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Commentary on Chris Campolo's "Deep Disagreement in a Multicultural World"

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1. INTRODUCTION

Chris Campolo's fine paper rests on a view that I do not share: namely, that argument has a particular social purpose, and that specific arguments should for that reason be evaluated in terms of how well they work, where 'work' is understood in a particular way. Because I don't share this view with him, I cannot wholly accept his account of 'deep disagreement.' That said, I find many of his remarks on deep disagreement, argument, and reasons and rationality both plausible and challenging. I address these in turn.

2. WHAT IS 'DEEP DISAGREEMENT'?

On Campolo's view, deep disagreements are those in which arguments fail to work because arguers do not share understanding: "Deep disagreement, on my [i.e., Campolo's] formula, is what we get when there is not enough shared understanding for argument to work." (p. 2) The crucial question this formula raises, I think, concerns the invoked notion of 'work'; I address this next. But first I should say a word about Campolo's understanding of 'understanding.'

Campolo says that "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." (p. 2)

This seems to me a dubious example, since for most of us an ATM is something we *don't* understand. We don't understand their internal workings, or their relations to the larger networks of which they are a part, or how to fix them, etc. For most of us they are 'black boxes,' i.e., something we do *not* understand, even though, as Campolo rightly notes, we know how to use them to fill our wallets. That said, Campolo is clear that this is

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not what he means by ‘understanding,’ so I set this worry aside and will work with Campolo’s understanding of that notion in what follows.

3. WHAT IS IT FOR AN ARGUMENT TO ‘WORK’?

The most crucial question that Campolo’s view raises, I think, concerns the notion of ‘work.’ What is it for argument to work? On Campolo’s view, argument works when it helps us ‘get along’; when it helps us ‘resolve disagreement,’ i.e., agree. His key claim is that argument’s ‘working’ in this sense requires ‘shared understanding,’ so that when such understanding is not shared, argument cannot work. And this is the situation he characterizes as one of deep disagreement: “Argument runs on shared understanding, or it doesn’t run at all. And it’s when it cannot run at all that we can have deep disagreement.” (p. 4)

It is striking that Campolo does not speak of ‘arguments’ in the plural; he speaks only of ‘argument.’ Although he acknowledges the possibility of there being other purposes of argument (p. 3), his discussion suggests that he conceives it as a unitary social practice, with a particular social purpose, namely to help us ‘get along’ or ‘get us on the same page.’

I think this is too narrow a view of argument. Campolo’s discussion runs together *arguments*, understood as abstract objects in which premises and conclusions stand in logically or epistemically significant relations, and *argumentation*, the social practice that is the focus of Campolo’s discussion and that seems to be what he means by ‘argument.’ (Biro and Siegel 2006) On my view ‘argument’ covers both, and arguments are properly understood as abstract objects that, when successful, establish the truth or justificatory status of their conclusions. (Biro and Siegel 2006a) I won’t defend this epistemic view of arguments here. One needn’t embrace the epistemic view to see that Campolo’s view of argument is too instrumental or social-result oriented. Consider Euclid’s argument that there is no largest prime, or Anselm’s ontological argument, or Kripke’s central arguments concerning contingency, necessity and identity. These are powerful and deeply interesting arguments, even if they might vary in their ability to ‘work,’ understood epistemically in terms of their securing the truth or justificatory status of their conclusions. Moreover, their quality (or lack thereof) has nothing to do with their working in Campolo’s sense, i.e., in the sense of helping us agree, get along, “get us back on the same page when we have been brought up short” (p. 3), “restore the smoothness and sureness of our interaction” (p. 3), or achieve any other desirable social result. That is, Campolo’s view of argument in terms of social purpose fails even to acknowledge the fundamental epistemic character of arguments. As a result, his account of deep disagreement trades on ignoring a—if not *the*—fundamental feature of arguments.

If I am right that Campolo’s account of argument’s ‘working’ is too narrow, then his account of deep disagreement might also be too narrow. Is it? I think it is, since our interest in argument, arguments, and argumentative disputes and their resolution involve more than our ability or inability to get along or resolve disagreements. If deep disagreements are understood solely in terms of our getting along or resolving disagreements, some questions raised by the spectre of deep disagreement—for example, Are some disputes involving the epistemic quality of particular arguments irresolvable, even for *ideal* epistemic or argumentative agents? If so, does that leave us with a

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debilitating epistemological relativism at the heart of our theory of argument? What, more broadly, is the epistemological significance of disagreement (a question enjoying serious attention by contemporary epistemologists)?—will remain unaddressed. That would be a shame.

4. ARGUMENT AND RATIONALITY

Despite my charge of narrowness, I find myself in agreement with the spirit of Campolo's closing thought that "it can at times be rational to leave argument behind, at least for a while." (p. 7) Indeed, the point can be put more strongly: it can be rational to leave, not just argument, but reason itself, behind. This is true even in some educational contexts, as well as in many personal interactions and a whole host of activities involving skill, reflexive reactions and the like. Campolo's point is correct, but not worrisome, since it is rational to leave argument or reason behind only when there is good reason to do so. (Siegel 1988, pp. 132-3)

But I worry about Campolo's worry that, in exchanging reasons in circumstances of inadequate shared understanding, if we nevertheless reach agreement, "our conclusion isn't really underwritten by the argument." (p. 6) This seems to trade on the narrowness mentioned above. How well a *conclusion* is underwritten by an argument is not a function of shared understanding; it is rather a function of the ability of premises or reasons offered to afford justification to that conclusion. That is, 'underwriting,' if referring to support, is an epistemic matter. (The premises of Euclid's argument underwrite his conclusion, no matter how little algebra and logic we might understand.) Of course by 'underwriting' Campolo might mean to refer not to support for a conclusion, but rather something like 'agreeing on the same basis.' But then he should perhaps have said, not that the conclusion is not underwritten, but rather that the *agreement* is not. And this, I trust it is clear, is rather a different point.

5. CONCLUSION

Campolo's topic is an important one, and his discussion of the role of shared understanding in resolving disagreement is salutary. I wish to insist only that we should not understand 'argument' in the narrow way that that discussion suggests.

[Link to paper](#)

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