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Intellectual Hipsters and Meta-Contrarianism

by Scott Alexander 13th Sep 2010

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WARNING: Beware of things that are fun to argue -- Eliezer Yudkowsky

Science has inexplicably failed to come up with a precise definition of "hipster", but from my limited understanding a hipster is a person who deliberately uses unpopular, obsolete, or obscure styles and preferences in an attempt to be "cooler" than the mainstream. But why would being deliberately uncool be cooler than being cool?

As [previously discussed°](#), in certain situations refusing to signal can be a sign of high status. Thorstein Veblen invented the term "conspicuous consumption" to refer to the showy spending habits of the nouveau riche, who unlike the established money of his day took great pains to signal their wealth by buying fast cars, expensive clothes, and shiny jewelery. Why was such flashiness common among new money but not old? Because the old money was so secure in their position that it never even occurred to them that they might be confused with poor people, whereas new money, with their lack of aristocratic breeding, worried they might be mistaken for poor people if they didn't make it blatantly obvious that they had expensive things.

The old money might have started off not buying flashy things for pragmatic reasons -

they didn't need to, so why waste the money? But if F. Scott Fitzgerald is to be believed, the old money actively cultivated an air of superiority to the nouveau riche and their conspicuous consumption; not buying flashy objects becomes a matter of principle. This makes sense: the nouveau riche need to differentiate themselves from the poor, but the old money need to differentiate themselves from the nouveau riche.

This process is called **countersignaling**, and one can find its telltale patterns in many walks of life. Those who study human romantic attraction warn men not to "come on too strong", and this has similarities to the nouveau riche example. A total loser might come up to a woman without a hint of romance, promise her nothing, and demand sex. A more sophisticated man might buy roses for a woman, write her love poetry, hover on her every wish, et cetera; this signifies that he is not a total loser. But the most desirable men may deliberately avoid doing nice things for women in an attempt to signal they are so high status that they don't need to. The average man tries to differentiate himself from the total loser by being nice; the extremely attractive man tries to differentiate himself from the average man by not being especially nice.

In all three examples, people at the top of the pyramid end up displaying characteristics similar to those at the bottom. Hipsters deliberately wear the same clothes uncool people wear. Families with old money don't wear much more jewelry than the middle class. And very attractive men approach women with the same lack of subtlety a total loser would use.¹

If politics, philosophy, and religion are really about signaling, we should expect to find countersignaling there as well.

Pretending To Be Wise

Let's go back to Less Wrong's long-running discussion on death. Ask any five year old child, and they can tell you that death is bad. Death is bad because it kills you. There is nothing subtle about it, and there does not need to be. Death universally seems bad to pretty much everyone on first analysis, and what it seems, it is.

But as has been pointed out, along with the gigantic cost, death does have a few small benefits. It lowers overpopulation, it allows the new generation to develop free from interference by their elders, it provides motivation to get things done quickly. Precisely because these benefits are so much smaller than the cost, they are hard to notice. It takes

a particularly subtle and clever mind to think them up. Any idiot can tell you why death is bad, but it takes a very particular sort of idiot to believe that death might be good.

So pointing out this contrarian position, that death has some benefits, is potentially a signal of high intelligence. It is not a very reliable signal, because once the first person brings it up everyone can just copy it, but it is a cheap signal. And to the sort of person who might not be clever enough to come up with the benefits of death themselves, and only notices that wise people seem to mention death can have benefits, it might seem super extra wise to say death has lots and lots of great benefits, and is really quite a good thing, and if other people should protest that death is bad, well, that's an opinion a five year old child could come up with, and so clearly that person is no smarter than a five year old child. Thus Eliezer's title for this mentality, "Pretending To Be Wise".

If dwelling on the benefits of a great evil is not your thing, you can also pretend to be wise by dwelling on the costs of a great good. All things considered, modern industrial civilization - with its advanced technology, its high standard of living, and its lack of typhoid fever - is pretty neat. But modern industrial civilization also has many costs: alienation from nature, strains on the traditional family, the anonymity of big city life, pollution and overcrowding. These are real costs, and they are certainly worth taking seriously; nevertheless, the crowds of emigrants trying to get from the Third World to the First, and the lack of any crowd in the opposite direction, suggest the benefits outweigh the costs. But in my estimation - and speak up if you disagree - people spend a lot more time dwelling on the negatives than on the positives, and most people I meet coming back from a Third World country have to talk about how much more authentic their way of life is and how much we could learn from them. This sort of talk sounds Wise, whereas talk about how nice it is to have buses that don't break down every half mile sounds trivial and selfish..

So my hypothesis is that if a certain side of an issue has very obvious points in support of it, and the other side of an issue relies on much more subtle points that the average person might not be expected to grasp, then adopting the second side of the issue will become a signal for intelligence, even if that side of the argument is wrong.

This only works in issues which are so muddled to begin with that there is no fact of the matter, or where the fact of the matter is difficult to tease out: so no one tries to signal intelligence by saying that $1+1$ equals 3 (although it would not surprise me to find a philosopher who says truth is relative and this equation is a legitimate form of

discourse).

Meta-Contrarians Are Intellectual Hipsters

A person who is somewhat upper-class will conspicuously signal eir wealth by buying difficult-to-obtain goods. A person who is very upper-class will conspicuously signal that ey feels no need to conspicuously signal eir wealth, by deliberately not buying difficult-to-obtain goods.

A person who is somewhat intelligent will conspicuously signal eir intelligence by holding difficult-to-understand opinions. A person who is very intelligent will conspicuously signal that ey feels no need to conspicuously signal eir intelligence, by deliberately not holding difficult-to-understand opinions.

According to [the survey](#)^o, the average IQ on this site is around 145². People on this site differ from the mainstream in that they are more willing to say death is bad, more willing to say that science, capitalism, and the like are good, and less willing to say that there's some deep philosophical sense in which $1+1 = 3$. That suggests people around that level of intelligence have reached the point where they no longer feel it necessary to differentiate themselves from the sort of people who aren't smart enough to understand that there might be side benefits to death. Instead, they are at the level where they want to differentiate themselves from the somewhat smarter people who think the side benefits to death are great. They are, basically, meta-contrarians, who counter-signal by holding opinions contrary to those of the contrarians' signals. And in the case of death, this cannot but be a good thing.

But just as contrarians risk becoming too contrary, moving from "actually, death has a few side benefits" to "DEATH IS GREAT!", meta-contrarians are at risk of becoming too meta-contrary.

All the possible examples here are controversial, so I will just take the least controversial one I can think of and beg forgiveness. A naive person might think that industrial production is an absolute good thing. Someone smarter than that naive person might realize that global warming is a strong negative to industrial production and desperately needs to be stopped. Someone even smarter than that, to differentiate emself from the second person, might decide global warming wasn't such a big deal after all, or doesn't exist, or isn't man-made.

In this case, the contrarian position happened to be right (well, maybe), and the third person's meta-contrariness took em further from the truth. I do feel like there are more global warming skeptics among what Eliezer called "the atheist/libertarian/technophile/sf-fan/early-adopter/programmer empirical cluster in personspace" than among, say, college professors.

In fact, very often, the uneducated position of the five year old child may be deeply flawed and the contrarian position a necessary correction to those flaws. This makes meta-contrarianism a very dangerous business.

Remember, most everyone hates hipsters.

Without meaning to imply anything about whether or not any of these positions are correct or not³, the following triads come to mind as connected to an uneducated/contrarian/meta-contrarian divide:

- KKK-style racist / politically correct liberal / "but there are scientifically proven genetic differences"
- misogyny / women's rights movement / men's rights movement
- conservative / liberal / libertarian⁴
- herbal-spiritual-alternative medicine / conventional medicine / Robin Hanson
- don't care about Africa / give aid to Africa / don't give aid to Africa
- Obama is Muslim / Obama is obviously not Muslim, you idiot / **Patri Friedman**⁵

What is interesting about these triads is not that people hold the positions (which could be expected by chance) but that people **get deep personal satisfaction from arguing the positions**[°] even when their arguments are unlikely to change policy⁶ - and that people identify with these positions to the point where arguments about them can become personal.

If meta-contrarianism is a real tendency in over-intelligent people, it doesn't mean they should immediately abandon their beliefs; that would just be meta-meta-contrarianism. It means that they need to recognize the meta-contrarian tendency within themselves and so be extra suspicious and careful about a desire to believe something contrary to the prevailing contrarian wisdom, especially if they really enjoy doing so.

Footnotes

1) But what's really interesting here is that people at each level of the pyramid don't just follow the customs of their level. They enjoy following the customs, it makes them feel good to talk about how they follow the customs, and they devote quite a bit of energy to insulting the people on the other levels. For example, old money call the nouveau riche "crass", and men who don't need to pursue women call those who do "chumps".

Whenever holding a position makes you feel superior and is fun to talk about, that's a good sign that the position is not just practical, but signaling related.

2) There is no need to point out just how unlikely it is that such a number is correct, nor how unscientific the survey was.

3) One more time: *the fact that those beliefs are in an order does not mean some of them are good and others are bad*. For example, "5 year old child / pro-death / transhumanist" is a triad, and "warming denier / warming believer / warming skeptic" is a triad, but I personally support 1+3 in the first triad and 2 in the second. You can't evaluate the truth of a statement by its position in a signaling game; otherwise **you could use human psychology to figure out if global warming is real**!

4) This is my solution to the eternal question of why libertarians are always more hostile toward liberals, even though they have just about as many points of real disagreement with the conservatives.

5) To be fair to Patri, he admitted that those two posts were "trolling", but I think the fact that he derived so much enjoyment from trolling in that particular way is significant.

6) Worth a footnote: I think in a lot of issues, the original uneducated position has disappeared, or been relegated to a few rednecks in some remote corner of the world, and so meta-contrarians simply look like contrarians. I think it's important to keep the terminology, because most contrarians retain a psychology of feeling like they are being contrarian, even after they are the new norm. But my only evidence for this is introspection, so it might be false.

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[\[-\]](#) **Scott Alexander** 16y ▼ 73 ▲ ✕ 1 ✓

I also recently noticed this triad:

Seek sex + money / pursue only pure truth and virtue / seek sex + money

[\[-\]](#) **MichaelVassar** 14y ▼ 16 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

To be fair, I think that this triad is largely a function of the sort of society one lives in. It could be summarized as "submit to virtuous social orders, seek to dominate non-virtuous ones if you have the ability to discern between them"

6 **EditedToAdd** 9y I think it's more along the lines of: people in the third stage have acquired ...

2 **AlexanderRM** 11y Could anyone elaborate on this? All the ones listed in the article seem fair...

[\[-\]](#) **simplicio** 16y ▼ 63 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

Implementing your suggestion is easy. Just keep going "meta" until your opinions become stupid, then set meta = meta - 1.

There's an art to knowing when;

Never try to guess.

Toast until it smokes & then

20 seconds less.

[-] **CronoDAS** 16y ▼ 89 ▲ ✕ 1 ✓

I'm reminded of some "advice" I read about making money in the stock market:

Buy a stock, wait until it goes up, and then sell it. If it doesn't go up, then don't have bought it.

[-] **Clippy** 16y ▼ 17 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

That strategy requires an impossible action in the case that the stock does not go up.

[-] **homunq** 14y ▼ 13 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

That comment made me smile. I didn't upvote it, but I just hid a paperclip, making the moment when I'll have to buy another box that much closer.

edit: actually, I wrote the above before I actually did it. But when I looked in the place I expected to find paperclips, and didn't find any, making the probability that I'll buy paperclips in the near future somewhat higher. So it's all good.

-5 [anonymous] 14y

[-] **Emile** 16y ▼ 57 ▲ ✕ 3 ✓

One more time: *the fact that those beliefs are in an order does not mean some of them are good and others are bad*. For example, "5 year old child / pro-death / transhumanist" is a triad, and "warming denier / warming believer / warming skeptic" is a triad, but I personally support 1+3 in the first triad and 2 in the second. You can't evaluate the truth of a statement by its position in a signaling game; otherwise you could use human psychology to figure out if global warming is real!

Well worth stressing.

It's possible to go meta on nearly any issue, and there are *a lot* of meta-level arguments - group affiliation, signaling, rationalization, ulterior motives, whether a position is contrarian or supported by the majority, who the experts are and how much we should trust them, which group is persecuted the most, straw man positions and whether anybody really holds them, slippery slopes, different ways to interpret statements, who is working under which cognitive bias ...

Which is why I prefer discussions to stick to the object level rather than go meta. It's just too easy to rationalize a position in meta, and to find convincing-sounding arguments as to why the other side mistakenly disagrees with you. And meta-level disagreements are more likely to persist in the long run, because they are hard to verify.

Sure, meta-level arguments are very valuable in many cases, we shouldn't drop them altogether. But we should be very cautious while using them.

[-] minusdash 11y ▼ 15 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

That's a triad too: naive instinctive signaling / signaling-aware people disliking signaling / signaling is actually a useful and necessary thing.

[-] Will_Newsome 16y ▼ 10 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

Going meta often introduces **burdensome details**. This will only lead you closer to truth when your epistemic rationality is strong enough to shoulder the weight.

[-] DanB 16y ▼ 42 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

One element of meta-contrarian reasoning is as follows. Consider a proposition P, that is hard for a layperson to assess. Because of this difficulty, an individual must rely on others for information. Now, a reasonable layperson might look around and listen with an open mind to all the arguments, and choose the one that seems most plausible to assign a probability to P.

The problem is that certain propositions have large corps of people whose professions depend on the proposition being true, but no counterforce of professional critics. So there is a large group of people (priests) who are professionally committed to the proposition "God exists". The existence of this group causes an obvious bias in the layperson's decision algorithm. Other groups, like doctors, economists, soldiers, and public school teachers, have similar commitments. Consider the proposition "public education improves national academic achievement." It could be true, it could be false - it's an empirical question. But all public school teachers are committed to this proposition, and there are very few people committed to the opposite.

So meta-contrarians explicitly correct for this kind of bias. I don't necessarily think that the public school proposition is false, but it should be thoroughly examined. I don't necessarily think that the nation would be safer if we abolished the Army and Marine Corps, but it might be.

[-] komponisto 16y ▼ 16 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

The problem is that certain propositions have large corps of people whose professions depend on the proposition being true, but no counterforce of professional critics.

This really is a very good point.

[-] HughRistik 16y ▼ 36 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

I think this post speaks of an interesting signaling element in societal **dialectics**. Let's call your hypothesis the "contrarian signaling" hypothesis. But to me, your post also hints at a couple other hypotheses behind this behavior.

The first hypothesis is the mundane one: that people end up in this groups with positions contrary to other positions, because those are just the positions that are more plausible to them, and they decide their subcultures out of their actual tastes. The reason that people divide themselves into groups with

contrary views is because people have different phenotypes. I'm sure you've already thought of it, but I want to say a little more about it.

Under this hypothesis, hipster are hipsters primarily because they *like* retro clothes (and other aspects of the culture). They would have worn these same clothes back when they were in fashion; whereas true contrarians wouldn't have. This might be easier to imagine with another overlapping subculture: hippies. Hippies don't idolize the 60's to be contrarian: they idolize the 60's because they *like* the ideals of the 60's and feel nostalgic for them.

Now, you may say that the 60's were a contrarian time (w... (read more)

[-] **Relsqui** 16y ▼ 14 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

But to me, your post also hints at a couple other hypotheses behind this behavior.

My reading of the post was not so much that it proposed contrarianism as an explanation for other cultural divisions, but that peoples' inclination towards a given level of contrarianism is itself a cultural division. We don't need to hypothesize about why people are metacontrarians; we're defining them by the habit of being metacontrary.

However, your hypotheses are still interesting in their own right. I predict that, were we to run your experiments, the first one would tend to describe the early adopters of a given subculture--the first hipster actually liked those dumb glasses, etc.--and later members would increasingly be described by the latter.

This is roughly what Gladwell's Tipping Point is about, actually.

check out this other cool belief Y!

I think that this is how all debates (and evangelism) should sound.

2 **FrogSaga** 13y The account of the nouveau riche's ostentatious behavior and appearance com...

0 [anonymous] 16y I have a strong urge to signal my difference to the Lesswrong crowd. Shoul...

[-] **steven0461** 16y ▼ 33 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

Here's a different hypothesis that also accounts for opinions reverting in the direction of the original uneducated position. Suppose "uneducated" and "contrarian" opinion are two independent random (e.g. normal) variables with the same mean representing the truth (but maybe higher variance for "uneducated"); and suppose what you call "meta-contrarian" opinion is just the truth. Then if you start from "contrarian" it's more likely that "meta-contrarian" opinion will be in the direction of "uneducated" than in the opposite direction, simply because "uneducated" contains nonzero information about where the truth is. I think you can also see this as a kind of regression to the mean.

2 **VAuroch** 12y I don't see why we should expect the random variables to be based around "tru...

1 **AlexanderRM** 11y It seems to me that uneducated-person opinion would be the "human-in...

1 **Paul Crowley** 15y I think that this only works if positions are in one dimension. If they are in ...

1 Will_Newsome 15y I'm a little sad that I've integrated this pretty thoroughly into my episte...

1 shokwave 15y Thank-you for commenting and bringing this to my attention. This also makes...

[·] RobinZ 15y ▼ 22 ▲ × 0 ✓

Belatedly, a quotation to hang at the top of the post:

There is a great difference between *still* believing something and believing it *again*. *Still* to believe that the moon affects the plants reveals stupidity and superstition, but to believe it *again* is a sign of philosophy and reflection.

Lichtenberg, Georg Christoph, 1775

[·] loqi 16y ▼ 22 ▲ × 0 ✓

Whenever holding a position makes you feel superior and is fun to talk about, that's a good sign that the position is not just practical, but signaling related.

Readers be warned: Internalizing this insight may result in catastrophic loss of interest in politics.

[·] Vladimir_M 16y ▼ 18 ▲ × 0 ✓

Perhaps for some people -- but on the other hand, it creates an even higher intellectual challenge to achieve accurate understanding. Understanding hard and complicated things in math and science is extremely challenging, but ultimately, you still have fully reliable trusted authorities to turn to when you're lost, and you know they won't lie and bullshit you. In politics and heavily politicized fields in general, there is no such safety net; you are completely on your own.

1 AlexanderRM 11y I've known politics is largely about status signaling (which hasn't caused an...

[·] Will_Newsome 16y ▼ 22 ▲ × 0 ✓

Yet another thought-provoking post from Yvain.

I've implicitly noticed the meta-contrarian trend on Less Wrong and to a lesser extent in SIAI before, and I think it's led me to taking my meta-meta-contrarianism a little far sometimes. I get a little too much enjoyment out of trolling cryonicists and libertarians: indeed, I get a feeling of self-righteousness because it seems that I'm doing a public service by pointing out what appears to be a systematic bias and flaw of group epistemology in the Less Wrong belief cluster. This feeling is completely disproportionate to the extent that I'm actually helping: in general, the best way to emphasize the weaker points of an appealing argument isn't to directly troll the person who holds it. Steve Rayhawk is significantly better than me in this regard. So thanks, Yvain, for pointing out these different levels of meta and how the sense of superiority they give can lead to bad epistemic practice. I'll definitely check for signs of this next time I'm feeling epistemically self-righteous.

7 Relsqui 16y A friend of mine likes to say that, if you find that your personal opinion happens t...

[-] **Apprentice** 16y ▼ 21 ▲ ✕ 1 ✓

A while back the "[Steveosphere](#)" had a list of items for which "the masses display more common sense than the smarties do". These suggest that they think they have located Yvain-clusters of the following type:

1. Troglodyte position.
2. Liberal position.
3. Troglodyte position held for sophisticated reasons.

2 **AlexanderRM** 11y ...many of those questions are rather odd. I went in expecting things like "...

[-] **mattnewport** 16y ▼ 20 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

Here's my alternative explanation for your triads which, while obviously a caricature, is no more so than yours and I think is more accurate: un-educated / academic / educated non-academic.

Essentially your 'contrarian' positions are the mainstream positions you are more or less required to hold to build a successful academic (or media) career. Some academics can get away with deviation in some areas (at some cost to their career prospects) but relatively few are willing to risk it. Intelligent, educated individuals who have not been subject to excessive exposure to academic groupthink are more likely to take your meta-contrarian positions.

See also Moldbug's thoughts on the [University](#).

4 **nick012000** 16y Seems to me like a (hopefully Friendly) seed AI is more likely to provide the ...

[-] **knb** 16y ▼ 19 ▲ ✕ 1 ✓

conservative / liberal / libertarian

No way, I don't buy this one at all. I find that most little kids are essentially naive liberals. We should give poor sick people free medicine! We should stop bad polluters from hurting birds and trees! Conservatism/libertarianism is the contrarian position. Everything has a cost! There are no free lunches! Managerial-technocratic liberals are the meta-contrarians. So what about the costs? We've got 800 of the smartest guys from Yarvard and Oxbridge to do cost-benefit analyses for us!

Of course there are meta-meta-contrarians as well: reactionaries, meta-libertarians (Patri Friedman is a good example of a metalibertarian IMO), anarchists, etc.

It's contrarians all the way down.

[-] **Scott Alexander** 16y ▼ 21 ▲ ✕ 1 ✓

I was thinking more in terms of conservative values like "My country is the best" and "Our enemies are bad people who hate our freedom", but your way makes a lot of sense too.

Although it's worth noting that all of what you say is obvious even to little kids are things no one had even thought of a hundred years ago. Rachel Carson and *Silent Spring* are remembered as iconic because they kick-started an environmentalist movement that just didn't really exist before the second half of the 20th century (although Thoreau and people like that get honorable mention). The idea of rich people paying to give poor sick people free medicine would have gotten you laughed out of most socially stratified civilizations on the wrong side of about 1850.

But I don't want to get too bogged down in which side is more contrarian, because it sounds too close to arguing whether liberalism or conservatism is better, which of course would be a terribly low status thing to do on a site like this :)

I think it was probably a mistake to include such large-scale politics on there at all. Whether a political position seems natural or contrarian depends on what social context someone's in, wha... (read more)

[-] **Relsqui** 16y ▼ 12 ▲ ✕ 1 ✓

I think you're right about the chronological sequence of kids as "naive liberals" to adults as conservative (more so than the kids, anyway), but not about the rationale. Positioning oneself on the contrarian hierarchy is about showing off that your intellect is greater than the people below you on it. It's the rare adult who feels a need to explicitly demonstrate their intellectual superiority to children--but the common adult who has a job and pays taxes and actually ever thinks about the cost of things, as opposed to the kids, who don't need to.

In short, adults don't oppose free medicine etc. to be contrary to the position of naive children; they oppose it because they're the ones who'd have to pay for it.

9 **kodos96** 16y I think the takeaway from this is just that classification of phenomena into these...

5 **Mercy** 16y Ah thanks that position makes more sense to me now, you mean what most peop...

[-] **steven0461** 16y ▼ 19 ▲ ✕ -1 ✓

Global warming was *the least controversial example you could think of?* Seriously?

[-] **Scott Alexander** 16y ▼ 32 ▲ ✕ 1 ✓

Well, the example was to show that there are certain meta-contrarian views held by a big part of this community which are trivially wrong and proof that they have gone too far. Given that restriction, what less controversial example would you have preferred?

I really would have liked to use the racism example, because it's most elegant. The in-group bias means people will naturally like their own race more than others. Some very intelligent and moral people come up with the opposing position that all races are equal; overcoming one's biases enough to believe this becomes (rightly) correlated with high intelligence and morality. This contrarian idea spreads until practically everyone believes it and signals it so much as to become annoying and inane. This creates a niche for certain people to signal their difference to the majority by becoming pro-racial differences. But taken too far, this meta-contrarian position could easily lead to racism.

But any post that includes a whole paragraph on racism automatically ends up with the comments entirely devoted to discussing racism, and the rest of the post completely ignored. Feminism would also

have worked, but I would have to be dumb as a rock to voluntarily bring up gender issues on this blog. Global warming seemed like something that Less Wrong is generally willing to admit is correct and doesn't care that much about, while still having enough of an anti-global-warming faction to work as an example.

[] **Paul Crowley** 16y 12 0

What less controversial example should have been used instead?

5 **Relsqui** 16y I've been lurking and reading for a few days--interested in a few things, thinking ab...

[] **Spurlock** 16y 17 0

I think it's worth noting explicitly (though you certainly noted it implicitly) that meta-contrarianism does not simply agree with the original, non-contrarian opinion. Meta-contrarianism usually goes to great lengths to signal that it is indeed the level above, and absolutely not the level below, the default position.

An example, from a guy who lives in a local hipster capital:

People not interested in (or just unskilled at) looking cool will mostly buy their clothing at places like Wal-Mart. The "contrarian" cluster differentiates itself by shopping at very expensive, high-status stores (dropping \$150 on a pair of jeans, say). Your hipster crowd does not respond to this by returning to Wal-Mart. Instead, they get very distinct retro or otherwise unusual clothing from thrift stores and the like, places that no one who simply, *actually* didn't care about signaling would never bother to seek out.

The counter-counter culture often cares just as much about differentiating itself from the culture as it does the counter-culture. The nouveau-riche may not have to worry about this, if in their case it comes automatically, but other groups do.

3 **evgenit** 16y Of course they do, otherwise their signalling would be indistinguishable from the ...

1 **sark** 16y There are other dimensions in which the counter-counter people can signal their diff...

4 **Spurlock** 16y Absolutely. This is the sort of thing I was referring to in the last sentence. The...

1 **sark** 16y No problem. I was just providing a live example of metacontrarianism ;)

[] **Raw_Power** 15y 15 0

Could it be that the entire history of philosophy and its "thesis, antithesis, synthesis" recurring structure is an instance of this? Not to mention other liberal arts, and the development of the cycles of fashion.

[] **komponisto** 16y 15 0

According to the survey, the average IQ on this site is around 145^2

I can't possibly have been the only one to have been amused by this.

(Well, doesn't Clippy claim to be a superintelligence?)

[-] Vladimir_M 16y ▼ 18 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

According to the survey, the average IQ on this site is around 145

I can't possibly have been the only one to have been amused by this.

The really disturbing possibility is that average people hanging out here might actually be of the sort that solves IQ tests extremely successfully, with scores over 140, but whose real-life accomplishments are far below what these scores might suggest. In other words, that there might be a selection effect for the sort of people that [Scott Adams encountered when he joined Mensa](#):

I decided to take an I.Q. test administered by Mensa, the organization of geniuses. If you score in the top 2% of people who take that same test, you get to call yourself a "genius" and optionally join the group. I squeaked in and immediately joined so I could hang out with the other geniuses and do genius things. I even volunteered to host some meetings at my apartment.

Then, the horror.

It turns out that the people who join Mensa and attend meetings are, on average, not successful titans of industry. They are instead – and I say this with great affection – huge losers. I was making \$735 per month and I was like frickin' Goldfinger in this crowd. We had a guy who was

... (read more)

[-] komponisto 16y ▼ 13 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

I should clarify that I was specifically referring to the interesting placement of that superscript 2. :-)

EDIT: Though actually, this is probably the perfect opportunity to wonder if the reason people join this community is that it's probably the easiest high-IQ group to join in the world: you don't have to pass a test or earn a degree; all you have to do is write intelligent blog comments.

[-] Vladimir_M 16y ▼ 15 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

Oh, then it was a misunderstanding. I thought you were (like me) amused by the poll result suggesting that the intelligence of the average person here is in the upper 99.865-th percentile.

(Just to get the feel for that number, belonging to the same percentile of income distribution in the U.S. would mean roughly a million dollars a year.)

5 blogospheroid 16y Hmm.. Isn't the intelligence distribution more like a bell curve and th...

7 BillyOblivion 16y Both can be power-law or Gaussian depending on your "perspective"....

3 Relsqui 16y Upvoted for the quality of the analogy, although I also agree with you.

1 komponisto 16y Well I'm also amused by that, to be sure.

0 faul_sname 14y And since the correlation between the two is about 0.4, that would sugg...

0 Relsqui 16y I find this sort of puzzling. There is clearly a demand for organizations which p...

[-] komponisto 16y ▼ 13 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

There is clearly a demand for organizations which provide opportunities to interact and socialize with people carefully selected for their ability to solve clever puzzles (and whatever else is on the IQ test--I haven't taken a real one)

That's not the sense of IQ that I mean; rather, I mean the underlying thing which that ability is supposed to be an indicator of.

(My guess would be that this underlying thing is probably something like "richness of mental life".)

Does anybody here specifically seek out high-IQ friends? Do you feel like trying to explain the appeal to me?

My experience suggests that it makes a significant difference to one's quality of life whether the people in one's social circle are close to one's own intelligence level.

Not too long ago I spent some time at the SIAI house; and even though I was probably doing more "work" than usual while I was there, it felt like vacation, simply because the everyday task of communicating with people was so much easier and more efficient than in my normal life.

3 Relsqui 16y See my response to cata. [...] I suppose it's possible that I'm merely spoiled ...

4 komponisto 16y Of course not. What caused your probability of my saying "yes" to b...

1 Relsqui 16y It was rhetorical, and meant to support the point that intelligence alone ...

[-] [anonymous] 16y ▼ 11 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

Here I go, speaking for other people, but I'm guessing that people at the LessWrong meetup *at least* met some baseline of all those other qualities, by komponisto's estimation, and that the difference of intelligence allowed for such a massive increase in ability to communicate made talking so much more enjoyable, given that ey was talking to decent people.

Each quality may not be linear. If someone is "half as nice" as another person, I don't want to talk to them at half the frequency, or bet that I'll fully enjoy conversation half of the time. A certain threshold of most qualities makes a person totally not worth talking to. But at the same time, a person can only be so much more thoughtful, respectful, funny, supportive, before you lose your ability to identify with them again! That's my experience anyhow - if I admire a person too much, I have difficulty imagining that they identify with me as I do with them. Trust needs some symmetry. And so there are probably optimal levels of friendship-worthy qualities (very roughly by any measure), a minimum threshold, and a region where a little difference makes a big difference. The left-bounded S-curves of friendship.

Then there ... (read more)

3 Relsqui 16y I think this is a really excellent analysis and I agree with just about all ...

5 [anonymous] 16y Your suspicion rings true. Having more intelligence won't mak...

2 wedrifid 16y Isn't that what you would expect for most conversations, when all ...

2 Relsqui 16y ... well, it isn't what I do expect, so I guess I wouldn't. The thought ...

2 komponisto 16y Actually, I was talking about my two-week stay as an SIAI Visiting...

3 wedrifid 16y I'm quite curious about what benefits you experienced from your t...

3 LucasSloan 16y Neither of these should stop you. Alicorn lives on the other si...

0 wedrifid 16y Oh, there's the thing with being on the other side of the world t...

2 LucasSloan 16y They pay for airfare, you know...

2 wedrifid 16y Damn you and your shooting down all my excuses! ;) Not that ...

4 randallsquared 16y Fortunately, you appear to be able to rationalize more ...

2 komponisto 16y Perhaps the most publicly noticeable result was that I had the ...

1 [anonymous] 16y I hear that the secret to being a fellow is show rigorously tha...

1 [anonymous] 16y Ah, you lucky fellow!

[-] cata 16y ▼ 10 ▲ × 0 ✓

There is clearly a demand for organizations which provide opportunities to interact and socialize with people carefully selected for their ability to solve clever puzzles (and whatever else is on the IQ test--I haven't taken a real one).

Really? I don't think that's true; I think people just tend to assume that IQ is a good proxy for general intellectualism (e.g. highbrow tastes, willingness to talk and debate a lot, being well-read.) Since it's easier to score an IQ test than a test judging political literacy, education, and favorite novels, that's what organizations like Mensa use, and that's the measuring stick everyone trots out. Needless to say, it's not a very good one, but it's made its way into the culture.

I mean, even in casual usage, when most people talk about someone's high IQ, they probably aren't talking about focus, memory, or pattern recognition. They're likely actually talking about education and interests.

4 Relsqui 16y That's precisely what troubles me. I don't like that we use a term which act...

1 [anonymous] 16y I definitely agree on this. It's an abused and conflated word, though ...

1 Relsqui 16y You've hit an important point here, and not just about the topic in quest...

1 cata 16y Well, me neither; I think it's a reflection of how people would like to imagine...

0 Relsqui 16y That's reassuring. :) [...] Me too. I don't have a post's worth of idea yet. ...

4 NancyLebovitz 16y This surprises me. One explanation for the mismatch between my expe...

[-] Vladimir_M 16y ▼ 27 ▲ × 0 ✓

I'd say that the problem is the selection effect for intelligent underachievers. People who are in the top 2% of the population by some widely recognized measure of intellectual accomplishment

presumably already have affiliations, titles, and positions far more prestigious than the membership in an organization where the only qualification is passing a written test could ever be. Also, their everyday social circles are likely to consist of other individuals of the same caliber, so they have no need to seek them out actively.

Therefore, in an organization like Mensa, I would expect a strong selection effect for people who have the ability to achieve high IQ scores (whatever that might specifically imply, considering the controversies in IQ research), but who lack other abilities necessary to translate that into actual accomplishment and acquire recognition and connections among high-achieving people. Needless to say, such people are unlikely to end up as high-status individuals in our culture (or any other, for that matter). People of the sort you mention, smart enough to have flashes of extraordinary insight but unable to stay focused long enough to get anything done, likely account for some non-trivial subset of those.

That said, in such a decentralized organization, I would expect that the quality of local chapters and the sort of people they attract depends greatly on the ability and attitudes of the local leadership. There are probably places both significantly better and worse than what you describe.

1 **komponisto** 16y I'm not sure about this. I doubt I would do all that well on a Mensa-type I...

3 **gwern** 15y While I'm passing through looking for something else: <http://news.ycombinato...>

0 **NancyLebovitz** 16y I was generalizing from one example-- it's easier for me to focus on ...

2 **Relsqui** 16y That's fairly analogous to my worries about joining LW. I was afraid it would be ...

3 **Raw_Power** 15y How do you know this isn't the case?

1 **BillyOblivion** 16y Intelligence is but one measure of mental ability. One of the critical ones f...

0 **wedrifid** 16y It's correlated with self discipline but it is actually a different ability. In fact, so...

[-] **DSimon** 16y ▼ 14 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

herbal-spiritual-alternative medicine / conventional medicine / Robin Hanson

Can you link to a Robin Hanson article on this topic so that people who aren't already familiar with his opinions on this subject (read: LW newbies like me) know what this is about?

Or alternately, I propose this sequence:

regular medical care by default / alt-med / regular medical care because alt-med is unscientific

[-] **Will_Newsome** 16y ▼ 11 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

regular medical care by default / alt-med / regular medical care because alt-med is unscientific

This is more in line with the other examples. I second the request for an edit. Yvain, you *could* add "Robin Hanson" to the fourth slot: it would kinda mess up your triplets, but with the justification that it'd be a funny example of just how awesomely contrarian Robin Hanson is. :D

Also, Yvain, you happen to list what people here would deem more-or-less *correct* contrarian clusters in your triplet examples. But I have no idea how often the meta-level contrarian position is actually correct, and I fear that I might get too much of a kick out of the positions you list in your triplets simply because my position is more meta and I associate metaness with truth when in reality it might be negatively correlated. Perhaps you could think of a few more-wrong meta-contrarian positions to balance what may be a small affective bias?

4 **FAWS** 16y Huh? In all of those examples the unmentioned fourth level is correct and the se...

3 **Will_Newsome** 16y Half-agree with you, as none of the 18 positions are 'correct', but I do...

[-] **FAWS** 16y ▼ 15 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

My comment was largely tongue in cheek, but:

- KKK-style racist / politically correct liberal / "but there are scientifically proven genetic differences"

If I failed to notice that there are scientifically proven genetic differences I would be missing a far more important part of reality (evolutionary psychology and the huge effects of evolution in the last 20,000 years) than if I failed to notice that being a bigot was bad and impeded moral progress. That said, if most people took this position, it'd result in a horrible tragedy of the commons situation, which is why most social scientists cooperate on the 'let's not promote racism' dilemma. I'm not a social scientist so I get to defect and study some of the more interesting aspects of human evolutionary biology.

Awareness of genetic differences between races constitutes **negative knowledge** in many cases, that is it leads to anticipations that match the outcomes more badly than they would have otherwise. If everyone suspects that genetically blue-haired people are slightly less intelligent on average for genetic reasons, you want to hire the most intelligent person for a job and after a very long selection process (th... (read more)

[-] **Eliezer Yudkowsky** 16y ▼ 13 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

Okay, anyone who cares about helping people in Africa and can multiply should be giving their money to x-risk charities. Because saving the world also includes saving Africa.

But... but... but saving the world doesn't signal the same affiliations as saving Africa!

[-] **Larks** 16y ▼ 20 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

On LW, it signals better affiliations!

8 **NancyLebovitz** 16y My impression is that Hanson's take on conventional medicine is tha...

5 **Larks** 16y The RAND Health Experiment, which he frequently cited study didn't investi...

8 multifoliatrose 16y Why is giving money to x-risk charities conducive to saving the wor...

[~] Will_Newsome 16y ▼ 12 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

Sorry, I didn't mean to assume the conclusion. Rather than do a disservice to the arguments with a hastily written reply, I'm going to cop out of the responsibility of providing a rigorous technical analysis and just share some thoughts. From what I've seen of your posts, your arguments were that the current nominally x-risk-reducing organizations (primarily FHI and SIAI) aren't up to snuff when it comes to actually saving the world (in the case of SIAI perhaps even being actively harmful). Despite and because of being involved with SIAI I share some of your misgivings. That said, I personally think that SIAI is net-beneficial for their cause of promoting clear and accurate thinking about the Singularity, and that the PR issues you cite regarding Eliezer will be negligible in 5-10 years when more academics start speaking out publically about Singularity issues, which will only happen if SIAI stays around, gets funding, keeps on writing papers, and promotes the pretty-successful Singularity Summits. Also, I never saw you mention that SIAI is actively working on the research problems of building a Friendly artificial intelligence. Indeed, in a few years, SIAI will have begun the ende... (read more)

3 multifoliatrose 16y Reasonable response, upvoted :-). •As I said, I cut my planned se...

4 wedrifid 16y If you had a post on this specifically planned then I would be interested ...

-3 timtyler 16y Is that what they are doing!?! They seem to be funded by promoting the...

[~] Will_Newsome 16y ▼ 19 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

/start rant

~~They seem to be funded by promoting the idea that DOOM is SOON -- and that to avert it we should all be sending our hard-earned dollars to their intrepid band of Friendly Folk.~~

~~Or, more realistically, the idea that DOOM has a CHANCE of happening any time between NOW and ONE HUNDRED YEARS FROM NOW but that small CHANCE has a large enough impact in EXPECTED UTILITY that we should really figure out more about the problem because someone, not necessarily SIAI might have to deal with the problem EVENTUALLY.~~

~~One might naively expect such an organization would typically act so as to exaggerate the risks -- but SIAI doesn't seem to be doing that so one's naive expectations would be wrong. It's amazing how people associate an aura of overconfidence coming from the philosophical positions of Eliezer with the actual confidence levels of the thinkers of SIAI. Seriously, where are these crazy claims about DOOM being SOON and that ELIEZER YUDKOWSKY is the MESSIAH? From something Eliezer wrote 10 years ago? The Singularity Institute is pretty damn reasonable. The journal and conference papers they write are pretty well grounded in sound and careful reasoning. But ha, who would read tho... (read more)~~

[This comment is no longer endorsed by its author]

-4 timtyler 16y That was quite a rant! [...] I hope I don't come across as thinking "the...

[~] Will_Newsome 16y ▼ 12 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

FWIW, I don't see what I am saying as particularly "contrarian". A lot of people would be pretty sceptical about the end of the world being nigh - or the idea that a bug might take over the world - or the idea that a bunch of saintly programmers will be the ones to save us all. Maybe contrary to the ideas of the true believers - if that is what you mean.

Right, I said metacontrarian. Although most LW people seem SIAI-agnostic, a lot of the most vocal and most experienced posters are pro-SIAI or SIAI-related, so LW comes across as having a generally pro-SIAI attitude, which is a traditionally contrarian attitude. Thus going against the contrarian status quo is metacontrarian.

You encourage me to speculate about the motives of the individuals involved. While that might be fun, it doesn't seem to matter much - the SIAI itself is evidently behaving as though it wants dollars, attention, and manpower - to help it meet its aims.

I'm confused. Anyone trying to accomplish anything is going to try to get dollars, attention, and manpower. I'm confused as to how this is relevant to the merit of SIAI's purpose. SIAI's never claimed to be fundamentally opposed to having resources.... (read more)

[-] **ata** 16y ▼ 21 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

Everyone is incredibly critical of Eliezer, probably much more so than he deserves, because everyone is racing to be first to establish their non-cult-victim status.

I don't know about anybody else, but I am somewhat disturbed by Eliezer's persistent use of hyphens in place of em dashes, and am very concerned that it could be hurting SIAI's image.

[-] **Will_Newsome** 16y ▼ 10 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

And I say the same about his use of double spacing. It's an outdated and unprofessional practice. In fact, Anna Salamon and Louie Helm are 2 other SIAI folk that engage in this abysmal writing style, and for that reason I've often been tempted to write them off entirely. They're obviously not cognizant of the writing style of modern academic thinkers. The implications are obvious.

5 **wedrifid** 16y Another reason that I suspect is more important than trying to sign...

-2 **timtyler** 16y To recap, the SIAI is funded by donations from those who think th...

8 **Will_Newsome** 16y No, I see it, look further, and find the model lacking in exp...

2 **wedrifid** 16y "This one is right" for example. ;)

-7 **timtyler** 16y

0 [anonymous] 16y Another reason that I suspect is more important than trying ...

0 timtyler 16y I didn't say anyone was "racing to be first to establish their non-c...

0 wedrifid 16y Oops, connection troubles then missed.

6 orthonormal 16y Tim, do you think that nuclear-disarmament organizations were...

2 khafra 16y Will said "meta-contrarian," which refers to the recent meta-contraria...

0 timtyler 16y Reforming the SIAI is a possibility - but not a terribly realistic one, I...

0 Will_Newsome 16y Oh, that might be. Other comments by timtyler seemed re...

7 [anonymous] 16y This is an incredibly anti-name-calling community. People ascribe a...

0 [anonymous] 16y I think the reasoning goes something like: * Existential risks are thing...

2 waveman 12y This is only true if it is the case that the first-order effect of legalizing drug...

1 Relsqui 16y I actually disagree with this statement outright. First of all, ignoring the exist...

3 ChristianKI 16y X-risk stands for existential risk. It about possible events that risk endi...

0 Relsqui 16y Got it; thank you.

0 NancyLebovitz 16y What do you have in mind?

0 Relsqui 16y I'm not sure what "what" would refer to here. I didn't have an incident in ...

[-] Bongo 16y ▼ 13 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

Noticing a social cluster takes social savvy and intelligence.

Therefore, showing that you can see a social cluster makes you look good.

Maybe going up a level in one of Yvain's hierarchies is *showing off that you've discovered a social cluster*? It goes together with distancing yourself from that cluster, but I don't know why.

[-] Will_Newsome 16y ▼ 17 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

I would like to announce that I have discovered the social cluster that has discovered the method of discovering all social clusters, and am now a **postmodernist**^o. Seriously guys, postmodernism is pretty meta. Update on expected metaness.

0 Spurlock 16y I'm confused. What point are you trying to make about postmodernism?

[-] Will_Newsome 16y ▼ 19 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

None, really. I just like how its proponents can always win arguments by claiming to be more meta than their opponents. ("Sure, everything you made sense within your frame of reference, but there are no privileged frames of reference. Indeed, proving that there are privileged frames of reference requires a privileged frame of reference and is thus an impossible philosophical act. I can't prove anything I just said, which proves my point, depending on whether you think it did or not.")

(I don't take postmodernism seriously, but some of the ideas are philosophically elegant.)

[-] **DSimon** 16y ▼ 16 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

I can't prove anything I just said, which proves my point, depending on whether you think it did or not.

I would like this on a t-shirt.

0 [anonymous] 12y Mmm, but isn't it true that "proving that there are privileged frames of...

0 [anonymous] 12y I think there's missed "you said" here: "everything you made sense".

[-] **SilasBarta** 16y ▼ 12 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

I have to admit, this has definitely been a hazard for me. As I [said to simplicio°](#) a few months ago, I've had a sort of tendency to be "too clever" by taking the "clever contrarian" position. This gets to the point where I'm fascinated by those who can write up defenses of ridiculous positions and significantly increase my exposure to them.

I think part of what made me stray from "the path" was a tendency to root for the rhetorical "underdog" and be intrigued -- excessively -- with brilliant arguments that could defend ridiculous positions

I have to wonder if I'm falling into the same trap with my "Most scientists only complain about how hard it is to explain their field because their understanding is so poor to begin with." (i.e., below Level 2, the level at which you can trace out the implications between your field and numerous others in both directions, possibly knowing how to trace back the basis of all specialized knowledge to arbitrary levels)

[-] **knb** 16y ▼ 10 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

Does [making fun of hipsters](#) to seem cool make you a meta-hipster?

[-] **Vladimir_Nesov** 16y ▼ 10 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

Very much related to [The Correct Contrarian Cluster°](#).

Also, we had a post specifically on countersignaling: [Things You Can't Countersignal°](#).

[-] **Apprentice** 16y ▼ 10 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

One more cluster I can think of is attitude to copyright law. Something like:

1. Huh? It's illegal for me to copy that song? How totally stupid, I'm not harming anyone.
2. Strong intellectual property law is necessary to encourage innovation and protect artists.

3. Copyright law does more harm than good and needs to be reformed or abolished.

[-] **Relsqui** 16y ▼ 11 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

This is actually an interesting example, because I think if you look at the patterns of contrarian and meta-contrarian groups--that is, the people who tend to prefer those attitudes--you actually flip the second two, which breaks the pattern of contradiction and counter-contradiction. That is to say,

1. (ordinary people who don't worry too much about this) Huh? It's illegal for me to copy that song? How totally stupid, I'm not harming anyone.
2. (people who are really into the torrent community) It's not/shouldn't be illegal! Information wants to be free!
3. (meta) If nobody paid for music, no one could live off being a musician. Torrenters are just making excuses for the convenience of breaking the law.
4. (approaching sense) We need to reform or abolish copyright law and replace it with a system that pays artists fairly while working with, not against, new technology.

At least, that's my experience; take it with a grain of bias in favor of position four.

3 **DSimon** 16y That's an interesting example because 1 and 2 arrive at the same conclusion, b...

4 **Relsqui** 16y I agree with that, and you make a good point--it suggests that being contrarian...

3 **loqi** 16y I basically object to copyright law because of 1. Clearly my opinion is transcendent, a...

[-] **buybuydandavis** 12y ▼ 9 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

Not everything is signaling.

The intellectually compulsive are natural critics. You see something wrong in an argument, and you argue against it. The natural stopping point in this process is when you don't find significant problems with the theory, and that is more likely for a fringe theory that other's don't bother to critique. When no one is helping you find the flaws, it's less likely you'll find them. You'll win arguments, at least by your evaluation, because you are familiar with their arguments and can show flaws, but your argument is unfamiliar to ... (read more)

[-] **fburnaby** 13y ▼ 9 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

doesn't follow politics / political junkie / avoids talking about politics due to mind-killing

[-] **Larks** 16y ▼ 8 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

This suggests that a common tactic (deliberate or otherwise) would be to represent your opponents as being the level below you, rather than the level above. For example [this article](#), which treats Singularitarians as at level 1, rather than level 3, on

technology is great! -> but it has costs, like to the environment, and making social control easier -> Actually, the benefits vastly outweigh those.

Ironically, it's not that far off for SIAI, which is at level 4, 'certain technologies are existentially dangerous'

This seems to hold true for all the triads ... (read more)

3 Will_Newsome 16y Existentially dangerous doesn't mean the benefits still don't outweigh th...

0 AlexanderRM 11y I've noticed that quite often long before seeing this article. There seems t...

[-] Apprentice 16y ▼ 8 ▲ × 0 ✓

The pleasure I get out of trolling atheists definitely has a meta-contrarian component to it. When I was a teenager I would troll Christians but I've long since stopped finding that even slightly challenging or fun.

7 Scott Alexander 16y Yes, I often find myself tempted to do that too. Although I understand ...

[-] TobyBartels 16y ▼ 7 ▲ × 0 ✓

As a mathematician, I offer my services for anybody who wants arguments (mathematical arguments, not philosophical ones) that $1+1 = 3$. But beware: as a meta-contrarian mathematician, I will also explain why these arguments, though valid in their own way, are silly.

8 A1987dM 14y $1.3 + 1.4 = 2.7$, which when reported to one significant figure...

3 CronoDAS 14y As the "old" computer science joke goes, $2 + 2 = 5$ (for extremely large val...

1 Manfred 14y The physicist-typical version is that $3=4$, if you take $\lim(3 \rightarrow 4)$.

4 TobyBartels 14y This reminds me that the difference between a physicist and astronome...

7 A1987dM 14y I remember someone in a newsgroup saying the average person is about ...

1 RobinZ 15y You know, I am seized with a sudden curiosity. You have arguments such that 1 is...

4 TobyBartels 15y Ah, now I have to remember what I was thinking of back in September! W...

3 RobinZ 15y I wrote "successor of the successor of" - 3 is the successor of 2, which is the ...

2 TobyBartels 15y Ha, that would be a reado! But seriously, I should have read that again. I...

[-] Orfell 16y ▼ 7 ▲ × 0 ✓

I have a strong urge to signal my difference to the Lesswrong crowd. Should I be worried that all my positions may be just meta² contrarianism?

[-] multifoliatrose 16y ▼ 7 ▲ × 0 ✓

people get deep personal satisfaction from arguing the positions even when their arguments are unlikely to change policy

I very much wish that intellectual debate was more effectiveness-oriented in general. I myself *try* to refrain from arguing about things that don't actually matter or that I can't hope to change (not always successfully).

[-] **Catnip** 11y ▼ 6 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

I have a style question. Are there less grating ways to write gender neutral texts?

I, to my great surprise, was irritated to no end by "ey" and "eir". I always stumbled when reading it. I dislike it and think "he/she" or "they" may be more natural and cause less stumbling when reading the article.

So far, I am against all the invented gender-neutral pronouns. Most of them sound strange ("ey" and "eir" look like a typo or phonetic imitation of deep southern accent, "xe" and "xir" use "x" sound and are simply painful to pronounce)

As of now, I am willing to sacrifice gender neutrality in texts in favor of readability.

3 **g_pepper** 11y Technically, "he" is perfectly acceptable for gender neutral texts. Merriam-Web...

0 [anonymous] 11y The Eir of Slytherin has opened the Chamber of Socrates...

2 **MarkusRamikin** 11y If you dislike zes, xes and eys and find them horrible little abominations ...

[-] **PhilGoetz** 11y ▼ 6 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

That suggests people around that level of intelligence have reached the point where they no longer feel it necessary to differentiate themselves from the sort of people who aren't smart enough to understand that there might be side benefits to death.

This is an interesting hypothesis, but applying it to LessWrong requires that the LW community has a consensus on how people rank by intelligence, that that consensus be correct, and that people believe it is correct. My impression is that everybody thinks they're the smartest person in the room, and judges ... (read more)

3 **Vaniver** 11y I think this is generalizing from one example; I've certainly met people who didn't...

[-] **gwern** 12y ▼ 6 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

Ebola has offered a recent nice example of the triad. Mainstream: "be afraid, be very afraid"; contrarian: "don't be so gullible, why, hardly any more people have died from Ebola than have died from flu/traffic accidents/smoking/etc"; meta-contrarian: "what is to be feared is a super-lethal disease escaping containment & killing many more millions than the normal flu or traffic death toll".

4 **A1987dM** 12y Meh. Mankind survived the mad cow, the SARS, the bird flu and the swine flu ...

6 **gwern** 12y 1. human deaths are not irrelevant; a million deaths != no deaths. 2. pandemics a...

0 **A1987dM** 12y No, I don't. EDIT: Anthropics?

1 **Confusion** 8y In that triad the meta-contrarian is broadening the scope of the discussion. The...

[-] **Carinthium** 16y ▼ 6 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

BTW, I'm not actually that intelligent (IQ about 92 or 96 if I remember right) but pretending to adopt a meta-contrarian position might be a useful social tactic for me. Any advice from those who know the area on how to use it?

[-] **HonoreDB** 15y ▼ 18 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

Advocate for the obvious position using the language and catchphrases of its opponents. I remember once saying, "Well, have we ever tried blindly throwing lots of money at the educational system?" Everyone agreed that this was a wise and sophisticated thing to say, even though I was by far the least knowledgeable person in the room on the subject and was just advocating the default strategy for improving public schools. Other examples:

"Greed is good."

"The chief virtue of a \$professional is \$vice."

"I'm a tax-and-spend liberal, and I think there should be much more government regulation. For example, the sad truth is that the realities of medical care require the existence of death panels, and I'd rather have them run by government bureaucrats than corporate accountants."

2 **glenra** 14y Kansas City was one of the more notable examples of having tried that; it didn't ...

1 **epursimuove** 12y This seems quite unlikely given your reasonably high-quality posting history...

1 **Carinthium** 12y I have Aspergers Syndrome, which affects things like this. Probably has som...

[-] **[anonymous]** 16y ▼ 6 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

I wonder if this means we should place more weight on opinions that don't easily compress onto this contrarianism axis, since they're less likely to be rooted in signalling/group affiliations, and more likely to have a non-trivial amount of thought put into them.

0 **AlexanderRM** 11y Another thing to take away from this is that we should be wary of any sys...

[-] **Matt_Simpson** 16y ▼ 5 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

I think about the counter-signaling game a bit differently. Consider some question that has a binary answer - e.g. a yes/no question?. Natural prejudices or upbringing might cause most people to say pick, say, yes. Then someone thinks about the question and for reason r1 switches to no. Someone else who agrees with r1 then comes up with reason r2, and switches back to yes. Then r3 causes a switch back to no, ad infinitum.

Even though the conclusion at each point in the hierarchy is indistinguishable from a conclusion somewhere else in the hierarchy, th... (read more)

- 1 ChristianKI 16y Nassim Taleb's makes an argument that he believes on God by default and he...
- 3 Matt_Simpson 16y His belief by default is based on some sort of argument, not unthinking ...
- 0 nick012000 16y So, where would "Believe because of generalised Pascal's Wager" be on your ...
- 0 Matt_Simpson 16y I'm not sure what the "generalized" is doing, but normal pascal's wager ...

[~] ikrase 13y ▼ 4 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

6) Worth a footnote: I think in a lot of issues, the original uneducated position has disappeared, or been relegated to a few rednecks in some remote corner of the world, and so meta-contrarians simply look like contrarians. I think it's important to keep the terminology, because most contrarians retain a psychology of feeling like they are being contrarian, even after they are the new norm. But my only evidence for this is introspection, so it might be false.

Deserves MORE than a footnote.

[~] A1987dM 14y ▼ 4 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

conservative / liberal / libertarian

Liberal and *libertarian* don't mean the same thing in Europe as in America; keep that in mind when writing for international audiences. (Very roughly speaking, an European liberal is a moderate version of an American libertarian, and an American liberal is a moderate version of an European libertarian.)

- 7 steven0461 14y Do European and American liberals advocate different policies, or is it just th...
- 7 A1987dM 14y If I understand correctly, in America liberal is essentially a synonym of '(mode...
- 2 David Althaus 14y FWIW I'm from Germany and tend to agree with the above comment.
- 2 MugaSofer 13y Would have upvoted just for this.
- 2 wedrifid 13y Alternately, note that the escape character in markdown is "\". Putting that ...
- 4 thomblake 14y In short, 'liberal' in the US is merely the opposite of 'conservative', matching...
- 5 steven0461 14y It looks to me like it means something more specific than just the opposit...
- 3 thomblake 14y The thing is, "less conservative" doesn't actually mean anything in the US...
- 5 A1987dM 14y At least in Italy, "It's a complete mess" would be a more accurate (thoug...
- 0 thomblake 14y Agreed.
- 1 dbaupp 14y FWIW, in Australia, there are two main political parties, Liberal and Labor. The...

[~] ata 16y ▼ 4 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

Thus Eliezer's title for this mentality, "Pretending To Be Wise".

Have we broadened that term to refer to... well, lowercase pretending-to-be-wise in general? In the [original post](#), he used it specifically to refer to those who try to signal wisdom by neutrality. (Though I did notice he used it in the broader sense in HPMoR. Is it thus officially redefined?)

0 Scott Alexander 16y Yeah, I was thinking of the HPatMOR usage. It's a good phrase, and it w...

[-] Guillaume Charrier 3y ▼ 3 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

Death universally seems bad to pretty much everyone on first analysis, and what it seems, it is.

How can you know? Have you ever tried living a thousand years? Has anybody? If you had a choice between death and infinite life, where infinite does mean infinite, so that your one-billion year birthday is only the sweet beginning of it, would you find this an easy choice to make? I think that's big part of the point of people who argue that no - death is not necessarily a bad thing.

To be clear, and because this is not about signalling: I'm not saying I would immediately choose death. I'm just saying: it would be an extraordinarily difficult choice to make.

[-] Yustynn Panicker 5y ▼ 3 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

Funnily enough, triads became a meme format I've seen around recently (<https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/iq-bell-curve-midwit>)

[-] Lavender 10y ▼ 3 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

This triad was missed:

"Muslims are terrorists!" / "Islam is a religion of peace." / "Religion is problematic in general but Islam is the worst and I can back that claim up with statistics I read on Sam Harris' blog."

4 ChristianKI 9y Gwern's TERRORISM IS NOT ABOUT TERROR seems to me like a better ca...

0 username2 10y For the third slot I'd say "religious squabbles are the wrong problem to be thi...

[-] Jacob Falkovich 11y ▼ 3 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

It's always a bit of a shock when you're the contrarian and you discover someone meta-contrarianizing you on the outside lane. For example, here's an interesting triad I just recently became aware of:

Base: monogamy is assumed without discussion, cheating is the end of a relationship unless maybe if you confess and swear to never do it again.

Contrarian: open/poly relationship is agreed upon after discussion, it's not cheating if there's no lying.

Meta-con: non-exclusivity is assumed, no discussion. Cheating is whatever, just don't tell me about it.

I held the... (read more)

[-] David_J_Balan 16y ▼ 3 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

There is a neat paper on this by Feltovich, Harbaugh, and To called "Too Cool for School? Signaling and Countersignaling."

<http://www.jstor.org/pss/3087478>

1 toro 15y A little more from Harbaugh's home page <http://www.bus.indiana.edu/riharbau#CS>. ...

[-] Mercy 16y ▼ 3 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

I'm a little confused, what purpose does this distinction serve? That people like to define their opinions as a rebellion against received opinion isn't novel. What you seem to be saying is: defining yourself against an opinion which is seen as contrarian sends a reliably different social signal to defining yourself against an opinion which is mainstream, is that a fair assessment? Because this only works if there is a singular, visible mainstream, which is obviously available in fashion but rare in the realm of ideas.

Moreover, if order-of-contrariness doe... (read more)

[-] glenra 16y ▼ 13 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

The number of global warming skeptics who jumped straight from "it's not happening" to "well we didn't do it" to "well we can't do anything about it without doing more harm than good" should also...give us a bit of pause.

Actually, that move is perfectly consistent with real skepticism applied to a complex assertion.

To see why, let's consider a different argument. Suppose a True Believer says we should punish gays or disallow gay marriage "because God hates homosexuality". You and I are skeptical that this assertion is rationally defensible so we attack it at what seems like the obvious first link in the logical chain. We say "I doubt that god exists. Prove to me that god exists, and then maybe we'll consider your argument." At this point you can divide the positions into:

"god hates X"/god doesn't exist

Now let us suppose TB *actually does it*. He does prove that god exists. Does this mean that we skeptics immediately have to accept his *entire* chain of reasoning? Of course not! We jump to the next weak link. To establish the original claim, one would need to prove god exists *and* is benevolent *and* wrote the bible *and* meant t... (read more)

4 Mercy 16y This is a great point that's making me revise my position on some right wing com...

3 glenra 14y If you've ever said or thought "Okay, just for the sake of argument, I'll assume y...

[-] Vladimir_M 16y ▼ 10 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

Mercy:

Because this only works if there is a singular, visible mainstream, which is obviously available in fashion but rare in the realm of ideas.

However, it seems to me that such mainstream does exist. Compared to the overall range of ideas that have been held throughout the history of humanity, and even the overall range of ideas that I believe people could hold without being crazy or monstrous, the range acceptable in today's mainstream discourse looks awfully narrow to me. It also seems to me very narrow by historical standards -- for example, when I look at the 19th century books I've read, I see an immensely greater diversity of ideas than one can see from the modern authors that occupy a comparable mainstream range. (This of course doesn't apply to hard sciences, in which the accumulation of knowledge has a monotonous upward trend.)

Of course, like every human society, ours is also shaken by passionate controversies. However, most of those that I observe in practice are between currents that are overall very similar from a broader perspective.

0 Mercy 16y Well I can see that in certain areas, but it depends on where you look. The range...

8 Vladimir_M 16y Mercy: [...] Frankly, I disagree with that statement so deeply that I'm at a l...

0 CronoDAS 16y Two hundred years ago, then?

3 Vladimir_M 16y Two hundred years ago, the institutions were very different, and there ...

1 wedrifid 16y Dawn of history? Now I'm imagining uncovering writing on the wall of ca...

0 Vladimir_M 16y What Constant said. I meant "history" in the narrow technical sense...

-1 [anonymous] 16y You're mixing up history with prehistory.

0 [anonymous] 16y No I'm not. The counterfactual referred to writing, writing whic...

0 Mercy 16y People still argue those things nowadays though. Any remotely salacious cri...

1 HumanFlesh 16y Mephedrone clinics? Do you mean methadone clinics?

4 Scott Alexander 16y You're right, the examples were pretty cherry-picked. My point was to ...

3 cousin_it 16y Why do you want to define "genuine meta-contrarianness" based on correctne...

2 Mercy 16y As far as I can see, it's uncontroversial because it doesn't add any information in t...

4 cousin_it 16y I think the post was a guideline to help you catch yourself when you write th...

0 Mercy 16y Hah, I'm sure I do, I guess the point then is that just because your position is ...

[...] HughRistik 16y ▼ 3 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

Are there also meta-meta-contrarians?

7 Scott Alexander 16y Maybe it's context dependent. If I am hanging around a lot of contrarian...

4 multifoliatrose 16y The game theory goes as deep as people are inclined to take it. In practi...

2 [anonymous] 16y I'm somewhat of one for peak oil. What oil problem? > peak oil "we are d...

2 steven0461 16y I was wondering the same thing. Scott Aaronson and Cosma Shalizi come to ...

2 Liron 16y Since he doesn't present sophisticated meta-meta-arguments, to me it just seems ...

3 **steven0461** 16y That sounds right, though maybe as you go more meta it just gets harder ...

0 **Will_Newsome** 16y I don't mean to toot my own meta (especially as metaness isn't directly ...

[-] **TropicalFruit** 4y ▼ 2 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

Here's a good one:

Inflation is good because give everyone money / inflation is bad, deflation is good / small inflation may be necessary to offset human loss aversion

[-] **EditedToAdd** 8y ▼ 2 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

A triad I just thought of today which seems definitely true:

Doesn't care to make small mistakes that might make him/her look somewhat silly / Cares to avoid every level of mistake to acquire the cleanest reputation possible / Doesn't care to make small mistakes that might make him/her look somewhat silly.

[-] **akrates** 9y ▼ 2 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

A follow-up thought: This pattern seems to also work for life decisions, and not only for positions in debates or fashion choices. For example: A few years ago, I *almost* didn't take the offer to do a PhD at an Ivy League school, as opposed to a less highly ranked school, and to live in a mainstream popular city, as opposed to the middle of nowhere, because of my contrarianism. And then my meta-contrarianism kicked in, and I took the offer. I'm happy with the choice, but I do every once in a while have to remind myself of the fact that I consciously decided... (read more)

⤴ [-] **Lumifer** 9y ▼ 2 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

SPAMMITY SPAM SPAM

[-] **Entraya** 12y ▼ 2 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

I think the whole thing about dwelling on the negatives of our society, is because there's a deeper level to the concerns. Like a sort of collective lacking of something, lacking in Romantic relations to nature and society and such things, but without knowing where such things can be found. Just basic yearning that shows up in the extremes of our modern society, which manifests in media and overromantized movies about how 'spiritually connected' Indians were, or the peace of Buddhists, or the good old ways; you know what I mean. The movie Avatar is basical... (read more)

[-] **Asymmetric** 14y ▼ 2 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

This is exactly how history is studied.

Historiography is how historical opinions have changed over time. It first begins with the Orthodox viewpoint, which is the first, generally accepted viewpoint of the events that arises. It is generally very biased because it comes about directly after the event has occurred, when feelings still run strong.

This Orthodox viewpoint is contrasted by several Revisionist viewpoints, which tend to make wildly different conclusions based upon new evidence in order to sell books (historical scandals are quite good for that)... (read more)

[-] christina 15y ▼ 2 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

I know this is an old post, but I wanted to ask a couple questions.

Can you clarify if this meta-contrarian hypothesis of human psychology makes predictions that distinguish it from other explanations for holding an idea to be true or communicating it to be true? I ask since from reading some of the comments, the classification of these triads seems like a fluid thing, and I can't think of anything offhand that might be used to constrain them. If you want to use your hypothesis merely to talk about the reasons for why confidence is assigned, do you think ... (read more)

[-] UnclGhost 15y ▼ 2 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

Great post. I've had a similar idea for a while but didn't realize just how far it could be generalized.

I especially noticed this idea while reading C.S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters*, which seems to posit the hierarchy as being something like "Belief in Christianity because of social pressures / Disbelief in Christianity because who needs social pressures / Belief in Christianity because of comprehension of its 'true meaning' (or something)".

I guess when there are potentially a lot of layers of meta-contrarianism like in Matt_Simpson's example, t... (read more)

[-] owevr 16y ▼ 2 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

Great article. However, why do you call them "meta-contrarian", instead of "anti-contrarian"? I would not call something "meta-" unless it adds additional dimensions to the given context. For example, "meta-theory" is not about disputing particular theories but something totally different.

1 Scott Alexander 16y I interpret meta- to mean "one level above"; thus for example Douglas ...

[-] CronoDAS 16y ▼ 2 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

I advocate majoritarianism on most topics related to science.

Including nutrition.

I'll take Gary Taubes seriously when the NIH does.

3 Kutta 16y All I can say is that actual studies' results and science is the thing making it rationall...

- 0 CronoDAS 16y Yeah, they also tend to be inconsistent over time. Consider: butter or marg...
- 4 Relsqui 16y I think the butter thing, like a lot of very specific dietary concerns, is hard to s...
- 2 gwern 12y Mainstream: 'correlation=causation' (almost all of nutrition research); contrarian: 'c...
- 6 gwern 9y Computer chess: 'AIs will never master tasks like chess because they lack a soul / ...
- 1 Vaniver 9y 3 has been empirically disproven at this point, I believe?
- 2 arundelo 9y gwern on "centaurs" (humans playing chess with computer assistance): [...]
- 0 Decius 9y There will always be tasks at which better (Meta-)*Cognition is superior to the ...
- 0 happywheels 9y The game is best known for its dark sense of humor and its graphic viol...

[-] **Ethos Castelli** 4y ▼ 1 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

I'm new here and I have a question. If an overly intelligent person holds/displays meta-contrarian views in a group without deliberately trying to announce are they still signalling?

Also isn't First World/Third World an outdated classification?

- 2 Ben Pace 4y Post is 12 years old.
- 1 Ethos Castelli 4y AHH, I am quite new to the site, didn't see that.

[-] **kosmokrator** 4y ▼ 1 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

IMHO a good way to spot Meta-Contrarianism is when proponents of Popperian/Deutsch epistemology don't recognize that 'no final say' also applies to their own - even epistemic - beliefs.

[-] **Juli654** 5y ▼ 1 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

At the **university** I have met 2 types of professors. The **first type** will explain the new topic in very academic and strictly professional way. The **second type** will explain the topic in a plain language, in a very easy-to-understand way. If I look at it from the perspective of **countersignaling**, I would describe the first type as contrarian and the second type as meta-contrarian. My **observation** is also that the contrarian would be usually younger professor in his late thirties or forties, and meta-contrarian would be professor in his sixties and up.

[-] **Kinrany** 6y ▼ 1 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

The third "related to" link is a bit broken: points to a Google redirect instead of [the article](#)° itself.

[-] **eigen** 7y ▼ 1 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

What about the following triad?

life's good / nihilistic approach to life / I want to become a god on earth.

[-] **stcredzero** 13y ▼ 1 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

A person who is very intelligent will conspicuously signal that ey feels no need to conspicuously signal eir intelligence, by deliberately not holding difficult-to-understand opinions.

What does it mean when people hold difficult to understand moral opinions?

[-] **timtyler** 14y ▼ 1 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

But as has been pointed out, along with the gigantic cost, death does have a few small benefits. It lowers overpopulation, it allows the new generation to develop free from interference by their elders, it provides motivation to get things done quickly.

Right - and let's not forget that it takes out of circulation a load of persistent parasites which have evolved over hundreds of generations to exploit your genome, which might otherwise find and attack your relatives and descendants.

[-] **HughRistik** 16y ▼ 1 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

This post inspired me to write an article on [Feminism, criticism of feminism, and contrarianism](#) over at [FeministCritics.org](#).

2 **fburnaby** 13y I identified very strongly with your article. I feel exactly the same way and suspe...

-2 **MugaSofer** 13y At risk of sounding tautological, that depends on whether it's the right thin...

-1 **NancyLebovitz** 15y I agree with roshni-- it would be better if you made your criticisms as yo...

[-] **HughRistik** 15y ▼ 26 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

Nancy, I'm a bit confused by your comment.

From my point of view, the PUA believers have the advantage at LW

What does "PUA believer" mean? Out of the folks who discuss pickup positively on LessWrong, I doubt any of them "believe" in it uncritically. However, they may feel motivated to defend pickup from inaccurate characterizations.

I do not see people who want to discuss pickup in a not-completely-negative way on LW as having an obvious advantage. The debate is not symmetrical. Anyone who can be painted as a defender of pickup is vulnerable to all sorts of stigma. Yet the worst they can say in their defense is to call the attackers close-minded or uneducated about pickup.

and being gently told, no it's wonderful, and the non-wonderful bits (the worst of which I'd never heard of until you brought them up, something I'm never sure you quite believed) don't matter when so much of it is different

Yes, different parts of pickup are different. No, the good parts don't necessarily justify the bad parts, but the presence of good parts means that pickup shouldn't be unequivocally dismissed.

being in the brainfog business is best for everyone even though there's no

... (read more)

[-] **daenerys** 15y ▼ 13 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

How can we reduce this polarization?

Maybe by moderates coming out of the closet, so to speak?

Hi, my name is Daenerys, and I have ambiguous views about PUA. My initial reaction was "Ew! Bad!" but after reading the debates here, talking with a friend, and learning more elsewhere, my views towards it have softened. I still do not think that all of it is 100% ok though. It is a complicated issue with many facets.

Mainly I wish it wouldn't hijack non-PUA discussions. I am seriously close to just starting a PUA discussion to keep all this stuff in one place, but I guess I feel if anyone should do it, it should be the mods.

PUA Moderates of the World, Unite!

7 **TheOtherDave** 15y Speaking as an indifferent moderate, I suspect that well over 90% of ...

6 **wedrifid** 15y Moderators moving into a role of actively constructing official topics like th...

4 **HughRistik** 15y Hi daenerys! Welcome to the PUA Moderates club.

8 **NancyLebovitz** 15y This is very much a first attempt at answering these matters. [...] I thi...

9 **HughRistik** 14y On LW in general I've spilled gallons of ink engaging in moral analyses of ...

3 **A1987dM** 12y That's one of the best sentences I've read today, especially given what th...

1 [anonymous] 14y I think I agree with this. [...] We are already supposed to be honest her...

2 **TheOtherDave** 14y My \$0.02: It might help to state clearly what "addressing this" woul...

1 **NancyLebovitz** 14y I don't know what you mean by that-- could you expand on the det...

0 [anonymous] 14y I doubt talking about the emotions, specifically about individual's e...

1 **NancyLebovitz** 14y I think the last clause of the first sentence is missing some word...

1 [anonymous] 14y Correct, I was writing at a late hour. I've fixed the missing bits no...

4 **NancyLebovitz** 14y More for the list, based on your point about groups: It's impo...

0 **NancyLebovitz** 14y As for whether this kind of thing can be managed at LW, my a...

0 **lessdazed** 14y We could have a pidgin language pseudonym thread.

0 **lessdazed** 14y What exactly do you mean? If the situation is getting no worse, notice th...

6 [anonymous] 14y It is not improving. [...] This is up for debate. Vladimir_M and others...

1 NancyLebovitz 15y As for contrarianism, I think of myself as a second-order curmudgeon. ...

-3 NancyLebovitz 16y You might be interested in this-- it's by a male feminist who's working o...

6 MileyCyrus 15y If by "make feminism genuinely friendly to men" you mean "defend paternity...

2 NancyLebovitz 15y For what it's worth, I never got around to reading much of Schwyser's...

0 MileyCyrus 15y I like NSWATM too. I'm glad it's becoming more popular.

0 waveman 12y Read the update here. Truth is stranger than fiction. <http://en.wikipedia.org/...>

0 HughRistik 16y Thanks, Nancy. I do find Hugo's blog interesting, and I post there sometimes.

0 wedrifid 16y You are saying, I take it, that the guy in question was mistaken in believing the ...

1 NancyLebovitz 16y Yes, your first suggestion.

[...] jgoosse 16y ▼ 1 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

To be contrarian, I think you're only portraying a subset of possible outcomes. We might say the following fits:

Kantian Deontological Ethics (all men are obliged to) > Positivist Ethics (ethics don't exist as anything more than preference) > Modern Liberal Ethics (ethics exist as preference but preferences are important survival tools that can lead us to objective ethics),

But the truth is I don't see a necessary triad in any of this because there is no original position. In my example, we would find that Kantian Dialectical Ethics consumed prior t... (read more)

0 blacktrance 12y For ethics, I think it's more like (Divine Command/intuitionism)/(subjectivism...

0 Raw_Power 15y Could it be that the entire history of philosophy and its "thesis, antithesis, s...

[...] spencerth 16y ▼ 1 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

The bigger issue to me is the value system that makes this phenomenon exist in the first place. It essentially requires people to care more about signaling than seeking truth. Of course this makes sense for many (perhaps most) people since signaling can get you all sorts of other things you want, whereas finding the truth could happen in a vacuum/near vacuum (you could find out some fundamental truth and then die immediately, forget about it, tell it to people and have no one believe you, etc.)

It bothers me that extremely narrow self-interest (as indicated... (read more)

[...] thomblake 16y ▼ 1 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

from my limited understanding a hipster is a person who deliberately uses unpopular, obsolete, or obscure styles and preferences in an attempt to be "cooler" than the mainstream.

Not to argue over definitions, but your use of "hipster" seems overly-narrow. As I understand it, it refers to those who deliberately appropriate styles used by old / other subcultures with concern for aesthetics rather than signaling (or, if you prefer, complex signaling rather than mere group-membership). Obviously some of those folks are doing it to try ... (read more)

[-] [anonymous] 16y ▼ 1 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

The contrarian treadmill for medicine is more like "conventional / alternative / conventional again / Robin Hanson"

[-] multifoliatrose 16y ▼ 1 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

You can't evaluate the truth of a statement by its position in a signaling game; otherwise you could use human psychology to figure out if global warming is real!

Agree to some extent but not fully. In particular, I think that the fact the well documented phenomenon of **illusory superiority** gives rational grounds for skepticism when somebody claims that his or her abilities are greater than he or she able to effectively signal. In situations where there's great disparity between claimed ability and signaled ability, very high levels of skepticism are warranted.

[-] TropicalFruit 4y ▼ 0 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

One that really irks me is compound noun with a pronoun usage:

Always "Me and X" / Always "X and I" / "X and I" for an subject and "X and me" for an object

The second one is being smart enough to know that "Me and X went to the store" is improper because you're using "Me" in a subject, but not smart enough to know how to fix it, and instead just replacing "Me and X" with "X and I" one for one in every sentence.

What makes my blood run hot (and gives me that "like to argue it" high, I think) is that the middle section are trying to signal they're "... (read more)

[-] Tim Liptrot 6y ▼ 0 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

Stupid question for the guys here, but how long is optimal to counter-signal to a woman. i.e., how long do you pretend not to be interested in her, whether she is interested in you or not. Based on my non-trivial romantic experience, I have two theories.

1. Wait until she makes unusually-long eye contact with you. It should be pretty noticable, like ~5 seconds or longer, such that it would otherwise be unusual. Use Bayes theorem. THEN WAIT ANOTHER WEEK to stop countersignalling.

2. Three weeks. IDK it just seems to work that way.

3. You do not stop counter-si... (read more)

[-] **Motasaurus** 7y ▼ 0 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

I can think of clear examples where a particular ideological foundation allows for death to be good, without requiring a contrarian or meta-contrarian position. One thought along such lines is whether religion would fall into the contrarian, or meta-contrarian view.

If you ask most 5 year olds, they believe in the metaphysical.

So could a triad be religious/atheist/religious? Or is there an extra level, where the first kind of atheist is the fedora tipping teenager on reddit, then there be a meta-meta atheist, or would perhaps the meta-meta position be agnostic?

Is religion too complex for such an simplification?

[-] **Caspar Oesterheld** 9y ▼ 0 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

Great post, obviously.

You argue that signaling often leads to distribution of intellectual positions following this pattern: in favor of X with simple arguments / in favor of Y with complex arguments / in favor of something like X with simple arguments

I think it's worth noting that the pattern of position often looks different. For example, there is: in favor of X with simple arguments / in favor of Y with complex arguments / in favor of something like X with surprising and even more sophisticated and hard-to-understand arguments

In fact, I think many of yo... (read more)

[-] **Calorion** 9y ▼ 0 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

The Patri Friedman links are dead, and blocked from archive.org. Anyone have access to another archive, so I can see what he's talking about? There has got to be a better way to link. Has no one come up with a distributed archive of linked material yet?

0 arundelo 9y archive.is has both things from Patri's LiveJournal: * "Obama is a Muslim :). Serio...

0 arundelo 9y --archive.is faq [...] --archive.org blog, 2017-04-17

[-] **Kevin** 16y ▼ 0 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

On Hacker News: <http://news.ycombinator.com/item?id=1730731>

[-] [anonymous] 16y ▼ 0 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

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[-] [anonymous] 16y ▼ 0 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

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[-] **DanB** 16y ▼ 0 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

libertarians are always more hostile toward liberals, even though they have just about as many points of real disagreement with the conservatives.

I think it's because libertarians care a lot more about the points on which they disagree with the liberals. Issues like gay marriage and abortion don't seem to matter as much as economic rights.

[-] **kodos96** 16y ▼ 17 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

I don't think this is the case for most libertarians, especially the younger, internet based, ron paul oriented kind of libertarians - many of them are primarily motivated by the social issues.... and yet they still seem to prefer arguing with liberals rather than conservatives. I think it has more to do with the fact that they view liberals as smart people who believe stupid things, while they view conservatives as just stupid troglodytes not worth wasting time on.

[-] [anonymous] 16y ▼ 0 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

I'm a little confused, what purpose does this distinction serve? That people like to define their opinions as a rebellion against received opinion isn't novel. What you seem to be saying is: defining yourself against an opinion which is seen as contrarian sends a reliably different social signal to defining yourself against an opinion which is mainstream, is that a fair assessment? Because this only works if there is a singular, visible mainstream, which is obviously available in fashion but rare in the realm of ideas.

Moreover, if order-of-contrariness doe... (read more)

[-] [anonymous] 16y ▼ 0 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

atheist/libertarian/technophile/sf-fan/early-adopter/programmer = very large self selected group

college professor = very small highly filtered group

I believe this exemplifies a major weakness of this article and I'd actually like to hear a better analogy since I'm somewhat skeptical about a populist take down of a poorly defined subculture; one which I presume varies greatly from the authors' tribe(s). More vexing, but also harder to describe, is it's vaguely moralistic tone, but perhaps that's just the absence of evidence talking.

(Would like to be shown t... (read more)

0 [anonymous] 16y i.e. needs extra study controls for group-think.

[-] **MartinB** 16y ▼ 0 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

Word!

I went through a few of these on my way though idea-space and then it took a while to recognize the systematic.

[-] **MugaSofer** 13y ▼ -1 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

I wonder if conspiracy theories could be a "middle-band" position? Any fool can see the WTC was destroyed by a plane...

[-] [anonymous] 12y ▼ -2 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

#normcore

[This comment is no longer endorsed by its author]

[-] **Jimdrix_Hendri** 7y ▼ -3 ▲ ✕ 0 ✓

1. The average IQ of visitors to this site is 145 squared? Impressive!
2. Are you trying to be subtly meta-contrarian with your idiosyncratic orthography, or are you just really glad to see me?

[] **fractalman** 13y -4 0

|so no one tries to signal intelligence by saying that $1+1$ equals 3

oh, you are so asking for it, no matter how old this topic is...

There IS a sense in which $1+1=3$. It is not particularly deep, or philosophical, or even particularly useful mathematically, except possibly to demonstrate a simple result of playing around with unusual axioms.

See, when one man and one woman....

snickers

[] **TraderJoe** 14y -4 0

~~[comment deleted]~~

[This comment is no longer endorsed by its author]

[] **Plasticlizard** 15y -8 0

[] **taw** 16y -14 0

[] ~~[comment deleted]~~ 4y 1 0

Deleted by kwinnbee, 11/21/2022

[] ~~[comment deleted]~~ 4y -1 0

, 01/21/2023

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