Social Semiotics

Poe's Law, group polarization, and argumentative failure in religious and political discourse

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Poe's Law, group polarization, and argumentative failure in religious and political discourse

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Poe's Law is roughly that online parodies of religious views are indistinguishable from sincere expressions of religious views. Poe's Law may be expressed in a variety of forms, each highlighting either a facet of indirect discourse generally, polarized attitudes of online audiences, or the quality of online religious material. As a consequence of the polarization of online discussions, invocations of Poe's Law have relevance in wider circles than religion, particularly politics. Moreover, regular invocations of Poe's Law in critical discussions have the threat of further entrenching and polarizing views.

Keywords: straw man fallacy; epistemology; satire; group polarization; religion; political argument

Invoking Poe's Law is a mainstay of discussion of religion on the web. Poe's Law is roughly that online parodies of religious views are indistinguishable from sincere expression of religious views. Nathan Poe is widely credited for formulating the law, hence the law's eponymity. Poe first noted this particular difficulty in an entry on a *Christianforums.com* chat page regarding creationism:

> Without a winking smiley or other blatant display of humor, it is utterly impossible to parody a Creationist in such a way that *someone* won't mistake (it) for the genuine article.[1]

This is to say that unless there are unmistakable cues that one is being ironic or sarcastic, many parodies are not only likely to be interpreted as earnest contributions, they will, in fact, be identical in content to sincere expressions of the view. This phenomenon and invocations of it are of semiotic interest. On the one hand, Poe's Law and invocations of it regard a peculiar difficulty in media communication and interpretation. Specifically, the difficulty is in interpreting whether speakers sincerely believe what they have communicated or whether they are indirectly criticizing those commitments by way of parody. On the other hand, these and related difficulties of interpretation are contributing factors in the polarization of a good deal of religious and political discourse. This essay, then, is an exercise in applied semiotics.[2] I will argue for four theses. First, that Poe's Law may be rendered in a number of ways, each expressing either (1) a semiotic-interpretive difficulty of indirect discourse generally, (2) the polarized attitudes of online audiences, or (3) the quality of online

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religious material. Second, that Poe's Law has relevance in progressively wider circles as a consequence of the polarization of other discussions. Of particular importance are the political analogues of invoking Poe's Law. Third, regular invocations of Poe's Law or similar sentiments in critical discussions online or otherwise have the threat of further entrenching and polarizing views. And fourth, there are various philosophical lessons to be learned from the Poe's Law phenomenon, and as I sort through four competing takes, I will argue, finally, for three rules of augmentative responsibility that arise in light of the philosophical lessons.

Poe's Law and its versions

The website *LandoverBaptist.com* has had headlines that run from the goofy ("What Can Christians Do to Help Increase Global Warming?" and "New Evidence Suggests Noah's Sons Rode Flying Dinosaurs") to the chilling ("Satan Calls Another Pope to Hell" and "Trade Us Your Voter's Registration Card for Free Fried Chicken from Popeye's"). The site is designed to parody the racism, scientific illiteracy, and religious bigotry widely attributed to American fundamentalist and evangelical Christians.[3] But the site's posted mail hardly reflects public awareness that the site is parodic. Most email responses begin by chastising the authors for not knowing the true meaning of Christianity, for having misinterpreted some quoted Bible passage, or for being hypocrites about some point of contention. Very little of the posted mail actually confronts the owners and writers at Landover with what they are actually doing: presenting a grotesque, overblown, and bombastic parody of Christian religious life. LandoverBaptist.com's mail bag has entries from its first days, and there has been a consistent failure on behalf of the writing public to determine that the site is a parody.[4] This yields what may be a first, weak, version of Poe's Law:

> **PL1:** For parodies of religious extremism, there will be consistent confusion of the parodies for sincere commitments to the views expressed.

The reason why PL1 is weak is that it does not hinge on any requirements on the audiences or anything about the parody beyond that it is a parody. Nor is it an account of the difficulty for, or the possibility of, readers detecting the parody. In LandoverBaptist.com's case, detecting the farce is actually not particularly difficult, since their site links to a store selling atheist T-shirts and bumper stickers. Further, the owners of LandoverBaptist.com likely only post letters from aggrieved people who do not know the site is a parody, and a good deal of the mail confronting them for the parody is likely not posted (it would break the spell of parody). In essence, PL1 may simply amount to the observation that many of one's indirect speech acts are misinterpreted – e.g., sarcasm, satire, and irony also have their attendant confusions for sincerity. Poe's Law, on this weak version, is simply a truism about the semiotic challenges of indirect communication.[5] That is, given that the symbolic functions of the language in such cases of indirect communication (e.g., sarcasm, hyperbole, and so on) depend on assumptions shared by the audience, unless there is sufficient overlap between groups (speakers and audience), there will not be sufficient data to make a determination of what has been expressed. Meanings in parody (and irony, too) exploit the ambiguous space. The point that is raised here is that because

some communicative acts are functionally ambiguous, there will be confusion surrounding their interpretation.

To salvage what is unique about Poe's Law and what invoking it implies requires we set it in a context wherein two further factors are significant: (1) the speech acts of sincerity are indistinguishable from the parodies in some distinctive intellectually or morally vicious fashion; and (2) the audience for both kinds of speech acts are familiar with and likely expect indefensible expressions from the religiously extreme.

In order for two speech acts to be indistinguishable as sincere or parodic, there must be no overt hints of parody or humor. This is the case for most forms of indirect speech act. For example, sarcastic comments, when *spoken*, often have a tone of voice that works as a cue. In conversational written media where tone of voice cannot be communicated (emails, chat boards, text messages), informal icons have been used as such cues. Hence, Poe's reference to 'winking smiley' emoticons in his explanation – we have developed symbols to stand in for our natural expressive cues marking how our sentences should be interpreted. Exclamation and question marks were just the beginning. Without overtly marking one's speech acts as sarcastic, listener defaults are to take speakers as being sincere – saying what is relevant and true to the best of their knowledge. By Poe's initial statement, it seems the same goes for parody.

A second crucial feature of parodies, for them to be successfully appreciated *as parodies* by their audience, is that they must be received as humorous in a specific fashion. The humor of a parody is usually found in hyperbolizing a distinctive and offensive feature of what is parodied.[6] The force of the parody, usually, is that of a focused assessment in light of these features. The humor is often dark, in that we often see the unfortunate consequences of some bad habit run unchecked. Exemplary are parodies of religious fundamentalists highlight their scientific illiteracy and religious bigotry having these features motivate morally and intellectually indefensible statements. And so, at Landover, Pastor Deacon Fred insists that he "cannot wait to see people burn in Hell" and that modern Christianity is in an unfortunate track of "sissification," because there are no longer programs or holy wars. Regarding science, Landover's Pastor Deacon Fred holds that "being familiar with the holy Bible gives you more authority than anyone who holds a post-graduate degree!" And as a consequence, he reasons that given the contents of the book of *Revelations*, we should have no concern for global warming:

> Why should we give a lick if our thermometers are edging up a bit, when the Lord promised he is going to turn the whole planet into a fireball any minute now? [7]

It turns out those at LandoverBaptist.com can be both global warming deniers and downplayers. This is parody, and it is extreme, indeed.[8]

Again, the humor and point of these sorts of parody is to present religious bigotry and scientific illiteracy in a fashion that magnifies it and thereby highlights its vice. The question, though, is how *magnified* those parodies really are. Even the most casual websurfing yields similar, if not *more* shocking scientific illiteracy and religious bigotry. At *freesundayschoollessons.org*, global warming is refuted by God's promise in Genesis 8:22 that the climate will never change.[9] Republican US Representative John Shimkus of Illinois explicitly denied global warming on the basis of his literal interpretation of the same Biblical passage, saying: "The Earth will

end only when God determines it's time to be over.''[10] Ann Coulter famously insisted in her *National Review Online* opinion that once the United States has investigated the 9/11 highjackers, "we should invade their countries, kill their leaders, and convert them to Christianity."[11] D.L. Moody's quip, "The Christian on his knees sees more than the philosopher on tiptoe," is a regular refrain in exchanges ranging from discussions of intelligent design to the problem of evil, which regularly gets any believer out of any argumentative jam. Fred Phelps of the Westboro Baptist Church has been protesting at soldiers' funerals and posting leaflets for and videos from the protests at *godhatesfags.com*. They read, for example:

> These soldiers are dying form [*sic*] the homosexual and other sins of America. God is now our enemy, and God Himself is fighting against America.''[12]

Because the USA tolerates the sin of homosexuality, Phelps believes God justly punished the USA with the 9/11 attacks, and hence displays placards that read: "Thank God for 9/11."[13] Finally, Pastor Deacon Fred's ironic wish to view the suffering of the damned is not so far from St. Thomas's insistence that the blessed will rejoice in the sufferings of the wicked (Summa Question 94, article 3). Even serious philosophers have expressed the thought. These are *not* parodies, and they are extreme, indeed.[14]

Without the cues that the parodies are parodies and with equally extreme material available on the web, the casual websurfer is in a unique cognitive position. That is, from the perspective of an informal websearch, it seems that for any parody page with extreme and shocking content, there is at least one sincere page with equally (or more) extreme and shocking content of relevance. Given that parodic speech acts can be distinguished from those they parody by either overt cues or hyperbolic content, there are no positive reasons to ever take parodic statements as parodic. The evidence of content on any parody page provides no reason to prefer interpreting it as parodic or sincere, since many sincere websites have the same content as the parodies. As a consequence, we may formulate Poe's Law in two further ways. First, we may capture it as a principle of correlation between one group of webpages and another:

> **PL2:** For any webpage parodic of religious extremism, there is at least one webpage that has sincere and equally extreme content.

This is to say that for any parody, one can always find a page that says basically the same thing sincerely. Note, I am not, in this essay, out to determine the truth or falsity of this law, but to determine the effects that *believing* and *invoking* this law has on those participating in online deliberations. And if one believes or invokes Poe's Law in a discussion, one is saying that some content on the web is indistinguishable as parody or sincerity. Consequently, this places readers and interpreters of these pages in a difficult interpretive circumstance, which yields a further semiotic–epistemic version of Poe's Law:

> **PL3:** For any webpage parodic of religious extremity, if the webpage has no overt cues of its status as parodic, no appeals to the page's content can distinguish it from that of a webpage with sincerely expressed religiously extreme views.

This is to say: if a reader stumbles onto a webpage with shockingly extreme religious content, and if there are no overt cues of parody, the reader has no more reason to infer that the site is a parody than she has to take the site as sincere. The fact that the site's authors express ideas that are heinous, irrational, or even buffoonish is not yet a reason to infer that the site is a joke, because for every parody, there are equally extreme and equally sincere expressions on similar issues.

Before proceeding, it is important to be clear. This essay is not out to show that P1, P2, or P3 are true. The objective here is to clarify what one expresses when one invokes Poe's Law and to demonstrate what the consequences of its invocations are. The accounds given above should not be taken as cases for the truth of the above instantiations of Poe's Law, but as clarifications of what Poe's Law is supposed to be. We must first be clear about what the law is before we can assess its truth or the meanings expressed when it is invoked.

Dialectical consequences of holding Poe's Law as true

The question is what occurs when one takes Poe's Law as true. Further, what occurs when one expresses that attitude in critical conversation? It is clear that when one accepts Poe's Law or invokes it in critical discussion, one overtly makes an assessment of the quality of one's intellectual opponents, specifically, a judgment of their *poor* quality. Given the content of the law, as shown PL2 and PL3, we see that those who would hold the law true are committed to a view of (many) religious believers as people indistinguishable from their parodies. It is a decidedly negative assessment. Invoking the law, then, has dialectical consequences. It is instructive to see a parallel between Poe's Law and other dialectical strategies of overtly making negative evaluations of one's interlocutors, particularly, those with untoward argumentative consequences.

Let us consider the straw man fallacy. The straw man fallacy is that of taking one's opponent's views and arguments, distorting them in ways that make them indefensible, then attacking and refuting the distorted versions of the views. One *constructs* a new, less definsible opponent and engages with that construction (the straw man) instead of the real opponent waiting for an answer. Importantly, straw man arguments not only do our dialectical opponents a disservice, they do audiences for these exchanges a disservice, too. Audiences, unless they themselves are as knowledgeable as the speaker, rely on the speaker to be demonstrative of the dialectical situation generally between those who defend the speaker's view and those who defend the opponent's view. Straw-manning, then, badly educates listeners on the difficulties of the issue and the state of deliberations on it.[15] The question is how this element of straw man strategies obtain in Poe's Law cases.

On the one hand, the existence of parody sites seems vicious for the same reason why straw-manning is vicious – they not only fail to engage the other side in their refutations, but they populate the intellectual space around an issue with imaginary buffoons. Lampooning one's dialectical opponents with grotesque portrayals of their unrepentant intellectual and moral vice has real chances of distorting one's view of the dialectical situation. One comes to see oneself locked in battle with an opponent beyond reason and unredeemable. This is destructive of further positive contributions to resolving any disagreement between the sides, and, in fact, leads to fewer and fewer attempts at any cooperative communication.

On the other hand, on Poe's Law's second instantiation (PL2), parodies do not *distort* the current state of affairs, but are *reflective* of the current state of play with extremists. To clarify: since the parodies are indistinguishable in content from the real things, the parodies are *not misrepresentations* of how dire the intellectual situation has become. To put it expressively: *No matter how crazy or irrational a straw man of a religious fundamentalist one constructs, there will always be an equally crazy and irrational defender of religion one could have simply googled up.*[16] In essence, one does not *really* straw man the religious extremists with one's parodies, one just doesn't directly refer to them...but rather to them under pseudonym. If Poe's Law is correct, straw-manning is impossible. The dialectical consequences are severe.

Perhaps this is overstated, but it is close to the point. Straw-manning is the rhetorical strategy of depicting one's opponents as dumber than they actually are. The trouble is that Poe's Law makes it such that no matter how badly portrayed an opponent is, there is one that actually is that bad. One, thereby, cannot successfully portray the competition as dumber than they actually are, since (by hypothesis) there are members of the opposition that are as bad as (or even worse than) the portrayal. Consequently, believing Poe's Law is true effectively places any discussant in a uniquely difficult position: if one believes the other side of a dispute cannot be straw-manned, then how is one to take the other side's case seriously at all?

Ironically, online discussions of religious extremists and their presence on the web reflect this duality of dialog captured in Poe's Law. In some cases, this may be, in fact, an inversion of the law's regular application, one that has a unique purchase. For example, *ObjectiveMinistries.org* reported in 2001 that they had organized and sponsored a science fair for creation science. Some of the prize-winning entries (from elementary school to high school) were:

- "My uncle is a man named Steve. (Not a monkey)"
- "Pokemon prove evolution is false"
- "Women were designed for homemaking"
- "Rocks can't evolve, where did they come from, Mr Darwin?"
- "Using prayer to microevolve latent antibiotic resistance in bacteria"
- "Thermodynamics of Hellfire"[17]

MuseumofHoaxes.com opened a thread to discuss these postings, and many of the respondents took ObjectiveMinistries.org to be a hoax site, one like (even associated with) LandoverBaptist.com.[18] Instead of Poe's Law casting doubts on the quality of reasoning and material posted by religious extremists, the law here is invoked to undercut purported evidence of the excesses of extremism. It brings into question the quality of the discussion had at the time – calling Poe's Law in the middle of a discussion of a website's content calls attention to how some side of the discussion is being represented by parodists, instead of those sincere. However, it is important to note that many cases of "Calling Poe's Law" with some case has a follow up, which usually runs: "*that* may be a hoax, but *this* (LINK) is the real thing." And so the duality of Poe's Law is re-asserted: one case may be a straw man, but there is an equivalent site that is not.[19]

Even more recently, this duality of Poe's Law has been parodied at Land-overBaptist.com, which runs that atheist's websites, such as P.Z. Myers's blog *Pharyngula* and Richard Dawkins' site *RichardDawkins.net* are so extreme in the

"insanity" that infects the minds of atheists, it is impossible to tell if they themselves are parodies of atheism. And as a consequence, there is a correlate "Bo's Law":

> It is impossible to tell through the internet whether a person or organization is legitimately Atheist or is simply a person or organization making fun of Atheism.[20]

But the reasoning behind Bo's Law goes further than Poe's Law, as the central premise is that *all atheists are really fake atheists*, because: "we know that is quite impossible (to be an atheist), since there is no such thing as a real Atheist. All sane and rational people believe in God, whether they deny it or not." That is, the purported atheist is either someone parodying atheism or someone who has lost her mind. There are no people on the Internet (or in the world, for that matter) who profess to be atheists who are worthy of response or even attention. Remember, however, Bo's Law is posted on *LandoverBaptist's* site, so it is a parody of Poe's Law.[21] Or rather a parody of a fundamentalist Christian version of Poe's Law. But does this meta-parody have a correlate on the sincere side? Of course, the blogger *Christianscribbler* noted that the "fundamentalist atheists" could not tell parodies of their own elitism and arrogance from sincere expressions of them. A widely circulated music video, "Beware the Believers,"[22] has animated versions of popular atheists Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Eugenie Scott, P.Z. Myers, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens rapping that they are not to be questioned because, "after all, we are scientists, much smarter than you." Christianscribbler holds that the video is mostly collections of "offensive language" and "wacky hip hop dance moves" designed to display "naturalistic evolutionists' disdain for us religious folk."[23] The problem, however, was that of determining whether "Beware the Believers" was a parody of fundamentalist atheists and their purportedly elitist scorn or a sincere expression of that scorn. Some commenters at atheist P.Z. Myers' blog, *Pharyngula,* thought the video a perfect statement of their views: "More of that! If there's one way to overcome creationists, it's with cool. And this, (sic) is cool" and "How can any of the posters here think this was anything but anti-creationist, pro-science is beyond me."[24] But it was a parody. It was made as part of the advertising campaign for a movie promoting intelligent design, *Expelled*, as a means of framing the response from the scientific establishment. And so Christianscribbler triumphantly concludes:

> Yes, it was a parody, but a parody so close to the real thing that even adherents to fundamentalist evolutionary theory couldn't tell the difference, and even embraced the videos as representative of their position. [25]

The consequence, of course, is that Christianscribbler takes the lesson to be that, just as the atheist-naturalists hold that there is a difficulty in telling the difference between parodies of religious views and sincere statements of them, there is a difficulty in telling the difference between parodies of atheism and real atheists. Even the atheists have a difficult time telling the difference.

Calling Poe

A further point about the dialectical implications of invocations of Poe's Law is in order, as it also plays a well-poisoning function when deployed against an

interlocutor. For example, if a creationist holds that there were talking snakes in the Garden of Eden and expresses this commitment to the appropriate nonbelieving audience, one member of the audience may "Call Poe's Law" on the contributor – that is, accuse the contributor of being a parodist intentionally saying indefensible things. A case in point is that on a chatboard at UltimateGuitar.com regarding evolution and creationism (what special insight guitar bloggers have on the issue is never discussed), a creationist posts a lengthy and ill-formed defense of creationism, and is roundly 'flamed' by other contributors. Finally, one critic remarks, "I'm calling Poe's Law on this one, you can't actually be this retarded unless you REALLY try."[26] Similarly, the forums at RichardDawkins.net have many people who *pretend* to be defenders of intelligent design and creationism contribute in order to receive some measure of attention, and consequently they have their sincerity questioned.[27] The consequences are usually that discussions either end or proceed to devolve into personal attacks. The lesson of "Calling Poe's Law" directly to a contributor is the equivalent of saying: *the things you say are so stupid, you must be joking or something of the sort.*[28] That is: it offers the interlocutor only two options: either one is too incompetent for anything but ridicule or one is being insincere. The problem with this dialectical strategy is that it places one's interlocutor in a circumstance where there is no actual argument posed to her to defend herself against, and she has further the need to address questions of both her competency and sincerity.

Crucially, "Calling Poe's Law" on an interlocutor's contributions are not exclusively addressed to the interlocutor, but are also directed and displayed for the onlooking audience. That is, when one "Calls Poe's Law" on a particularly inept or egregious comment, one not only communicates a rejection of the opponent's view to the opponent, one reinforces a view of all such opponents as incompetent or insincere amongst the greater audience. And either way (incompetent or insincere) such a dialectical opponent is neither worth the time nor the energy in formulating more of a response than rebuffing their attempts to contribute. Importantly, such moments of "calling Poe" are often coordinate with expressions of mirth; that is, one often 'calls Poe' while laughing or trying to call attention to something laughably ridiculous about one's interlocutor – specifically, for one's onlooking audience.[29] The expressive communicative function of mirth, as observed by Hogan (2007, 404), is to decrease the tension in the situation, to indicate that the circumstance is not grave. The situation is not grave in the case where one has identified an interlocutor as a Poe, because one is no longer in an exchange with a real threat to one's cognitive economy. Rather, it is expressed to the onlooking audience that one is only exchanging with a buffoon, or a person who is merely playing one.

Poe's Law and group polarization

When groups hold each other in cognitive contempt and, as a consequence, regularly refuse to cooperatively communicate, they have a tendency to become more extreme in the views they hold as a group. That is, the lower regard one has for those with whom one disagrees and the less often one hears their views explained, the more extreme one's own views tend to become. When one talks with only like-minded people, one's views actually shift to being more extreme versions of the originals. When there are actual impediments to discussion between groups or even reflections on intelligent exchange, the discussion within the competing groups tends to be

enclaved and disconnected from those on their opponent's side. This phenomenon has been termed "group polarization" (Sunstein 2002).

Once groups begin to ignore opposing viewpoints, their "argument pools" shrink – the variety of data and their interpretations contracts (Sunstein 2002, 179). As a consequence, a limited perspective on issues yields more extreme views, because once most objections no longer are recognized as legitimate by a group, members are no longer inhibited and begin to speak not only more freely but progressively more extremely. Since there are no corrective objections arising, previously contentious views become normalized. In turn, groups that have no room for dissent tend to polarize so that they almost univocally hold extreme views.

Invocation of Poe's Law is reflective of the polarization of online discussion regarding religion. First, this is because nonbelievers take the law and references to it to be indicative of how beyond reason their infrequent religious interlocutors are. If one takes it that religious believers are of the same stripes as one's caricatures (as PL 2, specifically, runs), then one cannot seriously engage with them. Second, religious believers are aware of either invocations of the law or at least of the prevailing prejudice against them. They are regularly frustrated to the point of giving up in many discussions, because they feel that they are not taken seriously (a consequence of PL3). They then are further disaffected, because they feel that there are no serious attempts to understand their position. As a consequence, they simply prefer discussions with other religious believers. This leads directly to further insularity and balkanization of discourse, and as a consequence, a deepening of the divides that group polarization has wrought. And also, given the duality of Poe's Law and its correlates with Bo's Law noted above, the same attitudes of intellectual contempt are regularly directed at atheists and nonbelievers. Consequently, the dialectical environments of mutual regard are undercut and made so toxic that neither side would even consider a cooperative exchange with the other.[30]

One curious feature of the general Poe's Law phenomenon is its unique manner of contributing to group polarization. Invocations of Poe's Law are taken as evidence about and from one's dialectical opponents. That is, those who invoke Poe's Law in a discussion are claiming that there is evidence that an opponent's view fails a minimal standard for seriousness: either the speaker is an insincere parodist or the view represented is unredeemable and unworthy of substantive response other than parody. Regular invocations of Poe's Law, then, are taken as evidence of the fact that one's dialectical opponents regularly fail the test of seriousness. Once we notice these failures and their egregiousness, we are attentively primed to notice further instantiations. A similar pattern of *identity priming* can be seen with vocabulary words – when you learn a new word, you find it popping up everywhere. And so goes the heuristic with Poe's Law. The story unfolds as follows: A vivid and powerful case of religiously extreme views comes to a subject's attention, and subjects are then primed to detect further examples. As they are primed to detect extreme examples, many moderate, reasonable examples of the views they reject do not register. As a consequence, the subjects have collected evidence about their dialectical opponents, but they have done so through the lenses of a cognitive bias. Such a distortion then yields the view that idiocy and insincerity are representative of the opposing cognitive group. And so from a few cases of confrontational and religiously illiterate "new atheists," the theist develops generalized views about atheists. From a few cases of

religiously inspired bigotry and ignorance of science, the humanist has a view of believers as depraved illiterates.[31]

The Poe-pattern of cognition is a functional extension of patterns of selective emphasis. One takes a small, egregious sample of a class and hastily generalizes those egregious characteristics for the rest of the class. Further, once the attitude is set, the generalization becomes evidentially insulated. Once one is primed one not only detects and is attentive to the actual cases of extremism, one is primed to interpret those who do not fit the mold (one might call them *moderates*) as only cagey or closeted extremists. And so despite the fact that a speaker may present a moderate version of a view, one that may, say, make concessions to evolutionary biology, but nevertheless belongs to the same class of theistic views, once primed, an audience will be inclined to interpret the concessions as mere lip service. The opponents, as they see it, are making a purely strategic move to claim some preferred rhetorical mantle for their own. The defaults are then set on interpreting one's dialectical opponents in the worst light one can, and evidence that they are reasonable is turned into evidence they are insincere.

One further dialectical point is the unique role that invocations of Poe's Law play in group polarization. The dialectical explanation for why groups polarize is that their *argument pools shrink*, in that these pools do not have representatives for the variety of views on an issue. However, this does not mean that opposing views and their arguments fall out entirely. Only the good ones do. The bad arguments are maintained as exemplary, and consequently open to parody and easy dismissal. The functional role that Poes play in polarized discourse, then, is to maintain all the appearances of dialog properly run. Instead of the group only hearing its own voice, the opposition is allowed an appearance. But in this case, the appearance is guaranteed to be a parodic failure, which both reinforces the group's antecedent commitments and serves to maintain the thought that their opposition is nothing more than stupid and contemptible.

It seems a paradox. We have uncannily efficient means of communication and dissemination of information. Yet we seem to fail to engage with and understand each other. Poe's Law is, on the one hand, reflective of how extreme enclaved discourse has become both on the side of religious believers and the unbelievers. On the other hand, the dialectical situation has become so because of the regular invocation of the law and attitude that religious believers and unbelievers have become parodies of themselves. Neither side, given this attitude, is capable of cooperative deliberation. Polarized discourse not only breeds contempt, but further polarization. A further complication, of course, is that this communication is on the Internet. The interconnections between webpages not only allow, but also positively foster this insularity, as links are overwhelmingly to like-minded sites, not intelligent opposition.[32] And when those who have conflicting views interact, on the comment pages of YouTube or in a blog's comment string, very little of the exchanges are helpful. They, often because of the medium, are either dismissive or, worse, excessively aggressive.[33]

The breadth of the problem: politics

Poe's Law has had application beyond parodies of religious extremism. Political parody sites abound, and there are regular discussions about which are parodies and

which are the real thing. And there are many cases of confusion. For example, a Fox News commentator on "Fox and Friends" famously cited an article from a spoof news site, *AssociatedContent.com*, in 2007. He, in reviewing the story of how a school district in Maine is instituting a "ham task force" to ensure that Muslim students are not offended by their schoolmates' sandwiches in the lunchroom, insists that he is "not making this up!"[34]

Further, during the 2008 Presidential campaign cycle, a Sarah Palin parody site went up, *thepalindrome.com*, which purported to be a blog for the Republican Vice Presidential candidate to communicate with people beyond her political rallies. In it were stories about how she met awkwardly with world leaders and how many were from countries that were "not very important anyway," and how she was lectured by Henry Kissinger but "knocked off early for some McDonalds soft serve ice cream."[35] Numerous emails and blog entries with reference to the site circulated as further evidence of Palin's incompetence.[36] Further, it was widely reported that Sarah Palin thought Africa was a country, and it is here that the priming element of the Poe phenomenon is so important, as an overwhelming majority of the people who believed the rumor were self-identified Democrats (Sunstein 2009, 6 and 86).

In the wake of the financial crises of 2008, Cindy Jacobs writes at the Christian Broadcasting Network site for the 700 Club, that:

> We are going to intercede at the site of the statue of the bull on Wall Street to ask God to begin a shift from the bull and bear markets to what we feel will be the 'Lion's Market,' or God's control over the economic systems.[37]

This is to say that she is calling on Christians to come pray around a large bronze statue of a bull for market recovery. The liberal blogpage, DailyKos.com picked up the story, and blogger dhonig (already having posted entries with titles such as "Their reality has lapped our satire") posts a photo from the gathering, and ironically intones:

> "Christians," praying at a golden calf, for economic wealth. Seriously, people, how the f*#k do you satirize that?[38]

The point, of course, is that such a ritual seems positively backward for those who are readers of and believers in the Bible. Which is exactly what those who self-identify as liberal and humanist come to expect of those who self-identify as conservative and religious.

The conservative version of the problem can be seen in the tone and examples of Jason Mattera's recent *Obama Zombies*. Mattera's book is filled with vivid examples of twenty-somethings who, in 2008, were enthusiastic Obama supporters, but who also could not state any of Obama's substantive positions. Mattera describes one woman at a gathering at Bowdoin College celebrating Obama's victory:

> As one patchouli-smelling hippie on campus exhorted, "It's definitely the most spiritual experience I've had in a while." Meeting Ozzy Osbourne in the flesh was her previous one. (Mattera 2010, i)

Mattera interviews another Obama supporter, and he is careful to quote him perfectly:

> Mark Buhrmeister, young Obama supporter, had an honest observation: "Having a hip candidate like him makes it difficult to support someone else. Barak Obama is in style, so if you don't support Barack Obama it's like you're not in style. (Mattera 2010, xxi)

The Obama Zombie is not about policy, reason, or any particular issue, on Mattera's presentation. They are only about fashionability. Once we are properly cued, Mattera gives us examples of reporters and political pundits in the same vein, and then he turns to politicians. All zombies, all in the same position of being "lobotomized." The objective, again, is to portray the opposition in a way that makes their sincere expressions appear equivalent to parodies. Let your opposition talk, the thought goes, and *they satirize themselves.*

The parody-website, *the Onion*, of course, had a parody of the Obama Zombie phenomenon too, noting that after the election, Obama supporters had little to say or do. They, as a consequence, are left wandering the streets near comatose. One reporter covering the story observes:

> Worst case scenario is that someone with evil intent seizes control of them. They've proven their minds can be taken over by empty rhetoric.... They would have an entire army of extremely energetic, insufferably annoying, mindless pawns at their command.

The implication is, of course, these folks have been mindless pawns all along.

This (admittedly unsystematic) sampling of the netscape of religious and political commentary and satire paints an unhappy picture – fellow citizens, because of their polarization, often cannot tell (1) when they are being lampooned or sincerely engaged, or (2) when their opponent's positions are being parodied or presented honestly. That is, what discourse polarization in the form of Poe's Law yields is not only rough indirect communication in the form of hurtful parodies, but a lack of any confidence as to whether those with whom one agrees or disagrees are sincere. Further, it entrenches the reactionary view that all (or at least most) of those with whom one disagrees are beyond reason

Four philosophical options

A brief survey four philosophical options for articulating the significance and lessons of the Poe's Law phenomenon is in order. In the tradition of using philosophers' names as descriptors, I will call them: the MacIntyrian, Rortian, Mouffian, and Habermasian options.

The MacIntyrian response can be captured by the simple question: *what else did you expect?* One of the hallmarks of modernity is the fractured moral vocabulary of public discussion, and consequently, the dismantling of any systematic way for moral disagreement to amount to more than battles of insults. The consequence, of course, is that most deep disagreements yield the judgments that those with whom one disagrees are beyond reason – there is no way to access their reasons, given the fact that the traditions are incommensurable (MacIntyre 1984, 5). The MacIntyrian would suggest, then, that the only solution would be to stop wrangling with the opposition. The more one talks with them, the more one ends up talking and thinking like them. Better to just leave them alone and cultivate one's private virtues within one's own tradition.

The MacIntyrian option has its appeal. It certainly seems right that opting out of contestation would be a more pleasant form of life – you mind your own business. But I am unsure it would be a stable strategy, because opting out of public life in this form leaves much of the public sphere to the opposition. This is not sustainable policy. Moreover, one feature of the view seems to be that opting out *really is an option*, which is likely false for oppressed groups, or those without the resources and critical cultural mass to live apart from much of the dominant culture they abhor. Further, MacIntyrism nevertheless risks further polarization, as it amounts to doing one's best only to talk I within one's preferred tradition. That will not likely yield stable views. Finally (and this is clearly controversial, but will have to simply stand as bald assertion here), I believe the case for incommensurability between traditions is overblown, and so any argument that depends on the deep and abiding pluralism of traditions has a false premise.[39] The simple fact that the various traditions can recognize that they disagree about X, Y, or Z means that they share enough to be morally commensurate. Moreover, that the various traditions agree that it is wrong to steal, murder, and so on, at least shows that they have core sentiments in common. The issue is *what counts* as cases of those moral errors. There's more to build on, and MacIntyre's own tradition recognizes that in the many concessions the Natural Law tradition makes to pagan moral philosophy.

The Rortian response is that Poes are exactly the kind of ironic play of redescription that is necessary (Rorty 1989). Picturesque and powerful satire is so much more powerful than reasoned, logic-chopping critique. And so we sacrifice certainty about knowing that others mean what they say ... so what? Does that change whether what they say about religion or political commentary is acceptable to you? Likely not. Take, for example, the fact that though many conservatives are suspicious that Stephen Colbert is satirizing them, they still agree with most of what he says (LaMarre, Landreville, and Beam 2009, 220). The Rortian prescriptive angle, then, is that not only is this development not a bad thing, it very well may be the best development in discussion, as it is clear that nobody is ever *argued* out of their views, but rather they are joshed and cajoled out of them. These, the Rortian may say, are exactly the sort of means we should use.

The Rortian option, also, has its appeal – especially as it is designed to work within systems wherein uncertainty about final vocabularies is the norm. Ironism is the perfect comportment under these conditions. However, like MacIntyrism, I am concerned that it is not a sustainable strategy, as irony works only when one is not truly threatened, when stability is ensured. It is the attitude less of criticism, but of detached dissatisfaction. Again, I see irony less as a means for exchange, but rather as a means for dismissal. Further, it seems that Rortian ironism functions as a universal solvent on all of one's commitments. It, like skepticism, eats into anything: once it is introduced into a conflict, it not only deflates one's opponents, but also one's own positive side as well. Can one live ironically? Is there an ironic justice system? Ironic punishment? Is child-rearing ironic? Best not.

The Mouffian response is that political conflict takes many forms. Disagreement about important matters is an inescapable feature of political life, and contestation of these values and the policies they imply is a positive demand of anyone with value commitments. *Agonism* is the view that political tensions have an essential place in society, and, consequently, that conflict must be embraced in an appropriate fashion. *Agon* takes many forms, and the parody we see in Poe cases is a kind of guerilla

action. One dresses in the clothing of the opponent, one takes on their vocabulary
and their views . . . "to subvert them" (Mouffe 2005, 55). Confrontation between
conflicting notions of how to organize society will take many forms, and satire of
Poe-form is one such guise. The conflicts here cannot be solved by calm deliberation,
and they cannot be eliminated. To believe otherwise is to be a blind believer in the
"neo-liberal hegemony." What the unique form of confrontation we see with Poes is
that opponents may fight for their victories, but they maintain their opponents and
their right to fight for their visions, too. They, sadly, are maintained as caricatures,
but they are, nevertheless maintained. This is, as it were, a simple fact that the
political (as the background of conflict) will always diminish our *politics* (as attempts
to have ordered, fair exchange). Poes reveal, perhaps mutually, that adversaries in
political discussion are both, ultimately, hegemonic. That's the reality of the agonistic
situation, and Poes are artistic–symbolic extensions of that fact (cf. Mouffe 2007, 4).

The Mouffian response has its appeal, too. The best thing about it is that *agonism*
makes a space for the expressive function of constructed Poes, in that one expresses
one's frustration with one's political opponents for being opponents. As if to say: of
course they are obtuse – they believe so many false things! But the Mouffian
alternative has the background question: why, given this fact of agonism, aren't our
opponents simply our enemies? Why aren't we killing them? Or rather, why aren't we
just ignoring them or silencing them? Mouffe's (2000) answer is that they have a right
to make their case as best they can. But why do we have to listen? Why can't they just
talk to each other? Moreover, plenty of those in debates explicitly deny that the other
side has such a right. Consider, for example, blasphemy laws. Those who support
such laws must explicitly refuse to countenance cases for the other side, especially
those with examples, as that would contravene their requirements for proper
exchange. How does one enter *agon* with them? With blasphemy? With silence?
The Mouffian view requires that the situations be antagonistic, but nevertheless
bounded by basic rules of communication and argument. As far as I can see, this
view then depends on a deeper commitment to dialog and its norms, which, can be
captured better by our fourth and final option.

The Habermasian option is that in recognizing the problems that come with the
Poe's Law phenomenon, we are aware of and have the tools to articulate the norms of
properly run communicative action. Poes are cases of communicative acts that are
merely strategic, and they (because of their consequent polarization) do damage to
the background conditions for deliberation. But in any overt complaint about Poes,
we rehabilitate that ethic of nonstrategic communication. We must take steps to
avoid distortions Poes force on us. What may they be?

The following are a few rules of argumentative responsibility that allow us to live
with the fact of Poes (and perhaps even laugh at them), but nevertheless not suffer
the untoward consequences of insularity that comes with them.[40] First, get your
views about the opposition's commitments and arguments from the smartest and
most authoritative of the opposition. In the same way that you would prefer for the
representatives of the views you endorse be the most informed and clear among the
options, you should do your best to find the same on the other side. Second, ask
yourself honestly whether the parodies of your views are accurate. My argument here
has been that Poe-parodies are criticisms of element of the opposition's commit-
ments. The question is: how close to a parody of yourself are you? Third, and finally,
the following exercise is useful and rhetorically powerful: take time to construct the

best case you can for the opposition's views.[41] That is, if you are finding that even the identified best cases for the opposition fail, then take the job on yourself. You don't have to do this for every view, but it is certainly worthwhile for issues that matter. In addition, it is a powerful dialectical tool, as you set a good example for your opposition as to how to behave seriously in disputes.

To close: Poe's Law and its invocations are bellwethers for polarized discourse. Invocations of Poe's Law indicate both the extremity of the views on offer, and they reflect the cognitive contempt the sides have for each other. This is true not just for religion, but politics as well. The fact and the breadth of this polarization (and our consequent sensitivity to it) require that we argue with special care, specifically with an eye to the norms of argumentative responsibility.

Notes

1. http://christianforums.com/showthread.php?p=17606580#post17606580.
2. I see this applied edge of the semiotic program as an extension of Eliot Gaines' observation: "The pervasiveness of mass media and our dependence on it in contemporary life suggest that special skills are necessary in order to understand the nature of media and its effects on the interpretation of issues and events that happen outside the scope of an individual's experience. Semiotics could be the key" (2008, 239–240). Gaines (2007) extends this program in his application of semiotic analysis to political parody in *The Daily Show*.
3. See Lundberg's (2007) discussion of widespread academic attitudes about conservative Christians.
4. This, of course, is from *posted* mail on the Landover site, which is part of the parody. That is, were they to post confrontations of the parody as such, the parody would be undone. See the posted mail at: http://www.landoverbaptist.org/mail/
5. See, for example, Hogan's (2007) semiotic requirement of a shared system of interrelated meanings for jokes. Averbeck and Hample (2008), additionally, observe a requirement of background agreements on indirect communication for irony.
6. In this case, this humor is a counter-example to the Greimasian (1993) requirements of hidden coherences (79–80). Instead, it is all viciously coherent, yet morally and intellectually incoherent. For further discussion of difficulties with literary mirth (parody being a specie), see Hogan (2007).
7. http://www.landoverbaptist.org/2008/april/conservationsin.html
8. Elliot Gaines (2008) terms the use of the icons of a group to object to them acts of "semiotic disobedience" (243), and he notes that some cases of such deployment of humor are educational. In this case, parodies are iconic, but (as will be shown shortly), they are distortions.
9. http://www.freesundayschoollessons.org/practical-theology/environment/global-warming/
10. Reported in the Toronto Star.
11. http://www.nationalreview.com/coulter/coulter.shtml
12. http://www.godhatesfags.com/written/fliers/20081101_nicholas-casey-memorial.pdf
13. http://www.thesignsofthetimes.net/tgf911.html. Brouwer and Hess (2007) report that the responses of military bloggers to the Phelps campaign fail to recognize the thrust of Phelps's theology, but instead mistake him to be an anti-war protester (85). The presumption is that Phelps is not serious in his commitments, but overplays them for political purposes.
14. Sharon Crowley (2007) notes in "Tolerance and the Christian Right" that conservative Christians regularly adopt surprising rhetorical strategies in their public moral reasoning.
15. See Talisse and Aikin (2006) for the discursive consequences of the various forms of straw-manning.
16. See Coleman (2005, 277) for the case that blogging yields 'lowered standards' for views to be made public.

17. http://objectiveministries.org/creation/sciencefair.html
18. http://www.museumofhoaxes.com/hoax/forum/forum_comments/2265/
19. The following page is often referenced when referring to real creationist science fairs: http://www.tccsa.tc/adventure/2004_fair/
20. http://www.landoverbaptist.org/2009/january/boslaw.html (italics in the original)
21. Again, *Landover* is a parody site, at least as far as the evidence goes. It links to sites selling atheist T-shirts, it featured writers (e.g., Pastor Deacon Fred) frequently speak at freethinkers meetings, and its contents are regularly referenced by the online discussion boards as paradigmatic of online parody of religion.
22. Available on YouTube: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eaGgpGLxLQw
23. http://christianscribbler.wordpress.com/2008/07/22/poes-law-and-fundamentalist-evolutionists/
24. http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/2008/03/if_you_heard_my_voice_you_know.php
25. http://christianscribbler.wordpress.com/2008/07/22/poes-law-and-fundamentalist-evolutionists/
26. http://www.ultimate-guitar.com/forum/showthread.php?p=16706703
27. Similarly, P.Z. Myers' *Pharyngula* has a "Killfile Dungeon," which has banned commenters for abuses such as "Poe-Trolling: A particularly annoying form of trolling in which someone falsely pretends to be offering advice to favor a position they do not endorse." http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/plonk.php
28. One semiotic strategy for accounting for the implications here is that given the *situation* and the *sterotypes* (in this case, a creationist debating evolution), the *script* for the exchange is set. See Davidsen's (2007) use of the situation-sterotype-script frame for anticipating and responding to presented literary material. In this case, one treats the circumstance and interlocutor as scripted fictions.
29. For an account of the dialectical function of incredulous mirth in the face of an argument, see Aikin and Talisse (2008).
30. Russill (2007) observes that the fundamental challenge for communication, from a pragmatist perspective, is the difference between self and other (129). In this case, the challenge is deeper, because the differences are exacerbated.
31. Another strategy for articulating this is the observation that parodies provide what Horst Ruthorf (2007) calls "fictive iconic construals" of various types (282). These icons, because iconic in the sense that they are heuristic devices, become determinative of further exchange.
32. See Sunstein's (2001) *Republic.com*.
33. See Hess's (2009), observation that a good deal of the problem for reasoned discourse on the web, and specifically YouTube is the medium's "overwhelming structure and use for entertainment" (412).
34. http://thinkprogress.org/2007/04/27/fox-parody/. This is not the only case of news organizations reporting and responding to content on parody sites. More recently, Rachel Maddow reported that a number of Christians at ChristWire.org were advocating an invasion of Egypt in the wake of the 2011 political turmoil. The site, however, was a parody. See the discussion on *Talking Points Memo*: http://tpmdc.talkingpointsmemo.com/2011/02/rachel-maddow-falls-for-satirical-web-site-video.php?ref=fpb.
35. http://sarahpalin.typepad.com/
36. http://www.veryshortlist.com/vsl/daily.cfm/review/593/Website/welcome-to-the-palindrome-sarah-palins-blog/; http://www.ablemuse.com/erato/ubbhtml/Forum9/HTML/003088.html; http://wotnews.com.au/like/fake_sarah_palin/2437045/
37. http://www.cbn.com/700club/guests/bios/cindy_jacobs102008.aspx
38. http://www.dailykos.com/story/2008/10/30/145245/63/817/647006
39. Reference to author's work.
40. The following rules are adaptations of norms of argumentative discourse from a pragmatic/ dialogical perspective. See, for example, Walton (1989) and van Eemeren and Grootendorst (2004). From a rhetorical perspective on such norms, see Tindale (2004).

41. A version of this norm is articulated by You-Zheng Li (2006) as a rule of "epistemic communicational grammar" (185).

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