

# The Enlightened Centrism of Walter Sinnott-Armstrong

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I came across this article in *Aeon* magazine titled “[Reach out, listen, be patient. Good arguments can stop extremism](#)” by a philosopher named [Walter Sinnott-Armstrong](#). It starts off on a bit of an elitist footing, the author self-impressed with the ability of himself and his academic philosopher friends to support their claims using something he calls “arguments” while doubting such civil disagreement is possible for “ordinary folk,” but quickly moves on to a more down-to-earth racist framework to reassure us that [there’s actually zero difference between good and bad things](#).

The article tells the story of two extremists during the Civil Rights Movement who were forced to talk to each other whereupon “they realised that they shared the same basic values.” These two individuals were Ann Atwater, “a single, poor, black parent who led [Operation Breakthrough](#), which tried to improve local black neighbourhoods,” and CP Ellis, “an equally poor but white parent who was proud to be Exalted Cyclops of the local Ku Klux Klan.” (Yes, he actually calls Atwater an “extremist” in the article.)

Sinnott-Armstrong notwithstanding, it doesn’t take an ethicist to realize that representing the two extremes of American politics as a white supremacist terrorist group, on one hand, and a fund to ameliorate the crushing poverty faced by poor black Americans, on the other, sets up a false equivalency which lends legitimacy to white supremacist violence. But our author is so oblivious to this point that his article could pass as a satire of centrism. Unable or unwilling to take his own advice on asking questions like Socrates or engaging with conflicting perspectives, he never flinches from his presupposition that existing society—the one that produces and is historically

predicated upon poverty and Ku Klux Klans — must be defended against extremist views.

Sinnott-Armstrong's most recently published book is subtitled *How to Reason and Argue*.