

Inverse psychology

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [January 20, 1999](#) issue

The campaigns to discourage teens from smoking are counterproductive, says James Taranto in the *American Enterprise* (September-October). He has a point: teens often do rebel, and telling them not to do something is often the best way to get them to do it.

Taranto summarizes the anti-teen-smoking argument as follows: "Cigarettes are dangerous. They're for adults only. Teens are imperiled by their irresistible seductiveness. Authority figures of all kinds--politicians, teachers, editorial writers--agree they're bad."

"Why not just come out and say it," Taranto says. "Cigarettes are cool. I was a teenager once, and I remember my teen years as a time of intense rebellion. . . . All teenagers instinctively recoil at being told what to do--a fact that seems to have escaped the notice of anti-smoking zealots. Their heavy-handed moralizing has made cigarette smoking into the ultimate act of adolescent rebellion, at once counterculture and politically incorrect."

Taranto chides the "goody-two-shoes zealots" for "heavy-handed moralizing," but fails to acknowledge that the zealots have a point, or to suggest alternative ways to reduce the death rate from smoking. I know, pro-smoking zealots tell us that society would save money by promoting smoking, since it kills smokers off. When smokers die young we save money we'd have wasted on their health care and retirement benefits if they lived a long life. But I think a theological and ethical case can be made for nourishing full, long and happy lives.

Has Taranto ever smelled the puke of chemotherapy patients, or heard the wheeze, seen the bones, handled the mucous or prayed the prayers of people who are dying of lung cancer? Has he ever listened to parents who struggle for years against their own smoking addiction that alienates their nonsmoking teens? Has he no faith in any measures of warning, education, advertising or example? You can see my fanatic heavy-handed moralizing and goody-two-shoes propaganda coming through.

The old Kantian side of me wants to test Taranto's claim by universalizing it, making it categorically imperative and imperatively categorical. What is true and works in one case must be true and workable in another case. Let's apply Tarantoism to two discouraged practices.

The first: having babies out of wedlock. It is wrong for teens--or anyone--and bad for babies, the parent and society. Baby-making is for married adults only. Practice abstinence. Don't watch movies or TV programs that show couples that have just met climbing into bed together on a moment's notice and having sex. Doing it that way is bad. Authority figures of all kinds--pastors, counselors, national commissions--agree this is all bad.

Or as Taranto would say: "Baby-making is cool."

How about abortion? It's only for cases of incest, rape and other rare circumstances. Philosophy, religion and conscience all provide reasons not to have abortions casually. Authority figures of all kinds--priests, antiabortion movements, national task forces--agree that abortion is bad.

Or in Taranto's translation: "Abortion is cool."

You get the idea.