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Defending Deep Disagreement

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ABSTRACT: Argument has many functions. Argument can be used to articulate a position to oneself or to an audience; to show to oneself or others that a position is reasonable, in the sense that reasons can be given in favor of the position taken; as a tool of intellectual exploration or inquiry; and to help ‘locate’ areas of disagreement with or without the intention of addressing those areas. But clearly, one of the most obvious and important functions of argument is the rational resolution of disagreement. We often engage in argumentative discourse with the expectation that the end result will be a reasoned resolution of disagreement. In fact, part of the basic motivation of philosophical inquiry, and of the critical thinking movement as a specialized branch of philosophical inquiry, is that the careful construction and analysis of arguments can produce real progress in the adjudication of intellectual disputes—whether they be about such age-old philosophical controversies as the existence of freewill, the rationality of the fear of death, the desirability of embodied immortality, the nature and status of our epistemic claims or the nature of moral judgment, or about such contemporary social controversies as abortion, euthanasia, sexual morality, capital punishment, the war in Iraq or the current foreign policy goals of the United States

It is easy to see why we have such high expectations for argument. In countless mundane cases of disagreement we employ argument with great success. We expect it, then, to pay dividends in the more controversial aspects of our social and intellectual lives as well.

This optimistic picture of the role of argument in the rational resolution of disputes has not gone unchallenged. Twenty years ago Robert Fogelin suggested that in contexts of what he calls ‘deep disagreement’ argument fails to provide a means of rational dispute resolution: ‘there are disagreements, sometimes on important issues, which by their very nature, are not subject to rational resolution (through argument).’ This is because, according to Fogelin, contexts of deep disagreement ‘undercut the conditions essential to arguing.’

Fogelin’s view is seemingly very pessimistic. It has the distinct advantage, however, of being at least partly true. However, the claim itself is vague and the argument he employs for it is underdeveloped. First, can we say anything about the kinds of contexts in which deep disagreement is likely to occur? We can gain some insight into what he has in mind by the example of deep disagreement to which he appeals: the controversy over affirmative action. This suggests that deep disagreement is likely to arise in contexts involving contemporary social controversies. But I argue that we must

include contexts of great abstraction, most notably philosophical contexts, since abstract philosophical argumentation seems every bit as prone to deep disagreement as contexts of contemporary social controversy.

Second, can we flesh out his argument? Fogelin claims that it is the sharing of a vast, mostly inarticulate, background understanding of the world, or at least those aspects of it that are at issue in any given case of disagreement, that allows argument to cash in on its dialogical promise. And this shared understanding, which is and must be present in normal argumentative exchanges—its presence is what constitutes the exchange as a normal exchange—is just what is missing in contexts of deep disagreement. Thus interlocutors in contexts of deep disagreement not only fail to agree on what will count as settling the disagreement, they will most likely talk past one another, using vocabulary that seems shared but is not, since its significance comes from the vastly different understanding of the world the interlocutors bring to the table.

How exactly is argument undermined in these non-normal contexts of deep disagreement? Fogelin says little about the details, including what he means by ‘argument.’ We can begin to fill in the details, in particular what Fogelin means by ‘normal argumentative exchanges’ and thereby what he has in mind when argumentative exchanges are non-normal, by appealing to Wright’s ‘interrogative’ picture of argument.

Wright begins by articulating a traditional definition of the concept of an argument. An argument has two components: 1) reasons to believe a claim is true, usually referred to as premises; and 2) the claim for which the reasons serve as a justification, usually referred to as the conclusion. But Wright points out that as it stands this conception of argument is too formal and abstract to be of much help, since it is not at all clear how we are to select from the inexhaustible number of possible justificatory propositions. Wright’s suggestion is that what enables us to assemble the right kinds of reasons from amongst the vast amount of things we could say is a competent and mostly shared understanding of the issues in question. Such a shared understanding allows the interlocutors to understand the problem or the issue that has arisen; that is, they share a sense of the question that needs to be addressed. Wright calls this the ‘implicit question’. In addition, they share a sense of what would count as an answer to the implicit question—we expect them to have little trouble arriving at a short list of plausible, distinct (rival) answers. And we expect them to be able to identify some features of the situation that bear one way or another on the competition between those rival answers. Finally, we expect them to be able to make judgments about which rival answer is the best in light of those situational features. When the circumstances make it possible for arguers to settle on these issues, then it is not difficult to determine what counts as appropriate or relevant information: information is relevant as support if it has an impact on the list of plausible answers—rival conclusions—for the argument in question.

To determine what information needs to be made explicit, then, we need to at least be able to formulate an implicit question and provide a short list of serious rivals. What allows us to settle on these things is, as I have mentioned above, competence on the topic under discussion and a generally shared relevant understanding. When this competence and shared understanding fail to obtain, deep disagreement may occur, just because interlocutors in such situations will not be able to settle on an implicit question, what count as genuine rivals, or how information bears on the ranking of rivals relative to their competition.

Filling out a picture of argument that serves as a foundation for Fogelin's claims and getting clearer on what kinds of arguments are prone to deep disagreement goes part way to defending his view. In addition, however, any adequate defense must respond to criticism. Lugg, for example, claims that argument need not require a pre-existing shared understanding of the issues at hand for it to cash in on its dialogical promise of rational dispute resolution; instead, it is by engaging in the practice of argument that such a shared understanding is forged. Thus, Fogelin's potentially devastating conclusion can be resisted. I argue that while it is obviously true that there are some cases of disagreement in which producing arguments for a view leads to a shared understanding, it does not follow that Lugg's claim holds for all cases of disagreement. For Lugg's claim to be interesting it must be an empirical claim. If so, we must look to actual cases in order to determine its plausibility. A brief examination of the dispute between creationists and evolutionary theorists shows that Lugg's claim is, at least in cases involving great controversy and great abstraction, overly optimistic. There are, then, some deep disagreements that are genuinely deep. Appealing to argument—in the sense just developed—to resolve them is unlikely to yield fruit.

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