Politics is so nasty because we're all speaking different languages [1]

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If you?re frustrated by how vicious and pointless politics is, a brief Kindle single by Arnold Kling may offer some insight. ?The Three Languages of Politics [3]? (£1.34,US link [4]) dissects one of the main problems with politics: that progressives, conservatives and libertarians are all speaking different languages that rarely overlap and cause us to misunderstand and vilify our opponents.

The three languages are based on three different ways of thinking about problems. Progressives, says Kling, see political problems as being conflicts between oppressors and the oppressed; conservatives as between barbarism and civilization; libertarians as between coercion and freedom. These ideologies cannot be boiled down to these three things, but the rhetoric used by their adherents often can be.

As a libertarian I often find discussions with non-libertarians frustrating because they don?t even seem to care about the stuff that matters to me. (I?m told the feeling is mutual.) On drugs, for instance, conservatives seem not to care at all about the fact that people are put into jail for what they do in the privacy of their own home, and progressives often only seem to object to the harm caused by anti-drug laws, not to the very fact that these invasive laws exist at all.

Of course this is frustrating and it is tempting to say that these people are coercive authoritarians ? just as a progressive might say that I am a defender of oppressive businesses when I advocate for looser business regulation, or a conservative would say that I want to let British society unravel by letting more people immigrate to the UK. Maybe they have a point, maybe not. We?re speaking different languages without realising it.

The phenomenon of ?motivated reasoning? doesn?t help. The more informed a person is, the more closed-minded they are. If your web of belief about politics is well-developed, you will have stronger prior reasons to dismiss new information that contradicts what you already know. We are much quicker to question the methodology of a study whose conclusions we dislike than one we like.

And politics is usually about tribes, too. Even if you aren?t a member of a political party, you probably know people you consider to be on your side in politics, particularly if you are immersed in politics in your job or an extracurricular hobby. Much, even most, political discourse can be seen not as an effort to change the minds of your opponents (or your allies), but as a way of developing your status in your tribe.

All of these factors contribute to a poisonous political environment that rewards tribal point scoring above all else. Disagreement is never comes from honest error, but from malice or stupidity. Arnold Kling?s ?The Three Languages of Politics [3]? is a wise, insightful deconstruction of the hatefulness of political discourse. It is a classic. Everyone who talks about politics should read it.

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