

EDITORIAL

I have recently come across several examples in public debate of what I call 'going nuclear' – so I thought I would explain here my irritation at the strategy. Consider this argument:

Why suppose reason is a reliable route to the truth? Any justification of reason we offer will itself rely on reason, and so be unacceptably circular. So, that reason is a reliable route to truth cannot be justified. But if reliance on reason cannot be justified, then, because every justification relies on reason, nothing can be justified! So, all beliefs are equally irrational.

Moreover, if, to qualify as knowledge, a belief must be justified, knowledge is impossible too.

(Notice, by the way, how this skeptical argument undermines itself – if reason cannot be trusted, then the reasoning used in this argument cannot be trusted either).

Now suppose I am involved in a debate – and I'm struggling to make my case. In fact, my opponent seems to have shown I'm wrong. Oh dear. What do I do?

I might be tempted to make just this sceptical move. It offers a wonderful 'get out of jail' card. I give the sceptical argument outlined above and conclude: 'So you see? – both our positions are, in the last analysis, equally (ir)rational!'

Once I play the sceptical card, my opponent's hard work in constructing arguments against my position counts for nothing. At one stroke, they are all demolished. I can now walk away with my head held high, having 'established' that my position is no less reasonable than my opponent's.

Now sometimes, particularly in debates concerning the supernatural, people do play this sort of sceptical card. Perhaps that's OK. But bare in mind that in such discussions, playing the sceptical card really is 'the nuclear option'. By playing the card, we avoid defeat. But only by utterly annihilating the rationality of every position. All positions, no matter how sensible or nuts, come out as *equally* (ir)rational.

Once we press the nuclear button, we must now say: 'Hey, 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 Jesus is God, that he isn't – all these beliefs are *equally (un)reasonable!*'

But is that what we *really* want to say? Probably not.

In fact, once we take the nuclear option, we have to give up supposing reason is any sort of route to truth. We can't take the nuclear option, but then, when we think maybe we can muster a cogent argument to support our belief in ghosts, or astrology, or some particular religion, after all, slip that argument back into the fray.

Indeed, doesn't the fact that we do continue to use reason wherever we think it supports our case – and also in everyday life, when we rely on it almost every minute (indeed, we constantly trust our lives to it) – shows that playing the sceptical card is, in truth, usually just a rhetorical ploy. When we play this sceptical card, we don't *really* believe what we're saying about reason. Often as not, we say it simply to raise enough dust and confusion to make quick our escape. Or so it seems to me.

Stephen Law, Editor