

0.1 Chapter 4: self: Virtues of Character

0.2 Virtues of Character

1 On How to Disagree

We live in a world saturated with disagreement. People are at odds about pretty much everything from when to order a taxi, go out to dinner to whether there should be a caliphate; from the kind of orbit the International Space Station should assume; the right way to cook lasagna to whether Hungary is in Eastern or Central Europe, and how long a child should be allowed to play Minecraft on a Saturday morning.

While disagreement *can* be civilised, interesting and productive, it is much too frequently a powerful source of misery: we get enraged and bewildered; we are appalled at the views of others and feel intensely bothered by them; we feel defeated, hopeless and lonely; we agonise, rehearse the conflict alone in our heads, worry, feel guilty, get upset...



Disagreement is especially pressing now, because of certain large societal forces that have been building for the last couple of centuries.

1. Politics

The developed world is now democratic. We've long been moving away from habits of deference and

from hierarchies in which most people don't feel it's their role to have much of a view about a lot of things.

When everyone can vote it matters a lot what everyone thinks. Having opinions becomes more than a luxury, indeed, it's a necessity in a well-functioning democracy: one needs to have opinions about everything from who should rule to where the nuclear power stations should be positioned. But while we are encouraged to have opinions, little attention is paid to what we do when as seems to be the constant case we find that these opinions clash bitterly with those of our fellow citizens.

2. Relationships of Equality

To ask any couple what they disagree about is one of the more fascinating and consoling exercises: we realise we're not alone.

At the same time, disagreement in relationships feels more troubling than in the past, because low expectations once made contentions both routine and in line with aspirations. One was less disturbed by disagreements because the idea of a relationship of total agreement, sympathy and mutuality wasn't on the cards; it is a very recent invention, dating back (at best) to the mid-eighteenth century.



There is also the issue of hierarchy. For most of history, we lived in patriarchies: it was the men who settled disagreements within families. Now there's a profound (but historically still quite novel) sense of equality, between couples and also with children. We trust that couples should talk through their beliefs, they should know and be interested in, and respect, each other's minds. No one can be the boss in any particular area.

This extends to children: children are taken to be fountains of spontaneous insight and novel perspective. Their opinions deserve to be listened to as well. So concerned are we to ensure that children's egos are

not prematurely crushed, we encourage them to have opinions about all aspects of life. It can as a result be extremely hard to come to a decision on anything, including what to have for dinner.

The democratic cacophony and chaos within the family mirrors that in the political world beyond.

No longer able to govern hierarchically, we are not yet able to reach understanding and manage disagreement. This is the moment we are at.

The closer we are to someone, the more disagreement has the power to upset us. And we are upset because a deep longing in love is to find someone who wholly agrees with us about everything.

If a distant cousin doesn't have the same taste in films, we don't care. If our lover doesn't think a particular scene is funny, we might start to question the foundations of our union.

We demand much higher levels of agreement in personal relationships than in other parts of our lives, because we are looking for our views to be confirmed and understood at every step.

That is because we are vulnerable here as we are in few other areas.

3. Technology

Technology has made disagreement more vivid. We are very readily brought into contact with other people's abrasive attitudes which, until recently we could never have encountered.

If you follow a BBC report on a speech given by the leader of the opposition (for instance) you are alerted to the fact that someone by the name of Cockshield considers him to be an ugly socialist maggot! and you get exposure to the opinion of a certain Phill Watts: He does not care about Britain, he cares about his career and making money, he's in it for four or five years if he wins and after that he gets a nice big pay check and an early retirement and a luxury life that is his real goal.

In the past, the capacity to express disagreement was curtailed by fear of laying oneself open to the retaliation from the person one disagreed with. If one called someone a thieving, lying worthless piece of shit, one would be expected to be condemned by the community and possibly challenged to a duel. Now, one can throw out sentences like this on social media with zero cost and in total anonymity.

In addition, there's a feeling that being verbally abused online isn't such a problem. One mustn't be thin-skinned, one should be able to put up with the nasty comments of others. While our societies are very alive to certain forms of racism and misogyny, they are still remarkably sanguine about the ordinary forms of abuse that are traded on social media every minute.



We do not, as a society, take being offended very seriously and therefore offence is rife.

Technology has also generated stronger opinions; it has emboldened people whose opinions might previously have been hedged by a doubt about whether anyone else agreed, by introducing them to people who agree with them and strengthen their convictions. Someone with a passing, slightly embarrassed sense that Pluto should be recategorised as a planet can now join multiple websites full of people who think of little else. The same applies to politics, pornography, religion etc. If you are a Marxist but also a Christian Fundamentalist you can inhabit a corner of the online world in which it is taken for granted that this is the only intelligent way to see the world.

So thanks to technology, we are exposed to the uninhibited disagreements of other people and also the emboldening reassurance of fellow tribal devotees. In short, technology polarises and inflames.

Still, rather than despair, we must accept that disagreement will be constant and ubiquitous. We might fantasise about universal harmony, about reason prevailing spontaneously and about everyone being sweetly tolerant. But vicious disagreement is not going to go away by itself.

So we need to learn how to disagree well, how to navigate through a life in which we will inevitably conflict with many people over expectations, demands, hopes, convictions, priorities and attitudes. We need to deal well with disagreement so we can cope better in our own lives and make our own contributions (however modest) to a saner society.

HELPFUL MOVES

DONT RUSH OVER DISAGREEMENTS

Disagreements are often aggravated by a refusal to give them the time they would need to be properly untangled, because we assume that they arent inherently difficult.

We think it should be easy to agree on certain things who should run the country or what to do about pollution or how to arrange the bedroom.

An unwarranted notion that something is common sense is the fuel that aggravates many disagreements.

We should take inspiration from the patient way in which Socrates, the first great philosopher, untangled the knots in thinking in the minds of his fellow Ancient Athenians. It might take an hour to go through someones ideas of justice or goodness or love.



A fatal assumption of the obviousness of things particularly bedevils domestic life. Here couples are routinely to be found not only disagreeing, but also feeling that their disagreements are small and should be dealt with fast. How silly to spend an hour arguing over the temperature of the bedroom. How absurd to disagree (again) about what time its best to order the taxi.

We work with an unhelpful picture of seriousness. Theres a particular kind of bad mood that follows when something one expected to be easy turns out not to be. One is at once seriously angry and unable to take ones anger seriously. Reduced to stalemate, what follows is nagging and shirking. Nagging: that repeated unsympathetic and unpsychological attempt to force the other party into acquiescence, without any attempt to understand their position (as one might try to do if one accepted that something was hard). Nagging assumes the partner could only be disagreeing out of wilfulness and therefore that

prodding and poking can be the only recourse. And shirking: that sullen refusal to respond to the poking while maintaining an underhand, despairing reluctance to put forward any convincing rationale for ones resistance.

The two parties hope the problem so boring to them both will simply go away. Yet there are, of course in reality, no small issues. Philosophies of life stir and collide beneath the surface of apparently petty squabbles. Irritations are the outward indications of stifled debates about competing conceptions of existence.

If were going to disagree, and we will, we should at least do our disagreements the honour of spending a lot of time on them.

DISAGREEMENT IS NORMAL

To continue a little further with something that pertains particularly to relationships: its easy to be embarrassed about how much disagreement there is in the average relationship.

We think its weird, but its not. Its just that our idea of the normal is skewed unfairly towards harmony. So it would be hugely helpful to see more evidence of couples disagreeing. Generally, we see other peoples relationships only from the outside: we see couples walking comfortably round the market buying apples or bantering at a drinks party. We hardly ever get to see what they are like together in their trickier moments, what goes on when they get very upset, in what ways do they make each other deeply frustrated: how they drive each other mad. How many things they disagree on, and with what passion and intensity, and also, with what tragic-comic results.



By total contrast, we know our own relationships from the inside. The difference between these perspectives makes for a damaging distortion. Our sense of what a good enough relationship looks like is unfairly biased. We need to help ourselves to a more accurate, more informed picture of normal relationships. Despite all the books and the films: art lets us down in terms of holding up an adequate mirror to our daily follies.

Pretty high levels of conflict, meanness, folly and disappointment are standard. They are part and parcel of good enough relationships. A good relationship isn't one in which the couple get along well most of the time. It's one in which they've learned to accept that painful difficulties and frustrations are normal.

That this piece of knowledge is not yet very widespread explains the ongoing high incidence of divorce. We are not only unhappy, fatefully, we believe that our unhappiness is anomalous and a sign of error: and so we escape our perceived unnecessary troubles by leaving one relationship and starting another. And end up with a different set of sorrows.

DONT IMPORT ENERGY FROM ELSEWHERE INTO YOUR DISAGREEMENTS

Many of our disagreements are broadly about intellectual matters: the future of the euro, immigration, debt, censorship, education policy...

You might find yourself taking a passionate stand on the economy of Peru, the importance of George Orwell, whether the Chinese reached America in the 15th Century, the status of women in 18th century France ... (Everyones list is unique). These are not inherently unworthy topics but the intensity that gets invested in them can be disproportionate to what is really at stake.

In cooler moments you might wonder why you get so worked up about them.

It's here we encounter the phenomenon of ***Energy Imported from Elsewhere***: in this dynamic, the fuel for a disagreement is not coming purely from the topic under debate. The intensity comes from things that are going on elsewhere in your life. At the time we don't realise that this is what is going on which makes it very hard to calm a disagreement.

Energy gets imported in at least ***five*** distinctive ways:

One: Anger is redirected and concentrated

You are angry about something, or someone but for some reason that anger can't find a good outlet.

It could be someone senior at work (to whom you can't express your annoyance).



A friend who has let you down but you don't want them to see how hurt you are.

Multi-polar frustrations: the train was late, your shoe hurts, you feel tired but there's no one in particular to blame.

The anger that belongs in these other places gets imported into the disagreement. It gets discharged on a convenient (but otherwise inappropriate) person.

Two: We are arguing with the past

Sometimes we're disagreeing with people who are dead or gone. The present disagreement is a proxy for an issue from the past.

You could never get your father to see the merits of your career choice, so you try to convince him via getting worked up with the person sitting next to you at dinner.



There was an acquaintance at college whose political ideas irritated you; you are always trying to prove them wrong via lecturing strangers at drinks parties.

Your ex-partner was always going on at you for being selfish; now you try to win the argument against them by mocking bleeding hearts to anyone who will listen.

Three: Frustrated sexual desire gets channelled into disagreement

There's someone you are attracted to (though you might be reluctant to admit it); you find them exciting but they don't seem much interested in you. Disagreement offers a way of making contact; you contradict them, you make them acknowledge the importance of a certain fact; you rather forcibly try to dislodge one of their pet theories. The energy isn't coming just from the overt topic it's borrowed from thwarted desire.

Four: We are trying to compensate for a feeling of humiliation

In an unequal world, some have more than us. It might be more money, more status, better looks or more education. And we are easily made to feel lesser even if it's not at all what the other person intends. The pent-up fear of humiliation can get re-directed towards argumentative aggression. Argument becomes an alternative to a fight we're not allowed to have.

Five: We long for clarity in an ambiguous world

Often we have to live with huge amounts of uncertainty and ambiguity. In most cases, we just don't know what the right answer is.

A major project at work might not succeed, you have to grapple with issues where there's no obvious right or wrong no one knows yet; should you stay in a relationship or leave it can be agonisingly hard to weigh the pros and cons; how should you deal with a friend who is being difficult but who you like very much.

We have a deep longing to find things that are simple and clear and often, topics over which we disagree passionately provide the perfect opportunity. You find someone who is totally wrong (over the Euro or immigration). You feel you are completely right. The decisiveness might not really be justified but you need to find something to be completely right about given how much you worry about what is right in other areas.

The more you are aware of this possibility, the more you can see it happening, in your own life and in the behaviour of others.

The Repatriation of Energy is a major task of maturity. We need to return emotions to where they really belong.

The idea that energy can be imported into a disagreement from elsewhere helps one:

Grasp when someone else is grappling with an issue that's actually off the page. We can be more charitable to them. Their apparent venom or excessive heat is less disturbing. We understand that it's really about something else and that's very, very normal.

Be readier to apologise and reign yourself in. Ask yourself: am I importing energy? Because you understand that without meaning to you will sometimes be getting bothered by something quite different from the topic of disagreement.



Break deadlocks. Disagreements that seem stubborn could be managed if we could repatriate the energy on both sides. He says: I want the bedroom at 22 degrees Celsius. She says: I want it at 18. The repatriation solution looks elsewhere: it suggests that why people get so stubborn or entrenched in their positions can have other causes. For instance: hes less willing to compromise on this, because hes got to accept too many compromises at work. And shes determined to win this one, because she always felt that her sister got to decide how things would be when they were children.

Saying that a disagreement is fuelled by imported energy can sound patronising.

Theres a danger that well make an analysis of the origins of someones strong views which will inflame them further.

They will ardently deny it has anything to do with their mother or situation at work they will insist on the higher cause (global politics etc.).

The offence is unfounded: theres nothing necessarily high about passion derived from intellectual issues or low about passion from more biographical issues.

Still, its not wise always to tell the other person what you think. Your diagnosis cant necessarily be shared. But having it in mind, will stop you from fruitless antagonism.

TRAUMA: AUDIT OF THE BIOGRAPHY OF IDEAS

The word trauma sounds dramatic, but all of us carry experiences of deep disturbance and threat around certain things. And these traumas often have a powerful, usually unacknowledged, impact on the way

we think now.

Our culture is under the spell of objective disagreement. We like to feel that were discussing facts and sifting evidence and constructing rational arguments. But when the pure debate about ideas is going badly and disagreement seems bitter but fruitless it can help to discuss the origins of ideas in our own lives. The ideal is to turn the conversation away from what this person thinks now and explore how it has come about that they hold the views they do.

Case study one

Consider someone who is violently anti-conservative: anything that seems to support the status quo, or that is favourable to business, meets with extreme hostility. Arguing the other side (not everything that exists is bad, business is a major human activity) gets nowhere. Every suggestion you make is rejected.

Probing their background and early experiences might reveal that their fathers career was thrown into disarray in a period when a Conservative government was in power. It was a terrible time for their family. Their parents were very worried; their father felt humiliated. The governments policies were implicated; cuts to state expenditure were a key factor in their fathers job being axed. Its entirely understandable they feel the way they do.

Case study two

You meet someone who is violently opposed to modern architecture in any form and insists that classical architecture is the only good kind. They sound slightly crazy on this topic. Instead of trying to persuade them that there might be at least a fair number of great modern buildings, you might ask about their early experiences of architecture.

It turns out that in their adolescence when life felt dangerously chaotic theyd been drawn to buildings that seemed very calm, quiet and dignified, and that these were all classical in style. There was a particular part of the city they lived in that they loved for this reason. Then a dramatic, assertive modern building went up just there (just about the time their parents divorced). It felt like a personal attack, it seemed to be destroying an imagined refuge.



The idea each of these people dislikes (conservatism, modern buildings) represents a ***fear***. And the positions they espouse (Socialism, classicism) represent to them an ***imagined solution***.

This is typical about many topics over which we disagree.

Once we accept this, we might still not see eye-to-eye about economics or architecture. But the person who opposes us no longer appears merely stubborn and narrow-minded: they have a fear and they have gravitated to an ***imagined solution*** and we need to be aware of both of these moves...

By understanding the history that an idea or position occupies in someones mind, we grow better able to see some of the slightly haphazard, unfortunate associations it has picked up in their biography but that dont intrinsically belong to it. Modernist buildings are not really an attack on this persons well-being. Conservatism doesnt, on the whole, mean that peoples parents lose their jobs.

UNFORTUNATE INTRODUCTIONS TO IDEAS

Another way in which we can have difficulties reaching agreement is that we frequently encounter ideas via people. This means that certain dispositions get unnaturally tainted, depending on who introduced us to an idea, with negative auras which are then very, very hard to shift using the normal means of conversation.

We might have crucially encountered a line of thought via negative or frightening people; or (alternatively) it might have been unnaturally boosted by being advocated by someone who we loved and trusted and now feel a need to be loyal to, so loyal as to preclude any disagreement with them or departure from their original ideologies.

Case studies:

A very engaging, now dead uncle was immensely critical of trade unions and used to be very witty about their failings. Youve never been able to take labour unions quite seriously since then and instinctively regard them with suspicion.

A lovely art teacher really admired Andy Warhol, who in their eyes was the consummate 20th-century artist. Doubts about his genius now strike you as provincial and offensive, and a betrayal of a very nice old friend.



You knew an awkward, terribly shy person at college who was a devout Catholic. Without quite realising it, thats become your standard picture of religious belief.

You knew an awkward, terribly shy person at college who was devoted to astronomy. Without quite realising it, this has become your standard picture of scientists.

Taking an audit of ones own psychological intellectual history reveals the debt that ones ideas owe to the accidents of personal experience. Its not the issue in itself that we are responding to; we see it through a distorting filter. We are blurring concepts and people. Our intellectual life runs the risk of being held hostage by these accidental associations, which dont do any justice to the issues involved.

Exercise:

List ways in which an early trauma or personal association might have affected your own convictions.

Now allow the concept to grow apart from the people who may have first introduced you to it.

We try to imagine the nicest person who might hold this view and how and why.

If one is anti trades-union, imagine a charming, civilised person who is all for them.



If one is anti-conservative, imagine the case being made by someone who is kindly and astute.

If you despair of modern architecture, think of the defence that could be made for it by a serious, sweet natured and sensitive individual

We don't necessarily end up changing our own convictions. What changes is our mental picture of the disagreement. To feel that the other view can be held by an honourable and wise person doesn't have to mean you give up your own beliefs. But it does mean that you can have a much more productive and interesting time.

SURRENDER THE PLEASURES OF SELF-RIGHTEOUSNESS

In theory we are not meant to like strong disagreement the situation in which we tell ourselves the other person is very, very wrong in their opinions.

But there's a dark truth: instead of feeling uncomfortable, sometimes we actually like it very much.

It happens quite often around politics: one has the idea that those on the other side are terrible people not simply in error but also cruel, selfish, short-sighted, stupid and dangerous. They are very bad people indeed. Leaving aside the truth of the matter about whether (say) Catalonia would be better off apart from Spain, whether integration with Europe is good or bad for the UK, the nature and urgency of climate change or the status of religious belief, these are all topics around which some people end up loathing and looking down on those on the other side.

Why is this actually rather tempting?

Reason one: we get a reassuring encounter with our own convictions. We get a powerful feeling of being right (which is much more appealing than the sense that everything is murky and confusing). It is an antidote to melancholy and ambiguity. If the enemy is evil, we must be good.

Reason two: the disagreement (in which we feel righteous and indignant) provides a conveniently precise local target for otherwise wide-ranging disappointment. Instead of feeling broadly dissatisfied with life and oneself there is now an explanation: this awful person, or these awful people.

However pleasing self-righteousness can be, its deeply depressing in its effects, because it means one is actually giving up on the practical possibility of changing peoples minds or having ones own mind changed. One is refusing to learn or to teach.

In order to reverse out of a position of self-righteousness, we need to perform an unusual manoeuvre. We need to remember what it was like not to have our present conviction. We need to imagine what its like not to agree with oneself. We need to empathise with someone who might not find what we think to be obvious in any way apparent.

Successful persuasion relies on a memory of what it was like not to agree with ones current stance.



A standard exercise should run like this: pick a topic that you most easily feel you are absolutely right about (i.e. environment, taxation, drugs laws, pornography...). Argue against yourself in the most intelligent and sophisticated and sympathetic way that you can muster.

Disagreements often involve labelling the person one is in conflict with: fascist, idiot, bigot, neat freak, selfish. Such names cut us off from an account of what might really be going on in the head of the other person.

If we want to cope better with disagreement (and feel less threatened by it, more at ease with it, and have a better chance of reaching an agreement) we need a more benevolent picture of the other person.

THE USES OF ART IN SOLVING DISAGREEMENT

One way to lessen disagreement is to get people reading more novels and watching more of certain sorts of films.

The stories we need are those that explain how someone who at first seems utterly unworthy or our regard or understanding is, in fact, properly deserving of sympathy and empathy.

Charles Dickens was immensely effective at this. For example, in *David Copperfield*, he showed his Victorian contemporaries that (for instance) a convicted pickpocket was not necessarily some alien creature; but that there were many fearsomely plausible pathways to such conditions.

Over the course of the novel, we learn that David Copperfield is not the wretched and unsympathetic character that most middle-class Victorians would automatically have assumed he was if theyd spotted him in the street. They get to understand how a decent person how might you, his reader end up in his situation.



We can very usefully make the same kind of move around beliefs that we (perhaps vehemently) disagree with.

We need to ask the Copperfield Question: how could a good person end up here?

We sometimes get nervous around the move because it can feel too much like condoning that conviction.

If I understand how a decent, nice person could be a Nazi or an admirer of Stalin, am I not edging towards saying its OK to be either of those things?

That fact is, you are not. On the contrary, you are now much better placed to see how to disengage them from those convictions. You have a better chance of teaching them. Because you understand what it is you have to do; and what they are motivated by.

Unfortunately, the media does not help, because generally it does the opposite of what good novels and films do. It builds up caricatures.



The media provides composite pictures of characters like the recent immigrant, the politician, the CEO and so on. And we use these shorthands to navigate our way through a complex world. Theyre often not very good portraits.

And yet the media could be brilliant and do what Dickens did with pickpockets: namely, humanise those with whom we cant at first sympathise.

UNDERSTAND THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY IN CREATING ENEMIES

One major way in which technology makes it harder to understand your enemies (and so makes disagreement harder to deal with well) is by enabling high levels of anonymity.

People are nasty online for three basic reasons.

First, the fear of not being heard at all

This encourages turning up the volume: by being shrill, abrasive, curt, rude... all of which are intensifiers, they attempt to get a message across distances which are smaller than they might imagine. And the fact is that their target is indeed liable to be hurt. From the perspective of the attacker, an insult might be the psychological equivalent of a raised voice. But for the person on the other side, it may provoke deep hurt and mental collapse.

Second, the sense of being anonymous

We feel unobserved and therefore released from the constraints that arise when we are conscious that our friends and acquaintances or even just strangers will see what we are up to.

Thirdly, its not a person on the other end

We feel that the individual we are disagreeing with is not a whole person in our minds (just as the whole of ourselves is not being engaged by the encounter). We are ready to say things and express ourselves in a manner that we never would if we were speaking to someone face to face.



Traditionally, violent disagreement in politics was tempered by a pivotal figure found in places like London, Paris, New York and Washington DC: the hostess.

Certain unfortunate associations of class, money and taste now separate us from any sympathy for this character, but wed be wise to see what role hostesses used to play which is that they would, at the end of a day of fierce disagreements in business and politics, draw adversaries together in the living room or by the bar and introduce them to one another as people, rather than just as ideological cut outs.

The role of the hostess was to introduce one to a sense that the enemy was a whole person, with compatible interests and tastes in other areas. They too might have kids, love football and take an interest in jazz.

Technology has put us at the opposite end of the spectrum from the moves of the hostess. Distance and dehumanisation have made us incomprehensible to one another.

SNOBBERY

Part of the reason we disagree with certain ideas and people in a very rigid and unhelpful way is that we are, in areas, desperately snobbish.

Snobbery is here defined as a tendency to judge people and ideas by certain criteria which blind us to their full complexity. The snob might decide that all right wing people are nasty or all Romanians are untrustworthy or everything to do with Existentialism is great (or terrible).

We need to be aware of these snobbish blocks in which certain of our opinions are encased.

If Socrates applied (incognito) for a university post today, hed get rejected. No Ph.D, no publications, teaching experience only in the market square, hasnt been awarded any research grants. Or if Jesus turned up (in disguise, under an assumed name) at the Vatican, hed be regarded as a heretic. They would be high profile victims of snobbery.

Snobbery is the powerful tendency to assume that good things the things we need have to come with certain kinds of packaging.



We are very sensitive to, and censorious of, certain cases of snobbery. We castigate the social snob who cant imagine that someone is delightful if they didnt go to a particular kind of school or have illustrious ancestors. Or who will write you off on learning you income bracket, where you live or seeing what kind of car you drive.

But snobbery is far more widespread than this. At heart, snobbery is an error of thinking. We disagree with things in too large blocks and disagree in rigid ways.

When we analyse snobbery this way we can see that it applies in some surprising cases. Its the same problem, only we havent given it the right name yet.

We say: no one from Oxbridge can be nice.

Or: everyone on the left is a dreamer.

Or: right wingers are nasty...

These are entrenched positions which impoverish us.

HUMOUR

Intense disagreement tends to be marked by the absence of one very important quality: humour.

Humour is desperately important and useful because what it can do is introduce what is generally missing from passionate disagreements: perspective.

What is a joke? It frequently features a redescription of a serious situation from an oblique or distant perspective, which teases out the latent absurdities or exaggerations in our normal view of it. Our laughter will be evidence that we acknowledge that we have drifted from moderation.

Humour can be far from silly: it is an agent of moderation.

Conflict can be intensified by provocative descriptions. Think of language like this which stokes disagreement and the desire for vengeance:

The brutal unbelievers are desecrating the sacred soil of the motherland.

There is a long tradition of this kind of talk, what we might term rabble rousing rhetoric, and which exploits exactly our capacity to lose perspective.

But any description can change our perspective. And if it can do so for the worse (making the conflict or disagreement more intractable, more terrifying) it can also do so for the better taking the heat out of it.

This is what (dark) humour often does. It brings out the latent absurdity in a situation which has unfairly grown violent or heated.

A couple squabbling over what time to order a taxi might be calmed by their child who steps in to hold up a picture of their Death Clock on an iPad:

www.deathclock.com

Take this redescription of World War one:

Because some people in large buildings are worried about what other people might be thinking of them and are anxious not to look foolish, pieces of paper are sent to lots of people in small buildings telling them to put on special kinds of clothes and walk in a certain way and travel, mainly, to France. Then they must live for quite a long time in the ground. Should they see anyone wearing hats of a special shape they must try to insert some metal under the skin of that person.

George Bernard Shaws take on patriotism makes the same kind of move: a deflationary, but accurate, redescription: Patriotism is, fundamentally, a conviction that a particular country is the best in the world because you were born in it...

Imagine seeing this photo: with the caption: You cant see any borders from up here.



This to shake fierce nationalists from some of their conviction.

This absolutely isnt to say that there might not be times when we need to be perfectly serious and times when it is good to be elevated. The point is just that humorous deflation is a significant resource when disagreement is going badly. Weve inherited essentially a legal attitude to conflict (which tries to work out who is right and what the evidence is). But often what we need is not to decide who is in the right but to defuse a conflict.

Laughter is a step away from hardened opposition.

THE ROLE OF SEDUCTION AND REASSURANCE

When people dont agree with us, it is natural to respond in three ways:

To get angry with those on the other side: they are stupid.

To try to make them feel guilty for their wrong opinions: they are bad people.

To get pedantic and lecture them in great detail: they are ignorant.

Those who oppose you may (sometimes) indeed be stupid, bad and ignorant. But telling people they are stupid, bad and ignorant has a very poor record as a means of changing peoples minds which is, after all, what you want to happen.

It tends, on the contrary, to harden attitudes and make people resent you.

Anger, pedantry and guilt are unsuccessful strategies because they ignore a crucial factor in disagreement. The person on the other side is holding on to a certain position in part because they are scared, disappointed and worried. They dont want to be bullied, they are alarmed by our stance on an issue which seems so far from what theyd hoped, theyre wondering why they ever agreed to be with us or why their social life includes people who have such opposed views to theirs.

Our disagreement is provoking fear and anxiety in them and thats in part why its very unhelpful to disagree back with them in a way thats too hard, aggressive or impatient. Such moves dont do anything to reduce the fear or soothe the anxiety. If we really want people to agree we should, instead, make use of reassurance and seduction.

Reassurance

Its easy at once to imagine that the person who is disagreeing violently in a relationship is *mean* or odd.

And hence one feels sorely tempted to make them **see** just how mean and odd they are in the simple (and terribly natural) conviction that this will lead to a good outcome. If only they could be made to see how appalling they are, then theyd become nice.

Case study: Refugees in Australia

Recently (August 2014) the Refugee Council for Australia put out a statement:

As we continue to push away those who seek our help, we risk becoming known as a mean and small-minded nation indifferent to the global challenges of forced displacement. It is high time for Australia to make a real contribution.

The Council for Refugees is describing the majority view as mean and small minded which could be true but it isnt likely to win support. In fact, it makes it extremely easy for the government (which is backed by the majority) to paint the Council as arrogant, disloyal and out of touch.

In spite of the efforts of the Council and a large number of parallel pressure groups *The Sydney Morning Herald* reports that A strong majority of Australians, 60 per cent, want the government to increase the severity of the treatment of asylum seekers.



Whats missing in attempting to calm the disagreement of anti-asylum seekers is a more sympathetic understanding of *why* people take the view they do on such a topic: an acknowledgement that those who hate asylum seekers might be afraid and worried, rather than mean and unintelligent. The fears have to be acknowledged and taken seriously first, before anyone can change their mind. If you dont do that your advocacy simply adds to the anxiety and makes the other person *less* likely to agree with you.

Reassurance doesnt mean saying I know you are afraid which can sound patronising. It starts with a genuine understanding of what the anxieties are being swamped, ignored, envy that another will get special treatment when you dont. And then offering a defence against these bad outcomes. Or explaining in terms that work for the other person why these things are not, in fact, going to happen.

We understand this intuitively when dealing with children. If a child is afraid there is a monster under the bed, we dont think its wise to tell them not to be idiotic, cease complaining and grow up. We might examine what bothers them. We look under the bed, and get them to do so too. We might give them a bell to ring to bring us running if a monster should appear. We ask them about anything that might have bothered them during the day. We might even try cutting the legs off the bed. We dont share the anxiety, but we do the child the honour of taking it very seriously.

Reassurance is also crucial in intimate disagreements. Theres a fatal tendency to see the single out-of-control disagreeer (ones partner) as mean which mars many attempts to make headway in domestic life.

Case study: the sofa

A: I think we should change the cover on that sofa; I was thinking of this ...

B: No, no, no. Thats totally disgusting, I hate that. Why are you doing this to me. You are always doing these terrible things .

A: What have I done, Ive only made a suggestion?

B: Fuck off.

The disturbingly intemperate person is not generally mean, they are, above all else, panicked and **scared**. Though as yet it is not at all clear what it is they are worried about. Panic here means an inability to calmly explain what it is that is really bothering you. It feels so urgent and so serious that the mind races to aggression. But somewhere, under the aggression, are genuine worries that perhaps can be identified and resolved.

For instance, the agitated one might be (under the surface):

Anxious about losing control of their life. Its a real worry, but exaggerated in this one instance. So the move would be to trade off this choice for letting them have their way on something else. Its not really the sofa cover they object to.



The proposed cover reminds them of one in a shared house they lived in as a student, in a very unhappy year. They dont hate you, just a memory. They might be able to adjust, with some sympathetic encouragement. Or possibly not. But its a different, less confrontational, issue.

By taking seriously the possibility that the person you disagree with is scared, theres a huge opportunity to shift the disagreement to more hopeful territory.

Seduction

In romantic terms, seduction involves being very, very attentive and nice, making the environment just right, saying sweet and exciting things. Seduction can be cynical. But at its best it is a generous art of helping another person overcome their nervousness. Ideally, the seducer helps the one they seduce. When we are seduced (ideally, again) we don't go against our own best interest; on the contrary, we are deftly assisted to what we really do want, but didn't have the confidence to pursue.

The honourable seducer knows that people get held back by shyness, nerves and self-doubt. And takes great pains to lull these unhelpful forces. Essentially the seducer possesses a highly important kind of confidence: they know that someone who is not yet convinced can be won over by consideration, warmth and tenderness.

Seduction has a role to play in public debate. Consider what can go wrong in its absence.

Case Study

In 2009, the UK government announced that it was considering cuts to the public funding of Humanities courses. They were testing public opinion to see what kind of support for, or opposition to, such a move there might be.

The government view was that the Humanities were a luxury, enjoyed by the few and therefore not something that really deserved to be paid for by public funds.

Many people were disturbed by this. *The Guardian* attacked this as dark philistinism. The Academy of the Humanities vilified the policies as sterile and outdated. The National Union of Students complained that the policy was short-sighted, reckless, socially and culturally barren and fixated on a mean and narrow ideology. They also noted, that the mainstream media had been entirely silent. It may have been the case that the policy was philistine and culturally barren.

Although highly charged, those opposed to the cuts failed to move public opinion to their side. The following year many Humanities courses lost their public funding entirely.

The cause may have been a good one. But the advocacy was not at all seductive. It did not set out to woo people who might be a bit reluctant or not yet convinced.



There was no attempt to seduce someone who was a bit suspicious of the Humanities to see there might be a point in funding them.

At the root of seduction is the insight: In any disagreement, one must try to explain to the other person (or other group) what is so attractive and appealing about our position rather than focusing on what is bad or wrong with theirs.

STRATEGIC PESSIMISM

Sometimes we can't make headway in disagreement and therefore need to do that most unfamiliar and rather downbeat move: learn to live with disagreement.

This can feel extremely disappointing. There are some topics we tend to feel are too important for compromise. Typically, they are big political and social matters, which might include:

Climate change

The economy

Immigration

Education

If you have strong opinions on these things, you are unlikely to think it's just fine when others hold very different views. It feels crucial that the truth, as you see it, should prevail. You want things to change in the world. You might be very confident of the rightness of your own position.

But what lends us this belief that the truth can prevail, that other people can be won around, that disagreement works?

When we disagree violently with some people (who we think of as fools and idiots), we are generally in a rather dark and gloomy mood about things. It would feel odd to describe us at this point as being ***optimists***.

And yet that's precisely what we are and it is an optimism that is deeply dangerous and something we should try to wean ourselves from. The passionate desire to get people to think as we do is born out of a naive belief that agreement can eventually be found on all great issues and that harmony is the natural state of things between people. Of course, right now we may be in a bit of a fight, but, so the optimistic arguer believes, with a few more assaults on the issue, the argument can be ironed out.

At a political level, it is this sort of optimism which has belied great moments of institutional intolerance. The Soviet Experiment was so violent in part because it was so optimistic about agreement: it genuinely believed that with a little more prodding and pushing an entire nation could be made to agree with the principles of Lenin. One has to be a rather optimistic leader to set about torturing members of the opposition into agreement. The Gulag was an act of optimism.

By contrast, modern democratic states are notably pessimistic in their structure about agreement. They know there will always be disputes and therefore, they have learnt to accommodate them. Citizens have the right to disagree, no one can coerce anyone else into belief, were often left alone to think what we want. There isn't a constant quest for total universal approval.



All this is the fruit of pessimism. Pessimism takes as its starting point that agreement between people is actually not the normal order of things. Given how humans are, the possibility of large groups of people thinking the same thing is highly unlikely. We shouldn't be surprised or indeed too depressed or angry about this no more than we'd be sad about bad weather or the onset of a bad cold. These things happen.

Once disagreement starts to be seen as utterly normal, and agreement the rare and beautiful exception, we can stop being so surprised and therefore so passionately annoyed when we meet with someone who doesn't see eye-to-eye with us.

The strategic pessimist also grasps that it's very unlikely that one can ever rationally persuade people of something: people's opinions are formed over long years, through emotional dynamics, and ten minutes of conversation over dinner is entirely unlikely to make any difference.

The pessimist therefore shifts the focus away from an attempt to convert to an attempt to endure and manage disagreement.

This involves two responses.

The first at the political level is:

a) Human Rights

The modern state seeks to create structures that can contain and moderate disagreement.

This gets expressed through the language of human rights. This means certain rights to liberty and freedom for the individual are guaranteed. The state cannot coerce, convince or bully the individual.

Citizens are also expected to leave one another alone. One has a lot of freedom from interference.

b) Manners

What human rights accomplishes at the political level, manners accomplishes at the private level.

The mannered person reveres politeness as a very important lid that suppresses what might destroy us. They believe deeply in getting on around other people. It is not that they are afraid of ruffling anyone's feathers per se but they just doubt whether it is ever really a constructive move and they are not interested in merely symbolic victories. They would prefer to have civil relations with someone rather than tell them frankly what is on their mind. They're alive to how difficult it is for us to take on board challenging information from someone else. They accept an important role for secrets and white lies.



The ideal hope is that disagreement can be resolved. Good manners aim at a lesser, but practically crucial goal: how to cope when disagreement won't go away.

Politeness is a set of tactics for artificially reducing the feeling of conflict, in the absence of real agreement. Instead of being open and honest about how we feel, the well-mannered person will:

Thank someone to whom we do not feel especially grateful.

Smile, when they feel bored.

Laugh when they are not amused.

Say that an idea is interesting, when they think it is unimpressive.

Keep their opposition quiet.

Good manners are pessimistic; they build on an acceptance that we can cope with not everyone agreeing with us (especially when we are in the right).

It might be too hard to reach agreement with this person.

We have limited energy and should save it for the most important occasions.

Not every disagreement is worth resolving, even if the other person is dead wrong.

Social peace is mostly better than conflict.

Being misunderstood is a normal part of life.

The key point is that rather than focus on the point of disagreement, manners encourage us to skirt round it, avoid it, and keep it out of sight.

Your sister's partner has a whole lot of ideas with which you strongly disagree. But you don't see them very often. They don't really listen to you. The fall out with your sister could be awful.

Your mother has some cherished views about art, religion and sex which you find deeply unconvincing. But they are very, very important to her. To try to talk her out of them would be cruel. You need to avoid disagreement in order to avoid needlessly hurting her.

An old friend from college has some whacky convictions. But you don't want to stop seeing them. They are a cherished link to that period of your life.

A work colleague at a reception reveals some views about politics with which you are in profound disagreement. But, you are going to have to work with them all next month on a major project. It is crucial you maintain a viable working relationship.

At a dinner you are seated across from someone you find very ill-informed, yet voluble on a range of topics that matter a lot to you. But clearly this person is a great friend of your host. You must not let your contempt show.

You care more for your relationship with your sister than about the rightness or wrongness of the issue with your brother-in-law (the merits of North Sea oil exploration). There are often more important things than to be right. There might be things we care more for than victory in a disagreement. This the mannered pessimist understands.