

Final Answer

By Theodore Dalrymple

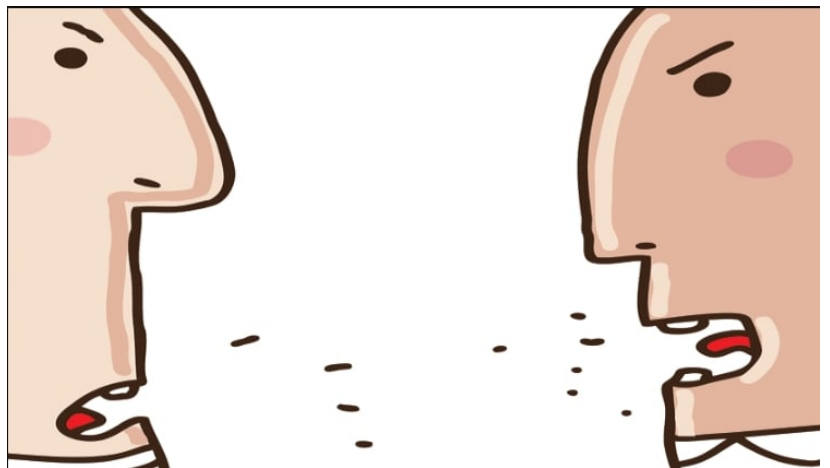
Very shortly before he was shot dead by a single bullet in front of 3,000 students in Utah, Charlie Kirk had the following exchange with a student:

STUDENT: Do you know how many transgender Americans have been mass shooters over the last ten years?

KIRK: Too many.

STUDENT: Five in ten years. How many mass shootings have there been in that time?

KIRK: Counting or not counting gang violence?



This shows Kirk to have been quick on his feet and a master of rhetoric, but both the questions and answers deserve closer examination.

The questioner clearly meant to imply that transgender persons had no greater, or perhaps a lesser, propensity to extreme violence than other people. Kirk adroitly answered, "Too many," because, virtually by definition, one is too many: There is no acceptable number of mass shootings except zero. Kirk was therefore right, but only in a rather trivial sense.

It was ironic, perhaps, that his presumed killer was living in some kind of relationship with a man "transitioning," as the cant phrase put it. However, this does not answer the question one way or another.

In fact, to demonstrate that transgender persons had a higher, lower, or equal propensity to mass shooting would be very difficult. Leaving aside the question of the definition of mass shootings, there is the question, not easily answered, of who is to count as transgender.

Then there is the question of the proper comparators. Male-to-female transgenders would have to be compared with males, and female-to-male with females. The comparison would have to be controlled for age and other factors. Another difficulty is the rarity of the index events (there is less than one mass shooting annually per million of the American population), and transgender people of various ages are not very common, either. These problems combine to make any statistical generalization about the increased, decreased, or equal propensity of transgender people to extreme violence hazardous, and most likely meaningless.

Even if some reliable statistical relationship between transgender people and mass shooting were found, it would not by itself prove causation. The association, if there were one, would most likely be very much less than that between maleness, or age, and extreme violence. If it were found that transgender people were 40 or 50 percent more likely to commit a mass shooting, so what?

The argument against transgenderism as an ideology does not depend on some doubtfully proven increased liability of transgender people to mass shooting, nor would the ideology be in any way strengthened by the absence of such an increased liability. The ideology is wrong because it is based upon the most obvious lies.

Kirk's answer to the second question, how many mass shootings there had been in the past ten years, was interesting. Certainly, it was very rhetorically effective, using a technique that almost anyone who has ever been involved in a debate has used. Kirk's quickness of wit was admirable, but was his answer a good one?

It might have been a good answer if mass shooting and gang warfare were the same or very similar phenomena, but obviously they are not. They are both deliberate shootings as tuberculosis and thyroid cancer are diseases.

Presumably, Kirk meant to draw attention to the fact (I assume it *is* a fact) that gang warfare in America results in more deaths than mass shootings and therefore is the more significant social problem. This may be so, but it is not a direct answer to the question.

No doubt victims of mass shootings tend to be a different kind of person from those of gang warfare, but the crime of murder is not the killing of a nice person, but the killing of a human being. In a civilized society, this has to be so; otherwise, we are on the slippery slope to a situation in which everyone can decide whom they may eliminate in a clear conscience, or even as a public service. Apparently, a disturbingly large proportion of young Americans think that killing a political opponent, if he or she is sufficiently dislikable, is justified.

Imagine trying to console the relatives of a victim of a mass shooting by telling him or her that there are more victims of gang warfare; it would be like telling someone with a brain tumor, in the hope of comforting him, that far more people die of heart attacks. If you suffer from a rare disease, you don't tell the specialist in that disease that he could be attending to people with a much more common disease.

The student who questioned Kirk could have accused him of

avoiding the subject, while Kirk could have accused the student of having avoided a much larger subject. It seems that once a political subject is broached, people enter a labyrinth of *ad hominem* recriminations and speculation about the motives (always bad) of those with whom they disagree.

We are not obliged, of course, to occupy our minds with only the most important subjects (even if there could be an objective measure of importance, like a wavelength or specific gravity). It is no criticism of someone that he is interested in an arcane subject and of no interest to us or to many others, provided only that he does not grotesquely inflate the significance of his interest.

To ask how many people have been killed in mass shootings is not automatically to deny the importance of gang killings; though as a matter of psychological fact, it is probable that those who interest themselves in the one are less likely to interest themselves in the other. Few are those who can spread their outrage equitably between all that merits outrage. It is rare that those who recount the misdeeds or greed of landlords also recount the dishonest or disgraceful conduct of tenants. It would be difficult to find a common measure that allowed one to decide, objectively, which was worse.

While we remain human rather than all-seeing gods, I do not see any way out of this problem. I have to admit that I have not always been entirely scrupulous in verbal argument myself—which is why I prefer the printed word, in which I never employ such rhetorical tricks as arguing past the point, begging the question, and resorting to the *ad hominem*.

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