Why Have Constructive Disagreement?

**Problem:** What you see isn’t all there is to see

- Selective Attention: There is evidence against your position of which you are completely unaware. You are hard-wired to search for and remember evidence for your position much more effectively than you search for and remember evidence against your position.
- Selective Scrutiny: There are problems with your views and reasoning of which you are completely unaware. You are hard wired to evaluate the evidence against your position much more carefully than you evaluate the evidence for your position.

**Partial Solution:** use disagreement as a collaborative endeavor, so that others can fill you in on what you are missing and you can fill them in on what they are missing.

Advice for the “Proponent”

- **Relax.** You are not your argument/idea: if there is a problem with the argument/idea, there is not a problem with you.
- **Realistic Expectations.** 99% of good philosophical (including many political and religious) ideas and arguments need improvement or further development, so your good ideas probably need improvement and/or further development too.
- **Ready to learn.** Even if you end up “sticking to your guns”, criticism can allow you to better understand your own ideas, improve them, and/or help you understand how to more persuasively present them.

Advice for the “Critic”

- **Repeat.** Repeat in your own words what the proponent has said, or at least the part that you plan to challenge. You will thereby avoid criticizing a position that the proponent does not hold.
  - “If I understand you, you are saying that R is a reason for P. Did I understand you correctly?”
  - “You seem to be saying that P is true. Is that right?”
- **Reassure** your interlocutor. You want to make the interlocutor feel that you view them as a reasonable person even if you disagree with them.
  - “That’s interesting, and I can see why a reasonable person would think that.”
  - “Some of the smartest people I know agree with you on this point.”
  - “I can see that you are thinking carefully and conscientiously about these issues. I really appreciate that.”
- **Relay the challenge.** Explicitly state the concern, objection, or criticism in a way that suggests you are open to a dialogue.
  - “I worry that R can’t be a reason for P because of X. What am I missing?”
  - “I’m inclined to think that P is false because of X. Can you help me understand where my reasoning might be going wrong?”
  - “I’ve never thought of things that way, so I’m not sure I fully understand your argument. I worry that it has such-and-such a problem. Can you help me understand where we might disagree?”

Proponent and Critic: Two Sides of the Same Coin

- **Critic as Proponent.** Once you are a critic, you are a proponent of a criticism.
- **Proponent as Critic.** Once you are a proponent, you are implicitly criticizing—you are saying that someone who disagrees with you is wrong.
- **Thus,** the critic needs to heed the advice for the proponent and vice versa.