Rationally Speaking #152: Dan Fincke on, "The pros and cons of civil disagreement"

Julia: Welcome to Rationally Speaking, the podcast where we explore the borderlands
                between reason and nonsense. I'm your host, Julia Galef, and with me is today's guest,
                Dan Fincke.

                Dan has a PhD in philosophy from Fordham University. He specializes in topics such as
                ethics, and atheism, and Nietzsche. He blogs at Camels with Hammers, and was, for
                many years, a professor of philosophy at various universities.

                Now he does online philosophy courses, as well as being a certified philosophy
                practitioner, using philosophy to help people think through troubling dilemmas and give
                life advice. Dan, does that sound like the right description of a philosophy practitioner?

Dan: Yup, that's about right.

Julia: Okay, great.

                I want to start this episode by just explaining what the impetus was for me to invite Dan
                on the show for this particular episode. As I mentioned, Dan blogs quite eloquently
                about a bunch of different interesting topics, any one of which would honestly have
                made a great episode.

                But the impetus for this invite happened to be that about a week ago now, I posted an
                argument on Facebook about a controversial issue, which I'm sure we'll get to at some
                point in this episode. A bunch of people agreed with me, some people disagreed with
                me.

                Dan disagreed with me, but his disagreement was so thoughtful and nuanced and
                reasonable, that it was -- on complicated issues I tend to feel like I have a lot more in
                common with the people who disagree with me, but think the issue's complicated than
                the people who agree with me and think it's obvious. Dan definitely fell into that former
                category.

                His post gave me a lot of food for thought, which again, we'll get into the details of later.
                We may still disagree to a substantive extent, I'm not sure, but the key point here is that
                I thought that disagreement on Facebook was just a really nice example of what I wish
                disagreements over very fraught and controversial topics should look like.

                I invited Dan onto the podcast to talk broadly speaking about civility in discourse, what
                the rules for civility should be, when it's sort of warranted and when it's maybe not as
                warranted. To talk about taking and giving offense and what the expectations for that
                should be, what determines those expectations. It's a big field.

                Maybe a good place to start, Dan, would be to talk about one of probably your more
                famous blog posts, which is a civility pledge that you wrote out very carefully, and sort

of stood behind yourself and encouraged your commenters and readers to stand behind, to take the pledge as well.

Maybe you could just explain what that civility pledge is and what motivated it. Sort of help readers understand how it jives with other positions you've taken, like for example, defending Charlie Hebdo, who certainly does not meet the criteria of civility, I would say.

Dan: Yeah, that's a great question. The thing with the civility pledge was that, to me being a rationalist and an atheist, the reason I'm at all a public atheist is because I really do take it as a matter of defending a rational approach to the world.

I do feel like religions, being faith-based, have a particularly ... not that, of course, all religious people are all irrational or anything overblown like that, but that there are certain parts of religion that encourage subordination of reason to other gods, or faith, et cetera.

That's what got me into being in the atheist blogosphere at all, is the concern with the idea that the most important philosophical matters about ethics and about metaphysics, and what we know and who we are, and the meaning of life. That these really are rational questions and they're not the province of mythologies, et cetera. That they really should be seen as really rational questions.

That doesn't mean only science, I mean there's philosophy too, and rigorous philosophical inquiry can be really rationally engaged with these things. It's that belief in rationalism that really motivates me to be a public writer like this.

The problem emerges where the atheist community I was a part of often, even though it ostensibly says it's about promoting reason, sometimes it engages in tactics which are not really rational, right? They're very emotionalistic. They're very much about demonizing religious people, or being really abusive to them in the way that they'll call them stupid and insane. That's problematic to me.

To me, if we're going to be in the business of promoting reason in the public square, we have to do that by modeling it. That means modeling an approach which is rational in the way we behave and treat each other, not just saying we're for reason. There's many or a Christian who says, "Why are you against Christianity? Christianity's just about love. Why would you be against love?"

You can't take any institution for what it says it's about, you have to look at how it actually carries itself. The criticisms of Christianity would be in ways it doesn't carry itself with love, and the criticisms of the atheists are where we don't carry ourselves with reason.

What wound up happening was I wound up defending that we have to have a rational approach that puts the priority of reason, the kind of enlightenment ideal that we

persuade each other with reason rather than with force. That core sort of intuition was at the core of it.

What wound up happening though, was when I got into talking about social justice issues about which I was very, very passionately on the side of feminism and LGBT rights, et cetera, I wound up finding that my commenters no longer ... like, I had a lot of push back. I was at Freethought Blogs.

I had a lot of push back where people wanted to attack bigots or perceived bigots, and misogynists or at least perceived ones, with a kind of vitriolic shaming, and just using all sorts of just vicious sorts of language about them. I was basically arguing that we need to argue humanely, even with bigots.

What wound up happening was that I got a lot of push back and a lot of people making a very good argument to me: That in the past, a lot of the people we celebrate today, as important activists who were clearly on the right side of history, at the time they were called uncivil, et cetera. Civility has been a kludge of those with power to keep the marginalized at bay.

I internalized what was very valuable about that criticism, and I also internalized a lot of ... I was also sympathetic because I'm a Nietzschean and that's a whole other story. I'm sympathetic to the role the emotions in reasoning, in good reasoning, the role of them. That they're not entirely ... as you, the tireless champion against the Straw Vulcan, well no. Emotions have a role too and that's good.

What I wanted to do, and we have to be able to make harsh moral criticisms, I believe that. I believe we have to be able to say things that do make people uncomfortable. I tried to find that balance of writing a civility pledge that didn't silence the marginalized, but also didn't take the attitude that the marginalized can never be wrong, and whatever they do is morally okay, even if it is still abusive.

Julia: It is a tricky line to navigate, I think.

Dan: That's exactly it. It's a tricky line. I tried to sketch out what I think are principles that can do it in a principled way. I think what I've seen is that the more I've adhered to it the more it does work and the more I see I can just diagnose countless escalating feuds as their problem being that they don't stick to the principles that I'm trying to lay out here.

Now consistent with that, I do think that there's a room for satirists. I do think that that's a genre. I do think that there's a place for South Park. There's a place for Charlie Hebdo. There's a place for people who are in a particular kind of art form that is about exposing absurdity and hypocrisy. There's different rules for them.

South Park is about skewering everybody and they're fair about that. If you feel like they were unfair to you, well they're unfair to everybody. They're on a hyper level of discourse. I can disagree with them, while recognizing that their attitude is they're just skewerers, equal opportunity.

Same with Charlie Hebdo, and I felt like with Charlie Hebdo there was a particular emphasis where I do think sometimes there's a bit more latitude to the marginalized, where I don't believe that it's always okay to punch up and it's always wrong to punch down. I think that's too simplistic.

Julia: Can you just briefly explain what punching up and punching down are in case ...

Dan: Yeah, so a lot of social justice push back against my civility standards, a lot of people would say, "Well, jokes are okay if they're punching up. If you're punching at the powerful, you can be as mean and unfair and vicious as you want, but if you're beating up the marginalized, that's picking on the weak. It's unjust and it's unfair, and it just perpetuates injustice."

There's some truth to that, but I don't think that's it. I do think that satire is about showing absurdity and hypocrisy everywhere, and that there is room to show that even, for all of us, because we're all flawed. I also do think that sometimes there's some validity to that. Sometimes when the powerful are making fun of the weak, it is just bullying. Sometimes it is just reinforcing a power structure.

Sometimes when the marginalized are attacking something powerful they do deserve a little bit more latitude, because of the power asymmetry. I wanted to focus on the fact that I thought Charlie Hebdo got really horribly treated by people on the left, who were basically arguing that they got what they deserved for picking on Muslims.

Julia: Are you talking about the statements that began, "Well, they shouldn't have been murdered, BUT…" and then basically said, "They were being horrible bigots and shouldn't have published what they did."

Dan: Yeah, exactly. I tried to argue two ways to try to thread that needle. One way was that I wanted to argue that they weren't really attacking Muslims. They were attacking Mohammad and Islam. I do think that Mohammad and Islam represent religious power, that holds power over at least a billion people in the world. That's enormous power.

Muslims are not the same thing. I am protective of your average Muslim in a western country where there's a lot of bigotry. I think that the Charlie Hebdo writers and cartoonists were trying to draw that distinction between defending, in many cases, Muslim immigrants, but also acclaiming the right to speak against the ... to satirize the power of religion.

If we lost that, then we lose a cornerstone of secular freedoms. I feel like blasphemy laws and attempts that secular people defer and not offend religious beliefs out of a fear of violence or out of a feeling like it's inherently wrong to mock a religious belief. That is, to me, accepting the holiness, the un-separateness, and the "Above-it-ness" of our religious belief. I think that violates against secular conscience.

I defended Charlie Hebdo, and the other thing is I defend them purely on free speech grounds. A lot of the people who violate my civility pledge aren't my ... I'd still defend

their right to do so. I want to make a clear distinction that when we're talking about how we morally should be civil with each other, that has nothing to do with free speech rights. It's perfectly fine to argue about that.

Julia: That is a very misused term, I think -- both free speech and censorship are very misused terms. They're sort of two sides of the same coin.

Dan: Yeah, exactly. Let me just say one more word about that and then you can ask me questions. The last thing I'd want to say about that is that, yeah, on the private level it's perfectly valid for us to argue that some sorts of speech are counterproductive to a good discourse.

That's perfectly valid. Look, I put my money where my mouth is. Every month I have an ongoing donation to the ACLU. I support Amnesty International with my money. I mean I believe in free speech rights.

I think it's a different issue when we want to have discourse spaces that are constructive. I do think that a bullying kind of discourse silences people, and makes it so the loudest and most obnoxious voices win. I don't think that's actually cultivating civility. I don't think it's cultivating reason or discourse. I want to make the separation that there's a difference between, like when people claim they're offended, of course sometimes that's irrational, sometimes they don't have a good reason, sometimes they do.

If we get into the attitude that any speech is okay, that if you're offended it's always the person who's claiming offense's fault, then that's wrong. Basically I think that ... there's something C.S. Lewis calls Bulverism, where instead of making an argument that your opponent is wrong, you just declare that they're wrong and diagnose why.

Sometimes that argument is, "You're privileged, therefore you're wrong," instead of, "Here's why you're wrong and oh, I think I know why, because privilege may be a factor." Your privilege is supposed to be diagnosing why you're wrong before even proving you're wrong.

Similarly, when people say they're morally offended, sure they could be wrong about being morally offended, but they should first be proven that they shouldn't be offended. The fact that they're offended shouldn't be a reason to diagnose them as easily dismissed. That's the broad view that I have.

Julia: That's a great overview. I think I'll double click on one of the most recent points you made, which is that people can be wrong to be offended, or they can be unjustified in being offended in some cases. That rings truer to me than another more common position, which is that if someone is offended then they are sort of owed an apology, whether or not you meant to offend them.

I guess the flip side of that position, which is also a common position in its own right, is that offense is just this subjective thing and some people are going to be offended and

other people aren't. It's like an aesthetic taste almost. It means that no one is owed an apology for having been offended, essentially. They should just deal with it or decide not be offended or whatever, but that's not on the person whose thing ... whose words caused the offense.

Your position feels more correct to me, but I've had trouble figuring out how to apply it in practice. I think maybe the most interesting, tricky case, is when there is a joke or satire or something that can be interpreted, maybe was intended as being a satire of something racist or misogynist or otherwise bad, but many people interpret it as actually *being* racist or misogynist.

Maybe a good example is the New Yorker magazine cover that was a political cartoon of a sort of Islamic militant imagined version of Barack and Michelle Obama, doing like a terrorist fist bump. Michelle Obama has like a Black Panther-reminiscent 'fro.

To me it was clear that this was, or it *seemed* clear at least, that this was a satire. It was making fun of people who view everything, even the most innocuous fist bump that Barack and Michelle Obama do as being a sign that they're secretly Islamic and terrorists.

But many people thought it was racist. I think even understanding that maybe the people who created it didn't mean it that way, that they meant it to be satirizing that view instead of promoting it, they still felt like it was offensive. I've run into this a bunch of times where, yeah, same kind of format.

I don't know how to argue that people shouldn't be offended. It certainly feels to me that they shouldn't be offended, but I don't know what kind of argument to make in a principled way. What do you think?

Dan: Yeah, it's a really good question. That one's a fine line for me. I think that one is going to come down to debates about the specifics of whether that particular satire is more perpetuating the problem than skewering it, right?

Julia: Is that about intent, or about the effects -- like how it could reasonably be expected to be interpreted by the people who consume it?

Dan: Yeah, I think that's the question. I think it's a really good question. Let me just kind of, let me try it through a backdoor, because I don't know how to hit it right on the ...

Julia: Okay.

Dan: I'll come in the backdoor and talk about the larger context of the intents versus effects, right? In the social justice internet, you often hear that "intent is not magic," right? What they want to say is that just the fact that you say you didn't intend it, doesn't mean that it still doesn't hurt someone, or that you're not perpetuating something bad.

I think that in those situations they make a good point. There are some people who they make what's called like the Schrodinger's joke -- where someone will make a sexist joke or racist joke, but whether or not they were only kidding depends on whether or not people get offended.

Julia: Right, yeah.

Dan: There's a lot of insincerity there. I do think that sometimes people can imagine themselves immune to sexism and racism and perpetuate it, by thinking that, "Oh, I'm so above it that when I make the racist joke, it's not really that way." We are making those jokes around a lot of people who really do hold these views, and we do sort of perpetuate the stereotypes a bit.

I worry about that, but what I would say to the "intent is not magic" people, is that when someone gets upset and says I didn't intend it, at that moment, I think we just really have to be psychologically realistic here. At that moment that person feels a great threat that they're going to be seen as an immoral, terrible person, a racist, a sexist.

Sometimes the social justice side acts like nobody cares about being seen as immoral. Nobody cares about being called a racist or a sexist, that doesn't hurt anyone. We have to recognize that it *does* hurt them, and if you send the message to them that we're going to pummel you, and tell you you're a terrible person over that racist or sexist thing you just said, they have two choices.

They have the choice to either prove the thing they said wasn't sexist or racist, and therefore they're not a terrible person. Or they have the choice to accept that they're a terrible person. And nobody wants to do either of those things. If you say "You're a terrible person for what you just said," you've just given them an incentive to fight to the death that what they just said wasn't sexist or racist.

Julia: It also seems to me that it's not just a strategic question that you want to give people an incentive to change their mind and admit fault. It seems that there's also a question of fairness, in that the situation in which you sort of were being malicious, or just knowingly causing harm, is a different situation from the one in which you unknowingly or accidentally caused harm.

You may still sort of owe people an apology in the latter case, but it's very different ... you've done a very different kind of moral crime in the second case than in the former case. When people protest, "but just to be clear I had no idea it would be interpreted that way," or "I didn't mean it that way," I think they're trying to eke out a pretty reasonable position there. While still hopefully acknowledging if they should have known better or something.

Dan: Yeah, exactly. I don't mean to just be strategic, because I would also add that it's really wrong and unfair to people to say, well number one that this one action is the sum of who you are. You need a lot of evidence before you call someone a racist or a sexist. You can say that was a racist or a sexist thing, and separate it from them as a person.

I do see though a room, that there is a little bit of a bite at them, because it does seem too easy if, well they don't mean anything bad, therefore we just let it go.

Julia: Right.

Dan: But we do have to kind of recognize that if there's no stigma, then it becomes just too easy, everyone's always brushing it off. Marginalized people kind of have to brush it off, brush it off all day. It gets a little bit unfair to them when the one time they're finally like, "I'm fed up with this crap," and they lash out, that's it's "Well, I didn't mean it."

We kind of have to have a balance where we're not saying, "Oh, you're a terrible person, because of this mistake, and it's just as bad as if you meant it," but we also have to have the discussion about how it could be really a problem.

Also if we're not allowing for the honest mistake, then a lot of people feel like "Well, I'm going to be pummeled and I don't even know what's coming," and that's a disaster too because now they feel like those who are attacking them are capricious.

Oh, and the last part about this, social justice arguments really hinge on the idea that these problems are systemic, and I really agree with that. That it's not about a bunch of racists getting together to do racist things. It's about systematic procedures of things that were put in place by racists, and still operate. Then the implicit logic of marginalization and all sorts of racist prejudices which are very unconscious and demonstrated that those sorts of things are the problem.

But I think what happens sometimes is the social justice movement will fixate on an individual, and lose sight of the point that it's not about that individual, it's about the systemic issues. Pummeling that individual as a scapegoat, as the source of all evil, is a huge ... it's not fair, like you said, it's dishonest.

Julia: Right. Systematic issues don't have faces or names and are much harder to target, make much less natural villains, I guess, than a person.

I think at this point, maybe it would be good to circle back to the original conversation we had on Facebook that inspired this whole episode.

Probably many of our listeners are aware that about a week ago the Northeast Conference on Science and Skepticism, where I've attended and spoken for the last few years, rescinded their invitation to Richard Dawkins, who had been the keynote speaker at the conference. Because he had tweeted a link to a video that, it was a pretty crass satire video that was basically making the argument that feminist ideology is kind of equivalent or has a lot of parallels to Islamist ideology. So Dawkins was disinvited.

I think there's a number of interesting angles on this controversy. One of which being the rather uncivil tone of the video and whether or not that was inappropriate, and why or why not.

But the one that I want to jump in on first is this: So, a fair amount of the discussion on my Facebook post was about whether the video was misogynist and/or racist.

Now that we've been talking about attacking issues instead of individuals, I think it can be pretty difficult to separate an attack on an ideology from an attack on people. For example, there was a caricature of an Islamist and a caricature of a feminist, who was in fact a caricature of a real feminist, although I think Dawkins didn't know that when he posted it.

I think they were not very flattering caricatures, of course. But I sort of have to wonder what takes a critique of an ideology like feminism or Islamism over the line where it becomes a critique of women or a critique of Muslims, or Arabs. Do you have any heuristics for settling those issues?

Dan: Wow, you ask hard questions, and like, right past where I'm ready.

Julia: Sorry! I mean, you can say you don't know. But I bet you have some thoughts.

Dan: Yeah, I mean let me build up again to my take on the situation. My take on the situation in general, why we disagreed, was about Dawkins being disinvited over it.

Julia: Oh, I guess I didn't actually say what our positions were, I just sort of pointed at the issues.

Dan: Yes.

Julia: Would it be easier for me to just lay out what my original Facebook post said and you can just respond as you did on Facebook?

Dan: Yeah, that'd be great.

Julia: All right. What I said on Facebook -- it's a public post I can link to it if you want to read it, which I only mostly agree with now, not entirely, but what I said at the time is: I did not like the satirical video. I thought it was crass and immature and intellectually lazy, and I don't think Dawkins should have posted it.

However, I still, nevertheless, disagree with the NECSS decision to disinvite Dawkins because of the video. It's not because I think they were censoring his free speech or anything like that. I think a conference has a perfect right to disinvite a speaker, if they feel like he's not appropriate for the conference or for the audience.

I objected because I felt like the crassness and unfairness and intellectual laziness of the video was not really any different from the kind of crassness and intellectual laziness that I see in a lot of skeptic and atheist satires, and even just blog posts aimed at, say Christians, or homeopaths, or even particular people within the skeptic or atheist community with whom the author disagrees.

It seemed to me that disinviting Dawkins, because the video he posted was crass and unproductive and immature was kind of a double standard -- in that that same tone, that same level of discourse seems to be, in practice, considered fine *unless* it's directed at, say, feminism.

I can talk about how my views have shifted a little bit since then, but maybe why don't you just jump in and say what you disagreed with in that, Dan.

Dan: Yeah. What I disagreed with was, so the first thing is that I do think it matters that Richard Dawkins is not just any speaker. I think that if you invite Matt and Trey from South Park, or the Charlie Hebdo guys -- they are honest, they're clear about what they are, right? Their credibility is as satirists.

They're not as leaders of a movement. They're not as someone who's on the board of one of the most important and powerful secular organizations in the country. I think that the nature of Dawkins' power means that he's seen as the face of the entire movement, when he does things it reflects on all of us, whether we like that or not.

I don't think it's rational for Dawkins to ignore the laws of human psychology and say, "Oh, no, no, no. If I call it just my personal Twitter feed, then I'm not representing anybody else." I think that that's irresponsible about how he's actually representing everybody, because of that, I think that's different. Does that make sense?

Julia: I think so, but to ask a clarifying question: does that imply that if he had posted a video with the same sort of level of tone, but about a different target, say Christians or homeopaths, that it would still have been unacceptable because of his role in the movement, his prominence?

Dan: He said things about Muslims that have upset even many people in the movement that are ostensibly ... like he's offended people by saying the Muslim world has no Nobel Prize winners in science or very few. Like he has upset other atheists even when he was attacking religion.

Julia: But he didn't get disinvited from a conference for that, right?

Dan: Yeah. I tend to see him getting disinvited here as a threshold issue, right. You allow people a certain number of -- if we're going to call them mistakes; I think they're mistakes -- you allow someone a certain number of mistakes, because they're only humans, at a certain point. That there is no clear line, at a certain point we say, "Okay, we're fed up."

Now, to me, NECSS maybe just shouldn't have invited him in the first place. It is weird to do it over one video, but it isn't just one video. It is that finally they took into account the whole history.

Julia: Although -- it's possible I'm misinterpreting their position, but I think their position was not that his incivility in general, including towards Christians or Muslims, was the thing

that had accumulated enough to cause NECSS to disinvite him. I thought it was his incivility in critiquing feminism.

Dan: It could be. Let me get to that prime of my argument, so that I've got a nice set up.

Julia: Right.

Dan: The next prong of my argument was the other issue is that NECSS isn't trying to bring in homeopaths to their conference. It's not trying to bring pseudoscientists. It also doesn't represent the values of homeopaths et cetera. Whereas I do think that the skeptic movement is or should be part of the humanist movement.

I do think it's fine for skeptic organizations to say humanist values include feminism, and that the kind of vitriol in the video was towards mainstream feminism. You can say oh no, it's only about that segment of feminists who are apologists for Islam even when Islam is harming women. I agree, that is a serious problem. I am friends with many ex-Muslims, and my heart goes out to them.

I'll give you a great example: this led to a big fight on Facebook attacking a kind of feminists who apologizes for Islam when they shouldn't. I was pointed to a video in which a feminist Muslim explained how she wears the hijab completely out of her own preference. It's because she believes that it makes her more dignified. She should not be a sexualized object.

Mainstream western feminism would call that kind of modesty position patriarchal, because it puts the emphasis on women to be the ones who don't get themselves objectified by being more modest. It puts the emphasis on men being these uncontrollable dogs, who if they see a woman's hair they will objectify her.

And I don't think just because it's a Muslim woman who is claiming that is being a feminist, by saying that, that becomes feminism. I do think that feminists have done a bad job sometimes in defending the women in the Middle East against a patriarchal culture. They have been kind of condescending and patted them on the head. I think they put their anti-colonialism, which is a good thing in general, above their feminism. I think that's valid.

The problem was this video was lumping anything related to feminism as inherently as bad as Islamism. It was so cruel to be completely alienating to anybody who sees themselves as part of the actual feminist revival going on in the internet. That I think these organizations don't see themselves as against it, and want to have a hospitable environment towards those people, even if there is disagreement among them, that there just should be that kind of ... they should be welcome. Does that make sense?

Julia: Yeah, it does. This is probably a good point to bring up one of the ways that my viewpoint shifted after the long comment thread that followed my original Facebook post, in part because of some things Dan said and a few other commenters as well.

I think I can get on board with the idea that there should be different standards for how careful or civil you should be expected to be, depending on what the target of your criticism is.

I haven't worked out exactly what I think those differences depend on, but I can see an argument for if the target for your criticism is a marginalized group or is associated with the marginalized group, maybe. Or the target of your criticism is a group that could reasonably feel unwelcome in your community or movement because of your criticism. Then maybe the standard for civility should be higher. Which is not what I had argued in my original post. That is kind of a shift for me.

The thing that I'm still confused about is whether my disagreement with you, Dan, the original disagreement, is mainly over whether we think that Dawkins posting that video was him satirizing or slamming feminism in general.

I think the sort of core tenets of feminism are almost like moral fundamentals, at least in the humanist community. Like the idea that women should have equal rights, and no woman deserves to be raped. Women should be paid the same for the same work. Women should have the right to vote and all those things. Even if you're civilly criticizing those things, that's still a pretty hostile ... that does create a hostile environment for women, I think.

However, Dawkins, he's sort of explicitly trying to separate out those core tenets of feminism, which he supports, from the more fringe parts of the feminist movement -- like the parts are often apologists for Islam and its mistreatment of women.

My question for you is whether you think Dawkins' fault was not separating cleanly enough the target of his criticism away from feminism in general, and thereby creating a hostile environment for women because it felt like he was attacking ... maybe he was sort of indirectly attacking by leaking to that video, which didn't make the distinction… the basic rights of women?

Or whether you think that even if the video had said "This is just fringe feminists," that critiquing fringe feminists in an uncivil way could justifiably make feminists feel unwelcome?

Does that make sense?

Dan: Yes, it does. I don't think he is only attacking the fringe. I think that he is attacking a very large segment of feminists, who think that the kind of feminism that he identifies with doesn't go far enough.

Now I want to be clear, because I'm sure his fans are chopping at the beat right now to mention this. He does say, in linking to the video that this is not about all feminists.

Julia: Oh yes, I should have mentioned that. Exactly.

Dan: Okay. I will give him that.

I think though the problem is the video is not nearly as clear. And Dawkins' hostility is against more than just the fringe. I'm going to bring up a previous tweet, when he was on a rampage about rape accusations over people being drunk and having non-consensual sex and calling that rape afterwards. He writes this tweet which says again, "Officer it's not my fault I was drunk driving, you see somebody got me drunk." He's going after there, something that I don't think it's just the fringe. ...That kind of victim blaming, the kind of pattern of hostility here, towards positions which are defensible, is a problem.

The other problem I have with it is that the ostensive purpose of this was to satirize, as I understand it, what was going on in Cologne, where there were a number of sexual assault reports on New Year's Eve. Apparently it was some sort of coordinated thing by middle eastern people of Muslim countries descent.

There was this huge thing in the media, "Why aren't the feminist calling this out? It's because they don't think it's rape if it's by Muslims." That's the joke in that video. I really feel like in that case, what you're looking at is people who are very disingenuously putting feminists in a bind. They were like, "Huh, you don't want to pick on Muslims do you, huh?"

It's like no, they're not being hypocrites. Like if you were in -- to be extreme about it, but -- if you were in 1930s Germany, and you found out about some really bad things done by a group of Jews, when you know that the Nazis are about to clamp down and commit horrendous things against the Jews, you don't want to stoke a facist flame. It's the worst consequence if you do that.

I totally understand that. No feminist came out and said, "It's just Muslims so it's not rape." They didn't say that. What they said was, hello, don't use the sexual assault to stoke the backlash against Muslim immigrants that's happening in Europe and the United States.

To satirize those feminists as saying it's not rape if a Muslim does it, as that video said, that's disgusting.

Julia: So, we have a few more minutes left --

Dan: Okay, I'm sorry.

Julia: Don't apologize. I just want to give you the opportunity, if there is something that we didn't touch on, that you think should be said, to introduce the last thread. But if not, I can just ask you another question.

Dan: I just feel like I didn't answer your question.

I'll just admit to you, I do think you have a really good point. In fact when I was looking back at the discussion, I remember saying, "I don't know how to answer that," and then you brought it up again here. "Ah, rats." And that point is what's the difference between attacking a woman and attacking feminism, right?

Julia: Right.

Dan: I do think you're right, political movements can be skewered. It's not like picking on women. I guess you can satirize Black Lives Matter without picking on black people, but it is ...

Julia: It would be tricky to do. That is a very, very fine needle to thread.

Dan: It's tricky. It's a very fine needle to thread.

I think that one thing I have picked up from the feminist blogosphere is sometimes if we actually look at the latitude we give to our criticism to feminism that we wouldn't give to our criticism of anti-racism. Like we do seem a little bit more forgiving of sexism and misogyny. I do think maybe that's telling that we would see a satirization of black activism as an attack on black people. It's a similar kind of thing with attacking feminism too carelessly.

Finally the one thing I did make a point with you was that it was a real woman in the video. Even though Dawkins in his official thing said, "I've scrubbed it because I found out it was a real person," He went on to say that "Maybe she hasn't really gotten all that vitriol she is saying, but I've decided to scrub it anyway." Then he congratulated himself, because no one should be harassed even a vile person like her, every life matters even with vile women like her...

I found that really hypocritical. Because the anti-feminist side has gotten upset over Twitter storms over powerful people making sexist remarks like Sam Harris saying, "The estrogen vibe is not as good in theism, that's why women aren't [better represented]." Of course he was kidding, but the point is, these sorts of jokes, the anti-feminist side has not really been kind of happy about those people being raked through the mud. People like Sam Harris or the scientist, who said that you don't want girls in the laboratory, because they cry and they fall in love with you.

... But meanwhile here is Dawkins being told that there is a street level activist, who of course -- I mean, look, she was very uncivil. I hate that video. It's terrible. I don't support her, but she doesn't deserve to be the face of all that's evil with feminism.

Dawkins, even after he's alerted about that, started denying that she's gotten any abuse, called her vile, for what? For being an incendiary activist who gets out of control. You mean like Dawkins fighting theists can be?

I find that really problematic and hypocritical for the anti-feminist side. That they're so against witch-hunts, if it's Sam Harris, who can more than take care of himself, but if it's

a street level activist who is on the feminist side, that is where I think that their claims, that they are just about civility and free speech are hypocritical.

I am trying to really chart the course that's really there to both sides in my civility pledge. I don't find that that side is really fair to the feminist side. Of course I know that the feminist side can be abusive. They're wrong as often as they're right, I think.

I just don't like when people are taking themselves, wrapping themselves in free speech, and declaring themselves the winners. Any more than people who take themselves, and wrap themselves in social justice and say they are the winners. Both of these sides are not listening to each other, because they think they can do no wrong, because they are on the side of justice.

I want to actually look at claim by claim by claim. No, privilege is not the end of the story. We have to actually prove the argument's wrong, not that you're wrong because you have privilege. No, just saying I have the right to offend is not the end of the story. When you offend people can actually make an argument that it was a moral reason they got offended and that they have a right against you to get an apology.

Julia: We're just about out of time. That seems like a good point at which to close this section of the podcast, but I want to say before we close this section how much I appreciate your style of engagement, and the level of nuance that you bring to these arguments.

As I think I said at the beginning, even when I disagree with you -- although I don't think we disagree that much -- I feel like I have more in common, or more important things in common, with you, than I do with people who happen to have the same object level position as I do on a particular issue, but think it's a clear cut case and anyone who disagrees is a moron.

The last thing I will say is the kind of thing that I really like about your civility pledge and your sort of general approach to discourse, of which this civility pledge is a manifestation, is: I like to think of these two common approaches to controversial moral disagreements. Where one approach is just to get angry and hurl invectives at each other and demonize the other side, which is clearly not good.

Then the second common approach is sort of a reaction to that first approach, and it's to say look, let's just live and let live. Let's be tolerant of each other, let's not attack each other for our views. Let's just let people agree to disagree, basically.

Dan: Right.

Julia: I think that is an improvement over the first, but I think we can still do better. I think that ideally, we can sort of appreciate that these issues are important and should be discussed. In theory, if I am wrong about my position on some of these important issues, I would like to find out that I am wrong.

That requires actually hearing people's criticisms of my position. It's much harder to do while not falling, collapsing, back down into the first approach. But I really appreciate your efforts to try to push us towards that third strategy.

Dan: Thanks. Yeah, the admiration is mutual -- like in fact, I literally had been thinking it would be neat to be able to come on your show some day, the morning you actually wrote me. I was so excited.

Julia: That's wonderful. Fantastic.

All right. I will wrap up this section of the podcast, and we'll move on to the Rationally Speaking pick.

[interlude]

Julia: Welcome back, every episode we invite our guest on Rationally Speaking to introduce the pick of the episode. That's a book or website or movie, or something that influenced his thinking in an interesting way. Dan, what's your pick for today's episode?

Dan: I'm going to go with a wonderful anthology on meta-ethics called Foundations of Ethics. It's edited by Russ Shafer-Landau and Terence Cuneo. It is an anthology covering most of the reading on philosophy scholarship on moral philosophy from the '70s, '80s, '90s and the early 2000s.

It was one of the books that has a lot of articles that really opened my eyes to the philosophy complexities that philosophers have really figured out in the Foundations of Ethics.

I feel like so much of our public discourse acts like there is no good thought out there about moral foundations. It's as if we just leave it up to religion or just turn it into a brain science, a cognitive science.

But there is a lot of really, really good thought that's been done in the last 40 years and I think that anthology has a number of papers that proved that to me, and changed my views and really influenced them in countless ways. I would recommend that anthology for anyone, who really wants to know what philosophers had to offer to the question in the Foundation of Ethics.

Julia: Excellent. In fact when I first started the podcast with Massimo I was somewhat inhabiting this persona of being, like, anti-philosophy in general, arguing that philosophy was pointless or worthless or something. Which I think was all along somewhat of a caricature of my actual position, but it is true I was pretty skeptical of most philosophy.

I don't know what particular papers are in the anthology, but I will say that reading meta-ethics is one of the things that shifted me more towards the position that, okay, fine, there is a fair amount of philosophy out there that's tackling meaningful important questions, in useful ways. I will be checking it out, is what I'm trying to say!

Dan: Yeah, great.

Julia: Great. We'll link to the pick as well to your blog on the podcast website and maybe also to our original Facebook conversation.

            Dan, it's been such a pleasure having you on the show. Thanks so much for joining us.

Dan: Thank you. It's been a real honor.

Julia: This concludes another episode of Rationally Speaking. Join us next time for more exploration on the borderlands between reason and nonsense.