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Consensus, Dissensus, and a Third Way, Learned Ignorance

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ABSTRACT: The simplest statement of the relationship between consensus and dissensus is that arguments are supposed to begin in dissensus and end in consensus. This essay introduces a third state for argumentation, learned ignorance. Nicolas of Cusa's *De Docta Ignorantia* (1440) lays out both a case and a logic for argumentation that is not designed to end in a clear conclusion. Instead, the arguer pursues a matter up to an inconclusive point, and ends there, satisfied with the results. The underlying logic of this view is centered on the "coincidence of opposites," which requires rejection of the usual logical principle that A and not-A cannot both be true.

KEYWORDS: consensus, dissensus, learned ignorance, Nicholas of Cusa, theology, transcendence

1. INTRODUCTION

In theorizing argumentation, scholars have worked out several theories of *stasis*, which is a "resting point" or critical issue whose resolution will decisively turn the argument toward one conclusion or another. These *stases* are all internal to the argument in the sense that they refer to different points along an argument's trajectory. When we analyze the beginning and ending states of arguments, however, our literature seems to admit only two theoretically interesting circumstances, consensus and dissensus. The aim of this essay is to nominate a third such state, learned ignorance, to scholarly attention.

In developing this theme, I will begin by examining common views of consensus and dissensus, and then move on to learned ignorance, an idea championed in Nicholas of Cusa's *De Docta Ignorantia* (1440), a treatise of mystical theology. In the final section of the essay, I will attempt to move his theological position into the more mundane world of everyday arguing.

2. CONSENSUS AND DISSENSUS

Some theorists explicitly propose, and far more scholars tacitly assume, that the purpose and natural course of good argumentation is to achieve consensus among the disputing parties. Arguments need to begin on ground common to the arguers, of course. They need to share various factual understandings of the world, must have a common language, and

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need to have some way of cooperatively connecting their general values and understandings of what counts as an acceptable argument (Brockriede 1975; Fogelin 2005). While obviously important, these agreements on starting points are not ordinarily what is meant by consensus, as I use the term here.

Instead, consensus is held out as the desired end state of a successful argument, a final agreement on the main point of dispute. It is displayed as free and mutual endorsement of the whole argument's conclusion. This endorsement is expected to be the outcome of working through the various supporting ideas for that conclusion, and so consensus also involves acceptance by at least one party of matters that were not originally congenial. In our community, we concentrate on adherence to the content of the arguments rather than their emotional or sociological surround, although there are some welcome expansions of that focus (e.g., Gilbert 1997).

In certain theories, this commitment to consensus is explicit (e.g., van Eemeren & Grootendorst 1983; Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969). Implicit commitment is apparent in the many conceptualizations of argumentation's purpose: to persuade, to enhance knowledge, or to promote democracy, for instance. These outcomes only occur in the face of new adherence. But perhaps most revealing of all is how we describe arguments that fail to end in consensus (and we know that this is true of many everyday arguments; Vuchinich 1990). We call them "unresolved." This linguistically marked term means that the argument is incomplete or deficient. Occasionally, as with Vuchinich, we are comfortable with this outcome; more often, as with Trapp and Hoff (1985), we worry about the consequences of being unresolved. But we always notice that the argument has not run its theoretically proper course, and is in some important way unfinished. The aim of argument, its desired end state, is understood to be consensus.

Dissensus, in contrast, is usually regarded as a beginning status for arguing, in fact the very state that brings an argument into existence. Arguments begin in disagreement (O'Keefe 1977) or doubt (Peirce 1980) or in a question (Meyer 1995). Arguments are normally regarded as tools for managing ignorance, uncertainty, or conflict. Even when they have other purposes, such as play or identity display, they take their form and procedure from the prototype, which is an argument designed to be "resolved." We usually think of argument as a way of bridging the human gap between dissensus and consensus. So arguments are considered to begin in dissensus.

Several scholars, however, have suggested that dissensus is also a productive closing state for an argument. Willard's (1986) classic essay, "Valuing Dissensus," promoted dissensus as a desirable end for arguing. Dissensus mitigates against intellectually coercive homogeneity, it valorizes disagreement, and it establishes a tolerant open-minded context for important public debate. Hynes (1991) proposed that organizations reconfigure themselves to reduce their inevitable desire for conformity, in favour of institutionalizing dissensus of high quality. Both Willard and Hynes wrote as though the real value of dissensus is that it will eventually lead to better arguments and thus to better consensus. But we can see that in a particular instance, it might well be desirable to create dissensus out of harmony, to jolt people into examining their assumptions and easy agreements. Even if dissensus is only taken to be a temporary resting place for an ongoing controversy, Willard and Hynes see it as a perfectly appropriate ending state for a particular argument.

So we normally theorize the beginning stage of argumentation as dissensus. Most often we consider that its point is to achieve consensus at the end. These two conditions have produced valuable theory. However, there may also be a third way, learned ignorance. In the following section, I will summarize this argumentative status in hopes of showing that it may well justify scholarly attention as an alternative end state.

3. LEARNED IGNORANCE

Nicholas of Cusa (1401—1464) was a prominent churchman of his time. He was eventually a Cardinal, and spent an active career as a church diplomat and participant in key governance disputes, such as the disagreement over the relative authority of the Pope and church councils conducted at the Council of Basel (1431-1449). Not unused to practical matters, he once had the ignominy of having to surrender in an armed conflict over whether he or a secular prince should have control of Cusa's bishopric. He was well educated, and received a doctorate in canon law early in his career. He often did legal work for Rome. His written works included sermons and treatises on a variety of subjects. He has been consistently read, reprinted, and translated throughout the centuries, and Cusanus societies in several countries are active in the academy. Perhaps his most famous work is *De Docta Ignorantia* (*On Learned Ignorance*, 1440), a treatise of mystical theology. This book will be my focus here. Bond's (1997) introduction to the volume is useful in summarizing it and putting it into context with Cusa's other theological writings.

Perhaps it will be most helpful to start at the end, with book III. Several Christian theological matters are, on their face, mysterious. For example, Christ is held to be both human and divine. Surely these are contradictories, and both terms cannot simultaneously describe the same person or thing. Humans are born and die, for instance, but the divine is eternal, without beginning or end. Another example is the Trinity. God is three Persons, and also one. But obviously three is greater than one, and so different from it. Three persons cannot also be one person. These and other matters fundamental to Christianity involve *prima facie* contradictions, and our unaided reason recoils at them. Cusa set out to create a theology, a system of reasoning, that resolves these apparent contradictions.

His basic principle is called the "coincidence of opposites." Here, coincidence does not mean happenstance; it means that two things, opposite things, coexist in intellectual peace, without friction, distinction, or contradiction, with equal truth and force. Among the opposites he has in mind are those mentioned just above, human/divine and three/one.

Permitting contraries to coexist without opposition violates logic's law of contradiction, to wit, A and not-A cannot both be true. Cusa was entirely aware of this. On learning that his treatise had received criticism, he wrote *Apologia Doctae Ignorantiae* (*A Defense of Learned Ignorance*, 1449), and there he said,

> But when he [the critic, John Wenck] alleges that both the fundamental principle-of-knowledge (which is enfolded in the principle 'every thing either is or is not [the case]') and all inference are destroyed, he is misconceiving. For he fails to notice that learned ignorance is concerned with the mind's eye and with apprehension-by-the-intellect (*intellectibilitas*)—so that whoever is led to the

> point of *seeing* ceases from all discursive reasoning, and his evidence comes from sight. (14; the first editorial insertion is mine, the others are Hopkins')

On confronting mysteries that cannot be resolved by logic or discursive reasoning, Cusa recommended that we abandon logic and discourse in favour of direct spiritual sight. This gaze can only be directed once logic is exhausted. *Intellectibilitas* is the last thing one achieves, not the first.

Learned ignorance is a hard-won state. One pursues enlightenment with reason as far as reason will go. In theology, however, one eventually encounters matters that human reason will not resolve, and so there we must be guided by the intellect, our spiritual intelligence. Letting go of reason requires the embrace of learned ignorance, which is a modest condition. It means "to know that we do not know" (*De Docta Ignorantia*, I.i.4). He concluded the first of *De Docta Ignorantia*'s three books by writing, ". . . the precise truth shines forth incomprehensibly in the darkness of our ignorance. This is the learned ignorance for which we have been searching . . ." (I.xxvi.89).

In the *Apologia* Cusa displayed awareness that this general idea had been proposed by others, including Socrates, Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, and Augustine (for connections between Cusa's work and the prior work of Pseudo-Dionysius, John Scottus Eriugena, and Meister Eckhart, see Duclow, 2006). But his development is independent of those earlier writers, and has its own special force and coherence. I will try to sketch the outline of his thinking here.

Centuries before the invention of calculus, Cusa was deeply involved in thinking about limits and infinity, and did so in mathematical terms (*De Docta Ignorantia*, I.xi.30-I.xxiii.73). He chose geometry as an entrée into the nature of God because mathematics uses abstract symbols, and so is already somewhat purified in the sense that manipulation of the symbols involves only the use of reason. In these passages, he considered the line, the triangle, the circle, and the sphere. His key move was to contemplate the natures of an infinite line, infinite triangle, infinite circle, and infinite sphere. His explanations of why all these infinite constructions are equivalent to an infinite line really deserve to be read for themselves, but I will summarize his argument about infinite circles here (I.xiii).

A finite circle has a center, a diameter, and a circumference. Along the circumference, we can cut arcs to examine. In a circle with a small diameter, say a few inches, such an arc is obviously and definitely curved. If the diameter increases to a foot, we can still perceive the curve but it is less dramatic than for the smaller circle. A circle with a diameter of a few miles would also produce a curved arc, of course, but it appears less curved, thus straighter, than those of the smaller circles. Any finite circle yields curved arcs, but as the diameter and circumference increase, the arc becomes straighter and straighter. So Cusa reasoned that the limit for a circle's arc is a straight line. For an infinite circle—one with infinite diameter and infinite circumference—the line defining its arcs and circumference is therefore an infinite line. Thus an infinite circle is an infinite line. This infinite line is simultaneously the infinite circle's circumference, diameter, and center. Cusa offered similar explanations for why an infinite triangle is an infinite line, and why an infinite sphere is, too.

He took one further important step, arguing that there can only ultimately be one infinite line, the maximum infinite line. If there were two or more they would be numbered, distinct, and so conceivably comparable, all of which he said is conceptually impossible in the realm of the infinite. They would, if they existed, resolve themselves

into the one maximum infinite line. The infinite line, after all, is not an actual thing and so should not be expected to have the properties of finite lines.

Before moving on to other details of Cusa's theological system, let us pause to notice an important thing. Infinite triangles, infinite circles, and infinite spheres are all the same thing, infinite lines. Considered in their infinite, unlimited, ultimate state, these are not distinct, and so cannot be opposites. They have no relations such as greater and lesser, cause and effect, basic and constructed. They coexist in a coincidence of opposites. (This last is a questionable sentence. "Coexist" is not quite the right word because it implies that two distinct things are present, and a similar objection can be laid against "they." Infinity is just infinity, in Cusa's thinking.) The fact that neither a finite triangle nor a finite sphere seems to be a straight line is just an indication that human reason can only lead us so far. Reason takes us right up to the limits of finitude. After that, we must place ourselves in a state of learned ignorance.

This sort of reasoning—he understood the geometrical arguments to be transumptive, or analogical—led Cusa to the conclusion that there is one absolute maximum, which is God. This is where all the infinities we can conceive are collected into their common essence: the maximum line, the perfect human, anything that is purified to its infinite, eternal nature. He said that the maximum is "the absolute one that is all things" (I.ii.5). The infinite, absolute maximum is the beginning and end. It can be contracted (i.e., projected or realized in a particularized way) to "being," and being is necessary for both being and not-being (I.vi). So being and not-being are another coincidence of opposites. He was explicit about how this differs from ordinary understandings of knowledge:

> […] it is necessary to reject things that, along with their material accessories, are attained through the senses, the imagination, or reason, in order to reach the most simple and most abstract understanding, where all things are one; where the line is a triangle, a circle, and a sphere; where unity is trinity and trinity is unity; where accident is substance; where body is spirit and motion is rest, and so on. (I.viii.27)

The absolute maximum is "where all things are one." It is God, of course, eternal and unavailable to interrogation by logic or the senses. Learned ignorance is the means by which faith, allied with reason but finally independent of reason, can join a believer into this eternal union.

Since our interests are not essentially theological, I will pass over Cusa's explanation of how the universe is a contracted unfolding of the absolute maximum (II), as well as his detailed discussion of Christian theological mysteries (III). Instead, I will only take note of Cusa's remarks concerning the implications of the coincidence of opposites for some specific argument schemes. Then we will pass into the final section of the paper, where I try to apply these principles to ordinary arguing.

Cusa's treatise is itself closely argued, and he made no objections to the use of logic and ordinary argument schemes for working out finite matters. However, on confronting questions dealing with the absolute maximum, many sorts of argument must be abandoned. The most fundamental sort of inadmissible argument is that from opposites, of course, since there are no opposites in the absolute maximum. This thesis has implications for other argumentative tools as well.

In the absolute maximum, no distinctions remain. Everything coexists in the coincidence of opposites. Let me summarize how Cusa expanded this idea in various comments that we would construe as being about argument schemes.

- Since there are no distinctions, naming is inappropriate (I.v.13), especially in the case of God (I.xxiv.76). To name a thing is to separate it from everything with a different name, and that presupposes distinction.
- Number also requires distinction, and it further implies the possibility of quantitative comparison (I.v.13). Nothing can be counted in the infinite realm. It is even wrong to speak of the infinite as being unity, because once the idea of one has been introduced, that implies the possibilities of two and three, which make no sense in the absolute maximum.
- Arguments about proportion, making use of relations such as greater and lesser, require number and so are nonsensical (I.iii.9). Nothing in the absolute maximum is greater or lesser than another thing because nothing is distinguished. Thus the absolute maximum is also the absolute minimum, a point Cusa repeated often in the book.
- Cause and effect also presume separation or otherness (I.vii.20). The connection between the two things is prior to their causal relation, and that connection is unity. So connection is "prior" to causality, and connection is eternal.

From Cusa's point of view, loss of these argumentative resources was no inconvenience, because at the absolute maximum we cease to reason anyway. Instead, we must try to embrace learned ignorance. *De Docta Ignorantia* ends with this personal note:

> […] by what I believe was a celestial gift from the Father of Lights […] I was led to embrace incomprehensibles incomprehensibly in learned ignorance, by transcending those incorruptible truths that can be humanly known" (III.263).

4. LEARNED IGNORANCE IN THE MUNDANE WORLD

In this last section of the essay, I want to explore how Cusa's ideas about theological argument might apply to ordinary discourse. Two ideas in particular seem worth thinking about: transcendence and learned ignorance.

The coincidence of opposites is a doctrine that transcends differences. For Cusa, the transcendence is accomplished when all distinctions disappear and one arrives at direct spiritual sight of a unity that cannot be named or described in discourse. I do not propose we aim for that sort of outcome in everyday argumentation, but something similar has long been noticed as useful. The main difference between mundane transcendence and Cusa's is that we ordinarily strive to transcend differences by arriving at an articulable synthesis of what originally appeared to be distinct things.

In a basic sense, most arguments aim to join ideas together in a new way. The *New Rhetoric* (Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca 1969) laid out four main types of argument: quasi-logical arguments, those based on the structure of reality, those establishing the structure of reality, and dissociative arguments. The last type takes a single idea and shows that it is really two or more things. The others, however, create a transcending whole, an argument, out of disparate thoughts: "In the first three chapters [on the first

three kinds of argument] we examined connecting links in argumentation that have the effect of making interdependent elements that could originally be considered independent" (p. 411). All arguments except the dissociative ones are transcendent in the sense that they collect distinctions into unity. This "transcendence of distinction" is a basic function of argumentation, and justifies our thinking of argument as a transcending machine.

Argument can also accomplish a more advanced kind of synthesis, one we might call "transcendence of opposition." Here the argument does not simply join up things that were previously unrelated (distinct). It unifies things that were thought to be contraries. Opposition requires distinction, of course, but it also has contradiction in its essential character. A and B are distinct; A and not-A are both distinct and opposed.

Burke (1959, p. 337) said that one can transcend disagreement by creating a vantage point from which the previously opposing terms "cease to be opposites." Parson (1993) characterized H. Ross Perot's public appeals as efforts at transcendence. Perot's idea was that as a third party candidate, his presidency would transcend the Republican/Democrat opposition that he felt prevented public progress.

Current headlines might be read as offering another example. One element held to have caused the present economic crisis is the set of economic motivations allowed to operate in the financial markets. Consumers tried to profit by taking mortgages they could only pay if home equity increased and they were able to flip their houses. Lenders made those loans in hopes of quick profit, depending on market forces to reinforce the loans' reliability. Mortgages were bundled, sold, and insured, so that the risks were moved away from the lender, in the same way that a bookie lays off bets when they become unbalanced. Once the financial crisis occurred, the same profit motivations prevented money from moving around. Lenders had so little liquidity that they could not afford to take further risks, and few were willing to buy instruments from financial institutions to supply those companies with sufficient liquidity. So the many but opposed motives—each centering on self-profit—froze the operation of the financial sector.

Rather than change any of those motives, the current U.S. administration can be viewed as trying to transcend them. The idea is to discipline the market by regulation, so that the previously opposing motives are made irrelevant in the sense that everyone will operate comfortably in a more regulated economy. These are "new rules of the game," needed because "[m]arket discipline failed to constrain dangerous levels of risk-taking through the financial system" (Geithner 2009).

> This crisis has made clear that certain large, interconnected firms and markets need to be under a more consistent, and more conservative regulatory regime. These standards cannot simply address the soundness of individual institutions, but must also ensure the stability of the system itself. (Geithner 2009)

In other words, the motivating arguments of individual institutions are to be transcended by arguments about the whole financial system. The proposed regulations are intended to affect local decisions by setting aside private aims in favor of an overriding concern for "the stability of the system itself." Both Geithner's argument and the policies it supports are designed to transcend the variety of often-opposed individual motives in favor of one common financial motive.

How, exactly, does transcendence of opposites work? Superficially, what seems to be needed is an idea that is somehow higher, perhaps more abstract, than the opposing ones. In fact, transcendence of opposites seems to function by discovering a lower, more basic thing. A simple example of this is Sherif's (1958) classic study of intergroup hostility. Working with boys at camp, he formed two distinct groups and stimulated considerable hostility between them, evidenced by sharp in-group/out-group prejudice. Then he created what he called "superordinate goals," which required the two groups to work together to achieve some jointly-desired end, for instance, pulling a truck out of the mud so groceries could be bought and the boys could have lunch. Repeated exposure to these superordinate goal tasks brought the groups together and eventually erased the earlier hostilities and group identifications.

Cusa often remarked that the absolute maximum is also the absolute minimum, and illustrated this once by saying that "being" is necessary for both being and not-being. "Being" is not more abstract than being and not-being; it is fundamental to both ideas. To sum up our examples in these terms, we would say that superordinate goals wash out in-group motivations, that a stable financial system is a value that subordinates private desires, and that a third party President can operate on the ground common to both major political parties. Transcendence of opposites, then, seems to be a moving downward conceptually, a search for common assumptions and ideas basic to both halves of the opposition. A transcendent thought permits the coincidence of opposites.

Cusa's second possible lesson for us is the one with which this paper began, learned ignorance. I argue that it can be a stable ending point for disagreement, a kind of argument resolution, though not one that has attracted much study. To illustrate the nature of mundane learned ignorance, let me begin by pointing out some things that are *not* learned ignorance.

First, it is not a state of avoidance. Simply refusing to engage a spouse's request to paint the living room is not learned ignorance. Avoidance is not even an argument. Walking away does not normally settle anything, though it might permit a disagreement to evaporate due its inherent lightness. Avoided arguments are "unresolved," in our usual terminology.

Second, learned ignorance is not, as the aphorism has it, "agreeing to disagree." This interpersonal status leaves the disagreement intact. It is merely a polite way of declining to talk about something. Here, too, the argument is "unresolved" and deficient in some way.

Instead, learned ignorance is the state of having satisfied oneself that an argument is inherently incapable of being resolved by human reason. An example of this is how Watzlawick, Beavin, and Jackson (1967) dealt with paradoxes derived from problems of logical type. A classic example is the liar's paradox: "I am lying." The statement is true if it is false, and false if it is true. Working at this level, the paradox is irresolvable. Only by understanding the distinction between a statement and a statement about a statement can one pass through the fallacy. But this understanding does not generate a solution to the question, Is this true or false? The advanced comprehension of logical types does not settle the original issue; it makes the question go away. This is an example of learned ignorance.

Besides the especially clear example of paradox, we can find ordinary situations that resemble it. A theist and atheist may have such contradictory commitment stores that

no way can be found to resolve their disagreement. We should state this even more strongly: their argument is inherently unavailable to joint rational solution. A biologist might find no way to establish a connection to the views of a Creationist who believes that God laid fossils in the earth's crust. A Democrat might find every conciliatory remark made by a Republican to constitute proof of an effort to manipulate.

At one level, we might express frustration that the arguments are not resolved. At a higher level, accompanied by the further reasoning required for a state of learned ignorance, we might realize that each argument is impermeable to reason in its own terms, and take satisfaction in drawing that stable, reasoned conclusion. This would not be a conclusion *to* the argument; it would be a conclusion *about* the argument. It would transcend ordinary reasoning, in approximately the way Cusa described. The danger is in coming to that ending point prematurely, and giving up on real opportunities for argumentation. But the possibility of bad judgment is not an indictment of the concept of learned ignorance.

Learned ignorance, then, is a settled state of argument, akin to consensus and dissensus but not to being "unresolved." We achieve this state when we realize that the argument before us cannot be settled, given our mutual commitment stores and capacity to reason. Learned ignorance is not disappointment or avoidance. It is a satisfying inability to resolve an argument on its original terms.

Link to commentary

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