Ryan Bourne's Ironic Mention of Tyler Cowen

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In an article titled "**The expert bias toward Covid catastrophe has been exposed**," *The Telegraph*, February 15, 2022, economist Ryan Bourne of the Cato Institute writes, as the title suggests, about the many expert failures during the Covid pandemic.

He has a very good quote from Tyler Cowen. Bourne writes:

Specialist expert failure these past two years has been pervasive, whether in epidemiological modelling or macroeconomics. In fact, "the people who reasoned best across multiple domains, and made a lot of the right calls, were often generalists with significant experience talking to both political decision-makers and the educated general public," says American public intellectual Tyler Cowen.

Bourne is right about the huge failures in epidemiological modeling. One of the worst failures was Neil Ferguson's Imperial College model, a model that Phil Magness has effectively critiqued elsewhere.

I think Tyler's right that some generalists have done better.

But there's something missing here in Bourne's treatment. It leaves out two roles that Tyler Cowen played during the pandemic–roles that both seemed to indicate Tyler's own reliance on narrow experts and his own unwillingness to reason across multiple domains.

The first was Tyler's praise early in the pandemic of "expert" modeler Neil Ferguson, and his related action, with his Emergent Ventures project, of sending a **large check** to Ferguson and Ferguson's Imperial College team. If you check the link just above, you'll see that Tyler thought, correctly, that Ferguson had a huge impact on the U.K. and U.S. governments' responses to Covid. Because Tyler is so well respected, not just in the United States but also internationally, that large payment put the imprimatur on some very bad modeling. It was that modeling that led Boris Johnson and Donald Trump to recommend lockdowns, and Johnson and many U.S. governors to impose lockdowns. Would they have done that without Tyler's support of Ferguson? Probably. But if Cowen had recognized how little we knew at first and taken more

seriously the early seroprevalence studies, such as that done by Jay Bhattacharya, that showed that the infection fatality rate from Covid was a small fraction of the case fatality rate, and if Tyler had publicized that, there might have been more pushback early against the lockdowns.

The second role was Tyler's attack on the Great Barrington Declaration. The GBD was the ultimate in, if only tersely, "reasoning across multiple domains." I criticized Tyler on his negative reaction to the GBD (**here** and **here**), In a later interview on EconTalk with Russ Roberts, he **doubled down**, arguing that it couldn't be any good because it was done at the American Institute for Economic Research, at which place Jeffrey Tucker was an employee. Tyler's crude guilt by association argument is not even an example of reasoning across one domain, namely that of logical reasoning.

It's true that Ryan did not say that Tyler did a good job. He left that issue unaddressed. But if he had wanted to give examples of people who, on the Covid issue, did work across multiple domains and recognized tradeoffs, four of the best candidates are economists Phil Magness and Don Boudreaux, and Doctors Jay Bhattacharya and Scott W. Atlas.