

University of Windsor

Scholarship at UWindor

OSSA Conference Archive

OSSA 11

May 18th, 9:00 AM - May 21st, 5:00 PM

Commentary on “The Normative Significance of Deep Disagreement”

Chris Campolo
Hendrix College

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive>



Part of the [Philosophy Commons](#)

Campolo, Chris, "Commentary on “The Normative Significance of Deep Disagreement”" (2016). *OSSA Conference Archive*. 25.

<https://scholar.uwindsor.ca/ossaarchive/OSSA11/papersandcommentaries/25>

This Commentary is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences and Conference Proceedings at Scholarship at UWindor. It has been accepted for inclusion in OSSA Conference Archive by an authorized conference organizer of Scholarship at UWindor. For more information, please contact scholarship@uwindsor.ca.

Commentary on “The Normative Significance of Deep Disagreement”

CHRIS CAMPOLO

Philosophy
Hendrix College
1600 Washington Ave.
Conway, AR 72032
USA
Campolo@hendrix.edu

I used to write about “deep disagreement,” which is probably why Hans has sometimes asked me to comment on papers that contain that phrase in the title. As it happens, these papers are usually about what I’d call, “very stubborn disagreement,” and about how to get past it without using guns or trickery. These are extremely important things, of course. But my interest in what I call “deep disagreement” is mostly distinct from these kinds of issues. Though my perspective is therefore somewhat different from Professor Dare’s, I’d like to contribute a few thoughts, in case they can be useful in our discussion.

First, as Professor Dare notes, the phrase “deep disagreement” now has several senses. Usually, I am happy to let a thousand flowers bloom, but in this case a multiplicity of meanings can cause us trouble. To my mind, it is particularly important to be cautious about treating the stubbornness of a disagreement as measure of its “depth.” It is true, and unfortunate, that a very stubborn disagreement can look a lot like one that cannot be resolved, even in principle, through reasoning. (The latter are the kind I call “deep.”) But I think we ought to recognize them as completely different creatures. They carry significantly different implications for important questions, including some about the relationship between the parties, the nature of what they’re actually doing by exchanging “reasons,” the status of any possible outcome, and the status of the problem at issue (with respect to its moorings in knowledge and practice and morality).

To that end, I’ll just note that from my perspective there are several different kinds of vaccination disputes at issue in Professor Dare’s paper. For example, there is the disagreement between those who favour vaccination and those who think that the very idea is cosmically impious. And then there is the one between those who favour vaccination and those who aren’t at all that opposed to it. The progress that can be made in the latter doesn’t tell us about the prospects for the former. I won’t belabour that here, but it matters, and it might be something that we should talk about.

Second, there are tricky philosophical issues swirling around the idea of “resolving a disagreement.” Professor Dare is surely and importantly right in his claim that not all alternatives to argument are sinister. He suggests that the pro-vaccination cause can make progress by applying measured incentives, story-telling, enhanced monitoring, reorientation of priorities, and so on. All to the good. But what were the consequences that we avoided by applying such measures? We didn’t resort to compulsion or coercion or deception. True—and good. However, I think it is arguable that we did risk failing to respect the moral agency of those who responded in the way we wanted them to. Even if we had secured compliance merely by saying “please” until we exhausted or annoyed some people into it, I think that we would need to refrain from saying that we had resolved a disagreement. We got them to do what we wanted, and that is a way “to go on.” But we treated their reluctance as an obstacle to be overcome, not as a commitment or position with which to engage seriously. We can be comforted by the gentleness

CHRIS CAMPOLO

of this victory, but it could still be an end-run around moral agency. Really respecting the agency of those who would rather not secure vaccinations probably means either letting them do what they wish or entering genuinely into the conversation, bracketing, at least for the time being, our certainty that we know how the exchange should turn out.

I am pro-vaccination. I agree with Professor Dare that some ways of approaching that goal are not as bad as others. But that doesn't mean that we should be completely comfortable with the gentler ways. The consequentialist in me looks for ways not to be so worried about it. But then again, the consequentialist in me rarely fully faces my conscience. In any event, I still regard as extremely significant the difference between reasoning and everything else.

And now let me briefly return to a point I raised earlier. Several senses of "deep disagreement" are now in regular circulation. I am not (only) trying to protect my strange little theoretical turf when I wish that the term were reserved for impossibilities instead of stubbornnesses. I think that it is possible that calling an enduring disagreement "deep" reflects a temptation to move, too soon, away from reasoning toward stratagem. That's a moral problem. Elsewhere in my work I explore the moral problems posed by making that move too late. They're bad, too. It's all rather difficult. Professor Dare's thoughtful and timely paper gives us a great chance to talk about it, and for that I'm grateful.