

# Weak Men Are Superweapons

*Posted on May 12, 2014 by Scott Alexander*



I

There was an argument on Tumblr which, like so many arguments on Tumblr, was terrible. I will rephrase it just a little to make a point.

Alice said something along the lines of “I hate people who frivolously diagnose themselves with autism without knowing anything about the disorder. They should stop thinking they’re ‘so speshul’ and go see a competent doctor.”

Beth answered something along the lines of “I diagnosed myself with autism, but only after a lot of careful research. I don’t have the opportunity to go see a doctor. I think what you’re saying is overly strict and hurtful to many people with autism.”

Alice then proceeded to tell Beth she disagreed, in that special way only Tumblr users can. I believe the word “cunt” was used.

I notice two things about the exchange.

First, why did Beth take the bait? Alice said she hated people who *frivolously* self-diagnosed *without knowing anything about the disorder*. Beth clearly was not such a person. Why didn't she just say "Yes, please continue hating these hypothetical bad people who are not me"?

Second, why did *Alice* take the bait? Why didn't she just say "I think you'll find I wasn't talking about you?"



One of the cutting-edge advances in fallacy-ology has been the [weak man](#), a terribly-named cousin of the straw man. The straw man is a terrible argument nobody really holds, which was only invented so your side had something easy to defeat. The weak man is a terrible argument that only a few unrepresentative people hold, which was only *brought to prominence* so your side had something easy to defeat.

For example, "I am a proud atheist and I don't like religion. Think of the terrible things done by religion, like the actions of the Westboro Baptist Church. They try to disturb the funerals of heroes because they think God hates everybody. But this is horrible. Religious people can't justify why they do things like this. That's why I'm proud to be an atheist."

It's not a straw man. There really is a Westboro Baptist Church, for some reason. But one still feels like the atheist is making things

just a little too easy on himself.

Maybe the problem is that the atheist is indirectly suggesting that Westboro Baptist Church is typical of religion? An implied falsehood?

Then suppose the atheist posts on Tumblr: “I hate religious people who are rabidly certain that the world was created in seven days or that all their enemies will burn in Hell, and try to justify it through ‘faith’. You know, the sort of people who think that the Bible has all the answers and who hate anyone who tries to think for themselves.”

Now there’s practically no implication that these people are typical. So that’s fine, right?

On the other side of the world, a religious person is writing “I hate atheists who think morality is relative, and that this gives them the right to murder however many people stand between them and a world where no one is allowed to believe in God”.

Again, not a straw man. The Soviet Union contained several million of these people. But if you’re an atheist, would you just let this pass?

How about “I hate black thugs who rob people”?

What are the chances a black guy reads that and says “Well, good thing I’m not a thug who robs people, he’ll probably *love* me”?

### III

What is the problem with statements like this?

First, they are meant to re-center a category. Remember, people think in terms of categories with central and noncentral members – a sparrow is a central bird, an ostrich a noncentral one. But if you live on the Ostrich World, which is inhabited only by ostriches, emus, and cassowaries, then probably an ostrich seems like a pretty central example of ‘bird’ and the first sparrow you see will be fantastically strange.

Right now most people’s central examples of religion are probably things like your local neighborhood church. If you’re American, it’s probably a bland Protestant denomination like the Episcopalians or something.

The guy whose central examples of religion are Pope Francis and the Dalai Lama is probably going to have a different perception of religion than the guy whose central examples are Torquemada and Fred Phelps. If you convert someone from the first kind of person to the second kind of person, you’ve gone most of the way to making them an atheist.

More important, if you convert a culture from thinking in the first type of way to thinking in the second type of way, then religious people will be unpopular and anyone trying to make a religious argument will have to spend the first five minutes of their speech explaining how they’re not Fred Phelps, honest, and no, they don’t

picket any funerals. After all that time spent apologizing and defending themselves and distancing themselves from other religious people, they're not likely to be able to make a very rousing argument for religion.

## IV

In [Cowpox of Doubt](#), I mention the inoculation effect. When people see a terrible argument for an idea get defeated, they are more likely to doubt the idea later on, even if much better arguments show up.

Put this in the context of people attacking the Westboro Baptist Church. You see the attacker win a big victory over “religion”, broadly defined. Now you are less likely to believe in religion when a much more convincing one comes along.

I see the same thing in atheists' odd fascination with creationism. Most of the religious people one encounters are not young-earth creationists. But these people have a dramatic hold on the atheist imagination.

And I think: well, maybe if people see atheists defeating a terrible argument for religion enough, atheists don't *have to* defeat any of the others. People have already been inoculated against religion. “Oh, yeah, that was the thing with the creationism. Doesn't seem very smart.”

If this is true, it means that all religious people, like it or not, are in the same boat. An atheist attacking creationism becomes a deadly threat for the average Christian, even if that Christian does not herself believe in creationism.

Likewise, when a religious person attacks atheists who are moral relativists, or communists, or murderers, then all atheists have to band together to stop it somehow or they will have successfully poisoned people against atheism.

## V

This is starting to sound a lot like [something I wrote on my old blog about superweapons](#).

I suggested imagining yourself in the shoes of a Jew in czarist Russia. The big news story is about a Jewish man who killed a Christian child. As far as you can tell the story is true. It's just disappointing that everyone who tells it is describing it as "A Jew killed a Christian kid today". You don't want to make a big deal over this, because no one is saying anything objectionable like "And so all Jews are evil". Besides you'd hate to inject identity politics into this obvious tragedy. It just sort of makes you uncomfortable.

The next day you hear that the local priest is giving a sermon on how the Jews killed Christ. This statement seems historically plausible, and it's part of the Christian religion, and no one is implying it says anything about the Jews today. You'd hate to be the guy who

barges in and tries to tell the Christians what Biblical facts they can and can't include in their sermons just because they offend you. It would make you an annoying busybody. So again you just get uncomfortable.

The next day you hear people complain about the greedy Jewish bankers who are ruining the world economy. And really a disproportionate number of bankers are Jewish, and bankers really do seem to be the source of a lot of economic problems. It seems kind of pedantic to interrupt every conversation with "But also some bankers are Christian, or Muslim, and even though a disproportionate number of bankers are Jewish that doesn't mean the Jewish bankers are disproportionately active in ruining the world economy compared to their numbers." So again you stay uncomfortable.

Then the next day you hear people complain about Israeli atrocities in Palestine (what, you thought this was past czarist Russia? This is future czarist Russia, after Putin finally gets the guts to crown himself). You understand that the Israelis really do commit some terrible acts. On the other hand, when people start talking about "Jewish atrocities" and "the need to protect Gentiles from Jewish rapacity" and "laws to stop all this horrible stuff the Jews are doing", you just feel worried, even though you personally are not doing any horrible stuff and maybe they even have good reasons for phrasing it that way.

Then the next day you get in a business dispute with your neighbor. Maybe you loaned him some money and he doesn't feel like paying you back. He tells you you'd better just give up, admit he is in the

right, and apologize to him – because if the conflict escalated everyone would take his side because he is a Christian and you are a Jew. And everyone knows that Jews victimize Christians and are basically child-murdering Christ-killing economy-ruining atrocity-committing scum.

You have been boxed in by a series of individually harmless but collectively dangerous statements. None of them individually referred to you – you weren't murdering children or killing Christ or owning a bank. But they ended up getting you in the end anyway.

Depending on how likely you think this is, this kind of forces Jews together, makes them become strange bedfellows. You might not like what the Jews in Israel are doing in Palestine. But if you think someone's trying to build a superweapon against you, and you don't think you can differentiate yourself from the Israelis reliably, it's in your best interest to defend them anyway.

## VI

I wrote the superweapon post to address some of my worries about feminism, so it would not be surprising at all if we found this dynamic there.

Feminists tend to talk about things like “Men tend to silence women and not respect their opinions” or “Men treat women like objects rather than people” or “Men keep sexually harassing women even when they make it clear they're not interested”.



Put like that, it's obvious why men might complain. But maybe some of the more sophisticated feminists say "Some men tend to silence women and not respect their opinions". Or "Some men keep sexually harassing women even when they make it clear they're not interested."

And the weak-man-superweapon model would suggest that even this weakened version would make lots of men really uncomfortable.

From feminist website Bitchtopia (look, I don't name these websites, I just link to them): [Not All Men Are Like That:](#)

I've heard this counter-argument almost every single time I've tried to bring up a feminist issue with a man: "but not all men are like that!"...

Having to point out that not every man exhibits explicitly harmful behavior allows for oppression to continue because having to say "some men do harmful things" gives oppressors peace of mind...

Sure, white men—you were brought up to feel entitled to anything you wanted and now you see anyone trying to have opportunities equal to yours as a threat...

When you say, "not all men are like that!" what you're really saying is, "I don't want to have to think about my privilege as

a white man, so I'm going to try to defer the blame to other guys because I clearly don't act like that."

Nice try.

Remember, not wanting to be stereotyped based solely on your sex is the *most* sexist thing!

This is not just an idiosyncrasy of Bitchtopia (look! I'm sorry! I swear I didn't name that website!). There's also an entire [notall-menarelikethat dot tumblr dot com](#) (of course there is) and it's now [a feminist meme](#) abbreviated NAMALT.

But of course, it's not just feminists. The gender-flipped version of feminism has the same thing. From men's rights blog "The Spearhead", which is not quite as badly named but still kind of funny if you think of it in a Freudian way:

Talking about the current sad state of dating and marriage in the USA will often elicit "Not All Women Are Like That" or NAWALT.

The first thing is not to contradict whoever makes that claim. Why? Because it is true. Not all women are skanks, attention whores or predators. The MRA cause is not helped by attacking people who speak truthfully.

[But the consequence of a] false positive is that a man ends up married to a skank, sociopath or gold digger. The cost of bad wife selection is so high that he is forced to turn away good women for fear of mistakenly choosing a bad one.

More polite and scientific than the feminist version, but the point is he expects men's rights readers to be so familiar with "not all women are like that" that he's perfectly comfortably abbreviating it NAWALT. Apparently there's even a [NAWALT video](#).

I don't know where to find neo-Nazi blogs, but I'll bet if there are some, they have places where they talk about how annoying it is when people try to distract from the real issues by using the old NAJALT.

## VII

But I shouldn't make fun of NAJALT. There really are two equal and opposite problems going on here.

Imagine you're an atheist. And you keep getting harassed by the Westboro Baptist Church. Maybe you're gay. Maybe you're not. Who knows why they do what they do? Anyway, they throw bricks through your window and send you threatening letters and picket some of your friends' funerals.

And you say "People! We really need to do something about this Westboro Baptist Church! They're horrible people!"

And you are met by a wall of religious people saying “Please stop talking about the Westboro Baptist Church, you are making us look really bad and it’s unfair because not all religious people are like that.”

And you say “I really am not that interested in religion, I just want them to stop throwing bricks through my window.”

And they say “Hey! I thought we told you to stop talking about them! You are unfairly discrediting us through the inoculation effect! That is epistemically unvirtuous!”

So the one problem is that people have a right not to have unfair below-the-belt tactics used to discredit them without ever responding to their real arguments.

And the other problem is that victims of nonrepresentative members of a group have the right to complain, even though those complaints will unfairly rebound upon the other members of that group.

Atheists who talk about the Westboro Baptist Church may be genuinely concerned about the Westboro Baptist Church. Or they may be unfairly trying to tar all religious people with that brush. Religious people have to fight back, even though the Westboro Baptists don’t deserve their support, because otherwise the atheists will have a superweapon against them. Thus, a stupid fight between atheists who don’t care about Westboro and religious people who don’t support them.

## VIII

This gives me some new views on political coalitions. I always thought that having things like political parties was stupid. Instead of identifying as a liberal and getting upset when someone insulted liberals or happy when someone praised liberals, I should say “These are my beliefs. There are other people who believe approximately the same thing, but the differences are sufficient that I just want to be judged on my own individual beliefs alone.”

The problem is, that doesn't work. It's not my decision whether or not I get to identify with other liberals or not. If other people think of me as a liberal, then anything other liberals do is going to reflect, positively or negatively, on me. And I'm going to have to join in the fight to keep liberals from being completely discredited, or else the fact that I didn't share any of the opinions they were discredited for isn't going to save me. I will be [Worst Argument In The World](#) -ed and swiftly dispatched.

In the example we started with, Beth chose to stand up for the people who self-diagnosed autism without careful research. This wasn't because she considered herself a member of that category. It was because she decided that self-diagnosed autistics were going to stand or fall as a group, and if Alice succeeded in pushing her “We should dislike careless self-diagnosees” angle, then the fact that she wasn't careless wouldn't save her.

Alice, for her part, didn't bother bringing up that she never accused Beth of being careless, or that Beth had no stake in the matter.

She saw no point in pretending that boxing in Beth and the other careful self-diagnosers in with the careless ones wasn't her strategy all along.