

How to Have Constructive and Respectful Disagreement

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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.