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Deep Disagreement in a Multicultural World

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ABSTRACT: Deep disagreement isn't about the irresolvability of actual disputes, it is about one of the inherent limitations of argument as a tool for re-establishing intersubjectivity. I explore the relationship between argument, deep disagreement, and shared understanding, while responding to Phillips' criticisms of my account. If we can learn about the conditions under which argument cannot work, then we can learn when to turn to other strategies to help us get along.

KEYWORDS: argument, deep disagreement, Fogelin, intersubjectivity, rationality, reasons, understanding

1. INTRODUCTION

Dana Phillips and I disagree about 'deep disagreement,' but I don't know if our disagreement is a deep one. For one thing, 'deep disagreement' names a whole cluster of ideas and issues, and it takes some care to avoid confusion. For another thing, deep disagreement, in the technical sense, is only one kind of persistent disagreement, so diagnosis can be tricky. In what follows, I'll sketch my view of deep disagreement and draw upon that sketch to address some of Phillips' criticisms.

Two prefatory remarks: First, Phillips understandably lumps my views together with those of Fogelin, who started the discussion about deep disagreement years ago (Fogelin 1985). I'm glad to be in such company, but my approach and concerns are different from Fogelin's. In what follows I'll speak just for myself.

Second, I want to agree with Phillips about the stakes of these questions. She wants to show that there's no such thing as deep disagreement because she wants us to believe that argument can be fruitful even across lines of significant cultural difference. Her real concern is with our ability to get along. I admire and share that concern. But because I share it, I think that it is important to get a clear view of the tools we have at our disposal. Argumentation is indeed one of our tools, but it is a very limited one. It will not—it cannot—always help us get along. Further, we can do ourselves some harm if we fail to face this clearly and honestly. I'll return to that point below.

Now then, Phillips and others don't seem to believe in deep disagreement, and that's a good place to begin. I am a believer. That is, I believe that there are some disagreements that cannot be resolved through argument. The trick is to avoid focusing first on "disagreement" or "resolved" or even on "cannot." Instead we should focus first

on “argument.” Deep disagreement is about argument, about some of the conditions that must be fulfilled in order for argument to work. There are, of course, many different conditions that must be fulfilled in order for argumentation to work. But when we talk about deep disagreement, we’re talking specifically about the degree to which prospective arguers share an understanding. Some believe that no matter how little arguers have in common, argument can *still work*. They don’t believe that a lack of shared understanding, all on its own, is an insurmountable barrier to argument. After all, someone like Phillips might say, argument is all about *not agreeing*, and the less people agree, the more they have to hope for from argument. My claim is that a lack of shared understanding, all on its own, can be an insurmountable barrier to argument. From my point of view, the question of deep disagreement was never: Is there such a thing as an irresolvable disagreement? It was always: Are there some disagreements that cannot be solved *by argument*? I think that Phillips would say “no” to the latter because she wants to say “no” to the former. But if we want to avoid confusion, we need to separate these questions better than Phillips and I have done in the past.

2. UNDERSTANDING, SHARED AND INTERRUPTED

Deep disagreement, on my formula, is what we get when there is not enough shared understanding for argument to work. But what is “shared understanding”? And what does it mean to say that argument “works” or “doesn’t work”?

Understanding, the way I mean it, is a matter of knowing what you’re doing in some more or less definite endeavour. Having an understanding amounts to having an expertise at something, even if the something is mundane. If you understand the ways of ATM machines, then you know how to work them, you know what to expect from them, you know what people mean when they mention them, and so on.

Though Phillips mistrusts them, mundane examples like this serve several purposes. They can highlight something important about the idea of understanding, namely, the fact that we usually take it for granted. Expertise with an ATM may be unexciting, but it is actually a complex achievement, along with pencil-sharpening, paper-stapling, parking-meter-paying and the myriad other mundane proficiencies that get us through the day. Mundane examples can also help to head off a tempting mistake. Understanding, the way I mean it, is not always, or even usually, an intellectual matter. You can use the ATM machine, or exit an elevator, or refill your water glass, without thinking much about it at all. We’re usually not talking about mental exercises here, even if they are often accompanied by a variety of beliefs, attitudes, and so forth.

But mundane examples can lead us off course, too. For they fail to suggest the enormity of what’s going on in even the simplest of situations. If you have an understanding of ATM machines, then you understand many other things, too. For example, you understand some very complex matters about physical objects like push buttons, ATM cards, cash, envelopes, transaction statements, and so on. You know about view screens and how to interpret and respond to them. You know about bank accounts, account balances, transaction fees, and PIN numbers. You know a language and you know something about mathematics. Your ATM understanding rests more or less directly on your understanding of many other parts of the world and your experience in it. That’s as true for the mundane understandings as it is for more exciting ones like auto racing or DNA sequencing.

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When people *share* an understanding of something, then they have the same competence or expertise, more or less. Many of us share an understanding about ATM machines, pencils, telephones, sidewalks, and so on. It is this mass of widely shared understanding that makes it possible for us to interact so successfully in so many different ways. I say “excuse me,” and you step aside to let me off the elevator. I queue up at the cashier, and my chance to pay for my coffee comes and goes without incident. You answer your doorbell, and I hand you the pizza you ordered. It is because we are all experts at these same things that we know just how to respond to each other, to cooperate, to go on together in all of the ways that we do. In normal circumstances, our synchronization, if I can put it that way, reaches quite far. Almost always we know what to do, and we know what we can expect others to do, and for the most part it all runs like clockwork because we share so many of the same understandings.

Of course, it doesn't always run like clockwork. Things go wrong, unexpected events intervene, confusion or disagreement interrupts us, and we find ourselves at a loss about how to go on together. Sometimes we're brought up short, like when the sign at the gas station reads, “self-serve,” but the attendant yells at me for pumping my gas. Or when the light turns green but the car at the head of the line fails to move. These are little interruptions in the otherwise smooth flow of our interaction, and they beg for some sort of remedy. We need to get back onto the same page. So I point out the “self-serve” sign to the attendant and ask him what's wrong. Or I sound my horn, lightly, to get the first driver in line to stop daydreaming.

Remedies *work* when they get us back on the same page, that is, when they help us to restore the smoothness and sureness of our interaction. They help us to get past the interruption. Sometimes we pick the wrong remedy, and then we remain stuck. But we can remain stuck even when we pick the right remedy. Attempts to get back on the same page can fail in a thousand different ways. But here's a crucial point: The question about why certain attempts fail in practice is not the same as the question about what makes a given remedy the right one to try. What makes a remedy the right one to try is, partly, a matter of how it appeals to (or rests on) our shared understanding. There's no guarantee, but when I sound my car horn, the daydreaming driver will know how to respond if he and I share an understanding about the protocols of driving. If we don't share that understanding, then the honk is lost on him. Of course, it is hard to imagine that someone could know how to drive without knowing what a horn honk could mean. But that just shows that sometimes the remedy is so closely bound up with the interrupted activity that it is a part of it. Horns are *built into* cars. The remedy relies on the very same understanding that usually guides us smoothly.

3. DISAGREEMENT AND ARGUMENT

On my view, argument is one kind of remedy for interruptions in the smooth flow of our interaction. I don't claim that there are no other uses for argument. But I do believe that most of the time, by far, argument is aimed at getting us back on the same page when we have been brought up short. And very often when we're brought up short, we experience it as a disagreement.

There are many kinds of disagreement, but the ones we care about here are the ones that cause us problems, the ones that seem to us to need resolution. They seem to need resolution because they are in our way somehow, they are preventing us from going

on together. For example, I think that we should attend the funeral of our colleague's cousin. You think that we really shouldn't. This needs solving. Or, you think that we should order one meal and split it. I think that we should order separate meals. This needs solving. And yes, why not: I believe that it should be legal to have an abortion, but you are pro-life all the way. This cries out for remedy, at least if we want to continue to be related to each other in whatever ways we are.

Argument is often the right remedy to pick. Do we go to the funeral or not? I say that attending the funeral shows respect and support for our colleague. But you say that since our colleague barely knew his cousin, we would just be intruding. We give each other reasons. I say that we ought to order our meals separately, since I don't like any of your favourites. You say that it is healthier and cheaper to split a meal. I point out that there's a plate charge added to the bill when we share, so it's not really cheaper. And so on. Here we are, trying out reasons and conclusions and counter-arguments. In many cases this will work—we will come to see one conclusion as the best one, and then we'll be on the same page again, able to go on.

It doesn't always work. Like any attempted remedy, argument can fail in a thousand ways. But it definitely cannot work unless our reasons can reach into what we understand together. If my reasons don't have any purchase at all in some understanding of yours, then reasons-giving will not be the right remedy. If, for example, I know nothing at all about the mechanical workings of automobiles, then none of the reasons you give me will help convince me that we need a new clutch. I am more likely to go along with your plan just because you seem to know what you're talking about. If you know nothing at all about botanical matters, then you should probably just trust me, because you won't be able to follow my reasons for planting a *prunus cerasifera* instead of a *prunus maritima* over there near the shed. Reasons cannot elevate or depress candidate conclusions where there is no understanding for them to invoke.

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You should trust me about the *prunus cerasifera*, and I should take your word for it about the clutch. Believing in and relying on authority is one kind of remedy that doesn't require much shared understanding. Another kind of remedy involves shelving the question. How about if we don't plant any *prunus* this year? That's a way around a disagreement, at least temporarily. Yet a third approach, if you have the patience for it, is for me to give you a course on the natural history of *prunus*. And you can teach me all about cars. Then we'll perhaps be able to evaluate each other's reasons. These strategies are all very important, but they are very different from argument. Argument runs on shared understanding, or it doesn't run at all. And it's when it cannot run at all that we have deep disagreement.

Of course, it is never easy to accept the idea that one's reasons have no purchase at all in the other's understanding. In fact, when people reach a disagreement, when they are brought up short and don't know how to go on, it is usually fair to assume that they were acting on *some* shared understanding. If they weren't, then in what sense were they "on the same page?" How could they have been engaged in something *together*, if their understandings fail to overlap to such a large degree? Very often we get closer to the mark when we look for some other explanation for a disagreement's stubbornness in the face of argument. Perhaps neither arguer really does have very good reasons for his

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conclusion. Or perhaps both are too proud to give in. Or perhaps each has too much at stake. Or maybe they're just not paying enough attention. Again, even the best attempts at a remedy can be derailed in many ways.

But sometimes it really is deep disagreement, and they really were doing something together, in a sense, without any shared understanding. These situations are rare. They are also painful, bewildering, and often enough, infuriating. Some of the pain comes from the suspicion that good reasons are being turned away perversely. And some of the pain comes from features of the situation that creates the disagreement. Think of the English and the Wompanoag, who shared very little understanding. Each party had certain views, practices, customs, attitudes, aspirations, and intentions about "living on the land." But they differed so radically that there were many interruptions and disagreements. And argument didn't seem to be able to help much. I'm not positive that this constitutes a deep disagreement—again, there are a thousand ways for remedies to fail, and we can never know what would have happened if reasoning had been pursued with more skill and earnestness. But I suspect that the recipe for deep disagreement was in place: An inability to go on together, and too little shared understanding to get back on the same page through argument. There were treaties. There were commercial arrangements. There were battles. There were natural interventions like disease and famine. There were relocations, religious conversions, and temporary alliances. All of these things changed the shapes of the difficulties. But what didn't seem to budge them was argument.

How different that sort of case is from the ones we considered above, about attending a funeral or splitting a meal! But that is part of the point. Deep disagreements don't arise in the normal course of things when people are sitting in a restaurant or driving on the freeway. They happen without much warning, when people of very different understandings are brought together and forced to face the fact that they cannot just go on doing what they were doing. There's a need for a remedy, but too little held in common to reach agreement through argument. Usually, there is a power struggle. The scary thing, for Phillips, and for me, is that our ever more globalized world seems to sprout these scenarios with increasing frequency.

But Phillips thinks that I paint the picture too hopelessly, and that I don't understand how argument works. Sure, if we begin with a picture of argument that makes its effectiveness depend on massively overlapping understanding, then things will look grim when we get to more dramatic divergences. Surely I should realize that people who share no special competences, apart from, perhaps, basic common sense, settle disagreements through argument all the time. And if one arguer genuinely doesn't understand the other one, then all that's needed are lengthier explanations. If an argument depends on some special knowledge, then it is the arguer's responsibility to spell it out clearly, so that it can be understood and evaluated by the other party.

My response to Phillips is easy to extract from what I've said above. Common sense is just the phrase we use to refer to the many widely shared and overlapping understandings that we expect people like ourselves to possess. It is mundane, perhaps, but it is genuinely rich and far-reaching know-how, nonetheless. Or to put it another way, people who have common sense are experts at a great many things. When arguments work effortlessly, it is because so much is already agreed upon. At the same time, I suspect that the appearance of so much argumentative success, even among those who seem not to share much understanding, is just that, an appearance. Sure, at a certain point,

argument ends and action resumes. But it takes real care to be sure that I didn't just agree with you finally because I was bored, or intimidated, or embarrassed, or indifferent, or spiteful, or distracted, or scheming, or affected in a host of other ways that have nothing to do with the weight of the reasons offered. Arguments *end* much more often than they *work*.

Phillips' suggestion that gaps in shared understanding can be filled in by additional explanation runs into the same limits: I need to understand a great deal already before an explanation can make any sense to me. At some point, when too little is shared, what's needed is not explanation but rather an education. And education is not the same as argument aimed to overcome disagreement.

5. REMEDIES AND RATIONALITY

I have no quarrel—not much quarrel—with those who say that education, or shelving the question, or appealing to experts are possible remedies to what appear to be deep disagreements. But why must they construe these as components of argument? I think it's because they want us to recognize these strategies as rational. We philosophers tend to think that remedies can be separated neatly into the rational and the nonrational, and that it is our job to champion the rational ones. The nonrational ones, we believe, are just different flavours of coercion. I suspect that the truth is not so tidy. But in any case, I think that there is an important reason to deny that these other strategies count as argument. When arguers exchange reasons, it is their own shared understanding which underwrites their chosen conclusion. It is their own judgment, which, collected and focused by argument, re-establishes their ability to go on together. In a world characterized by escalating technological, political, and cultural complexity, we need to get clear about the relative range of our own understanding, and of the tools with which we apply it. The distance between the outer edges of our understanding and the things we need to do is always changing, and when we are not able to gauge this distance, we fail to know ourselves in a deep way. You can insist that it is perfectly rational to seek out experts, get an education, or shelve the question. Maybe you just mean that these are all better than coercion—that's fine, I agree. But each of those asks us to depart from our own understanding in search of the best solution, and we ought not to disguise the departure.

OK, but *so what* if we try to exchange reasons when we have too little shared understanding? *Where's the harm?* There is some harm, and it deserves careful investigation, but I can only mention it here. If we share too little understanding, then our conclusion isn't really underwritten by the argument. We either settle on a conclusion that might as well have been dictated by a ouija board, or we reach no conclusion at all. The former is worse than the latter. Apparent success in argument reinforces a poor grasp of what argument is good for, and when it can work. That, in turn, degrades our reasoning skills, and it leads to misology, in just the way that Plato warned us about. I have begun to explore this topic elsewhere (Campolo 2005). My purpose in the above has been merely to explain what I take to be the nature of deep disagreement, given the doubts raised by Phillips.

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6. CODA

Fogelin's essay appeared at a time when new fields like informal logic and critical thinking were promising more than they could deliver. On my reading, his point was to add some ballast to those promises. We ought not to offer argument as the ultimate solution, because it is subject to inherent limitations, and we can see those in what he called the *logic* of deep disagreement. Admittedly, he also said that deep disagreements are not subject to "rational resolution," and that has caused some trouble (Fogelin 1985, p. 7). There's more to rationality than argument. Surely the best way to approach some deep disagreements is for the parties to stay away from each other. The more difficult approaches involve listening and learning and considering the possibility that one's own side could be wrong. These aren't ways of arguing, but that just shows that it can at times be rational to leave argument behind, at least for a while.

[Link to commentary](#)

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