

4 Deep Disagreements

We all have had moments when we feel that those with whom we disagree not only reject the point we are focused on at the moment, but also reject our values, general beliefs, modes of reasoning, and even our hopes. In such circumstances, productive critical conversation seems impossible. For the most part, in order to be successful, argument must proceed against a background of common commitments. Interlocutors must agree on some basic facts about the world, or they must share some source of reasons to which they can appeal, or they must value roughly the same sort of outcome. And so, if two parties disagree about who finished runners-up to the Hornblowers in their historic Sportsball League championship last year, they may agree to consult the league website, and that will resolve the issue. Or if two travelers disagree about which route home is better, one may say, “Yes, your way is *shorter*, but it runs through the traffic bottleneck at the mall, and that adds at least twenty minutes to the journey.” And that may resolve the dispute, depending perhaps on whether time is what matters most.

But some disagreements invoke deeper disputes; disputes about what sources of information are authoritative, what counts as evidence, and what matters. Such disputes quickly become argumentatively abnormal. And so if someone does not recognize the authority of the Sportsball League’s website about last year’s standings, it is unclear how a dispute over last year’s runners-up to the Hornblowers could be resolved. What might one *say* to a disputant of this kind? Does he trust news sites, television reporting, or Wikipedia entries concerning the SBL? Does he regard the news sites and the league website as reliable sources of information concerning *this* year’s standings or when the games are played? What if our interlocutor in the route-home case doesn’t see why the quickest route is preferable to the shortest? Maybe our traveling companion regards our hurry-scurry as a part of a larger social problem, or maybe wants to enjoy the Zen of a traffic jam. Sometimes a disagreement about one thing lies at the tip of a very large iceberg composed of many other, progressively deeper, disagreements.

The puzzle about deep disagreement is whether reasoned argument can work at all in them. There is a widely held view, perhaps at the core of deliberative views of democracy, and certainly central to educational

programs emphasizing critical thinking, that well-run argument is at least never pointless, and often even productive. And many hold that it's important to practice good argumentation, especially in cases of deep disagreement. Call this view *argumentative optimism*. The trouble for this optimism is that as disagreements run progressively deeper, it grows increasingly difficult to see how argument could have any point at all. Again, in deep disagreements, there isn't enough shared commitment for there to be any place where arguments can resolve anything. This result, in turn, encourages us to regard interlocutors as targets of incredulity, bemusement, and perhaps even ridicule, contempt, or hatred. There's little, many think, one can *argue* or *say* that is going to rationally resolve certain disagreements. That's just how far gone the other side seems. In the end, it all may come down to who's got better propaganda, more money, or, perhaps, the better weapons. Call this view *argumentative pessimism*.

A famous argument for pessimism is given by Robert Fogelin in his essay, "The Logic of Deep Disagreements." The core of his case is as follows:

- 1 Successful argument is possible only if participants share a background of beliefs, values, and resolution procedures.
- 2 Deep disagreements are disagreements wherein participants have no such shared background.
- 3 *Therefore*: successful argument is not possible in deep disagreement cases.

Fogelin holds that "deep disagreements cannot be resolved through the use of argument, for they undercut the conditions essential to arguing" (1985: 5). And so, as Fogelin reasons, given that no rational procedures for resolution offer themselves for those in deep disagreement, we are in a difficult situation. He observes: "[I]f deep disagreements can arise, what rational procedures can be used for their resolution? The drift of this discussion leads to the answer NONE" (1985: 6). Presumably, when we face a deep disagreement and cannot argue any further (on Fogelin's reasoning), we must decide what to do next. Do we just give up the argument? Do we also give up the disagreement? If we can't give up the disagreement, what do we do? Could we use further means, non-argumentative and non-rational strategies? Fogelin approvingly quotes Ludwig Wittgenstein on this: "At the end of reasons comes *persuasion* (Think of what happens when missionaries convert natives.)" (1985: 6). What exactly is *persuasion* here, and how is the model of missionaries supposed to help? Fogelin's conclusion is that we need to look to persuasion, but he's not provided much beyond that. Here's how many have reasoned beyond Fogelin's conclusion.

4. In disagreements needing urgent resolutions that also do not admit of argumentative resolution, one should use non-argumentative means to resolve the dispute.

5. *Therefore*, in urgent deep disagreements, one should use non-argumentative means to resolve the dispute.

Fogelin did not explicitly endorse any particular non-argumentative means (beyond whatever missionaries use on “natives”), nor did he clarify how one might determine that a disagreement is deep (as opposed to merely hard) or urgent. But we can see that a form of argumentative pessimism can put us on the way to a more wide-ranging attitude toward argument, namely that it stands in the way of quickly and decisively resolving disagreements. The better option with deep disagreement, so says the more radical argumentative pessimist, is to make sure one’s arsenal of rhetoric and propaganda is ready to hand in deep disagreements. Argument is, from the perspective of the pessimist, pretty much a waste of time. Persuasion is the key. Moreover, if the disagreements are deep, that usually means that there’s a lot at stake. Best to win, even if it means that one has to bend the rules of argumentative exchange. Regardless, it is clear that argumentative optimists face a challenge in the face of deep disagreement and the radical pessimist’s line of thought. How might they respond?

For starters, optimists should ask whether deep disagreements, so described as cases with *no* shared background, really exist. And so, an optimist could concede Fogelin’s point, and yet contend that in fact *no actual disagreements are so deep that there are no shared background commitments*. One way the optimist could argue for this thought is as follows: In cases of persistent and hard disagreement, interlocutors seem not to share enough *meanings* in common to have their dispute count properly as disagreement. That is, in order for two parties to *disagree*, there must be a sufficient degree of other kinds of cognitive overlap, otherwise there is no disagreement at all, and the parties simply “talk past” each other. In other words, when one party asserts “Birds fly,” and the other says “Birds don’t fly,” they apparently disagree. But if it is discovered that the two parties do not share in common a broad conception of what it is to fly, what things are birds, what authorities to consult, or whether one of them *really did see a seagull up in the air just the other day*, we should conclude that there is no *disagreement* after all, but rather a case of mutual unintelligibility. Perhaps it’s worse to countenance the possibility of mutual unintelligibility than deep disagreement, but it’s one way to retain argumentative optimism. The deeper the disagreement, the harder it is to see it as *a disagreement*.

This means that insofar as we see disagreements as *disagreements* at all, we must take the disputants to share enough in the background to allow them to talk about the same things; that is, in order to see parties as *disagreeing*, we must take them to inhabit the same world and talk about it in enough of a similar way that they can recognize that they have a disagreement. Consequently, we can never see disagreements as so deep that there’s no shared commitment at all. Where we see disagreement, we see (at least in principle) resolvability.

A different optimistic strategy is to reject Fogelin's first premise. One might say that argument isn't *only* about resolving disagreements. An argument, as an exercise of manifesting our rationality, may improve our understanding of our own views and those of others. In an exchange, we may, in thinking about an issue, actually *create* common ground in developing a shared culture of reasoning together. Consequently, argument can be productive in deep disagreement cases, but it takes a longer-run view. But even if argument isn't productive of agreement in the end, there are other goods that argument can promote, and mutual understanding and the capacity to see the disagreement as the product of rational creatures who can reasonably disagree is a good, too.

Further, the optimist may reject even the fourth premise. She may deny that when argument gives out in urgent cases, one may resort to some form of non-argumentative persuasion. The optimist could insist that the fourth premise states a dangerous policy, since one may have misidentified merely difficult or hard cases as instances of deep disagreement. That, certainly, is a bad error to have taken what was a rationally resolvable disagreement to be rationally irresolvable. That's because you've missed an opportunity to reason with someone who may have something to say to you that's worthwhile, and you've treated someone you could have moved with reasons as someone who can only be moved by something other than reason. That's bad.

Additionally, the optimist might claim that resorting to propaganda, rhetoric, verbal coercion or other non-argumentative means gives up on the plausible thought that even in cases of severe and stubborn disagreement, parties still can learn from each other. The pessimist's policy presumes that when disputes seem irresolvable, the only alternative is to simply defeat or at least neutralize one's opponents. But notice that these tools, *were they used against us*, would strike us as objectionable.

It's worth pausing to let this last thought sink in. When we are thinking about rules for good argument, we should be thinking not only about rules that we would want us to be using *as arguers*, but we would also want there to be good rules for arguers to follow when they are *addressing arguments to us*. Our dialectical view of argument essentially takes argument as an interpersonal *process*, and that process is best considered as a *turn-taking* game of giving and asking for reasons. In argument, we take turns giving and receiving reasons. And we need the rules of argument to be straightforward enough as to not be too onerous for arguers, but also flexible enough so that we as hearers aren't forced to accept reasons that we can't see the point of. So the point is that as *hearers* of arguments, we wish that we be presented with cases that appeal to *our reason*, instead of manipulate us with fear or propaganda.

The dispute between argumentative pessimists and optimists is itself stubborn and unlikely to be soon resolved. But in light of the dangers of prematurely adopting pessimism, this tie, we think, goes to the optimist.

The problem concerning deep disagreement can be formulated in a different way. It is a common enough experience we've all had while arguing with those with whom we have serious disagreements: as a controversial view is supported, even more controversial reasons are given, to be followed by more and more controversial commitments. As we noted earlier, a regular strategy in what might be called *normal* argument is that arguing parties trace their reasons to a shared ground of agreed-upon premises and rules of support, and then they test which of their sides is favored by these reasons. But disagreements that are *deep* are those where shared reasons are not easily found. And consequently, it seems that under these conditions, argumentative exchange is doomed to failure.

Of late, our interest in deep disagreement has not been purely academic. With Donald J. Trump winning the 2016 U.S. presidential election and the rise of the alt-right movement in American politics, we found that we face very real cases of what had seemed a sheer theoretical posit. In particular, the intellectual movement of the self-styled “neo-reactionary right” and the “Dark Enlightenment” seemed to be exemplary. We have given an argument above for argumentative optimism in the face of deep disagreement, so our theory now has a real test case.

When we started reading around in the neo-reactionary corpus, we found ourselves in what felt like an upside-down world—all the dialectical elements of the argument were familiar, but none of the premises presented as truisms seemed remotely plausible. Liberal democracy was taken to be obviously wrong-headed, and the attitudes of totalitarian programs were presented as equally obviously right. The regular defaults that some measure of equality of consideration is required by justice and that peoples' voices matter are openly held in contempt. The journalist James Duesterberg captures his experience first reading the literature of the Dark Enlightenment:

Wading in, one finds oneself quickly immersed, and soon unmoored. All the values that have guided center-left, post-war consensus ... are inverted. The moral landmarks by which we were accustomed to get our bearings aren't gone: they're on fire.¹

This *Alice through the looking glass* experience is something that those on the neo-reactionary right anticipate in their reading audiences. But the writers in this genre have no plans of showing their readers the way back to the world they've left behind. In fact, this break with the world of purportedly liberal norms is one of the core commitments of the neo-reactionary program. Importantly, their view is that we all have been brainwashed by a quasi-religious political superstructural institution ruling the Western world—what those in the neo-reactionary movement call *The Cathedral*.

To start, the Cathedral is more a roughly ideologically confederated set of institutions: civil service, the university system, the media, and many

religious movements. There are no legally binding or formal connections between these entities, but rather, they are all blind allies in a great, but unconscious, collaboration in illusion. It is a common strategy to analogize the Cathedral to religious commitment seen through naturalistic eyes. Religions aren't invented *as lies*, despite their being false. Rather, they arise as short-hands for why some norms are binding. Originally, this was simply religion *simpliciter*, but according to Mencius Moldbug, the Dark Enlightenment's prime mover on the blogosphere, the religious movement has morphed into a kind of secular religion of political idealism.

You can go from religion to idealism and back simply by adding and subtracting gods, angels, demons, saints, ghosts, etc.²

The upshot is that contemporary progressivism, in the eyes of the neo-reactionaries, is a “nontheistic Christian sect.” The worship of diversity and intersectionality, the insistence on political correctness, are all religious rites, ones where the meanings of the words do not really matter, but whether one chants them at the right times and at the proper cadence.

Consider the Cathedral, then, on analogy with some of the great philosophical set-pieces about grand-but-undetected illusions. Plato's Analogy of the Cave in the *Republic* has the prisoners participating in games of shadow-image identification, and since they've never seen the real things the images are of, they cannot even fathom the idea of illusion. Of these sorry folks, Socrates has a dark aside, “They are like us” (*Republic* 515a). The movie trilogy *The Matrix* is premised on our lives taking place in a large-scale computer simulation, one about which one may have but only suspicions. And so, too, is the Cathedral—as Nick Land, the author of *The Dark Enlightenment Manifesto* notes, “the Cathedral has substituted its gospel for all we know.”³

In order to fill in the Dark Enlightenment picture, a further trope from the literature of grand illusions needs to be mentioned. In Plato's *Republic*, one of the prisoners is released and is dragged out of the cave, to a blinding, painful light. In *The Matrix*, Neo is given a choice between a red pill and a blue pill. He chooses the red pill, which shows him what the Matrix is; the blue pill would have put him back deeper in the illusion. The neo-reactionaries, too, need a symbol for those who have foregone the comforting and tempting illusion of the Cathedral. They use a term from *The Matrix*, that of the *red pill*. Mencius Moldbug makes a contrast in selling his version of the red pill, because it turns out that there are *many* out there selling red pills.

We've all seen *The Matrix*. We know about red pills. Many claim to sell them. You can go, for example, to any bookstore, and ask the guy behind the counter for some Noam Chomsky. What you'll get is blue pills soaked in Red #3... . [W]e provide the genuine article...

Seeing the Cathedral from the outside, neo-reactionaries feel they are shaken from an impossible but too comfortable dream. A similar vocabulary is necessary *internal* to the Cathedral—there are “woke” progressives, but this is more testament to the perverse incentives internal to the institution. That is, the best way to hide the illusion of the Cathedral is to acknowledge that there are illusions, but hold that they consist in not being aware of and committed to the core theses of Cathedralism.

Let’s call the complex of all these elements of the grand-but-undetectable illusion line of argument (the commitment to the illusion, the prospects of being brought out of it, and that there are illusions of enlightenment within the illusion) *red pill rhetoric*. The basic program of those using red pill rhetoric is that those on the other side are so badly brainwashed, they, for the most part, are in a position where only the most invasive methods are capable of reaching them to turn them from the truth. The mode of engagement using red pill rhetoric is to start with the thought that one’s intellectual opponents suffer from false consciousness, and so the failure of one’s arguments shouldn’t be evidence of them being bad, but rather evidence of how far gone the other side is.

Despite the depth of these disagreements between the progressive left in America and those on the neo-reactionary right, there are still prospects for productive argument here. One source of hope is the fact that so many neo-reactionaries already take themselves to engage in argument with the liberal progressive movement. As noted by Foseti, a reviewer of the Moldbug blog:

It’s important to remember this fact. The past year has seen an explosion of “reactionary” writing. And I’m left feeling ... unsettled. The explosion of high-quality Rightist thought is fantastic and should be enthusiastically applauded by anyone outside of the Cathedral (or anyone that enjoys a good argument—is that redundant?).⁴

The thought that it is *redundant* to think that those outside the Cathedral enjoy good argument should be reason to hope that there are lines of argument that can be open between progressives and neo-reactionaries. How could they enjoy a good argument unless argument was not only possible but actual?

The main challenge to those using the trope of red pill rhetoric at this stage is a form of leveling skepticism. Recall that Moldbug had acknowledged other competing red pill narratives, which he’d said were really “blue pills soaked in Red #3.” But doesn’t the progressive left say the same of the reactionary right? That they are false enlightenments? Moreover, if we *really are under such circumstances of deep and internally undetectable illusion*, how can *they themselves* know they really are out of the purported illusion? Thousands of students every year are taught about Plato’s allegory of the cave, and *The Matrix* is a piece of pop critique

culture—hasn't the "it's all an illusion" narrative been coopted by the illusion itself? Think about it for a second: if you were designing an illusion to trap human minds, wouldn't you build into the illusion versions of those who say that it's all an illusion, but just push the deceived deeper into the illusion? Moldbug observes the skeptical scenario, but only looking at his competition:

[Y]ou have no *rational reason* to trust anything coming out of the Cathedral—that is, the universities and the press. You have no reason to trust these institutions than you have to trust, say, the Vatican.

But under these conditions, we have no rational reason to trust Moldbug, either. The problem with high-grade skeptical tropes in red pill rhetoric is that once they are in place, they do not discriminate. The neo-reactionary narrative gets the same treatment as that of the most lefty social justice warrior—namely, that of the jaded eye of one suspicious that it's all overblown rationalization. The leveling skeptical consequence is that we are all returned to argumentative *status quo ante*. No one gets to claim to have genuine red pills any more than anyone else. Nobody gets to say, now, that the other side suffers from a false consciousness that they themselves have overcome. We are all on the same level, all with the burden of proof.

Now the leveling skeptical argument is both good news and bad news. The good news is that there are argumentative possibilities in these deep disagreement cases, and they are ones that both sides can see the consequences of. The bad news is that the consequences are skeptical, at least in the sense that when both sides use this rhetoric in these circumstances, the result is that the argument ends in stalemate. Now, that's bad news in the sense that we don't have a resolution that favors one side over the other at this stage, but there is more than one way to resolve an issue. Sometimes, the best answer to an issue is that we need more information—neither side, at this stage, has the better case. We need to keep talking, keep finding new evidence, new considerations. Just because we don't know *now* who has the better case, that doesn't mean we won't *ever*. And so, despite the skeptical conclusion of the leveling argument, there are some reasons still to be argumentatively optimistic.

Some further evidence for argumentative optimism arises from how we have outlined the dialectical state of play. Deep disagreement, from the theoretically optimistic perspective, is a mere theoretical posit, an anti-nomy of reason taken too far. Insofar as depth of disagreement is gradable and comparative, the theoretical worry about what one might call *Absolutely Deep Disagreement*, as disagreement with no in-principle overlap of premises to reason from and no disagreements possibly deeper, is purely a matter of conceptual possibility. *Actual* disagreements never reach this state, if only because in order for us to recognize disagreements *as disagreements* (where we share enough semantic overhead to contradict each

other) we must share enough commitments in common to start to arbitrate the disagreements. Earlier, we gave a kind of purely theoretical argument for this thesis, but now, we have a case in point. In fact, the advent of the rhetoric of red pills is testament to this. For the rhetoric of the red pill to work, we need notions like the appearance/reality distinction, the idea of being duped, and the idea of there being someone who sees it all for what it is and arrives to perform some consciousness-raising. All those elements of what might be called the *dialectic of false consciousness and its correction* must be in place for any of those narratives to exist or to make sense to their audiences.

The truth of the matter is that we do share those concepts, and those shared concepts bespeak yet more in common, such as a love of truth, a desire to know what one's position in reality and society is, and a desire to have some measure of control over it. That is, the background agreement is on all those norms of cognitive hygiene, cognitive command, and rational self-control we've been going on about throughout this book. How about that?

With this broad class of background concepts in place, we can see that the disagreement between liberals and neo-reactionaries is perhaps *deep*, but it is not one that approaches *absolute depth*. The theoretical program with deep disagreement optimism is that many disagreements are deeper than others, in the sense that there are disagreements with more contested argumentative moves than others. In a word, as the disagreements get deeper, they become *philosophical*. This, of course, should come as no surprise, since philosophy arguably began and thrives in the spaces where we attempt to wrestle with the Big Questions that separate us. But we argue all the time about Big Questions—philosophy wouldn't be possible if we couldn't.

Our optimistic response here to deep disagreement does not guarantee that arguments will eventually resolve the disagreements; and given the leveling skeptical argument earlier, it may be that there are no solutions coming. But this does not imply that argument is impossible under such conditions. In fact, the skeptical *argument* itself shows that argument is possible. Let that point sink in for a bit.

We are aware that many will find our case for argumentative optimism out of tune in these politically dark days. In fact, we expect that some will see our line of thought as complicit with the objectionable politics of the powerful and the moral failures of those with the loudest voices, since the argumentative stance we advocate does not sufficiently *resist* their power. But the moral situation should make this point clearer, since if we find those who propose authoritarian policies morally blameworthy, we must think them rationally responsible for the policies they endorse and the thoughts and reasons they act on. But if we hold them rationally responsible, we must think that if they had different reasons manifest to them, they could and should act

otherwise. If we, ourselves, have those reasons and the voice to get them out in argument, then we are obligated to do so. And so optimism about argumentative possibilities and prospects in deep disagreement is not pie-eyed Pollyanna-ism in the face of argumentative tragedy, but rather it is the view that well-run argument matters and is important to value, especially in the dark days.

For Further Thought

- 1 If depth of disagreement is gradable (some disagreements are deeper than others), then does it follow that argumentative optimism is only just a theoretical view?
- 2 The symmetry of dialectical norms requires that a rule for arguers should also be one that hearers of arguments can endorse. Notice that this now constrains what kind of reasons can be given. Does this amount to another version of the rule of public reason, or does this rule have a different outcome?
- 3 Can there be absolutely deep disagreements, only they are very hard to articulate?
- 4 Can members of the Dark Enlightenment reply to the skeptical challenge given? If they do, is their answer in the service of the democratic norms they say they reject?

Key Terms

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| Deep disagreement | A disagreement wherein the two parties do not share enough commitments or argumentative procedures to resolve the issue by argument. |
| Argumentative optimism | The view that either there are not deep disagreements or that argument is possible and worthwhile even when faced with deep disagreement. |
| Argumentative pessimism | The view that argument is either not possible or is pointless in cases of deep disagreement. |
| Dialecticality requirement | Arguments must be materially and logically successful in ways that their audience can recognize, and further, they must address concerns and challenges posed by the audience. |
| Red Pill Rhetoric | The argumentative technique of taking those with whom one has a deep disagreement to be deeply deluded and caught in a false-consciousness. |

Notes

- 1 <https://thepointmag.com/2017/politics/final-fantasy-neoreactionary-politics-liberal-imagination>

- 2 <http://unqualified-reservations.blogspot.com/2007/05/>
- 3 <http://www.thedarkenlightenment.com/the-dark-enlightenment-by-nick-land/>
- 4 <https://foseti.wordpress.com/2014/01/06/review-of-unqualified-reservations-part-1/>

References

Fogelin, Robert (1985) “The Logic of Deep Disagreements.” *Informal Logic* 7:1. 1–8.