom X does not apply is not a follower of Islam). However, Q is false. Even by Harris' own admission, Q is false. Harris himself says that there are follows of Islam to whom his criticisms do not apply. He emphatically denies that he is saying anything that is true of all Muslims and it is in virtue of this that he is not a bigot. However, if P implies Q, and Q is false, then this implies that P is false. This implies that what Harris calls a “criticism of Islam” is not actually a “criticism of Islam”. It is, at best, a criticism of a form of Islam. However, Harris is presenting this in language that says that the criticism applies to Islam itself, and not just one of its forms. This means that Harris is guilty of a contradiction. He is both asserting that he is offering a criticism of Islam. At the same time, by denying that the criticism applies to all Muslims, he is asserting that his criticism applies to only a form of Islam rather than Islam itself.

This is a mistake. This gives us reason to ask what seduced Harris and many of his followers into making this mistake.

The place where I expect people to want to attack this argument is in the passage from “X is a criticism of Islam” to “Any person to whom X does not apply is not a follower of Islam.” This is exactly the point I sought to reinforce in the previous sections on act-utilitarianism and atheism, where I showed that this is the implication we assign to claims about other ideas.

I can further reinforce this point with some empirical observations. A substantial number of native speakers of English see this inference. His critics see this inference. That is why they accuse him of bigotry for making derogatory claims about all Muslims and promoting hatred of individuals based on their member ship in the target group (i.e., followers of Islam). Just as importantly, many of his supporters see this inference and use his arguments as reasons to adopt attitudes of contempt and disapproval towards all Muslims.

It may be the case that Harris does not intend for his words to be interpreted this way. However, for him to be upset over this fact is like a person getting upset because, when he called Jim a bachelor, people assumed that he was saying that Jim was not married. If he does not want to be condemned as a bigot

by those who take him as making derogatory about all Muslims, and he does not want to be celebrated by others for that same effect, he needs to learn to communicate better in English. Even his failure to recognize these implications constitutes a mistake, which gives us reason to ask why he made that particular mistake.

I suggest that this is how bigotry itself works. Humans have a psychological disposition to favor in-group and out-group distinctions, and tend to "feel good" when they encounter arguments that feed these distinctions. There is a certain degree of pleasure associated with arguments that allow people to claim that "we" – the "in-group" – are the morally and intellectually superior beings and "them" – the "out-group" – is filled with villainous fools. When Harris, Maher, and their supporters embrace this argument they are embracing the psychological satisfaction of in-group/out-group distinctions. The good feelings associated with these types of arguments are incorrectly taken as evidence of their soundness.

Bigotry

I have argued so far that Harris and Maher violated a rule regarding criticizing an idea. The claim that one is criticizing an idea is the claim that one is criticizing that which defines a person as somebody who accepts that idea. To use terrorist acts as a basis for criticizing Islam is to say that support for terrorism is something that defines a person as Muslim, and that those who call themselves Muslims without embracing terrorism do not understand Islam. Yet, Harris and Maher cannot see the contradiction. They are blinded to it.

When a person makes a mistake like this one, we can ask what caused that mistake. There are countless mistakes that a person could make. There must be some explanation as to why a person made this mistake as opposed to one of the other possible mistakes – or no mistake at all.

Here, we can introduce the observation that people are disposed to believe things that they want to be true. People judge propositions in part on whether they feel right. They use these feelings or sentimental attitudes – having little to do with evidence and rationality – as a way of determining the merit of a particular claim.

Bigotry is an affliction of the mind that impacts both reason and perception. Under the influence of bigotry, one takes an argument with a desirable conclusion – the conclusion that "they" are worthy of condemnation – and embraces it. They do not embrace it because reason dictates the conclusion. They embrace it because it "feels" true. It "feels" right. It "feels" good to see "them" as worthy of condemnation. They use this feeling to judge the truth of the claim or the validity of the inference. One perceives an action and, if it conforms to the prejudice, the agent goes, "See, that's what I have been saying all along." If it goes contrary to the prejudice, it is forgotten – cast aside – so that it cannot contaminate the good feelings one gets from seeing "them" as the enemy.

In the years before the civil war, Doctor Samuel Cartwright proposed that some blacks suffered from a mental disorder he called "drapetomania".[3] On his theory, slavery to the superior white race was the natural condition of blacks – this is the state that they were meant to be in, and that which mentally healthy negroes would choose for themselves insofar as they were rational. For a slave to attempt to

[3] Wikipedia, "Drapetomania", https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Drapetomania, accessed 07/01/2017.

flee his or her natural state – the state the rational negro would embrace – represented a form of madness.

We have no reason to believe that Cartwright was trying to fool people. He probably seriously believed what he said. But why did he believe it? The reasons to believe it did not come from logic. One reasonable hypothesis is that Cartwright's bigotry caused this set of claims to "feel" right to him and, on the basis of those feelings, he accepted as true and promoted these ideas.

The same bigotry caused others to embrace his ideas as well. Because of Cartwright, other bigots could be more secure in their sense that their bigotry was a good thing – that their attitudes towards blacks were justified. Consequently, they accepted these ideas as well.

From Cartwright's own perspective, he was simply doing medicine. We can imagine that, subjectively, his ideas felt good and true. They felt right. They felt right precisely because Cartwright had certain bigoted attitudes towards blacks and the ideas fit well with those attitudes, and he took this "fittingness" as evidence that he had the truth of the matter. Cartwright "felt" that this was a good way of looking at things, ignoring the fact that it felt right because it fed a prejudice.

In the same way that Cartwright wanted to interpret his bigotry as a legitimate scientific theory based on observation and evidence, Harris and Maher (and their supporters) want to interpret their bigotry as a legitimate act of criticizing an idea. In the same way that Cartwright was not intentionally trying to deceive anyone or promoting a theory that he did not fully believe was a true and accurate representation of the world, neither are Harris and Maher. In the same way that we can still explain Cartwright's embrace of these ideas (and their acceptance among Cartwright's supporters) on bigotry, we can also best explain why Harris, Maher, and their supporters accept the claim that their bigoted statements are legitimate instances of "criticizing an idea" in spite of the self-contradiction contained within the claims.

Bigotry – or "us" versus "them" ways of thinking – are extremely powerful. They are what has made possible Genghis Kahn, the Crusades, Inquisitions, the Thirty Years War, the Holocaust, slavery and Jim Crow laws, the near-genocide of Native Americans, and Japanese internment camps. The idea that it could cause a couple of liberal intellectuals and their worshippers to fail to see that "criticizing an idea" means 'criticizing that which defines and individual as a member of a group" is not a radical position.

Membership in a group is also powerful in that it can cause people to accept absurdities against all evidence such as the claim that a prophet could walk on water or flew in a chariot pulled by winged horses, or in transubstantiation, or that the sun could be stopped in the sky. Certainly, they can cause a person to believe that their claim to be criticizing an idea can be made consistent with the view that one is not criticizing that which defines a person as somebody who accepts that idea.

At this point, I have argued that criticizing an idea requires criticizing that which defines a person as somebody who holds that idea. I have also suggested that a possible explanation for the fact that somebody fails to see this implication – or at least to acknowledge it (even to himself) – may be for the same kind of reason that Dr. Cartwright failed to recognize the prejudice in his own scientific theories. It may be due to the human tendency to fail to recognize and acknowledge their own implicit biases.

Next, I would like to offer a suggestion of how to avoid this kind of error.

Rule Against Derogatory Overgeneralizations

The argument above allows us to identify the use of derogatory overgeneralizations, and they are pervasive in our conversations. Humans are so disposed to these types of unjust hate-mongering ways of talking that they permeate our speech, and we scarcely recognize them for what they are.

It happens whenever people criticize a group – using a group name – without criticizing that which is a defining characteristic of the members of that group. This type of injustice happens any time somebody complains about atheists, Christians, liberals, conservatives, Republicans, Democrats, Marxists, libertarians, progressives, Americans, Africans, Arabs, the Chinese, men, women, children, homosexuals, generation X, millennials, the elderly, taxi drivers, farmers, factory workers, cops, billionaires – anytime a person follows a group name with a derogatory comment that is not directed at that which defines a person as a member of the group.

Look through posts on social media, in articles and news casts, in political speeches, editorials, and in private conversation. If a person follows a group name by a derogatory comment that is not directed at that which defined a person as a member of that group, you have an example of bigoted hate-mongering in action.

Given how common such bigotry is, there is little wonder that Harris, Maher, and their supporters cannot hear it in their own words.

The way to avoid making derogatory overgeneralizations (bigoted claims) is easy enough. It is to simply never use a group name with a derogatory statement that does not reference a defining characteristic of the group.

For example, to count as a legitimate criticism of atheism, one must be criticizing that which defines a person as an atheist. In other words, to count as a criticism of atheism, one must be criticizing the view that the proposition 'at least one god exists' is certainly or almost certainly false. A criticism of Marxism, Objectivism, social Darwinism, or moral nihilism does not count as a legitimate criticism of atheism since none of these views follow necessarily from the belief that the proposition 'at least one god exists' is certainly or almost certainly false. Any attempt to condemn all atheists by pointing out the crimes of Stalin and Pol Pot represent hate-mongering bigotry – since it is not an essential quality of atheism that one supports the actions of Stalin and Pol Pot. It is an attempt to promote an unjustified hatred and fear of a group of people by associating them necessarily with attitudes that the people being targeted can coherently reject.

To count as a legitimate criticism of act-utilitarianism, one must be criticizing that which defines a person as an act-utilitarian – that, without which, the person would cease to be an act-utilitarian. One must be criticizing the claim that the right act is always the act that produces the most utility. The mere fact that a person performs a horrendous act while claiming to be aiming to produce the most utility does not provide grounds for a legitimate criticism of act-utilitarianism unless it can be shown that such a person cannot be wrong.

To count as a criticism of Islam, one must be criticizing that which defines a person as a Muslim. To use an act of terrorism carried out by a Muslim as a criticism of Islam means that one considers it to be the case that any who properly understand Islam could not reject the actions of the terrorist. The criticism must be aimed such that, if a person accepts the criticism, then it follows necessarily that the person

would cease to be a Muslim. If the critic claims that his criticism does not apply to all Muslims, and yet he calls it a criticism of Islam, this is proof that his criticism is not a criticism of Islam. By admitting that one can be a Muslim and yet the criticism does not apply to that person then one is admitting that the criticism is not of Islam, but of, at best, some Muslims.

In many cases we can easily avoid error simply by adding a qualifier such as "some", "most", "a few", or "many". This standard does not prevent Harris from saying, "according to a recent poll, 78% of British Muslims think that the Danish cartoonist should have been prosecuted." If this is a true statement, then there is no fault in reporting it. As it turns out, a poll taken in 2015 reported that 68% believed that violence against those who publish images of Mohammed can never be justified.[4] However, even if the results turned out to be significantly different, it would not follow that the fault is Islam itself.

When using these types of facts, one must take pains to not step outside of the boundaries identified by those facts. It does not follow from, "X% of Muslims according to a poll believe Y" that "There is a problem with Islam" any more than "78% of atheists are Marxists" implies "there is a problem with atheism".

The rule remains – to not claim to be offering a criticism of X - where 'X' is a group name such as liberals, Republicans, Muslims, blacks, billionaires, wall-street bankers, act-utilitarians, atheists, people born in the 1960s, Texans, or the like – unless what you are criticizing is that which defines a person as a member of the group. It must be a criticism of something, without which a person would not qualify as a member of the group being criticized.

Yet another way to criticize an idea is to criticize a specific person who presented the idea. This is the tactic that I used in this paper. Instead of applying the ideas that I am criticizing here to a general group (e.g., "atheists", given that Maher and Harris are atheists), I identified specific people who presented the ideas that I sought to criticize, and limited my criticism to the claims of those individuals. The criticisms apply to them and to those who agree with them. In short, it applies to all and only those who are guilty of that which I criticize. No innocent person is condemned because they accidentally belong to some group that includes Harris and Maher, and no wrongdoer is excluded in virtue of not belonging to such a group.

Statistics

Something more needs to be said about the use of statistics in these types of debates.

I have written that no offense is justified on the basis of making a true statement. If a person is offended by truth, then the fault lies with the person who is offended, not with the person who made the true claim.

However, we do have to consider the fact that, in a particular context, a literally true statement can lead people to a false implication. In this case, we may have reason to condemn the person who puts a literally true statement in a context that invites this type of effect.

[4] ComRes, "BBC Radio 4 Today Muslim Poll", http://www.comresglobal.com/polls/bbc-radio-4-today-muslim-poll/, Accessed 07/02/2017

For example, as a matter of fact, African-Americans make up about 12% of the general population of the United States, but nearly 40% of the prison population.

This is a true statement. However, when expressed within a particular context, it may invite people to draw the conclusion, "Blacks are dangerous. If you want to be safe, do not invite them into your place of business and keep them out of your neighborhoods. Do not trust them in any position of authority or responsibility."

If somebody uses statistics such as these in a context that says, "This is a criticism of African-Americans," than that person can be accused of bigotry.

Analogously, when Harris and others use statistics about Muslims in a context that says, "This is a criticism of Islam; this is a reason not to allow them into your country, into your neighborhood, into your place of business, or give them any position of authority or responsibility," then this, too, can justify the charge of bigotry.

Note that the fault does not lie in making the true claim. The fault lies in putting that true claim in a context that suggests false and bigoted conclusions. The accusation of bigotry is grounded on the false and bigoted conclusions one is inviting others to draw, not on the basis of uttering a true claim.

Somebody seeking to defend this use of statistics might want to bring back the claim that Islam is not a race, it is an idea, and it is legitimate to criticize an idea. In response to this, I remind the reader that ideas are to be evaluated on their truth value – on the reasons we have for thinking that they are true or false. Truths about some percentage of act-utilitarians or atheists are irrelevant to the criticism of act-utilitarianism or atheism. Similarly, truths about some percentage of Muslims is irrelevant to the criticism of Islam.

In short, when people like Harris use statistics about Muslims, they have a great deal of common with the white supremacist citing statistics about African-American incarceration rates to encourage people to adopt racists attitudes towards blacks. If people like Harris should try to justify their use of these statistics by claiming that they are not criticizing a race but criticizing an idea, they need to be reminded that these types of statistics are not relevant to criticizing an idea. Consequently, in the context in which these types of statistics are often used, they are either expressions of bigotry or they are irrelevant. And even in cases where they are irrelevant, we have reason to ask what is really motivating the individual to present these irrelevant facts. It may well be that they are attracted to the other uses to which these facts may be put.

The Impossibility Objection

When I have brought up this rule in discussion the primary criticism I hear is that this is an impossible standard. If we were to adopt this standard, then we would not be able to legitimately criticize Islam – or anything else for that matter. This is an absurd consequence which renders the original assertion that criticisms of a group be limited to criticism of a defining characteristics absurd as well.

The reason I am often given for thinking that this is an impossible standard is because the critic interprets the standard as saying that the criticism must focus on what the members of the target group unanimously agree on. Since, with such a large group, it is never possible to find unanimous agreement, it would never be possible to mount legitimate criticism.

This standard would also render it always illegitimate to criticize groups such as the KKK or Nazis. All it would take is for one KKK member or one Nazi party member to be opposed to racism and discrimination and this standard would call "bigoted" any criticism made of that group.

However, that criticism of this standard confuses "defining characteristic" with "unanimous agreement".

One can make the case that racism is a defining characteristic of Nazis and the Klan. A parent who catches a confused teenager at a Nazi gathering or associating with Nazis can send the adolescent home saying, "You don't belong here; you're no Nazi," without being at all confused about the meaning of the term. If a group is defined by its racism, then criticizing that group and its members for their racism is perfectly legitimate on this standard.

Note that one of the implications that I have given for the criticism of a group according to a defining characteristic is that it may exclude some people who claim to be members of the group. For example, a person can claim to be an act-utilitarian, yet still ground her moral judgments on deontological moral intuitions that pay more attention to the intrinsic wrongness of an act than the utility contained within its consequences. The fact that there is somebody claiming to be act-utilitarian who seems to disagree with the basic principles of act-utilitarianism does not mean that all criticism of act-utilitarianism is illegitimate. The critic only needs to know what the term "act-utilitarianism" means, and the critic can then mount criticisms of act-utilitarianism.

The only way in which it would not be legitimate to condemn the Nazi or the Klan in virtue of their racism is if it turns out that racism is not a defining characteristic of Nazis or the Klan. If it were not a defining characteristic, then it would be a genuine mistake as well as an injustice to condemn these ideologies for their racism. Yet, the claim that the Nazis and Klan are not defined by their racism would be a very difficult proposition to defend.

Far from being an impossible standard, I have already demonstrated that this is the standard we habitually apply to criticism when we are not engaged in bigoted overgeneralization. It is the standard that applies to criticism of act-utilitarianism, Objectivism, moral relativism, libertarianism, and the like. It is a standard atheists demand when others criticize them in virtue of their atheism. "If you are not attacking that which makes us atheists – our defining characteristic – then you are not legitimately criticizing us."

For being an "impossible standard", it seems to get a great deal of use.

Protecting Liberal Values – Freedom of Speech Example

In their defense of "criticizing an idea", Harris and Maher make a counter-charge against their liberal accusers. They charge that those liberal accusers are sacrificing their own liberal values in defending Muslims against the accusations that Maher and Harris level against them.

> *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.*

In making this accusation, Harris and Maher are guilty of constructing a straw man.

Let us take the right to freedom of speech. I will illustrate how it is possible to criticize Maher and Harris without sacrificing a defense of the right to freedom of speech that will be applicable to all of the other liberal values as well.

I take the right to freedom of speech means that violence or threats of violence are not an appropriate response to words or other communicative actions (speaking, writing, cartoons, plays, movies, sign language, protest marches). We have reason to condemn and, in fact, even to punish those who respond to communicative acts with violence.[5]

According to Maher and Harris, one cannot coherently criticize them for their criticism of Islam and defend the right to freedom of speech. After all, Maher and Harris are attacking Islam, in this case, precisely because of its disregard for the right to freedom of speech. Islam, they assert, is calling for a violent response to those who criticize Islam or insult the religion. Liberals need to make a choice – either to side with Islam and against the right to freedom of speech, or to side with the right of freedom of speech against Islam. Those who choose to condemn Harris and Maher for their bigotry have taken sides against the right to freedom of speech.

This is a false dichotomy. This dilemma only exists if responding to words or communicative actions is a defining characteristic of Islam – if one cannot at the same time be a Muslim and accept a right to freedom of speech. If this were the case, then one would have to choose one or the other. However, if it is possible for a Muslim to defend the right to freedom of speech, then one does not have to take sides between Islam and this right – one can choose to defend both.

The position that Harris and Maher take make them poor defenders of liberal values such as the right to freedom of speech for two reasons.

First, one of those liberal values that is worth defending, in addition to the right to freedom of speech, is an opposition to bigoted overgeneralizations, which Harris and Maher violate directly. This paper should be taken precisely as a defense of one of those liberal values that Harris and Maher claim that I am doing a poor job of defending by attacking them – the value of treating people fair and justly depending on their individual actions and to shun the condemnation of whole groups when many of the group are innocent.

Second, Harris and Maher are poor defenders of the right to freedom of speech precisely because they fail to distinguish between "those who violate the right to freedom of speech" with "Muslims," and turn public attention against the latter when they should be turning public attention against the former. By

[5] This principle would also categorize those who attempt to control what others may hear by shouting down or threatening violence against those who may speak at a college or university as people who violate the basic right to freedom of speech.

confusing these two groups, they promote unjust attitudes towards people who actually are defenders of freedom of speech, and turn attention away from violators of freedom of speech who are not members of the target group.

When I defend the right to freedom of speech, without confusing those who violate this right with Muslims, I criticize those who are actually guilty and leave those who are innocent (or even active defenders of the right to freedom of speech) uncriticized (at least on these grounds). I do this by calling the target of my criticism "those who are opposed to the right to freedom of speech" rather than calling them "Muslims." This way, I do not end up condemning Muslims who would never approve of threatening or using violence as a response to mere words. At the same time, my target also includes non-Muslims who are eager to use or threaten violence as a way to control what others may see or hear, such as certain ultra-liberal college students.

In effect, I have no difficulty defending two liberal principles at the same time. I defend the principle that it is wrong to make bigoted overgeneralizations – to blame whole groups for wrongs that are not that which defines a person as a member of the group. And I defend the right to freedom of speech by condemning all and only those who would use or advocate the use of violence or threats of violence as a response to mere words.

There is yet another reason why Harris, Maher, and their defenders are poor defenders of liberal values. Whenever they make these bigoted generalizations, the whole subject of conversation changes. Instead of focusing attention on those (in this example) who respond to words with violence or threats of violence – instead of talking about the liberal values that they claim to want to defend – there poor choice of words allows the conversation to shift from a defense of the liberal values they want to defend to a discussion of their own bigotry. This diversion leaves the liberal values they want to defend undefended – or worse. By associating their so-called defense of these liberal values with bigotry, they taint these liberal values, causing people to think that the condemnation of bigotry implies a condemnation of the liberal values the bigots seek to defend as well.

If Harris and Maher could clear up their own thinking and their language when it comes to the defense of these liberal values, they would find that they could do a much better job of defending those liberal values. They could do so without derailing a conversation about these principles into a conversation about the bigoted implications of the words used by those who defend them. They could keep the conversation about these liberal values on-target. That, in turn, would be a better way to defend these liberal values.

The best way to defend liberal values is to defend all of them and to do so consistently. One defends the right to freedom of speech by condemning any who would respond to words or other communicative actions with violence or threats of violence. One defends justice by condemning the bigot who embraces ideas that condemn the innocent who are members of some target group, and fail to criticize some of the guilty since they are not members of the target group.

Policing the Group

Earlier, I argued that the bigot ignores the fact that criticizing an idea means criticizing that which defines a person as somebody who holds that idea because bigotry makes the attitude of condemnation towards the target group "feel right". It has no basis in reason, but it touches on the sentiments – a

psychological disposition to divide the world into groups of “us” and “them,” and to see all of “them” as an enemy to be defeated.

Another concept that bigots accept because it “feels right” is that of “policing”.

The argument here is that everybody in a target group is morally responsible for the wrongs of its worst members because everybody in the group is morally obligated to “police” the worse members of the group. If anybody in the group does something wrong, everybody in the target group is guilty for allowing the wrong to take place.

In this way of thinking, the moderate Muslim is just as guilty as the terrorist because the moderate Muslim has not done enough to control or police the extremist members of the group.

We can see this as an instrument of bigotry by asking the question, “Exactly what groups am I morally responsible for policing?” The answer can be found by looking at the prejudices of those who make this accusation of “ineffective policing.” The groups that are the object of their hatred and discrimination are the groups that they judge to exist under an obligation for each member to police all of the other members.

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 in January be used as a reason to condemn all people born in January for their failure to “police” the activities of the group’s more extreme members? 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?

The bigot does not demand policing in many cases because the group in question does not define a target group – is not an object of hatred. The relationship between “Stalin” and “atheists” may be seen by some as a legitimate case of policing precisely because they identify atheists as a target group for their bigotry, and they are eager to stain all members of the target group (atheists) with the crimes of one of its worst members (Stalin).

It is also interesting to note that this “moral stain” only goes in one direction. The moderate gets stained by the activities of the extremists, but the extremists get no credit for the virtuous actions of the moderate. The reason that this inference goes in the direction of more hate and condemnation is because this is the goal – to find an excuse for hatred and condemnation of whole groups. Giving the worst members credit for the virtuous actions of the best members does not fit the goal.

The rules for legitimately criticizing an idea call for condemning those who are actually guilty and leaving those who are not guilty off the hook. It does not involve inventing reasons to condemn or denigrate the innocent, merely because they share some set of accidental properties with the guilty. Attempts to spread the hatred of a few who share that quality to the whole group are attempts at promoting bigoted hatreds. It does not count as a legitimate criticism of an idea.

Again, this is not to say that the agent is pursuing and promoting these bigoted practices consciously. The agent is merely responding to the fact that these bigoted practices “feel good and right.” Having an excuse for extending one’s hatred of one or a few of “them” to all of “them” comes with a particular feel to it, and one responds to that feeling by embracing the implication, even though reason does not justify it.

Criticizing an Idea: Scripturalism

To further illustrate the points that I have been making in this paper, I would like to give an example of what I take to be the legitimate criticism of an idea that is close to what Harris and Maher actually seem to want to criticize.

I am going to give this idea that I criticize the name of "scripturalism".

I will define "scripturalism" as the practice of presuming that a particular body of text is without error.

Recall that the standard that I sat required that criticism be directed against a defining characteristic of the group being criticized. Those who judge this to be an impossible standard may have failed to recognize that words are a matter of convention. If the language does not have a term that makes the proper object of one's criticism a defining characteristic, one is free to create a word that fits the requirement. In this case I want to criticize the idea that some ancient text is without error. To criticize that idea, I will make it the defining characteristic of the idea I want to criticize, and I will name that idea "scripturalism".

The term "biblical inerrancy" is an example of scripturalism. However, this term might be thought of as specifically Christian since it refers to the inerrancy of the Christian Bible. I do not mean for this to be a criticism of a specifically Christian practice.

In fact, I do not wish it to target specifically religious practices either. Some Neoplatonists in ancient Europe seemed to have adopted a scriptural attitude towards Plato (or Socrates), while other writers in Europe and the Middle East seemed to have adopted a scriptural attitude towards Aristotle.

Scripturalism applies as well to the practice of treating the works of secular writers such as Karl Marx and Ayn Rand like religious scripture – as containing no error. I mean for the term "scripturalism" to cover all of these things. Some people treated Mao's *Little Red Book* as scripture.

In addition, I wish to distinguish two types of scripturalism: literal scripturalism and metaphorical scripturalism.

Literal scripturalism holds that the body of writings in question are to be understood in terms of the actual meanings of the terms as they would have been understood by a person writing at the time the text was written. If the Bible says that God created the earth and the heavens in six days, this is to be understood as six twenty-four hour spans of time. If researchers could show that writers at the time actually used the term "day" to refer to "steps" in a process (e.g., if they habitually divided instructions for constructing a house into "days" where each "day" represented a step in the process), then the literal scripturalist could adopt this understanding.

Metaphorical scriptualists would not need this evidence that people at the time used the term "day" to refer to "steps". It is enough for them to note that the idea that these things happened each in a 24-hour time seems unreasonable. From this they can infer that the 24-hour span definition of "day" needs to be rejected and replaced with some other definition, such as "step". More generally, metaphorical scriptualists allow us to determine truths by methods other than the text itself, and then to interpret the text in a way that metaphorically represents that separately determined truth.

This is not a sharp either-or distinction. One could be a literal scripturalist with respect to some text and a metaphorical scripturalist with respect to other text. Furthermore, there are passages that can be

literally metaphorical. That is to say, the literal understanding of the text intends that it be taken as a metaphor.

To see the problems with scripturalism, I wish to present the following hypothetical example:

Let us assume that a group of researchers at about 100 BCE gathered to review the works of Hippocrates. On reviewing the documents, they determined Hippocrates himself was the author of some of the documents, and that his students and others wrote documents incorrectly attributed to Hippocrates. From this they created a document that they called the Book of Medicine of writings attributed to Hippocrates. They asserted that the Book of Medicine contained no error – that everything written within it was true and that the field of medicine would tolerate no deviation from its teachings.

Hippocrates' medicine was quite advanced for its time. Many of its principles had merit, and the Hippocratic Oath is still in use today. However, the fact that a body of work contains important ideas for its age – the fact that it can be legitimately called a breakthrough – and even the fact that some of it is still useful – does not justify scripturalizing the content – claiming that it is without error.

We can immediately see the difficulties that would arise if people took the writings in the Book of Medicine to be literally true. We would still be treating illness and injuries in the ways that Hippocrates treated them – still attempting to restore health by balancing the "humours". Some of the procedures would work – such as applying traction to set a broken bone and then immobilizing it while the bone knitted itself back together. However, we would lose out of many of the benefits of modern medicine – benefits that came about upon realizing that Hippocrates was wrong in some instances and that we needed new and different forms of treatment.

In short, holding that the Book of Medicine was literally true would have resulted in a great deal of pain and other forms of suffering and preventable early death that modern medicine makes possible. Fortunately, we did not do that. Because we did not scripturalize Hippocrates, we live longer and have healthier lives today than we would have had.

A scholar who would have appeared on a national television show today to assert that the literal scripturalization of Hippocrates was "a well-spring of bad ideas" would not be wrong to make this claim. Nor would this be the type of claim that would make the person who made it guilty of bigotry. This is because a criticism of "the literal scripturalization of Hippocrates" is a criticism of a defining characteristic that is, in fact, worthy of criticism.

Metaphorical scripturalism applied to the Book of Medicine would not oppose the development of new medical techniques. In fact, it could well support those techniques as the product of activities that Hippocrates himself would endorse – the careful observation of the progress of disease to discover their common properties, and recording the effects of various treatments. Metaphorical scripturalization could be understood as a type of game where, with each new medical advance, the metaphorical scripturalist would return to the works of Hippocrates to discover where he had already mentioned this truth in his writing. The metaphorical scripturalist would try to discover which passages represented Hippocrates' metaphorical presentation of the idea that many diseases are caused by bacteria, that some illnesses are genetic, and that radiation provided a viable treatment for some types of cancer.

We may find some people coming up with some surprising ways to read the advances of modern medicine into the works of Hippocrates. Whole university departments may be devoted to the task, with

its practitioners coming up with unique theories of meaning and novel ways of interpreting concepts such as “humour” so show that Hippocrates already knew what medical science did not discover for more than two thousand years in some cases. However, modern medicine would still exist, and we would still be enjoying its benefits. While literal scripturalism is a very dangerous idea that would contribute to a great deal of death and suffering, metaphorical scripturalism would be entertaining but impractical.

With contemporary scripturalism, we are not dealing with a Book of Medicine but dealing instead with what we may call a Book of Morality. Errors here can be just as deadly and destructive as errors in medicine – even more so. These errors have given us slavery, genocide, the subjugation of women, wars of conquest, wars for the pleasure of killing others, religious conflicts, torture, and arbitrary and tyrannical leaders. A great deal of human suffering can be placed at the feet of failures of morality. The literal scripturalization of morality can be blamed for some of this, just as the literal scripturalization of medicine would have contributed to suffering in that field.

Many of the failures of morality and the suffering they create have persisted far longer than they should have because a great many people practice scripturalism with respect to certain Books of Morality. Potential advances in morality have been thwarted the way that potential advances in medicine would have been under a literal scripturalization of Hippocrates.

One might object to the fact that in my analogy I have selected an example – a hypothetical Book of Medicine – where the ancient texts were obviously in error and the error was harmful. In doing this, I may be accused of begging the question by assuming that religious scripture is also a collection of ancient ideas also substantially in error. Such a critic would claim that I need to provide some alternative evidence that scripture is in error.

To answer that objection, I would put the whole of physics, astronomy, geology, biology, paleontology, archaeology, history, psychology, and the texts of these documents themselves. Combined, they tell a story of humanity whereby the works of religious scripture are not much different from the hypothetical Book of Medicine. They were written by humans who knew only the common beliefs of their age, acting on the common prejudices of their age, by people tempted by ideas that promoted their own political, economic, and social standing. As with the Book of Medicine, we may be able to find some portions that showed significant insight and would still be useful today. However, there is a great deal of difference between extracting a few pieces of lasting wisdom from an ancient text and taking its entire content to be literally true and incapable of error.

The correct attitude to take to the works of scripture is that which is commonly taken to the works of the Stoics or the Neoplatonists, or those of Plato, Aristotle, and Avicenna themselves – or the attitude we take to the works of ancient medical scholars such as Hippocrates and Galen. They are the creations of humans acting without divine inspiration, trying to assemble the best ideas of their time and to improve them, but still showing the limits of their knowledge and understanding. We can still admire the work, but we admire it without attributing to it some type of supernatural inerrancy.

If we are going to criticize bad ideas, literal scripturalism is a very bad idea.

Scripturalism and Atheism

I want to note that an objection to Scripturalism is not an argument for atheism.

The hypothesis that the works of scripture were the works of mortal humans of their age working without divine guidance is no more an argument against the existence of God than the hypothesis that the works of Hippocrates were the works of a mortal human without divine guidance disproves everything he said about medicine. It does not imply that everything in those works are false or should be taken as false. It merely objects to taking the text as unquestionably true – literally or metaphorically.

The rejection of scripturalism still allows an individual to look to scripture as a source of inspiration – as something that contains some good worth following, and some error worth throwing out. When a non-scripturalist comes across a problematic passage, the non-scripturalist does not assume that it must be true and resolve either to either accept it literally or unquestionably or invent a metaphorical interpretation. The non-scripturalist takes it as an error, and may well wonder how that error got into the book.

Of course, this is an easy question to answer. There are several ways for error to get written into an ancient text. It could come from the limited understanding of the original writer. It could have been written into the text under the decree of a leader seeking legitimacy. It could have been inserted by somebody else in some translation either because the translator liked the new idea better or would have found it useful to have people believe such a thing.

The point is that there is no incoherence in using some text as a source of inspiration while, at the same time, admitting that, somewhere along the way, somebody happened to insert some error into the text that the wise person would discard.

Scripturalism and Bigotry

Literal scripturalism is responsible for a great deal of death and suffering. We would be better off if people stopped doing it – if literal scripturalists did not exist. This does not imply rounding them up and killing them – there is no better way to bring this about than to convince people of the error of literal scripturalism and convince them of the reasons to reject it. Those who condemn literal scripturalism – those who find it to be something that no morally responsible person would practice – are right on this matter.

However, bigotry is also responsible for a great deal of death and suffering. We would be better off if people stopped doing it – if bigots did not exist. Recall that bigotry manifests itself, in the cases relevant here, as a disposition to embrace certain arguments that allow the condemnation of whole groups to "feel" comfortable and right. In this essay, we looked at the disposition to see one's actions as "criticizing an idea" when, in fact, one is promoting derogatory generalizations of the members of a target group.

This happens because the agent fails to recognize or respect the fact that "criticizing an idea" means "criticizing that which is a defining characteristic of membership within a group that accepts that idea." If the reason for one's "criticism of an idea" is found in its support for terrorism, then one is saying that support for terrorism is a defining characteristic of membership in the target group. This does not imply that everybody in the target group supports terrorism. However, it does imply that everybody in the group who has a proper and correct understanding of the group's beliefs would support terrorism. By implication, those who do not support terrorism are those who do not fully understand what it means to be a member of the group.

Bigotry is like scripturalism in that both involve embracing a pattern of thinking that abandons reason and evidence so that the agent can embrace a conclusion that “feels” right and comfortable. Unfortunately, the agent is disposed to feel good about beliefs that support behavior harmful to others. The reasons we have for condemning scripturalism are the same reasons we have for condemning bigotry, and the reasons we have for condemning bigotry are the same reasons we have for condemning scripturalism.

In fact, scripturalism has an advantage over bigotry in that, since scripturalism says nothing about the content of the scripture being worshipped, it is at least possible that the scripture contains truth. On the other hand, bigotry, when it manifests itself as an illegitimate “criticizing an idea,” always leads to injustice. It condemns and says that there is reason to hate and denigrate people in the target group who are innocent of the bigot’s accusation. At the same time, it lets off or distracts attention away from those who are guilty of the same moral charge but who are not members of the target group.

Scripturalism has another thing in common with bigotry in that people do not like to admit that they are involved in the practice or that it is wrong that they do so. Yet, people do engage in the practice, and it is wrong that they do so.

It may not be easy to identify and put an end (or, at least, to diminish the use of) bigotry or scripturalism practices. However, this does not change the fact that there is good reason to do so.