INTRODUCTION

Suppose Mike is involved in a debate about the truth of his own particular New Age belief system. Things are not going well for him. Mike's arguments are being picked apart, and, worse still, his opponents have come up with several devastating objections that he can't deal with. How might Mike get himself out of this bind?

One possibility is to adopt the strategy I call *Going Nuclear*. Going Nuclear is an attempt to unleash an argument that lays waste to every position, bringing them all down to the same level of 'reasonableness'. Mike might try to force a draw by detonating a philosophical argument that achieves what during the Cold War was called 'mutually assured destruction', in which both sides in the conflict are annihilated. Here's an example.

Skepticism About Reason

In philosophy, a 'skeptic' is someone who denies we have knowledge in a given area. Here is a classic example of a skeptical argument:

> *Whenever we argue about the truth or falsity of a belief, we apply our powers of reason. But why suppose that reason is itself a reliable route to the truth? We might attempt to justify our use of reason, of course. But any justification of reason that we offer will itself rely on reason. Relying on reason to justify our reliance on reason is a bit like taking a second-hand car salesman's word for it that he is trustworthy – it's an entirely circular justification, and so no justification at all! So it turns out that our*

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reliance on reason is entirely unjustified. It's a leap of faith!

From the claim that our reliance on reason is unjustified, it is seemingly then but a short step to the conclusion that no belief is justified:

But if reliance on reason cannot be justified, then, because every rational justification relies on reason, so no belief can be justified. But if no belief is justified, then, ultimately, everything is a faith position! But then your belief is no more reasonable than mine. Get out of that!

Whether or not this is actually a good argument for the conclusion that no belief is justified is not a question I'll address here. The point is, at first sight, it does *look* pretty persuasive. It's not easy to spot precisely where the argument goes wrong, if, indeed, it goes wrong at all. This means that if Mike's belief system is taking a beating, rationally speaking, Mike can adopt the last-ditch tactic of employing this skeptical argument. Mike can then admit that *his* belief might not be justified. But he can insist that his opponent's belief system cannot be justified either. The skeptical argument offers Mike a wonderful 'get out of jail free' card. It allows him to walk away with his head held high, saying, 'So you see? In the last analysis, our beliefs are *equally* (ir)rational! They are *both* "faith positions"!'

You can see why I call this strategy *Going Nuclear*. Once Mike plays the skeptical card, all his opponent's hard work in constructing arguments against Mike's position counts for nothing. Kaboom! At one stroke, Mike demolishes them all. He lays waste to every rational argument, bringing every belief down to the same level.

In order for Mike's opponent to deal with his *Going Nuclear*, they will now have to refute his philosophical argument. That is a difficult, perhaps impossible, thing to do. They are certainly going to struggle. As a result, any

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audience to their debate will be struck not only by Mike's sophistication in employing such a devastating philosophical objection, but also by his opponent's mounting frustration as they wrestle with the thorny philosophical conundrum Mike has set them. It's quite likely Mike will be perceived to be the intellectual victor in this exchange. At the very least, he won't be thought to have lost.

This version of *Going Nuclear* can be employed in defence of a wide variety of beliefs. Believe in the curative powers of crystals, or that there's a family of fairies living at the bottom of your garden? If you find yourself on the losing side of the argument, you can always employ *Going Nuclear* as a last ditch, face-saving strategy.

So what, exactly, is wrong with this version of *Going Nuclear*? After all, it might be that the skeptical argument Mike has employed really is a good argument. Perhaps every belief system really is as rational as every other. So, if Mike finds himself argued into a corner, why shouldn't he employ such a skeptical argument?

Because it's almost certainly an intellectually dishonest ruse. Those who press the nuclear button rarely do so in good faith. Bear in mind that, in such discussions, playing the skeptical card really is the nuclear option. By *Going Nuclear*, Mike avoids defeat, but *only by utterly annihilating the rationality of every belief.* All positions, no matter how sensible or nuts, come out as equally (ir)rational.

If Mike is to be consistent, he must now accept that that the Earth is flat, that the Earth is round, that milk makes people fly, that it doesn't, that astrology is true, that is isn't – that all these beliefs are equally (un)reasonable. Now of course, Mike almost certainly doesn't believe any of this. The fact is, he does think reason provides us with a fairly reliable tool for establishing what is true and what isn't. We all rely on reason in our day-to-day lives – Mike included. In fact, Mike constantly trusts his life to reason, whenever, for example, he trusts that the brakes on his car will work, that a bridge will support his weight, that a medicine will save his life, and so on.

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Indeed, those who employ this version of *Going Nuclear* are usually quite content to rely on reason to make their case just so long as they are not losing the argument. It's only when the tide of rationality turns against them that they reach for the nuclear button. And of course, once their opponent has left the room, they'll start using reason again to try to prop up their belief. That's downright hypocritical.

So this version of *Going Nuclear* is, in truth, almost always a ploy. Those who use it don't usually believe what they're saying about reason. They say it only to raise enough dust and confusion to make quick their escape.

(N.b. this is adapted from Stephen Law's forthcoming book, *Believing Bullshit*).

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Editor

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