

The Moral High Ground

Immigration reformers need to recapture it

by David G. Payne

*The occupation of high ground can
thus mean genuine domination.
Its reality is undeniable.*

— CLAUSWITZ, *On War*, V, 18

An interesting article by Mark Sagoff¹ recently appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly*, in which he argues that those who are interested in curbing the destruction of our natural resources should change their approach. Traditional argumentation invokes dire predictions that the earth will run out of such and such a resource by such and such a date, and then concludes that we should therefore all start conserving or face the consequences. One problem with this argument, says Sagoff (and it is a problem that is traceable all the way back to Malthus), is that the dire predictions hardly ever pan out. The specified dates come and go without the arrival of Armageddon. Furthermore, says he, the pessimistic preachers are wrong — technology has and will continue to solve our ills before judgment day ever arrives.

I have before, in these very pages, praised the pessimist for making us conscious of problems that need to be solved, and thus for being partially responsible for solutions when they are found. But I am not interested in arguing with the content of Sagoff's article. Rather, I am interested in examining the strategy *behind* his argumentation, because I think it might well be applied to other areas (and is beginning to be so applied) with some success.

Sagoff claims we should argue not from economics based on impending losses of (or potential gains from) our endangered resources, but from moral and aesthetic grounds. In other

words, instead of appealing to the pocketbook, we should appeal to the heart. You will always lose using the economic argument, says he, because you will be fighting on your enemy's turf. In doing so you will inevitably overvalue the resources you are trying to protect, and thus set yourself up for failure.

By claiming that a threatened species may harbor lifesaving drugs, for example, we impute to that species an economic value or a price much greater than it fetches in a market. When we make the prices come out right, we rescue economic theory but not necessarily the environment.²

The "dire consequences" approach, then, is doomed to failure in the resource arena. Because of this, says Sagoff, we should change tack and argue, not from what our resources can do for us either now or in the future (their external value), but from their internal value to us as humans. The change here is from external fact to internal feeling. This latter has, by necessity, a moral aspect since it appeals to what we value most in our lives.

That, in a nutshell, is the strategy of Sagoff's article; and those within the immigration debate can learn much from this strategy, for the same distinction — factual arguments versus moral arguments — is to be found in this debate as well.

The problem is: the anti-immigration camp has implicitly conceded the moral high ground by focusing almost entirely on the factual side, and so has little of substance to fall back upon. Browse through any catalog containing anti-immigration literature — you will find book after book by demographers, economists, social scientists and population experts arguing that dire consequences will inevitably result from continued immigration.

I happen to think that there is some merit to these arguments, but then, I'm part of the choir. If the writers' goal is to persuade others to join in their cause, it is not people like me they should want to reach. And those they *do* want to reach they probably aren't even approaching. I think there are two reasons for this.

David G. Payne, Ph.D., teaches logic and philosophy at North Central Michigan College in Petoskey, Michigan. He is a frequent contributor to THE SOCIAL CONTRACT.

First, there is the reason lurking behind Sagoff's claim that past predictions have always failed to come true. The heart of this objection has to do with knowledge acquisition. All such arguments are based on what is going to happen in the future based on what we know about the past and the present, and no one knows what is going to happen in the future based on such information. No matter how exhaustive your information, knowledge of the future is undetermined. Therefore, no advantage is gained over your opponent by arguing in this way, and no one is persuaded to change sides.

Second, I am convinced that more people are persuaded by moral arguments than by factual arguments. People tend to form gut-level opinions on important issues, and only then look about for factual justification for these opinions.³ I'm not claiming this is the proper way to approach an issue, only that it is in fact the road usually taken, and that we ignore this fact at our own peril. Those who have formed gut-level (moral) opinions are not interested in seeking out the truth — they are interested only in justifying their already firmly entrenched opinions. For this reason, such people would never even consider reading a book or an article that is full of facts contrary to their position. Their bias prohibits their being persuaded by such arguments.

Do Anti-immigrationists Have a Moral Case?

Here we see the importance of the moral argument, which has the potential to strike at the very root of a person's bias. The problem is: most anti-immigrationists have already abandoned this field of battle, with the result that the pro-immigration camp has had huge success in convincing people to join their side on the basis of their claim to overwhelming moral superiority.

If we are to reverse the popular trend in anti-immigration argumentation and thereby become a persuasive force in the immigration debate we must return to arguments based on the morality of the issues. But, as mentioned, the enemy has already staked claim to that area, as anyone who has ever been accused of "racism" because of her position

on immigration is aware. The pro-immigration forces have traditionally been firmly in control of the moral high ground — or so they say. Which leads to an interesting question: when one side in a debate makes the claim to have "taken the moral high ground," what exactly do they think they have done?

I assume that taking the moral high ground is a good thing to do; or at least a good thing to say you have done. The analogy has military roots — taking and holding the high ground being a generally sound strategy, as the French learned

to their regret at Dien Bien Phu, as did the ANZAC forces at Gallipoli. When one is said to take the moral high ground the implied mental picture is of a heroic charge up, say, San Juan Hill where the forces arrive, bloodied but victorious, unfurling the flag to cheers and sounds of music. That is one version, based on a particular use of the term "take" *i.e.* "to seize by force."

There is another use of the word "take," however, which is subtly more appropriate to debate, *viz.*, "to obtain," (which includes "to steal"). This usage also has military application, if somewhat less heroic. If an army is first to arrive on the scene of a potential battle, it can take the high ground in this sense without a struggle, as the Union Army did at Gettysburg before Lee arrived. Armies are thus said to have "assumed" the high ground, and have gained an advantage by doing so.

The wisest move for an opposing army, having found the enemy firmly ensconced on high ground, is to decline battle if possible. But there is another move in debate that is not usually open to armies, since the fog in debate is often thicker than on a battlefield. In debating, it is possible to assume the high ground and turn out to be wrong — a most embarrassing circumstance. In a debate you can dispose of your opponents' assumed advantage by unceremoniously dumping them on the ground beside you (called "leveling the field"). Even better if, having dumped them, you then assume the high ground yourself (called "turning the tables"). Both of these are instances of the more general strategy known technically as "knocking them off their high

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horse.”

The pro-immigration movement has traditionally *assumed* the moral high ground in two ways. **First**, by claiming that Americans have a moral obligation to help those in less fortunate countries by allowing them into the land of opportunity — thus casting as immoral or less moral, those who deny this obligation, or “right” as it may be labeled. **Second**, the pro-immigration movement assumes the high ground by labeling immigration reformers as “racist” because they do not want to allow other nationalities into the country. Since the pro-immigrationists are against this “racist” position they must therefore be standing for all that is right and good — increasing the height of the ground on which they (think they) stand.

The first of these moves is fairly easy to counter with arguments that point out that we are not helping those who need help the most with our immigration policies — that there are better ways of helping those who are less fortunate than ourselves, etc. In this way you agree with the opposing side’s moral statement (“Yes, those in less fortunate countries should be helped”) but deny their solution. These are powerful and, I think, definitive objections which go a long way toward showing that if the pro-immigrationist is really serious about moral obligations to those in other countries, he needs to revisit his methods. (If *really* serious, we would hope he would trade places with someone in dire need.)

The second move has been both less and more troublesome. Less troublesome because it is often a strategy-of-last-resort — when you can’t think of any substantive criticism, go for the “R” word. This was evident in the debates over Peter Brimelow’s book, *Alien Nation*, several years ago. In such instances the epithet “racist” is little more than a red-herring designed to alleviate one’s discomfort at having nothing substantive to say.

The move has been more troublesome due to the fact that it is often difficult to know how to respond to the charge — sometimes because it comes as so off-the-wall, and sometimes because hardly anyone knows what the term “racist” means. Ironically, overuse of the term has eroded the reprobation it once conveyed.

One recent book that has addressed this second move with particular force is Roy Beck’s *The Case*

Against Immigration.⁴ For example, Beck makes at least three important points on the subject of racism. **First**, he shows that there is no necessary connection between being a racist and attempting to limit immigration — as his subtitle implies: there are “moral, economic, social, and environmental” reasons for limiting immigration. **Second**, and more important from the perspective of this essay, the immigration reform position, far from being racist, is shown to be a position that instead tries to *do away with* racism. These first two points thereby serve to level the field. **Third**, Beck shows by implication that the pro-immigrationist position fits better into the racist mold than does the alternative. Thus, he turns the tables.

I don’t want to delve into the details of Beck’s arguments here, but a brief statement of how this is

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done may be of interest. The vehicle used to make the three points is the same: labor. The argument running throughout Beck’s book is that high levels of immigration are being sustained primarily to satisfy big business’s insatiable hunger for low cost labor. Keeping the levels of immigration high insures a glut in the labor market, which in turn creates a buyer’s market — with the commodity being human labor. This excess of bodies has allowed business to successfully undermine a century of labor reforms by slashing wages and benefits, and reducing standards of working condition to the bare minimum. Were American workers overpaid? In many cases the answer is “yes” — no one denies that both executives and labor unions took advantage of a good thing, just as no one denies that business has the right to make a dollar. But the line must be drawn somewhere. History has shown that business, if left unrestrained, will consistently disregard that right of human beings to earn a decent wage. Since business cannot regulate itself in this matter, the task of doing so has been left to Congress — which

has also consistently failed to perform.

Doesn't this moral argument essentially boil down to a factual argument? Yes, to a degree. Isn't it just as difficult to determine who is right with this sort of argument? Yes, it is. But it doesn't follow from these points that the moral methodology *reduces* to the factual. For one thing, by invoking the moral argument you still have the high ground, *even if your reader thinks your facts, or your analyses of the facts, are mistaken*. This is why holding the high ground *can* mean genuine domination (as Clausewitz says) — its reality cannot be denied. Your intentions become almost as important as your arguments. No one can impugn your motivations. You are not a racist — you are battling *against* racism. The very fact will, in itself, cause many (who would otherwise be diametrically opposed) to look more favorably upon factual arguments put forth by yourself and others.

What We Should Do

So here is my suggestion for strategy. The demographers, economists, social scientists and population experts should keep pumping out books filled with factual arguments — we can't afford to let the opposition make inroads in that theater. This is an important function. But we are sorely lacking books and articles along the line of Beck's. We need books that argue from the moral point of view — books that assume the moral high ground or take back the ground assumed by others. These moral arguments are *logically prior* to the factual arguments in that they "prepare the way." By

showing first that the anti-immigrationist position is a moral position in its own right, they open the door for acceptance of the factual material. My suggested strategy thus diverges from Sagoff's. He seems to think factual arguments should be dispensed with altogether. My view, however, is that both are essential to a complete strategy. To paraphrase Immanuel Kant: the moral without the factual is empty, the factual without the moral is blind.

Antoine-Henri Jomini, the great propounder of Napoleonic strategies, claimed that victory in war is achieved by the occupation of enemy territory. This alone, claims Jomini, is what brings a war to successful conclusion. If also true of debates, then we must win the war of immigration reform by concentrating on turning the tables on the opponents and re-occupying the moral high ground which is rightfully ours. **TSC**

NOTES

¹ Mark Sagoff, "Do We Consume Too Much?", *The Atlantic Monthly*, June 1997.

² Sagoff, *ibid.*, p.96.

³ This is no elitist claim. We all do this, from scientists to philosophers. Objectivity is often preached but seldom practiced.

⁴ Roy Beck, *The Case Against Immigration: The moral, economic, social and environmental reasons for reducing U.S. immigration back to traditional levels* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), p.176ff.