Chapter 14: Creating a reasonable zone

The previous chapter discussed ways to make your own contributions to discussions reasoned and fair. There are also ways to extend that to the people around you and even further out into society. Of course one person alone cannot make much impact on humanity as a whole but you can be more successful with the few people you spend most time with.

The potential benefits of doing this include reduced stress and conflict in your life and faster solution of problems that affect you.

Be reasonable

Start with yourself. Be reasoned and fair in your own mind and develop your skills. How far that influences other people depends on who you are and what you do. The impact of your behaviour will be more if you are a politician or journalist, for example, but everyone has a role.

Use reason and fairness for influence in conversations with colleagues, with friends, with students, with your children, your parents, when posting online, writing to your MP, and when writing to others in positions of power to suggest courses of action or provide information.

Work with others promoting reason and fairness to increase your impact.

Have more reasonable people around you

Perhaps the easiest approach is to go to where there are more people relying on reason and fairness. Choose groups to join where reason and fairness are dominant. This might be a science, philosophy, or mathematics group but there are other possibilities and not all such groups are well behaved. Attend public lectures by clear thinkers. Join educational courses likely to rely heavily on reason and fairness. Prefer workplaces that are more reasonable. At work, volunteer for projects where reason and fairness are likely to dominate, perhaps because of the work or the people involved.

You may also have some ability to choose the people who come to you. Make friends and invite them to spend time with you if they are reasonable and easy to live with and talk to. Look for lovers who are rational, as well as everything else, and you will be more likely to enjoy a good and lasting relationship. If you can choose

employees, project team members, or team-mates then choose ones who use reason and understand fairness.

If you run a business then you may be able to attract more customers who are reasonable. Explain your products and what went into creating them. Influence with only reason and fairness. You may attract customers that are easier to deal with, more cooperative, and more profitable.

Consider creating a forum for people to meet or discuss where reason and fairness are encouraged and required, and where manipulation is rapidly blocked and removed. This gives you more support from reasonable people, including perhaps very smart reasonable people.

With the people in your life, try to do more activities that elicit reason and fairness from those involved, rather than manipulation.

Improve behaviour around you

There are many ways to steer people around you towards using reason and fairness rather than manipulative tactics:

- Set an example yourself.

- Invite people to make valuable contributions, such as providing relevant information or ideas for practical solutions to problems.

- Ask questions that push people to be more factual. For example, ask for the source of statistics they quote, the evidence for claims, precise numbers if they are available, or particular examples (e.g. 'What makes you think teachers are saying things like this in class?').

- Pick up on over-generalizations (e.g. 'When you say "men" presumably you do not mean literally all men do you?').

- Mention the value of reason and fairness and ask for their use.

- Praise and encourage use of reason and fairness by paying more attention to users, smiling, giving praise and thanks, clicking 'likes', and responding positively online.

- Discourage manipulation by not giving attention to people who use it, not giving in to their manipulation, not smiling or praising them, not going along with manipulative humour, criticizing manipulative behaviour, withholding 'likes' and perhaps clicking dislikes, and not responding online.

Within an organization (e.g. at work) you may be in a position to offer training in influence, introduce ground rules for meetings and influential writing, create templates for business cases and analytical reports, and make comments on draft documents that push them towards reason and fairness.

Invite to reasonable discussions

One way to enjoy a reasoned discussion is to organize one and invite people who will contribute with reason and fairness only, with little or no encouragement. Exclude people who are likely to damage the quality of the discussion.

This is not a restriction of 'free speech' or a recipe for a dangerous echo chamber without diverse viewpoints. What is being excluded is incorrect reasoning and unfair persuasion tactics, not unacceptable conclusions. This is possible provided we are competent to distinguish between reasonable and manipulative behaviour.

If someone is making reasoned, informed points, then it is usually wrong to try to stop them being heard. It can also be wrong to try to avoid listening to them. It does not matter if their conclusions are consistent with your current position, though some positions (e.g. the earth is flat, the moon landings were a fake, Creationism) are strong indications that something is wrong.

In contrast, if someone is angrily swearing at others and insulting them as people, perhaps blocking discussion with noise, while making few or no coherent points that contribute to the discussion, then it is reasonable to:

- exclude them from a conversation;

- stop listening to them; and

- encourage others not to invite them to join discussions that you plan to participate in.

The reason for this treatment is that they are disrupting what otherwise might be a useful discussion and not contributing positively to it. They should be excluded regardless of whether their position agrees with yours at that time.

Similarly, people who continue to state falsehoods even after they have been clearly and logically pointed out as false can be excluded as described above. Even if they have a calm manner, they are not contributing.

Clearly, mistakes can be made when deciding to exclude someone from your discussions, but there are two reasons why this is better than putting up with everything on principle. Tolerance on principle can lead to wasted time and opens the door to opponents exploiting the principle by demanding debates and using them to create the appearance of a genuine controversy.

One popular idea at present is that diverse viewpoints are always valuable and that debate is always good. After a bitter and unhelpful argument, people will often say that the conversation was valuable, that debate is good, and talk should continue.

In a statistical sense, this may be true. On average over all discussions, it may be that diverse viewpoints and debate are valuable. However, it is easy to see that in some situations diversity of view is not helpful. For example, is there any value in a group of flat-earthers attending a conference on satellite technology? The flat-earthers are wrong and will just waste time and seats for others.

What is valuable is to bring together in a discussion:

- people with different sources of evidence; and

- people from different stakeholder groups who can help to spread understanding of the impacts for those groups.

It is not necessary for the participants to have reached different conclusions from the information they have. It is only necessary that they bring different information, collectively increasing the information used in the discussion. In fact, it is helpful if they have not reached conclusions and just wait to hear all the information and inferences.

Calm the internet together

Debates on social media tend to get nasty quickly and a single person posting in a reasonable way, without unnecessary antagonism, has a very limited effect on this. However, as the proportion of people making reasonable postings on a thread increases the mood can change.

People start to take more care over what they say. They include more links to further information. They may even acknowledge good points made. Some people whose initial postings were careless or dismissive start to get themselves under better control.

It may be possible to encourage friends to coordinate their activities so that they focus on particular pages at the same time, increasing their impact on the quality of the discussion.

Improve behaviour more widely

You can extend your influence and spread more reason and fairness by getting involved in discussions online, in debates, and in local politics. You can do this as an individual or with friends. Beyond that, there are schemes you can suggest to politicians and other influencers, and support. Here are some suggestions for schemes.

Educate children

Education could include two topics that would help children and society as a whole:

- How to influence using reason and why they should not use tricks or abuse power.

- Guidelines for fairness and how to justify and apply them.

Teach influence methods

This would give young people effective methods instead of leaving them feeling powerless and attracted to disruptive protests. Disruptive protests, as explained earlier, almost always harm their cause, often in obvious ways.

The teaching could also inoculate them against manipulative tricks used by scammers, journalists, politicians, and others.

UK schools already teach persuasive writing as part of 'English language' and encourage reason in subjects like science, history, and geography. However, this could be taken much further and include more on distinguishing between reason and manipulation.

Lessons could teach the need to avoid being unnecessarily antagonizing, despite provocation, and provide practice in doing this. They could teach and encourage making useful contributions. They could explain what reason is and inoculate children against cognitive relativism and other tricks.

Teach fairness

Some principles of fairness may be instinctive but most details are learned with help from parents, teachers, writers, and friends. However, these efforts are unsystematic. Many people in their early teens still have a weak grasp of the principles of fairness, cannot justify them convincingly, and have little appreciation of how their actions affect other people. Many are inclined to think that decisions they take on many topics are their own business and nobody else's, even when their decisions have effects on others.

The explanation of fairness offered in chapter 2 suggests how much more systematic our teaching of fairness could be. The level of detail and the style of justification would be suitable for systematic teaching. It is practical and does not rely on a back story that has to be taken on faith, such as a religion might offer.

In addition to this, children should be taught about the effects of their actions and tested to ensure they have learned these lessons. For example:

- How the effort they put into studies and jobs is not just for their own benefit.

- Why not tidying up after themselves affects others.

- How the way they look after themselves affects others too (e.g. obesity is not just a personal issue).

- How their consumption choices affect others and the natural environment.

Teaching should cover the consequences of common actions and methods for thinking through consequences thoroughly. It could be linked to teaching of important laws.

This is education, not indoctrination. Students should be required to demonstrate an in-depth, accurate knowledge of all these but not demonstrate agreement to them, or even a promise to comply with the laws, principles, and implications of the consequences.

Nevertheless, it would be impractical to define a national set of fairness principles because of the resistance likely from some groups (e.g. religions, human rights lobbyists) who would want their rules to be used instead. It would be more practical to offer fairness frameworks for people (parents, teachers, students) to choose from if they want.

Educate adults

The topics to cover in educating adults are similar to those for children, but what would prompt adults to get more education and where would they go?

Some people might welcome the opportunity to develop their understanding of how to behave well, be more influential, or create a reasonable zone around themselves. They might welcome educational services that help them understand better the consequences of behaviour and how to think through complex situations. Others might be urged to get involved by friends or family.

Some might choose to do it as part of continuing professional education, perhaps prompted by the introduction of more demanding standards of reasonable influence in their profession.

Still others might be required to take more education because they have shown their knowledge is lacking. The justice system could use more educational sentences.

> E.g. In the UK, if you are caught driving over the legal speed limit you may be offered the option of taking a 'speed awareness' course as an alternative to getting points on your licence that will increase the cost of your insurance and might eventually lead to you being banned from driving. Most people find the course interesting.

In addition to motoring offences, other offences that might be suitable for educational sentences include littering, drunkenness, drug possession, damaging property (e.g. with graffiti), failing to obey public health rules, poor control of animals (e.g. dogs), minor hate crimes, hate speech bordering on crime, smoking where it is banned, being uncooperative towards the police, and noise nuisance.

People who have participated in disruptive protests might also be given educational sentences that include how to influence effectively instead.

Educational sentences are mild and could be given for relatively minor offences with a low burden of proof and little bureaucracy. They could be used by the police and, in a less formal way, by schools, youth groups, other clubs, and even parents.

To be acceptable to those given the education, it must not be indoctrination. The content must be factual and logical. This could include knowing some science, statistical facts, and the law. Much of the material would be itemising ways other people can be affected by behaviour.

The requirement would be to know and understand the facts, including facts that undermine their beliefs, and demonstrate knowledge in a test. Agreement to the implications of those facts for behaviour would not be required. The offender may continue to disagree if they want to, but further bad behaviour could trigger other penalties (which they will have learned about).

To be acceptable to those not given the education, it must not provide an advantage in life that is not available to someone more virtuous. The education should not give people a saleable skill; it should just rectify a deficit in understanding and behaviour.

Monitor and regulate public discourse

As I write this book many people are arguing over 'free speech', 'blasphemy', 'political correctness', and 'cancel culture'. One side argues that people should not be allowed to say things hurtful to others, including hurt caused by challenges to their ideas (e.g. religions, beliefs about gender). The other side says this is wrong and that they should be free to say whatever they like, including using mockery. A popular theory among free speech advocates is that a 'marketplace of ideas' will eventually ensure that only the best ideas survive. They say the solution to harmful speech is more speech.

In practice this is not working well and 'hate' is only one of the problems. The UK already permits a vast volume of speech, with endless news media, social media, websites, campaign groups, and so on. Nevertheless, unreasonable groups such as scammers and religious extremists are thriving. Unfiltered social media sites are awash with advertising material, bizarre conspiracy theories, and fake evidence of all kinds. Sites with some filtering, such as the main commercial social media, are better but still share a huge range of manipulative material, including videos by people complaining about their videos being removed or demonetized. Many social media sites help mistaken ideas survive by suggesting content to users that fits their thinking.

Some people have come to think it is impossible to get to the truth, impossible to be objective, and that bias is always overwhelming. In an absolute, philosophical sense some of this may be correct but in practice we can make huge, worthwhile improvements. An analogous situation is medicine. We cannot cure every disease but we can cure or manage many and this has extended lives hugely. With manipulative arguments it would be hard to stop everything but many are blatant and it should be possible to make a huge improvement.

The problem is not low volume speech; it is low quality speech. Too many clever tricksters are having too much success with too many people, not all of them mentally vulnerable. This is perhaps what happens when some intelligent and motivated people have a free hand to persuade anyone they care to target.

A similar problem undermining markets for goods and services has been greatly reduced by introducing and enforcing safety standards and rules of honesty. Under UK law, products and services must be described accurately. Fake products are illegal. Misleading advertisements can be reported to the Advertising Standards Authority which can have them removed. Many products must meet specific safety standards or they cannot be sold and experts monitor for non-compliance.

We can improve the marketplace for ideas by enforcing similar standards. These would be standards for logical speech that correctly responds to evidence, not standards that require particular conclusions to be supported. The standards would support rationality (the thinking that works, as explained in Chapter 2) but not an ideology. In short, when reason is used, speech is permitted but when specific manipulative tricks are used, regulation acts.

Crucially, speech that makes others angry or hurts their feelings would remain acceptable provided it was true, logical, and fairly put. People who are indignant at being resisted cannot claim to be offended and demand an end to opposition.

To be successful such monitoring and regulation schemes must get some critical details right.

The standards applied must be clear-cut, logical, and technical. A monitoring scheme should start with a limited set of clear-cut faults to search for and act against, and then cautiously increase its repertoire. It would be a mistake to try to catch every type of bad discourse behaviour, including those that require judgements likely to be disputed.

Issues likely to be suitable for monitoring include implausible generalizations across large demographic groups, unnecessary antagonism, and various types of flawed statistical inference (e.g. correlation confused with causation, post hoc ergo propter hoc). The rules could combine clear definitions in principle with many examples of each fault.

The scheme must be enforced by skilled reviewers. They would be selected for their skills and objectivity, trained to apply the standards consistently and objectively, and supervised closely, and would meet professional standards of independence and continuing professional education. They might be assisted by volunteers, including good citizens who want to help and have some free time.

A range of enforcement actions must be available, ranging from mild to drastic. The following actions are in order of increasing strength:

- Attach a quality warning to a publication (e.g. a video online, a book) that points out false or misleading statements and explains the problems. The author of the publication might be given the option to revise and republish.

- Attach a disclaimer to a publication saying that no interpretation that encourages illegal behaviour is endorsed by the owner, author, or publisher. (This is most likely to be relevant to religious texts.)

- Withdraw a publication, with a prominent retraction notice and explanation of the problems. An apology might also be required.

- Give authors and publishers demerit points that may add up and lead to firmer action based on persistent and frequent offending.

- Require an author to undertake training in good discussion behaviour.

- Withdraw an author's accreditation. (Authors might be awarded a prestigious accreditation if they voluntarily adhere to high standards of discourse.)

- Remove a licence to continue publishing. This could apply to authors and publishers.

Today, republishing documents is often easy because so many are available electronically. People who have downloaded or visited a document could be offered

the option to subscribe for updates, should they arise. That could be a requirement for some types of document likely to be challenged and revised.

Monitoring should be more than just responding to complaints. The expert reviewers should also initiate random and risk-based inspections.

Schemes of monitoring and enforcement could be applied to political proceedings in parliament and council chambers, journalists in all media, postings and comments on social media, books, magazine articles, reports published (e.g. by think tanks, research groups, charities, and campaigning organizations), religious preaching, and academic journals.

> E.g. At the time of writing, if an interviewer on the BBC uses unfair tactics against an interviewee then viewers may complain. Occasionally complaints are upheld and the interviewer is asked to take more care in future. This is too weak and too rare to have any significant effect. But imagine if an independent, expert review team existed that constantly selected BBC output for intensive reviews against rigorously defined standards as well as responding to complaints. Imagine if it could order the interviewer to make a prominent on-air apology and explain exactly what he or she did wrong and the effect of it. Imagine if repeat offenders could lose their accreditation as Public Interviewers for serious breaches and with that lose their jobs at the BBC. Imagine this rigour extended to all journalists with large audiences.

> E.g. In the UK Parliament people often say things that are rude and untrue. Occasionally the Speaker or a Deputy tells them off for it, but these interventions are inconsistent and not backed by significant punishments. But imagine if an independent, expert review team was operating. It might take them a day or two to act but they would apply specific technical standards of debate to statements made in Parliament and these could result in public retractions, possible apologies, and other punishments in more severe cases. To have a sustained voice in Parliament, Members would have to be logical, objective, and informed every time.

Another role for expert reviewers would be to adjudicate in important discussion disputes. Suppose two groups are debating a point and one thinks it has successfully debunked an argument used by the other. However, the side using the debunked argument does not agree that their argument has been debunked. At this point the debunkers might raise the matter to an independent adjudicator. The adjudicator then follows standard analysis procedures and decides if the argument is valid, debunked, or the situation is unclear.

Certify Reasonable Speech Venues

Venues for sharing ideas (e.g. lectures, conferences, presentations to audiences, sermons) could voluntarily apply to be 'Reasonable Speech Venues'. This might make them more attractive to audiences. Being a Reasonable Speech Venue means that they can accept any speaker they like provided the whole proceedings are video and audio recorded and the recordings are provided to the police for (potential) review. Any illegal incitement to crime or hatred can then be prosecuted.

Provided speakers and audience members do not incite crime or hatred then nobody need worry.

An alternative would be to require organizations to do the video monitoring themselves, with spot checks made and heavy punishments for venues that fail to report incidents that should have been reported. As with Anti-Money Laundering regulations, a 'suspicion' of incitement is all that should be required.

The organizations involved would probably include those registered as political parties, charities with religious objectives, campus societies, and others identified as having political or religious objectives, based on their publicity.

How are they to recognize what is unacceptable without the exercise degenerating into a battle of ideologies, or seeming to? Clear markers might include:

- Advocating terrorist tactics, e.g. physically attacking non-military sites or people (including military people not currently on active duty), hijacking, kidnapping, blackmail, threats of physical violence, etc, all against non-military targets.

- Advocating war to take new territory or property from someone else who legitimately owns it. The grey area would be where that territory is to be taken back from people who took it recently.

- Advocating a form of government where most people have no influence at all over who is in control. Typically, this will be governments without free voting.

- Advocating illegal actions. It is perfectly acceptable to argue that a law is bad or argue for a change in the law, but it is not acceptable to advocate breaking the law.

- An element of demonstrable untruth, chiefly incorrect factual claims and undisclosed selection of evidence.

- Systematically distorted, unjustified interpretations/conclusions. In particular, inferring that something has just one obvious cause when in fact there are others, e.g. 'increasing differences in wealth in a society must be due to the rich cheating the poor' ignores the other reasons why wealth differences can increase (e.g. savings, scale, career progress). Also unwarranted generalizations across demographic groups.

- Emotional amplification using methods other than information. These might include group chanting, strong body language, and powerful but irrelevant images. This is a more difficult area.

They should also be looking for persistently bad behaviour, not just the occasional, isolated remark by someone who is untypical of the group. The idea is for this kind of dangerous talk to be reduced, not used as a means of excluding people permanently from participation.

Respond firmly to disruptive or manipulative activism

Decision-makers should not be swayed by bad behaviour (e.g. terrorist tactics, disruptive protests) because if they are then they invite more bad behaviour. Not responding to bad behaviour should be standard policy and held to.

Decision-makers facing disruptive or manipulative activism can take steps to encourage the activists to campaign in a more constructive way. Aggressive activism is often undermined by lack of knowledge. The activists are pushing for the wrong changes as well as using the wrong methods to push.

Acknowledge their interest and effort then explain that there are some practical problems to be overcome and you would like them to understand those problems and work on finding practical solutions to them. Provide them with information and explanations of the real issues that they have previously not understood. Explain where you are stuck and what you are currently working on. Explain what an ideal solution looks like. Suggest research they could do and give criteria for that research to be solid enough for you to use it. Be willing to consider written analyses and suggestions from them.

> E.g. Imagine that a major supermarket chain is being pestered by eco-activists about plastic packaging. They want the store to eliminate all plastic packaging within 2 years. The activists have blocked the entrance to stores, disrupted stores at busy times by entering in large groups with plastic boxes and demanding they be filled with unpackaged products, and started several social media storms against the chain based on false claims. They are resented by shoppers and doing their own cause harm, but do not recognize it. In their minds they are brave heroes.
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> The supermarket chain invites the activists to a series of briefings about plastic packaging, covering all the important technical, economic, safety, and legal issues, among others. They begin to treat the activists as a focus group representing super-early-adopters of plastic reduction schemes. They ask them to think of alternative schemes and rate them for acceptability to shoppers like them.
>
> The activists are initially confused. Some think the briefings are a sham, others struggle with the technical detail and begin to go into denial about the real difficulties faced by supermarkets, but others see an opportunity to be more influential than before. The chain makes the briefings public knowledge through press releases and social media and puts briefing documents online for everyone to see along with an invitation to anyone with constructive suggestions to get in contact.

Decision-makers must make a stand against abuses of power. If they yield to them then they invite more. What is obvious with terror tactics and kidnapping is also true for disruptive publicity stunts and attempted smears. Using these tactics should delay changes demanded, not accelerate them, even if the decision-maker would otherwise have been happy to make the changes.

> E.g. Continuing the supermarket chain illustration, imagine that the activists are split between those who want to engage intelligently and those who prefer to

continue with disruptive publicity stunts. The chain explains to them all that if the disruptive stunts continue then intelligent contributions from the group will not be considered. The chain has been meeting other eco-activists who are more interested in intelligent engagement. The disruptive activists now struggle internally even more, with some worried they will be side-lined. The chain launches publicity about positive engagement with another activist group. In comparison to this the disruptive activists look even more childish and ill-informed.

Give foreign aid selectively

There are countries where most people, or at least most people with any power, do not like advanced western countries, democracy, science, or atheism. They hate and resent countries like the UK and USA in particular, even as those hated countries give them money and expertise to help with health and other aid programmes. Despite the ideological differences, some of their citizens would like to migrate to those same countries for a better life or more tolerance of their individual characteristics. When they migrate, some still retain many of the beliefs and attitudes they held in their home country.

This is a sad and dangerous situation. Resolving it requires recognizing that advanced western countries are wealthy and comfortable because of what they know and how they think, not just because of favourable climates, natural resources, or past bullying of other countries. Science and science-based technology have been combined with use of regulated markets to create material wealth. Various philosophical and social innovations have gradually developed an advanced system of fairness, laws, and secular institutions to carry these on.

If people in other societies want the material benefits and freedoms of western societies then one way to get them is to learn to rely on reason and fairness much as western societies do. Likewise, if individuals migrate to an advanced western country then they can improve their prospects further by learning to think in an advanced western way (if they don't already), using reason and fairness instead of tradition and religion.

(This is not the same as adopting all aspects of a culture, including its problems with alcohol, for example.)

Advanced western countries that want to help other countries could focus on programmes that teach the relevant western knowledge and thinking. This is likely to be safer for everyone than selling or giving them advanced technology without them having to go through the societal change that produced that technology. In particular, the world does not need countries with nuclear weapons and a religion that inspires them to conquer new territory and send non-believers to hell.