Philosophy of Disagreement: How to Win a Culture War Without Fighting

Some of my thoughts on disagreement for your consideration. We can discuss whatever seems most interesting or outlandish. The success of a philosophy pub is measured partly in your participation and partly in the number of beverages consumed. :)

We disagree about all sorts of things, and disagreement occurs in all kinds of contexts and at various levels. We are often in the position of wanting or needing to secure the agreement of others.

Questions

1) When was the last time you changed your (or played a part in changing someone else's) mind about something…?

a) Trivial or important
b) Simple or complex
c) Self-contained or widely consequential

2) How ought people change their minds, and how do they in fact change their minds?

3) How many ways are there to respond to disagreement? I started out with three basic responses and then realized there might be others. The way I list them should reveal my preference.

a) Rational argument
b) Propaganda
c) Violence
d) Art and storytelling
e) Maneuvering (not violent but exploiting, bending, or breaking rules)
f) Apathy

How do We Conceptualize our Interlocutors? Philosophy, literature, and movies offer various ways...

a) Plato's allegory of the cave portrays non-philosophers as systematically ensnared and confused, only observing shadows on the wall. It is unknown how anyone escapes the cave, and there is no way given by Plato for helping people out of the cave.

b) Religious fundamentalism and some political ideologies portray their interlocutors and critics as morally, spiritually, or rationally defective.

c) *The Matrix* depicts a world where machines hold human beings captive as living batteries. These humans are immersed in a simulated reality—The Matrix—which keeps them compliant. Most people living in the Matrix are dependent on the Matrix, not ready to question it, and will actively defend it. To quote one of the characters in the movie, "...and that makes them our enemy".

d) The least judgy thing we might say about someone we disagree with is that we respect their morals and their intelligence, but we think they happen to be wrong. The more complex, important, and consequential things become, the harder it is to take this line. We often attribute obtuseness, intransigence, dishonest, and bad intentions. Sometimes this *is* the only reasonable explanation.

The Problem of the Culture Wars

The reality of culture wars is debated. Some suggest that the usual "culture war" issues are not

fundamental in explaining political disagreements. If we think the culture wars are real, how we think about continued, entrenched disagreement might depend on all sorts of things. Who or what you think is fueling the culture wars depends on your outlook, and it also depends on how we answer the previous question.

Political views have become more estranged from one another. Meaningful communication is increasingly difficult. Much so-called discussion consists of the mutual barraging of memes and soundbites.

Changes of mind have always been slow, reluctant, and unacknowledged, but in our current climate they seem more so. Some say that we live in *echo chambers*—we don't encounter views contrary to our own. My suggestion is that we do encounter views contrary to our own—they just don't resonate, because we don't give them any credence. I call this *circular resonance*. The outlets and sources we trust all refer approvingly to one another. The outlets and sources we distrust also refer approvingly to one another.

If an *annoying fact* challenges my worldview, I will be likely to doubt it. If I can't doubt it, I will likely to deny its relevance. If I can't deny its relevance, I might simply lean on the rest of my worldview to drown out the annoying fact. What about this? What about that? The fact may be true, and it may be relevant, but it is unimportant in the grand scheme of things.

Compromise is hard to even imagine. Our worldviews constrain how we can compromise. I wouldn't compromise with a right-leaning politician by agreeing to deport half his proposed number of people, or to build a wall only half as high.

Apathy or non-participation is even hard to imagine. Even if you believe that certain controversies are manufactured, there are certain things we can't fail to defend.

Hybrid views are marginalized. For whatever reason, there's a sense of "us or them" in everything. Someone of a more case-by-case mindset might just disagree with everyone.

The Theory-centric View of Disagreement

The theory-centric view of disagreement has both descriptive and prescriptive aspects.

a) A theory is something that explains phenomena—things.
b) Our beliefs and values imply theories.
c) Theories are what fundamentally differentiate us politically.
d) Focusing on the *theories* rather than between people might help us disagree more productively.

For example, a fundamentalist might call me "a sinner". A conspiracy theorist might call me "brainwashed". I don't take it personally. Of course the theory says that—but since I reject the theory, I reject the theory's diagnosis of me.

e) People may be tolerant or intolerant, but it is *theories* which are tolerant or intolerant. And it is theories which are extremist, or moderate.

There are definitely cases where someone is immune to the facts, morally obtuse, and so on. Tolerance implies giving people the benefit of the doubt until the evidence is strong enough to decide.

f) The distance between the theories should become our common problem. We can take a philosophical step back, and see what might be possible. Can meaningful communication be revived?

g) How can our theories touch one another? How can you talk to someone who believes outlandish things, and who thinks you believe outlandish things?

h) Go inside the theory. Take the best aspects of someone's theory, and run with them.

A nice example comes from the movie *Inherit the Wind,* a 1960 fictionalization of the 1925 scopes trial, which concerned the teaching of evolution in public schools. The lawyer defending the teacher on trial for teaching evolution is forbidden from arguing that evolution is a true theory. So

he gets the lawyer from the prosecution on the stand to discuss his interpretation of the bible—forcing him to admit that the bible cannot always be interpreted literally, and so undermining the prosecution's whole case.

Concluding thoughts

Although I think we should take theories to be fundamental, theories are exemplified by people. The most persuasive people I've disagreed with have been personally kind, interesting, and well-meaning. That's what's usually caused me to think twice about something. Someone's character doesn't change the truth-value of propositions about the world. But character can lend credence to ethical and political theories.

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