

3. RAPOPORT'S RULES

Just how charitable are you supposed to be when criticizing the views of an opponent? If there are *obvious* contradictions in the opponent's case, then of course you should point them out, forcefully. If there are somewhat hidden contradictions, you should carefully expose them to view—and then dump on them. But the search for hidden contradictions often crosses the line into nitpicking, sea-lawyering,* and—as we have seen—outright parody. The thrill of the chase and the conviction that your opponent *has* to be harboring a confusion somewhere encourages uncharitable interpretation, which gives you an easy target to attack. But such easy targets are typically irrelevant to the real issues at stake and simply waste everybody's time and patience, even if they give amusement to your supporters. The best antidote I know for this tendency to caricature one's opponent is a list of rules promulgated many years ago by the social psychologist and game theorist Anatol Rapoport (creator of the winning Tit-for-Tat strategy in Robert Axelrod's legendary prisoner's dilemma tournament).†

How to compose a successful critical commentary:

1. You should attempt to re-express your target's position so clearly, vividly, and fairly that your target says, "Thanks, I wish I'd thought of putting it that way."

* Maritime law is notoriously complicated, strewn with hidden traps and escape clauses that only an expert, a *sea lawyer*, can keep track of, so *sea-lawyering* is using technicalities to evade responsibility or assign blame to others.

† The Axelrod tournament (Axelrod and Hamilton, 1981; Axelrod, 1984) opened up the blossoming field of theoretical research on the evolution of altruism. I give an introductory account in *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (Dennett, 1995, pp. 479–480), and in more recent times there has been an explosion of variations, both simulations and experiments, in laboratories around the world. Rapoport's wonderfully simple implementation of the idea "I won't hit you if you don't hit me" is the seed from which all the later studies and models have grown.

2. You should list any points of agreement (especially if they are not matters of general or widespread agreement).
3. You should mention anything you have learned from your target.
4. Only then are you permitted to say so much as a word of rebuttal or criticism.

One immediate effect of following these rules is that your targets will be a receptive audience for your criticism: you have already shown that you understand their positions as well as they do, and have demonstrated good judgment (you agree with them on some important matters and have even been persuaded by something they said).*

Following Rapoport's Rules is always, for me at least, something of a struggle. Some targets, quite frankly, don't deserve such respectful attention, and—I admit—it can be sheer joy to skewer and roast them. But when it is called for, and it works, the results are gratifying. I was particularly diligent in my attempt to do justice to Robert Kane's (1996) brand of incompatibilism (a view about free will with which I profoundly disagree) in my book *Freedom Evolves* (2003), and I treasure the response he wrote to me after I had sent him the draft chapter:

... In fact, I like it a lot, our differences notwithstanding. The treatment of my view is extensive and generally fair, far more so than one usually gets from critics. You convey the complexity of my view and the seriousness of my efforts to address difficult questions rather than merely sweeping them

* The formulation of Rapoport's Rules here is my own, done from memory of correspondence with Rapoport many years ago, now apparently lost. Samuel Ruth recently pointed out to me that the original source of Rapoport's Rules is in his book *Fights, Games, and Debates* (1960) and his paper "Three Modes of Conflict" (1961), which articulates rule 1, attributing it to Carl Rogers, and variations on the rest of the rules. My version is somewhat more portable and versatile.

under the rug. And for this, as well as the extended treatment, I am grateful.

Other recipients of my Rapoport-driven attention have been less cordial. The fairer the criticism seems, the harder to bear in some cases. It is worth reminding yourself that a heroic attempt to find a defensible interpretation of an author, if it comes up empty, can be even more devastating than an angry hatchet job. I recommend it.