

learning-to-disagree

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Posted by [Nathaniel Francis](#)

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“You know, what modern people have really lost is the ability to have a disagreement.”

This phrase was spoken by a friend of mine while we were humorously describing instances in our lives where we had bizarre arguments with people. The statement caused me to take pause - first to agree with him because I think he’s right, and second to bookmark the statement for further meditation - which I’m sharing here.

Not Nice

I abhor Nice Culture, the pseudo-pietistic, quasi-religious culture that esteems the personality trait of pleasantness aka “being nice” as the highest ideal. This proposition is absurd. Pleasantness is... well, pleasant - but from a Christian perspective, it does not embody the Fruit of the Spirit nor the character of Christ. Simply put, kindness is not exactly the same as nice. There were times where Jesus Christ Himself, the most loving human incarnation ever known was decisively unpleasant under the right circumstances and yet completely loving.

I bring this up because Nice Culture specifically avoids or completely abolishes the notion of disagreement. Disagreement is, obviously, unpleasant at least in certain circumstances. And when pleasantness is the highest ideal, anything unpleasant must, therefore, be de-prioritized, even rejected. Hence, implicitly, disagreement is frowned upon and in extreme circumstances, it is completely discarded.

But At What Cost

What is the effect of a lack of disagreement in human interaction? Are we better without it or does it bring some measure of value to conversation? Surely our interactions are smoother without all the unpleasantness that disagreement can bring, but are they more valuable?

No. Like human personality, human interaction is neutered when it is bleached of any form of dissonance, disagreement being a dissonance of competing ideas. In its stead, we are left with the ping-ponging of agreement that shapes echo chambers and the verbal parrying of pointed statements that lead nowhere. Conversations become campaigns of reaffirmation and mutual

support with little to gain except perhaps new information that fits into the common domain of the aforementioned agreement. We can only agree and affirm.

As I said, neutered. The best pleasant-centric engagement has to offer is either echo generation or perspective reinforcement. Little is there to be gained or learned.

Agree To Disagree

There is value in disagreement. Bringing forth alternative or contrary viewpoints, data, and conclusions to a conversation allows for the natural selection of ideas. Which is a critical component of the Free Market of Ideas, the ability to engage. This can be done without the pathological drive to be regarded as right, superior, or flexing one's intellectual prowess. Rather, let the ideas themselves engage with mutual respect being shared between participants.

Between people let there be agreement of worth and value of the individual and groups. Between ideas and issues, let there be disagreement. We can agree with each other to choose to disagree on a topic, idea, or position when it's beneficial to do so. And more often than not, it actually is beneficial.

The Natural Selection of Ideas

All men (humans) are created equal (Preamble to the U.S. Constitution). In Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28, ESV). People are to be regarded with honor as equal in God's sight.

Ideas are not equal. We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5, ESV). According to this passage, arguments and lofty opinions raised against the knowledge of God are to be destroyed. Ideas are not equal. This principle extends beyond the Gospel. Many ideas in life are not equal. In the same space, there can be a variety of approaches, perspectives, and solutions related to any given idea. They are not equal.

Allowing divergent ideas to engage with the intent of evaluating them individually, pitting them against each other, and allowing each member of the conversation to adopt what they believe to be the best one is the behavioral pattern of the Free Market of Ideas. As its name indicates, this market is best served freely, maintaining respect for the participants while giving due attention and due process to the ideas themselves. When clearly presented and fairly evaluated, the greater ideas generally rise to the top. This is the nature of the Free Market of Ideas: a purposeful process of natural selection pits them against each other in a fair contest. Greater ideas succeed over inferior ones.

I Did Not Know That

Something a disagreement brings to light that an agreement cannot, is what we do not know. We don't have to agree with it, but the prospect of seeing or understanding something that we previously did not know is of utmost value. It's learning.

In some cases, all we'll learn is that someone has the same information that we do available to them and somehow came up with an opposing position on the topic. That's differing analysis or opinion. It happens all the time. What did we learn? Possibly a different form of analysis or possibly that we hold different values than the other participant. That is still learning.

In other cases, one party may be lacking relevant or key information. Applying that to the topic at hand may sway analysis and conclusions. Another option is that either party may have incomplete or inaccurate information that taints their perspective. This also can be remedied, often with an additional effort like research or verification. The outcome is still the same, learning.

All of these learning cases are contingent on disagreement. Disagreement is the catalyst to learning in this sense. It presents the door of opportunity for both parties to either educate, correct, learn, or simply share differences in a way that encourages both to learn something.

Always Improving

This does not mean that disagreement is definitively superior to other ways of learning. Many legitimate and valuable forms of learning are done outside of a relational context, such as personal study and meditation.

The crux of the issue here is the relational dimension of learning. We have an abundance of environments from echo chambers to silenced voices that hinder the path of learning and understanding that disagreement can bring. The element of respectful disagreement is one of the paths we need to get out of this mess.

What I'm really proposing is that we value the Free Market of Ideas. We've murdered that by valuing pleasantries over actual knowledge sharing. Disagreement is important and valuable. The Free Market of Ideas depends on it.

Feel free to disagree with me if you want. I very well may learn something.

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