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Argumentative virtues and deep disagreement

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ABSTRACT: The theoretical possibility of deep disagreement gives rise to an important practical problem: a deep disagreement may in practice look and feel like a merely stubborn normal disagreement. In this paper I critique strategies for dealing with this practical problem. According to their proponents these strategies exhibit argumentative virtue, but I will show that they embody serious argumentative (and even moral) vices.

KEYWORDS: action, decision, deep disagreement, deliberation, misology, reasoning, skill, understanding, virtue

Many of us are in *these* fields because of our strong commitment to the notion that reasoning is an important way to resolve disputes, conflicts, disagreements, fights, standoffs, and so on. Sure. But the wrong question to ask about *deep disagreements* is: How can reasons-giving resolve them? Someone with Austinian patience could do us a great favor by categorizing kinds of disagreements. But the key picture that I have joined others (like Fogelin (1985) and Turner and Wright (2005) and Godden and Brenner (2010)) in offering is of a kind of disagreement that reasons can't fix. And the key insight of that picture resides in the idea that reasons rely for their efficacy on conditions that do not always obtain.

Of course, if someone will not "listen to reason," then the conditions of reasoning are not met. We could list a hundred similar obstacles. But when I focus on deep disagreement, I am thinking about something else altogether, something that has to do with where reasons come from, how they work, what they're for, and where they can't work. In order to be able to get to what I want to say about virtue and argumentation, let me briefly sketch the points that I have tried elsewhere to establish.

First, about the word "disagreement" in the phrase "deep disagreement." It's not quite right. Typically, the word "disagreement" conjures up conflicting or contradictory convictions. But when it comes to deep disagreement, it is misleading to put the accent on the differing convictions. The accent needs to be not on *difference*, but rather on *not being enough the same*.

A deep disagreement is one special kind of not-agreeing, a gap between us, about how to go on together. What came before it was smooth, unremarkable, concerted, action. We were, we *almost always are*, going on together. It would take

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volumes, in German, to fully explain that. The best I can do here is to gesture: We are, all of us, at all times, engaged in an enormous number of activities, practices, doings. Some of them are readily distinguished from others, while some have no special names, or noticeable or articulated characters. Sometimes one of the things we're doing comes to our attention temporarily, then fades again into the general unnoticed host of doings. Often, almost always, the many doings in which we are engaged flow smoothly together with those engaged in by others. We weave in and out of each other's lives, at every moment, and almost always unremarkably. That is, sometimes we are intentionally cooperating, but almost always, we are co-operating without any special decision to do so, or need to talk about it. Here's the picture: a many-faceted, thoroughly concerted, constantly shifting flow of engagement.

We also must note here that any particular doing can probably be described as part of any number of activities. Whatever I'm doing when brushing my teeth often also counts as getting ready for bed, tending to hygiene, preserving the health of my gums, earning the praise of my dentist, avoiding my OSSA deadlines, etc. So while we are engaged in a constantly shifting, cooperative flow of *doing*, any part of it, at any moment, could be described in any number of ways. This will be important later.

The flow is broken, or at least changed, very often—though context determines almost everything about our experience of just when and how. Did I stop making pancakes and start squeezing juice out of oranges? Or was I doing the same thing the whole time: making breakfast? What we do can be variously characterized, so we should expect that even questions about when we started or stopped doing something will depend to a great degree on who's asking, and why. Sometimes we find ourselves brought up short. We were doing whatever we were doing, and then we find that we can't go on, we are interrupted or somehow discontinued. Maybe the sound of some commotion makes me put down my book. Or I forget how to make a daiquiri. Or I notice that my shoelaces are untied. Then I have to get on with things somehow. Maybe I have to stop reading my book in order to clean up everything the dog knocked over. Or maybe I look up the daiquiri recipe and make a few. In general, we "get on with things," but there's no general plan for this. Sometimes I seek the help of Google, sometimes I ignore the interruption, sometimes I just decide to do something else. Very often, I simply fall back on my vast expertise in almost all of the things I do on a regular basis. I just tie my shoelaces. I did not always understand the ways of shoelaces, but now I am an expert. If you don't like the word "expertise" you can use "competence," or, "understanding." Taken together, the everyday activities in which I'm regularly and ceaselessly engaged, the things I understand, the bits of my competence, must number in the millions.

I say "millions," but who knows how to distinguish such facets from each other? Again, we could break down and explain any given activity in any number of ways, depending on our purposes, interests, and audience. To a beekeeper I could say, for example: "I checked my hives—they were fine." To a non-beekeeper I might have to explain the same activity and judgment in *many* more words. To someone who knew nothing about bees, or insects, or flowers, or seasons, or biology, or any of that, there might be *nothing I could say*, no matter how minute my description, to

get the message across. Indeed, at some absurd remove, it would not even be clear what message I could possibly be motivated or able to convey at all. Now that would be a formidable gap between two bodies of understanding. Happily, it is almost impossible to imagine how I could encounter someone whose understanding of life and the world had so little in common with mine. Of course just speaking the same language (or mutually translatable languages) means that we share a very great deal.

Instead of "disagreement," then, maybe we should always say "gap." If people didn't share enough understanding, the gap would be too deep to close using any of our usual inter-personal gap-closing remedies. Many of those remedies involve ways of using language. And one of those that we prize the most is the giving of reasons. (I will leave alone, for the moment, *very complicated* questions about the relationship between the giving of reasons and other ways of using language to remedy gaps in understanding.) Now, just as I don't always *need* to remedy an interruption in my own more or less solitary activity—I can leave the car up on cinder blocks, for example—we don't always need to remedy gaps in our shared understanding. We can leave them alone. We can change the subject. There are always other things to do. But sometimes we feel compelled to try to get back on the same page. This is particularly the case when we are very intentionally doing something together, and when it is of some importance to us that we go on together. And then, sometimes, giving reasons is just the ticket.

Imagine that we're walking in the woods and reach a fork in the path. What to do? You say, "let's go left—it leads to a great overlook." I say, "We need to go right—my little map here says that that trail is closed." Simple. Now, if I had said (and meant), "Well, I guess we should teleport out," I expect that you would not know what to say. Probably you would take me to be joking. Or maybe you'd try to explain to me the meaning of the word "teleport." But if I accepted your definition, yet maintained sincerely that our best, our only, option is teleportation, it would signal such a vast difference in how we understand the world, and so very *much* of the world, that you'd find it difficult to know where to start. What could you say to get us back on the same page? Luckily, things like that almost never happen. Almost every real interruption is like the easy one above—I give a reason or two, you give one or two, and we're back in business. Those reasons come from the *only* place they can come from—our understandings of what we're doing. I need to say that again—our reasons to go on in this or that way are drawn from our understanding of what we do. There's no other place from which they could come. This is no guarantee of a happy outcome—you appeal to the authority of the map, and I appeal to the beauty of the view, and maybe we weight those too differently to agree. Or maybe we're both rather clueless about what we're doing, and the best reasons our understanding and expertise can license are just not restorative. But in any case, the reasons we give each other, when everything goes well, draw on what we both know about what we're both doing. *We understand each other because we both understand what we're doing together.* When you see it that way, it looks as if we already have to be pretty much on the same page before our reasons can be of any use. Indeed, reasons are effective only when the gap that we discover in our shared understanding is really *very small*.

Reasons-giving is so often effective in everyday contexts that it can be hard to get people to believe in the realistic possibility of gaps so deep that they *cannot be* overcome with reasons. Maybe it never happens. Maybe all of our interruptions and disagreements spring from other sources. A handy way to show that deep disagreements are really possible would be to find some actual ones, but we can't do that. After all, how could we tell them apart from the many other kinds of stubborn disagreements and interruptions that plague our cooperative efforts? Certainly, we would expect a genuine deep disagreement to remain impervious to reasons. But then, others' reasons often fail to move us, even when we see things in very much the same way. A lack of sufficient shared understanding might resemble, in some real situation, stubbornness, or ignorance, or inarticulateness, or hostility, or disinterest, or willfulness, or corruption, or lack of imagination, or lack of information, or lack of candor, or lack of thoughtfulness, or lack of sincerity, or an incompatible weighting of values, or any combination of these, or of many other hurdles. Some people, apparently, disagree with others just for the fun of it. Nothing about the intractability or heat of a disagreement can tell us, on their own, about the extent of the shared resources available to those who are disagreeing.

That's probably part of the reason why many insist that we should never give up on reasons-giving. "Don't give in to misology," Socrates tells us, "we are not truly lost until we give up on argument—keep trying." If we take Socrates to mean that we should never stop producing reasons, never recognize that some gaps are too large to close with reasons, then, if there *are* deep disagreements, we have to recognize it as very bad advice. It's bad in two ways. First, it will lead us, if it leads us anywhere, to conclusions, and then actions, that have no appropriate connection to our understanding. Second, it will seriously harm our reasoning skills. I'll say a bit about each of these in turn. I have touched on them in the past as epistemological problems. Here I will try to show that they are also serious moral problems.

On the first point: When we continue to exchange reasons beyond where we should, we reason and act badly, and, in many cases, un-virtuously (which is not the same as viciously). To see this, it is important to see that the structure of effective reasoning is conservative in several ways. It is conservative insofar as it is *restorative*—it is *about* getting us back on the same page, or on a similar enough page that we can go on together, as we were (though perhaps not *precisely* as we were). It is conservative in another sense as well. I can only understand your reasons, they can only have a purchase on me, if they "catch" in my *current* understanding of the world. Reasons that can perform their function are those which call on what I know how to do. So reasons-giving is, in a sense, a return to who one already is, to the world one already knows. So far, then, the coarse structure of reasons-giving is analogous to part of a basic account of virtue. The virtuous person responds to the world from within her (virtuous) character. A situation may be novel, but how she meets it will be drawn on who she already is. Analogously, though we may be interrupted in a more or less novel way, the reasons that we give to, and accept from, one another can only usefully draw on what we already understand. And now maybe we can say that the relationship between reasons-giving and virtue is closer than mere analogy. Insofar as reasons-giving exploits my understanding of the world, it just *is* a special way, among many, of

accommodating my character to the world, it just is an exercise of virtue (which I'm not opposing here to the exercise of vice, but rather to action out of character.) None of this implies that we cannot innovate through reasoning. The only limits it places on novelty are those of unintelligibility, and there's nothing objectionable about that. When we are compelled to give and consider reasons that do not, cannot, be grounded in our understanding, the very point of reasoning is lost, and the mechanism of reasoning idles. We might as well consult a Ouija board—its reliability will be no worse. Our decisions about how to go on will fail to work, and our actions will be unhinged from who we are. I hold then, that it is required of us *morally*, as well as epistemologically, to keep firmly fixed before us the idea that in any given situation, continued reasons-giving might hurt rather than help. There is no misology in that. Effective reasoning runs out, and so the production of what we take to be reasons ought to *stop*, where our understanding runs out.

But how do we really know where our understanding runs out? That brings me to my second point. The second point, again, is the claim that persistence in the producing and exchanging of reasons, even where they cannot function effectively, positively harms our ability to reason well. I have lost some OSSA friends over this claim, and I hope I can make a better case for it this time around. For many well-meaning people, people who are powerfully impressed by the awfulness of some common ways of responding to disagreements, the default setting is that reasoning is, at its worst, merely ineffective—it won't hurt us, it'll just fail. Therefore, there's no reason to stop trying. But, as I say, this is not true.

Our reasoning skills are like most of our other skills in a very important way. We can get better at reasoning, and we can get worse at it. With other skills or practices, this is obvious. Sit hunched up at your desk for a few years, and your ability to sit up straight will be degraded. Accidentally skip some lyrics from a song you can't stop singing, and you will find it hard to get right later. Swing the golf club the wrong way too many times, and it becomes very difficult to swing it properly. The short story here is that doing something the right way requires and reinforces the right habits of action and judgment, and doing something the wrong way has the opposite effects. Reasoning really is just like that. If you do it badly, you make it much harder to do it well. And since reasoning is something we do together, you also make it harder for those around you to do it well.

So let's talk about some of the skills upon which we rely when we give reasons. There are many of them, but if I'm right, some of the most important are among the most easily overlooked. I'm referring to our skills in judging just what, and just how much, of our understanding is shared. When I choose which of the millions of bits of my understanding I'm going to offer to you in support of some conclusion I favor (also drawn from my understanding, of course), I need to know just what we share, or else I won't know just which bit you lack. If I couldn't tell what we shared, I would have no idea which part of my understanding needed to be made explicit to get us back on the same page. It's remarkable how good we are at that—on a regular basis we can diagnose the size and shape of the gap between us, figure out what needs to be supplied, and figure out how to supply it. And we do all of this against the backdrop of a shifting flow of activity, the understanding of any part of which can be characterized in more ways than we can count. How do we do

it? That's a long and fascinating story. But right now the point is just that we have this skill, or skill-set, and we could not effectively give reasons without it. And again, what these skills really amount to is cultivating and maintaining, ready for use, a sense of what we really have in common with each other.

But now consider what happens to these skills when we advise each other to keep reasoning, no matter what. What we're really doing is advising each other to assume and insist that we share enough to make our reasons effective. Maybe we could put it like this: Never accept the possibility that our understanding is insufficiently shared. Or maybe like this: Always proceed as if, no matter what, there is no understanding of life, or the world, that is significantly different from your own. Sounds troubling. But what I'm pursuing here is what happens to our skill at gauging each other's understanding, when we are instructed to act *without using it*, to disengage it, permanently, from the rest of the activity of reasoning. Like any skill of judgment, it erodes when it is not used. Just as a constantly blindfolded archer's aim would deteriorate, we lose our sense of what we share with the many others in our lives when we are told never to worry about it.

Of course life calls on our understanding of each other, our sense of what we share with those around us, generally and specifically, at many times. But appropriate reasoning places a special demand on that sense, keeps it sharp, trims its errors, and highlights its deficiencies. When we are told to do our reasoning without it, we do indeed start to lose track of each other, and therefore even of ourselves. And without a doubt, the reasoning we do without it will be random and capricious—hardly useful at all.

You might think that things can't be that bad. Surely, there is something self-correcting about reasoning undertaken without any regard to the presence of its necessary conditions. Surely, when we all get rusty enough at reasoning, it will show. Then we can all go to OSSA and get straightened out by the experts. Alas, that is not true. Skills deteriorate incrementally, and when we're talking about the skills that help to define and maintain a culture, their deterioration is very difficult to notice. Further, bad habits and deteriorating skills find support in other bad habits. Slouch in your chair for long enough, and you'll soon find yourself used to propping up your head with your hands.

We certainly do something like chin-propping to support our bad reasoning habits. Remember, any activity can be described in any number of ways. That means that any conflicting understanding of what we're doing together, any impasse we reach when trying to go on together, can be met with a description that presents no conflicts. What we *ought* to do when we find that we may deeply disagree, is to stop reasoning, and then, if going on together is important, see if we can make substantive changes in what one or all of us understand. That's a slow and painful process. It is also a process that can be subject to abuse, certainly. But so can the way we usually proceed. Here's what we usually do: We reach an impasse, have no sense of why we can't produce reasons that convince each other, believe that we should keep trying, and then pretend to be discovering greater common ground by merely re-describing, in a more general way, what we were doing. We haven't really changed what we understand, or how much understanding we share. So the resources upon which we could draw to give each other effective reasons *haven't*

changed at all. All that's changed is how much we *appear* to have in common, and that, on its own, unfortunately, seems to authorize us to keep trying. I believe that this happens all the time, captured in phrases we all recognize: "This isn't about labor vs. management—it's about coming together to do what's best for the whole organization." Or, "I'm not trying to make your life more difficult, I'm just trying to look out for the standards we all cherish in this community." Are phrases like this always the chin-propping concomitants of unhinged and rudderless pseudo-reasoning? Not always. But often. And often it isn't hard to hear in them something darker, something more like manipulation than like genuine attempts to repair gaps in our intersubjectivity.

What I'm suggesting is that a consequence of our prejudice to the effect that we should never give up on reasons-giving is a loss of the very skills by which we judge what we share, and how to select and offer parts of what we don't share, in a way that makes them intelligible and effective as *reasons.* And that loss is masked by an abuse of our ability to re-describe what we're doing, creating the impression that we are not suffering from differences which should compel us to stop trying. We are thus further separated from what we know and from each other, and that is a sad and ironic destination to reach by travelling on a path that puts reasoning first.

If I'm correct about how reasoning works when we use it to get on with things we're doing, then the prejudice against the possibility of deep disagreement is a real moral problem. Maybe there are no deep disagreements, in the technical sense I've been outlining. But that's not the point. The point is that we will reach bad conclusions about how to go on, and we will harm our reasoning skills, and we will alienate ourselves from others, and even from ourselves, unless we are willing to recognize that some gaps just *could not* be closed with reasons.

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