

The context is conflict

 putanumonit.com/2018/05/06/the-context-is-conflict/

View all posts by Jacob Falkovich

May 7, 2018

John Nerst wrote **an excellent analysis of the recent clash** between Sam Harris and Ezra Klein on the topic of race, IQ, and all the topics that get dragged in when you talk about race and IQ. The essay weaves together several layers: it dives deep into the details of the disagreement, and it also soars high enough to see the conflict as being not just between two interpretations of IQ science or two political positions, but two general ways that people think: **decoupling vs. contextualizing**.

As an Ashkenazi Jew, I don't have much to say on the race/IQ debate, but I'm fascinated by the meta-conflict in play. It shows up in many guises: nerds vs. non-nerds, scientists vs. activists, **mistake theorists vs. conflict theorists**.

This post is about the meta-conflict. I'll give some background on all of the above, but you should treat the three bolded links above as required reading; the rest of the post will assume that you are familiar with them.

A handy graphic for understanding outrage at statements about average differences between groups pic.twitter.com/w1xZnibbou

— Diana S. Fleischman (@sentientist) August 8, 2017

I'm a big fan of the bell curve: the bell curve of soccer ability, of attitudes on racism and on feminism, of tennis skill, of worrying about climate change. But none of these deserve to be capitalized.

That honor is apparently reserved for "The Bell Curve" of IQ scores in a population, and the book on said subject by Charles Murray. The book contains 900 pages that not a single person has ever read, and a chapter on the differences in IQ distributions among self-identified races. This chapter ensured that for the next 24 years, interacting with Charles Murray in any capacity, for or against, was a political statement.

Enter Sam Harris. Harris belongs to a group of people who share certain traits, one of these being a strong distaste for the idea that everything has to be a political statement. Sarah Constantin identifies some other commonalities:

Stanovich talks about “cognitive decoupling”, the ability to block out context and experiential knowledge and just follow formal rules, as a main component of both performance on intelligence tests and performance on the cognitive bias tests that correlate with intelligence. Cognitive decoupling is the opposite of holistic thinking. It’s the ability to *separate*, to view things in the abstract, to play devil’s advocate.

[...]

Speculatively, we might imagine that there *is* a “cognitive decoupling elite” of smart people who are good at probabilistic reasoning and score high on the cognitive reflection test and the IQ-correlated cognitive bias tests. These people would be more likely to be male, more likely to have at least undergrad-level math education, and more likely to have utilitarian views. Speculating a bit more, I’d expect this group to be likelier to think in rule-based, devil’s-advocate ways, influenced by economics and analytic philosophy. I’d expect them to be more likely to identify as rational.

And here’s a very important point that doesn’t get quoted as often:

I’d expect them *not* to be much better than average at avoiding the cognitive biases uncorrelated with intelligence. The cognitive decoupling elite would be just as prone to dogmatism and anchoring as anybody else.

Sam Harris, a decoupling black belt, invited Charles Murray on his podcast for a “devil’s advocate” discussion of Murray’s life and work.

The opposite of cognitive decoupling is contextualization. Contextualizers see every question as embedded in a holistic context, inseparable from the question’s implications, assumptions, and the identity of the asker.

Ezra Klein is a contextualizer. Here are some snippets of his response to Harris and Murray:

Harris and Murray’s conversation stretches more than two hours. A transcript runs to more than 20,000 words. Unless I missed it, at no point in the discussion do Harris or Murray use the words “slave,” “slavery,” or “segregation.” It is curiously ahistorical.

(Context)

The belief in black deficiency has been instrumental. It was used to justify slavery and to quiet moral qualms over unyielding oppression and violence. In more recent decades, it has been used to explain away the wealth and achievement gaps — if the disparities we see in American life are the result of an intrinsic inferiority on the part of black Americans, then that diminishes the responsibility white Americans have to correct those disparities.

(Implications)

International evidence suggests oppression, discrimination, and societal resentment lowers group IQs.

(Assumptions)

For two white men to spend a few hours discussing why black Americans are, as a group, less intelligent than whites isn't a courageous stand in the context of American history; it's a common one.

(Identity)

To Klein, a political journalist, this is obviously a political issue, and as such can only be discussed contextually. Harris' insistence that it's a matter of pure scientific curiosity is complicit or explicit support of racism. To Harris, a scientist and analytical philosopher, this is clearly a scientific issue. Klein approaching it as political debate is at best arguing in bad faith and at worst flat out lying for political gain.

Eventually, the two got on a podcast to call each other names for two hours. Like a root canal, the experience was both painful and valuable.

'We Can Have Differences Of Opinion And Still Respect Each Other,' Says Betrayer Of The One True Cause <https://t.co/nKBwmh74zu> [pic.twitter.com/GToD0HlnBl](https://t.co/GToD0HlnBl)

— The Onion (@TheOnion) May 1, 2018

Hypothesis: the primary piece of context that's important to contextualizers is *affiliation* – who is this *for* and *against*. This isn't always the case (c.f. the description of botany here), but as soon as an idea becomes aligned in favor of one group and in opposition to another, this alignment becomes the feature that can't be decoupled.

Scott Alexander describes this process in Five Case Studies on Polarization:

1. Some complex issue, such as whether the US should impose a quarantine on arrivals from Ebola-stricken countries, is debated by experts and ignored by the public.
2. The issue is becoming politicized – Republicans start speaking out in favor of the quarantine and Democrats against it – and people find out about this politicization.
3. The narrow epidemiological question of Ebola quarantine become a broad referendum on *which tribe is wise and virtuous and which is evil and ignorant*.
4. People form strong opinions on the subject based on their tribal affiliation, and not vice versa.

The polarization doesn't happen at random, and the entire process is iterative. There's a step that's happening in the background of the other four:

- o. People and issues align with groups based on mood affiliation.

The Red tribe has strong moral intuitions about purity and disgust, and wants to keep America free from harmful outside influences. The Blue Tribe has strong moral intuition about care and openness, and wants to protect the oppressed. These intuitions are probably the starting point that determines who and what is affiliated with which group.

To a cognitive decoupler, it is either insane or malicious to politicize an issue. To them, the only two sides in the quarantine debate are *Homo sapiens* vs. *Ebolavirus*, and the question should be determined by experts on epidemiology in a way that's good for the majority of people. Decoupling looks like taking the most politicized bit of research and saying I don't care who wrote this, just show me the raw data.

Here's Harris to Klein:

The thing that is “very off” is the highly moralistic/tribal posture some people take on every topic under the sun, which makes rational conversation on important issues nearly impossible.

But to the contextualizers, fighting for your tribe is the default. Anyone who denies that their speech and thought are shaped by their group identity is either lying or blind.

Ezra Klein: You have that bewildering experience because you don't realize when you keep saying that everybody else is thinking tribally, but you're not, that that is our disagreement.

Sam Harris: Well, no, because I know I'm not thinking tribally —

Ezra Klein: Well, that is our disagreement.

[...]

Right at the beginning of all this with Murray you said, you look at Murray and you see what happens to you. You were completely straightforward about that, that you look at what happens to him and you see what happens to you.

Sam Harris: It's not tribalism. This is an experience of talking about ideas in public.

Ezra Klein: We all have a lot of different identities we're part of all times. I do, too. I have all kinds of identities that you can call forward. All of them can bias me simultaneously, and the questions, of course, are which dominate and how am I able to counterbalance them through my process of information gathering and adjudication of that information. I think that your core identity in this is as someone who feels you get treated unfairly by politically correct mobs.

Decoupling makes one upset about tribalism and identity-biased thinking, but it does not make one immune.

If the most important thing about each idea is the group identity of the speaker, any battle between ideas is really a battle between groups. The decoupling vs. contextualizing dichotomy correlates strongly with another distinction in ways of thinking: conflict vs. mistake.

Mistake theorists treat politics as science, engineering, or medicine. The State is diseased. We're all doctors, standing around arguing over the best diagnosis and cure. Some of us have good ideas, others have bad ideas that wouldn't help, or that would cause too many side effects.

Conflict theorists treat politics as war. Different blocs with different interests are forever fighting to determine whether the State exists to enrich the Elites or to help the People.

[...]

Mistake theorists think you can save the world by increasing intelligence. You make technocrats smart enough to determine the best policy. You make politicians smart enough to choose the right technocrats and implement their advice effectively. And you make voters smart enough to recognize the smartest politicians and sweep them into office.

For a conflict theorist, intelligence is inadequate or even suspect. It doesn't take a supergenius to know that poor farm laborers working twelve hour days in the scorching heat deserve more than a \$9/hour minimum wage when the CEO makes \$9 million. The supergenius is the guy with the PowerPoint presentation saying this will make the Yellowstone supervolcano erupt.

[...]

Mistake theorists naturally think conflict theorists are *making a mistake*. On the object level, they're not smart enough to realize that new trade deals are for the good of all, or that smashing the state would actually lead to mass famine and disaster. But on the more fundamental level, the conflict theorists don't understand the Principle of Charity, or Hanlon's Razor of "never attribute to malice what can be better explained by stupidity". They're stuck at some kind of troglodyte first-square-of-the-glowing-brain-meme level where they think forming mobs and smashing things can solve incredibly complicated social engineering problems. The correct response is to teach them Philosophy 101.

Conflict theorists naturally think mistake theorists are *the enemy in their conflict*. On the object level, maybe they're directly working for the Koch Brothers or the American Enterprise Institute or whoever. But on the more fundamental level, they've become part of a class that's more interested in protecting its own privileges than in helping the poor or working for the good of all. The best that can be said about the best of them is that they're trying to protect their own neutrality, unaware that in the struggle between the powerful and the powerless neutrality always favors the powerful. **The correct response is to crush them.** [Emphasis by Jacob]

This final line points to a key asymmetry between conflict theorists and mistake theorists. It takes two to tango, and it takes two to have an honest debate, which is the mistake theorist's favored approach to disagreement. But it only takes one to declare war. When conflict theorists and mistake theorists meet, the result is more often war than an honest debate.

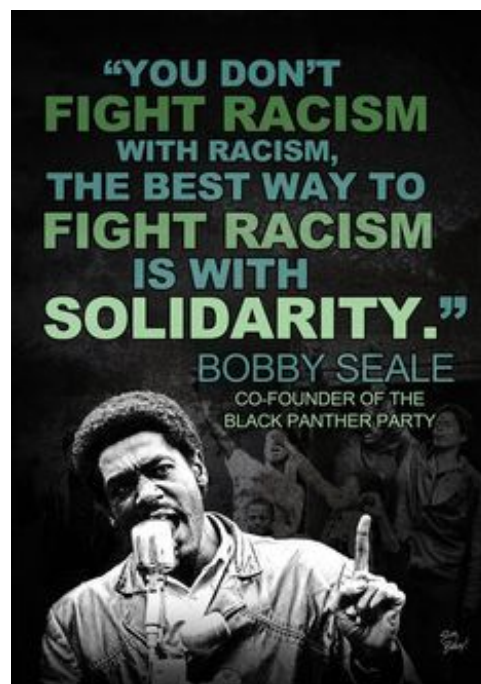
[start Black Panther spoilers]

Black Panther is unremarkable as a comic book movie, but remarkable in its direct examination of the conflict-mistake conflict. The movie's villain, Killmonger, is a pure conflict theorist. To him, the world's problems boil down to two groups locked in eternal strife: black people, and the oppressors of black people. His plan to address this is simple: give the black people enough weapons to turn the tide of war and establish themselves at the top.

The hero, T'Challa, is a mistake theorist. He's pursuing win-win solutions, education, dialogue, and incrementalism. But whenever T'Challa runs into a conflict-theorist in the movie, the confrontation is invariably resolved not by any of the above but by punching the conflict-theorist into submission.

[/end Black Panther spoilers]

To some extent, this is a constraint of an action movie, regardless of meta-political ideology. But in general, conflict theorists can and do impose conflict on mistake theorists. It was Klein's Vox that called out Harris, not vice versa.



It's not just the asymmetry that creates the conflict, it's also the sheer magnitude of the differences. For example, each side can't see the other's position as anything except naked hypocrisy.

Klein argues that Murray only researches IQ to support his favored policies, to which a decoupler would answer: *how the %&\$ do you know which policies to recommend if you don't do the research?*

I wrote about an article that claimed affirmative action helps Hispanic students while ignoring:

1. The data in the article itself showing zero effect of affirmative action on Hispanic students.
2. The fact the Hispanic high-school graduates enroll in college at higher rates than whites.

That article isn't pro-Hispanic, it's simply pro-affirmative action. To a decoupler, promoting a policy with no regard for its actual effects is nothing but a power grab on behalf of political party. Claims of helping the oppressed are nothing but cover and rationalization for this.

But to a contextualizer, my support for scientific and rational thinking looks as suspect as their own pre-scientific support for policies looks to me. After all, "scientific and rational thinking" is a favored activity of white guys who are good at math, and the direct result of all that thinking is empowering white guys who are good at math and their allies (e.g., Asian guys who are good at math). Silicon Valley and Wall Street are two places that proclaim the virtues of rational thinking while enriching a lot of white guys who are good at math and mostly ignoring the concerns of the rest of the world.

Well, I'm a white guy who's good at math, supports rational thinking, and made good money at a software company located two blocks from Wall Street. And my response to the hypothetical contextualizer is: *you've got a point.*

This is actually how you tell a mistake theorist from a conflict theorist. A decoupling mistake theorist writes blog posts analyzing the dichotomy at various levels and trying to pass both sides' ideological Turing tests. Someone saying "*conflict theorists are selfish hypocrites*" isn't a mistake theorist, they're just confused.

Of course, conflict theorists *are* selfish hypocrites. But so is everyone else, including the most devoted rationalists. I learned that from a black belt mistake theorist, himself beset by conflict-mongers.

I was waiting to get a copy from a friend, but after seeing that article I decided to signal my values in a more direct way: pic.twitter.com/OISjCovHMX

— Putanumonit Jacob (@yashkaf) May 2, 2018

To wrap up, I want to talk about one last curious fact: both sides are utterly convinced that the other's strategy is hopelessly self-defeating.

Klein thinks it very likely that the white-black IQ gap in the US is purely environmental, and uses that as justification for his policies. This was his default assumption, he has seen nothing in the research so far that would cause him to update, and he's skeptical that anything ever will. But of course, every year we discover more and more genes that contribute to intelligence, accounting for more and more of the genetic component differences between individuals and between groups.

We're going to find out sooner or later. The GWAS study I linked to has a sample of 78,000 people, but 23andMe has 5,000,000 genomes. 23andMe could conceivably find the answer tomorrow by asking their customers to submit an IQ test.

Why would anyone want to stake their group's position on an empirical question that's going to be answered in our lifetimes?

Most people's opinions on the minimum wage are based on their group affiliation, not on their estimates of the elasticity of labor supply. I oppose (for now) raising the minimum wage, but I can come up with a research program where I would commit to flipping my view if the results come out a specific way. The virtue of my worldview doesn't depend on labor supply elasticity.

I prefer to fight on the side that's aligned with truth, whatever that truth turns out to be. My weapons in that fight are free speech and open debate.

However:

Conflict theorists think of free speech and open debate about the same way a 1950s Bircher would treat avowed Soviet agents coming into neighborhoods and trying to convince people of the merits of Communism. Or the way the average infantryman would think of enemy planes dropping pamphlets saying "YOU CANNOT WIN, SURRENDER NOW". Anybody who says it's good to let the enemy walk in and promote enemy ideas is probably an enemy agent.

I listened to the Klein-Harris podcast looking to learn from Ezra Klein. I learned a lot – about race in America, about the link between science and policy, about my own tribal biases. I also learned a lot about how contextualizers think – to better find which win-win scenarios we can cooperate on. To a conflict theorist, this is self-sabotage – I'm allowing myself to be infected by enemy memes, which will inevitably result in my defeat.

According to this model, whoever is correct will win. This is exactly how a mistake theorist would want it.