

When Your Partner Advocates for the Devil

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I have the fortune to move pretty exclusively in geeky high-intellect circles and one of the most common fights between romantic partners I see all the time and have experienced on either side is the relationship catastrophe when one partner feels compelled to play Devil's Advocate on a topic the other finds inherently disturbing.

At low-energies Devil's Advocacy plays out rather formulaically. The disturbed individual snaps out some version of "the Devil needs no advocates", and the other—usually an attentive nerd who's read tumblr—politely if confusedly shuts up. But their niceness ultimately takes the patronizing form of "oh my lover is stupider/weaker than I thought." The Devil's Advocate feels a little intellectually isolated and betrayed by their partner refusing to participate in The One Game That Matters, and the other partner is set on edge, having to somewhat recalculate the trust they placed in their partner. A new detente in the relationship is promptly implicitly negotiated, one of increased suspicion and more limited communication. They go out to brunch. Life continues.

At high energies, with really intense geeks, shit really hits the fan.

There are many dynamics and possible dynamics that come into play and I suspect impossible to unpack in even a lengthy blog post. There's our ethical obligation to intellectual vigilance, which requires searching for and exploring different perspectives. There's also habit-forming and the memetic risk of getting sniped by an argument well beyond your current capacity to see alternatives to that might seriously fuck with your underlying values or utility function (the worst possible one being if by playing Devil's Advocate you got sniped by an argument for not thinking critically/vigilantly any more).

This is incredibly rocky and dangerous territory when it comes to close relationships. Hearing a loved one even momentarily arguing for fascism, police, racism, sexism, snitching, rape, lying, etc can absolutely destroy trust. While at the same time a partner not down for collaborating in these kinds of mental explorations can feel like a slammed door. Few want to feel that their relationships are deeply contingent upon limited communication or thought, that one's partner is implicitly policing you, wanting a cardboard version of you, and that you can't be 100% with them in your highs and lows. And often the intensely geeky are tempted to just declare that any functional or sufficiently intelligent partner should be able to hear a partner play Devil's Advocate without losing trust or being perturbed.

But that's actually kinda bullshit.

Love is the closest thing we have to magic, but it's not magic. It inhabits a world of physics and neurology and is fundamentally, inextricably *contingent*. The imperative question is *what* is love contingent upon. And there are more and less superficial answers to this.

Many relationships break because people have differing sets of virtues (or utility functions) that they want to be valued for and/or value in others (these are not necessarily the same). Do you most value compassion or intellectual vigilance? When someone starts exploring the arguments of anti-semitism in a Devil's Advocate fashion do you respect them for their intellectual audacity and commitment to due diligence? Or do you recoil in horror at their coldness and lack of concern? Which is the more fundamental value? (Or is the very fact that they're so behind the curve as to haven't yet explored and fully dismissed anti-semitism indicative of a *lack* of diligence?)

For reasons related to the previously mentioned infinitely dangerous value of "anti-thinking" and its terminal effect upon so many things I'd say intellectual vigilance *has* to be the deeper and more fundamental value than compassion, which for instance is more dependent upon external context like their being an external world and other minds. But there's a very close sort of immediacy between vigilance and empathy.

And it's not unreasonable to have one's feelings towards a partner affected by their investigations. First off there's the issue of information regarding their character being encoded in the symmetry-breaking of their specific Devil's Advocacy. *You have all the possible avenues of mental exploration in the world and you choose to defend this?*

There are, of course, valid reasons for folks to try and find the absolutely most repulsive position to them personally and to force themselves to examine it in a more immediate way, but there are other possible underlying motivators too, and someone abruptly declaring "Just playing Devil's Advocate but if I were to have raped your sister last Tuesday after the party and that's why she's been in a funk it wouldn't really be that bad" fundamentally shifts the array of possible motivations/character a person might have. Why the specificity? etc. It would be irrational for you *not* to update your priors re: the Devil's Advocate and their underlying character/motivations/inclinations at least a little bit.

If someone goes on and on and on, sometimes quite violently and desperately, about how snitching to the police isn't a bad thing, it would be irrational NOT to somewhat raise the odds in your head of them being a snitch (say from 1% to 70%, or from .005% to .007%), depending upon a host of other factors/impressions/etc. If someone argues vociferously that Ron Paul is not a racist that indicates their set of possible motivations is constrained (some good, some quite bad), and there's some kind of statistical estimate for how likely each possible motivation within the set is to be at root there. Merely stitching the term "Devil's Advocate" before making an argument shifts around the likely set of underlying motivations and their probability, but it doesn't automatically shrink to zero the bad possibilities.

The notion that playing Devil's Advocate with your partner should have absolutely no effect upon their trust in you is invalid. It assumes either that the Devil's Advocate has impeccable reasons for it, and that the other partner should already have *perfect* knowledge of their mind, character, and values. Or it assumes that the only virtue the partners' love for one another should ultimately be predicated upon is intellectual vigilance (or audacity, or other such).

But I would argue that while it's reasonable for intellectual vigilance to be the most fundamental value you have *in yourself*, that doesn't necessarily extend to whether it should be only thing drawing you close to a partner. Empathy and vigilance are ultimately closely related, both being

about modeling the world and others as well as shifting one's own sense of self. But it's valid to recoil a bit from someone who is demonstrating high intellect but low compassion or empathy.

Love is not just mere admiration. Deeper definitions of love are in part contingent not just on admiration and respect, but on empathy, and the deepest love is contingent upon a two-way street of empathy. When someone you love tortures animals or kills a man in Reno just to watch him die it's okay for that to affect your feelings for them. Similarly, if to a much lesser extent, it's okay if it affects your feelings when a lover makes horrid arguments. It's okay to want to hold at arms length someone whose intellectual fumbblings are still so primordial that they haven't become bored with cruelty or come to gravitate towards empathy and compassion as ultimately opening up far more fertile territory for exploration.

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