Everyday Lifestyle

How Philosophy May Help to Deal with Disagreement

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Philosophy is sometimes perceived as an abstract and nerdy discipline dealing with problems of its own creation in an isolated chamber of the Ivory Tower. And there is some truth to this view. But philosophy can help us deal with common problems, such as the disagreements we have in our everyday lives.

For instance, you may disagree with your family about how to arrange a family gathering; you may disagree with your friend's choice of movie for a movie night; or you may disagree with your colleague about how to implement the new guidelines from your boss. In all these cases, you disagree because the other party does not do what you would do or what you want them to do. How might you react? One way is to get angry and try to make the other party change their mind. This might be good, as you are getting what you want, but you will likely pay a price: your relationship with this person is worsened.

Why do we tend to behave this way—sometimes to the extent that we even put our relationships at stake? There may be many reasons. A main factor, however, is likely that you think that you are right and the other is wrong! The sociologist Ilana Redstone (2022) calls this the *Certainty Trap*: "a resolute unwillingness to recognize the possibility that we might not be right in our beliefs and claims."

In this post, I want to examine how insights from the history of philosophy can help us recognize when we are falling into this trap and how to get out of it.

Socrates: "I Know Nothing!"

Socrates, the founding father of Western philosophy, regarded rescuing people from the *Certainty Trap* as his God-given duty. He is depicted in the Platonic dialogues as someone who regularly talked with people about the relevant topics at the time. This included questions like: What is justice? What is rhetoric? What is piety? Socrates's method was to pose questions to his interlocutors to test whether their claims made sense. Often, the interlocutors, who were sometimes politically powerful and rich men, had to revise their original positions, which humiliated them in public. As a result, they often became angry and insulted Socrates. When they asked Socrates to provide them with an answer to the question he posed, Socrates often refrained from doing so. He regarded himself as a sort of intellectual midwife; that is, he wanted to help people to clarify their own ideas. Because of Socrates's intellectual humility, many Platonic dialogues end inconclusively with no answer given to the main question discussed.

Although Socrates claimed to know nothing, the Oracle of Delphi declared him to be the wisest person of Athens. Socrates knew the Oracle was infallible, yet his own disbelief in the label bestowed on him

led him to try to prove the Oracle wrong. He asked the wisest people in Athens about their knowledge. He went to politicians, poets, and craftsmen, but he discovered that all of them fell into the *Certainty Trap*, although, of course, it wasn't called that at the time. Unsurprisingly, they were not happy when Socrates pointed out their ignorance. It dawned on Socrates that the Oracle was indeed right: he was the wisest man of Athens. He was the wisest not because of what he knew, but because he recognized his own intellectual limitations. He knew how to avoid the *Certainty Trap*.

Locke: "How Certain Can I Be?"

In his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* (1689), John Locke examined what we can know, how we can know, and how certain we can be of what we know. He argued that the only domains in which we can have high certainty about what we know are logic, mathematics, and philosophy. This is because the issues are either intuitively clear or can be proven. In our everyday lives, he pointed out, we generally cannot reach the degree of certainty we can in scientific matters. The only exception, according to Locke, would be our own direct observations. If I see a red car parked outside my apartment, I can be certain that a red car is parked outside my apartment. In this line of thinking, because almost all other everyday situations rely on more indirect access to facts, we ought to be less certain of them.

Let's see what Locke tells us about these cases. When we don't observe something directly ourselves, we have to rely on the testimony of other people. But as we know from court cases, testimonies are tricky and often not reliable. Locke was aware of this limitation and developed a list of criteria to evaluate people's testimonies. I will focus here on a few items from that list.

First, we need to consider the number of people delivering the same or similar testimony. Second, we need to determine the integrity of the witness. Third, we need to consider contrary testimonies, if available (and usually they are). Not only do we need to evaluate the testimonies in this way, but we also need to check whether these testimonies support or contradict our own knowledge and experiences. Depending on how a particular testimony scores on these grounds, we then carefully adjust our degree of certainty.

In practice, we not only rely on the testimonies of others, which can give us a clue about whether some event happened and how it happened, but we also rely on the *opinions* of other people. That is, we listen to how they think of, interpret, and explain certain situations. Locke, however, warns us that we need to take the opinions of others with a degree of skepticism:

"[…] *the opinion of others*; though there cannot be a more dangerous thing to rely on, nor more likely to mislead one; since there is much more falsehood and error among men, than truth and knowledge" (Book IV, Ch. XV, §6).

Like Socrates, Locke recommended intellectual humility and showed in detail how our knowledge depends on indirect access to the world, including the testimony and opinions of other people. And yet, the world is complex—making this process far from straightforward. In the following section, we'll see how David Hume contributed another layer of complexity to what we can know about the world.

Hume: "No Ought from Is!"

Certainty doesn't just shape our view of whether some event occurred or not, but also about what we ought to do and how we should behave. Norms do not come from nowhere; we tend to justify them with other information. For example, you might say to your friend, "Please stop smoking because smoking causes lung cancer!" or "Please eat more vegetables because they contain fiber and vitamins!" Hume argued in *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), however, that we cannot immediately jump from facts to norms. This is referred to as the Is-Ought Problem:

"In every system of morality, which I have hitherto met with, I have always remarked, that the author proceeds for some time in the ordinary way of reasoning, […]; when of a sudden I am surprised to find, that instead of the usual copulations of propositions, *is*, and *is not*, I meet with no proposition that is not connected with an *ought*, or an *ought not*" (Hume, 1739/1985, 3.1.1).

Too often, we mistakenly think that facts by themselves justify norms. This kind of thinking leads us to conclude that, for instance, "Don't smoke!" is the inevitable outcome of "Smoking causes lung cancer." But this transition actually contains a hidden assumption—something like "Your health is the most important thing in your life!" This unspoken assumption, as reasonable as it seems, is about a value, not a fact. We can see the importance of this value assumption by thinking about what happens when we make a different one. Let's say you consider immediate pleasure more important than health: "My satisfaction in the moment is more important than my health in the long term." In this context, even if smoking causes lung cancer, smoking makes sense. Therefore, you may say to your friend, "OK, you

can smoke!" Hume's point was that we need to put value claims in to get value claims out. No amount of factual evidence on its own can be used to justify norms and behavior.

So, whenever we assert how people ought or ought to not behave, we fall into the Certainty Trap if we do not consider the values that go into our normative claims. People often get stuck hassling over the accuracy of the facts that they cite to justify their recommendations for behavior: "If I know for sure why and how smoking causes lung cancer, I can accurately justify not smoking." The Is-Ought Problem shows that this immediate inference is flawed. Furthermore, if we do add a normative assumption to our argument, we may still fall into the Certainty Trap if we think that others share the same values as we do. You may not smoke because you take your health seriously, but your friend may continue to smoke if pleasure appears more important.

How Shall We Disagree?

Arguments are complex and disagreement can be uncomfortable. But if we can't avoid disagreements, how can we best cope with them *in a constructive way*? We can recognize that when it comes to what we think we know, certainty tends to lead us astray. And when it comes to our values, we need to make our claims clear. Recall that telling someone not to smoke only makes sense if health is seen as important (and, of course, smoking as the cause of health problems). From here, we can draw two lessons:

1. Be intellectually humble!

2. Be intellectually charitable!

Intellectual humility refers to your own position—that is, your own commitment to avoiding the *Certainty Trap*. To be intellectually charitable refers to your awareness *of the other party's position*. You may not know all their motives and arguments. One way to navigate this is to try to ask questions, like Socrates, to understand the other position better. You may remind yourself of Locke's criteria when you rank your beliefs. And you may think about Hume and the complexity of justifying norms and guidelines. The upshot is that avoiding the *Certainty Trap* requires a commitment to interrogating our own thinking as well as that of the people with whom we disagree.

What Can Go Wrong?

Our commitment to intellectual humility and charitability faces various challenges. One comes from our own emotions. Emotions, like anger, make it difficult to listen to the other side and to reflect on our positions calmly. The same can happen when we are over-excited. If I really want to buy a sporty BMW, I may not listen to arguments saying that I cannot really afford it. Another challenge to our commitment can come from authority. For instance, a person may have good ideas to make changes in her company, but her boss can shut her down without justification by just reminding her to do her job.

Philosophy can inform our thinking about these kinds of challenges. In the *Republic*, Plato develops a theory of justice based on the internal structure of the mind. The mind has three parts: (i) *reason* for making rational arguments, (ii) *passion* regulating anger, and (iii) *desires* for fulfilling our needs. Justice is reached, for Plato, when all three parts of the mind are in equilibrium. When the desire for buying a sports car trumps reason, then we are not acting justly, according to Plato. Authority plays a key role in the *Republic,* too. Plato argues that Philosopher Kings and Queens should rule with a focus on the greater good, rather than on short-sighted decision making. To bring it to a modern example—even if you can't change your boss's mind, you can behave differently when *you* are in a position of authority. You do this by considering your colleagues' positions.

Constructively dealing with disagreements and avoiding the *Certainty Trap* is not a matter of merely applying rules and axioms. Rather, it requires self-reflection and character-building to become and remain intellectually humble and intellectually charitable.

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