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Commentary on: Chris Campolo's "Argumentative virtues and deep disagreement"

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1. INTRODUCTION

Chris Campolo's paper "Argumentative virtues and deep disagreement" builds on his earlier work (2005, 2007) – some done together with Dale Turner (2005) and based on the work of Larry Wright (Turner & Wright, 2005) – which presents a compelling picture of the pragmatic, situated, and social foundations and functions of reasoning and argumentation, and which (in a special issue of *Informal Logic*) applies this picture to deep disagreement. I should say at the outset that find myself largely in agreement with the theoretical perspective offered by Campolo (Godden & Brenner, 2010; Godden, 2011), and I find it to be remarkably informative when it comes to understanding, navigating and resolving deep disagreements. As such, this will be a sympathetic commentary. That said, I hope that there are a few points which I might add to complement the view and offer something in the way of a resolution to a disagreement.

I will begin by highlighting what I take to be the most important features of Camoplo's view and the perspective it offers on deep disagreements. Second, I will contrast Camoplo's advice concerning the use of reason when faced with seemingly intractable disagreements, or disagreements having the appearance of depth, with the advice offered by Adams (2005). Finally, I will conclude with some points which I suggest might be reparative of this difference.

2. CAMPOLO'S VIEW OF REASONS AND DEEP DISAGREEMENT

In his now famous 1985 *Informal Logic* paper "The logic of deep disagreements," Fogelin identified deep disagreements as lacking two contextual features that characterize normal (or near-normal) arguments: (i) they lack background context of broadly shared beliefs and preferences and (ii) they lack existing, shared procedures for their resolution (p. 3). Since, according to Fogelin, "the significance of all of our argumentative devices is internal to normal (or near-normal) argumentative contexts," (p.4) these background contextual features "provide the framework in which *reasons can be marshaled*" (p. 3). Thus deep disagreements are "by their nature, not subject to rational resolution" (p. 7).

While Fogelin did not devote any great effort to explaining the connection between these background, contextual features and the effective marshaling of

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reasons, Turner, Wright, and Campolo (2005) have. Campolo presents a picture of the role and foundation of reasoning, and argumentation understood as "reasoning together" (Campolo, 2005, p. 38), which I take to be correct in broad strokes. Roughly, and as you have just heard, the story is this – at least insofar as I understand it.[1]

The function of reasoning and argumentation is essentially reparative. They typically occur on occasions where there is some impediment in our normal activities – where we are unable to just get on with things, or go on as usual. Reasoning and deliberation typically occur when we are 'held up' because a judgment or decision does not strike us as readily apparent. Argumentation is typically occasioned by the impasse of disagreement, and when agreement is restored we are able to go on together. Argumentation, in particular, Campolo presents as reparative to a gap in intersubjectivity, or in our intersubjective understanding of things.

While the function of reasoning is reparative its foundation is in practice. Reasoning, and argumentation understood as reasoning together, is but one of many things that we *do* with words. This perspective yields an account of the normative foundations of reasoning as a kind of doing. Even if we privilege the giving and asking for reasons as the downtown (Brandom, 2001, p. 14)[2] of the ancient city that is our language (Wittgentsein, *PI,* §18)[3] such that many other, suburban, regions of linguistic activity are dependent on it, the nature and foundations of this core practice are no different than that of our other linguistic practices. Succeeding in doing things with words is a kind of competency and is grounded, ultimately, in the same way as all of our other successful doings: in training.

> The path to expertise, competence, and intersubjectivity is paved with training, practice, study, apprenticeship, immersion in a tradition or way of doing something. Reasoning together, on its own, cannot bring about any of this – it first gets its foothold once all of this is already in place. (Campolo, 2005, p. 45).

For example, in learning how to do thing with words we learn certain *paradigms of judgment*. These judgments do not involve the use or application of concepts; rather mastering them is preparatory to concept use. Thus, making these judgments plays a role in training – in teaching, learning and practicing the proper use of concepts and thereby becoming skilled in the normative practices in which such concept use is embedded. The judgments themselves are not based on reasons, but rather demonstrate or elucidate the proper use of concepts, and hence are partly constitutive of their meaning. Activities such as these are preparatory to the doings

[1] Parts of this overview will draw upon Godden and Brenner (2010) and Godden (2011).

[2] "Inferential practices of producing and consuming *reasons* are *downtown* in the region of linguistic practice. Suburban linguistic practices utilize and depend on the conceptual contents forged in the game of giving and asking for reasons, [and] are parasitic on it." (Brandom, 2001, p. 14)

[3] "Our language can be seen as an ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new house, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets and uniform houses" (Wittgenstein, *PI,* §18).

that we undertake when we use and apply the concepts in our normative practices, including reasoning itself.

As such, and despite how we might sometimes talk, the practice of reasoning does not have a privileged (e.g., justificatory, legitimating or founding) relationship to these formative and constitutive activities. Rather, these formative activities ground reasoning *as a normative practice*, in the same was that all our normative practices are grounded. Reasoning is dependent upon, and subsequent to these preparatory activities, rather than independent of, and regulative over them (Godden, 2011, pp. 4-5).

One moral Campolo derives from this story is that the efficaciousness of reasons – their ability to do their job properly – is contingent upon their remaining connected with these preparatory activities in which they are properly grounded. As Campolo wrote:

> [R]easoning together is not some sort of magically creative act that always produces efficacious results. It is rather a way of drawing on shared resources, and as those resources get thinner, reasoning loses traction. (2005, p. 41)

Luckily, this is almost never an issue. Most actual disagreements are squarely, or at least recognizably, situated within the kinds of situations and other practices in which our reasons are *at home*.

> Almost every real interruption is … [shallow in this sense:] – I give a reason or two, you give a reason or two, and we're back in business. [But:] Those reasons come from the *only* place they can come from – our understanding 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. … [T]he reasons we give each other, when everything goes well, draw on what we both know about what we're 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. (Campolo, 2013 OSSA, p. 3)

On the other hand, this is not always the case. Thus, a second moral Campolo derives from this story is that we must always be sensitive to the limits of our rational capacities, for there are severe cognitive and practical risks in not doing so.

> 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. (Campolo, 2013 OSSA, p. 4)

The cognitive risk in relying on ungrounded reason can be worse than error, for unless errors are fatal we can at least learn from our mistakes. By contrast, lucky success can be far more detrimental than ignorance or error. Instead of revising our cognitive practices and habits as we should and in view of the circumstances, we will mistakenly attribute our success to skill and continue to rely on our existing

practices when, in fact, we ought not to (Campolo, 2005, p. 46; cf. Godden & Brenner, 2010, p. 56).

Further, as Campolo reminded us today, this will lead to a deterioration of our reasoning skills themselves. To improve at any skill it must be practiced correctly, successfully, to reinforce good habits. Practicing something incorrectly can lead only to bad habits. And even if these occasionally or luckily yield success, they neither result in, nor are based on, any underlying competency. Finally, Campolo encourages us that cognitive irresponsibilities of this sort are a kind of moral failing as well.

3. ADAMS VERSUS CAMPOLO ON PERSISTING WITH REASONING

Campolo (2013 OSSA, p.3), considering the Socratic advice, "Don't give in to misology, … we are not truly lost until we give up on argument – keep trying," responds as follows:

> 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 [for the reasons just described].

Despite the fact that Campolo's story about reasoning generally – which we might see as a completely general skill not limited in its domain of application – should be both familiar and agreeable to us in light of all our other skills, abilities, habits and practices, Campolo claims that he has "lost some OSSA friends" over his claim that relying on reasons when the understanding in which they are grounded runs out is detrimental and should be avoided.

Though I don't know who Campolo had in mind here, David Adams, in a 2005 paper in *Informal Logic*, "Knowing when disagreements are deep," prescribed advice that is perhaps most deeply at odds with the advice Campolo gives us today.

Adams argues that we ought always to proceed in argumentation as though our disagreements were shallow, because doing otherwise comes at the expense of abandoning reason entirely. Arguers engaged in a disagreement, Adams claims (p. 67), have no way of knowing whether or not their disagreement is deep, since the only distinguishing feature of deep disagreement is "exhausting [all] the possible resources of normal discourse" (p. 76). "The only way, in other words, to come to know whether discourse is normal is to proceed as if it is" (p. 76), and to do otherwise is to abandon reason. At the same time, reasoners should prefer a rational resolution to their disagreement over a non-rational one, since non-rational resolutions are both substantively and procedurally inferior. "'Consensus' is not simply the name of an outcome but an achievement – something produced by a form of collective ... reflection and deliberation, a process of being mutually convinced by reasons" (p. 73). As such, Adams argues that even when a disagreement appears to be deep, by being intractable and resolution-resistant, arguers are rationally obliged not give up on reasoning, and to proceed as though their differences were rationally reparable.

Clearly, these two pieces of advice are not entirely at odds with each other. Both prefer a rational resolution where possible, and both recognize the prohibitive costs of abandoning reasons. Both claim that we should be sensitive to the idea that our intractable differences might actually be deep, and that this requires a change in how we go about doing things. Campolo's position seems to be predicated on the idea that we can recognize (at least sometimes) those conditions under which our reason-giving activities are no longer at home and hence have no purchase. To this, Campolo adds the idea that the risks associated with lucky resolution (or lucky success) are much higher than acknowledging that the gap which separates us is beyond the present reach of our reasons and the practices in which they are grounded. To proceed by way of existing reasons in this situation is both cognitively and morally irresponsible. Surely Adams should not disagree with this last point. Incompetence, even when combined with sufficient quantities of luck, is no virtue in comparison with success which is properly credited to the agent competently exercising her skills. By contrast, Adams's position is committed to the idea that there is no *a priori* or practical way of determining whether any actual disagreement is deep. Thus, according to Adams, while we should be sensitive to the possibility of deep disagreement, the only cognitively and morally responsible course of action is to proceed by way of reasons until they are entirely exhausted. Surely, Campolo should not disagree here either. If there is any hope that reason can settle the matter, e.g., if more training in the proper use of reason could repair the differences that separate us, then we should opt for that course of action.

The difference between Campolo and Adams does not seem to be especially deep, but rather seems to settle on the point of whether, and how, we can rightly recognize when our disagreements *are* deep, rather than just seeming to be so. Although deep disagreements are neither distinguished by their topic or subject matter nor their intractability, but rather on how, and with what shared commitments and resources, the disputants approach and contextualize the debate, it would seem that we can point to disagreements which have considerable depth.

Consider an example Wittgenstein (1966, pp. 55-56) contemplated during his *Lectures on Religious Belief* (c. 1938) about a religious person who believes in Judgement Day and a person who does not.

> If you ask me whether or not I believe in a Judgement Day, in the sense in which religious people have belief in it, I wouldn't say "No. I don't believe there will be such a thing." It would seem to me utterly crazy to say this. And then I give an explanation: "I don't believe in …", but then the religious person never believes what I describe. I can't say. I can't contradict that person. In one sense, I understand all he says – the English words "God", "separate", etc. I understand. I could say: "I don't believe in this," and this would be true, meaning I haven't got these thoughts or anything that hangs together with them. But not that I could contradict the thing. You might say "Well, if you can't contradict him, that means you don't understand him. If you did understand him, then you might [contradict him, or agree with him]." That again is Greek to me. My normal technique of language leaves me. I don't know whether to say they understand one another or not. These controversies look quite different from any normal controversies. Reasons look entirely different from normal reasons. They are, in a way, quite inconclusive. The point is that if there

> were evidence, this would in fact destroy the business. Anything that I normally call evidence wouldn't in the slightest influence me.

As Wittgenstein describes this, it strikes me as a paradigmatic example of a disagreement having considerable depth.[4] And if this is the case, then it would seem as though we can readily identify at least quintessentially deep disagreements without actually exhausting all of our reasons in our attempts to resolve them.

3. RESOLUTION

Godden and Brenner (2010, pp. 46 ff.) point out that the nature of meaningful disagreement places a lower limit on the depth of deep disagreement. The interesting, and troubling cases of disagreements having the character of depth are ones where reasons have no local-purchase (i.e., on the point of disagreement itself), but yet communication, understanding, and indeed disagreement are still possible. As Lugg (1986, p. 47) rightly pointed out, "the interesting case is the one in which individuals are able to argue yet unable to settle their differences, i.e., the case in which there exists a framework for disagreement but not one for bringing about its resolution."

Notice that in order for there to be a meaningful disagreement at all, there must be enough shared common ground that the discussants can do many, many things with words – except use reasons ordinarily to repair the gap that separates them. For example, discussants must be able to assert and deny, ask questions, give examples, tell stories, and indeed transact reasons *about other things*.

While a deep disagreement may be one on which we will "always turn our spade," as Campolo (2007, p. 1) so aptly put it, it is one for which *other* implements – even verbal implements – with which we have some skill must still have some purchase. Since reason giving in the usual way offers no traction, we must instead do *another sort of thing entirely* (cf. Turner & Wright, 2005, p. 31). But this is not to say that reasons have no role to play, and nor is it to say that the activities and skills involved are entirely foreign to our existing ways of doing things.

Rather, this too is something we do regularly and frequently with great success. Indeed, it is an activity, or set of activities, that is well entrenched in our way of life. Take the example of teaching or training people (be they children, students, or strangers) in some activity. Reasons are used here to orient perspective, or focus their attentions, so that they will come to understand, and be able to go on for themselves. To distinguish these types of activities from reason-giving in normal contexts Godden and Brenner (2010) called this "rational persuasion" which they explained as a form of rhetoric (i.e., persuasive discourse) in the service of concept formation.

Consider, as a final example, the perennial irresolvability of philosophical problems. All philosophical problems have at least some depth to them. Yet, their depth is often due neither to some transcendental profundity nor to any disguised

[4] Godden and Brenner (2010, sect. 6, pp. 57 ff.) consider a variety of similarly deep differences found in Wittgenstein's writings.

but underlying nonsensicality. Rather, they are questions which, as Russell identified, lack an existing method for their solution. While meaningful questions require that we are able to identify what we would count as an answer, or at least what would contribute to an answer, it does not mean that we have, ready-to-hand, a method for answering the questions. In this way, Russell characterized philosophical questions as distinct from scientific ones:

> Thus, to a great extent, the uncertainty of philosophy is more apparent than real: those questions which are already capable of definite answers are placed in the sciences, while those only to which, at present, no definite answer can be given [because no methodology for answering them exists], remain to form the residue which is called philosophy. (Russell, 1967, p. 90)

Thus, while Brenner and I agree with Turner and Wright that the "rational persuasion" in deep channels of disagreement are anything but ordinary, and are properly described as *another sort of thing entirely*, we deny that activities involved in "rational persuasion" are either irrational or non-rational. Rather, as Godden and Brenner (2010, p. 77) concluded:

> To be "won over" through such persuasion involves accepting a certain picture of the world; it involves learning to apply concepts in w way to which one way, perhaps, not initially inclined, and then "recognizing" (understanding, judging, appreciating) that *this* use of concepts is befitting of one's projects – it "allows one to go on."

At the very least, this seems to involve a kind of practical, instrumental, or means-end reasoning by which individuals, reasoners, arguers, and even deep-disagreers recognize that a, perhaps dramatic, change in perspective or grounding activities will allow them to get on with things in a way that is satisfactory and ideally reparative of the gap in intersubjectivity which derailed the initial (discursive) activity in the first place.

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