

An optimistic perspective on deep disagreement? Commentary on Tindale's Strange Fish: Belief and the roots of disagreement

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1. INTRODUCTION

Christopher Tindale offers a deeply philosophical reflection about the nature of disagreement and the way we can understand it. Especially, he challenges a rather anthropocentric perspective on argumentation we naturally tend to embrace, as our western cultural framework marks us. I think that analysis of argumentation which would not take into account what he calls the "forms of life" (after Ludwig Wittgenstein and Robert Fogelin) are too local to apply on a study of argumentation processes as global anthropological phenomena, free of primitive concepts and assumptions such as the trinity of judicial, deliberative and epideictic discourse.

2. CLOSE THE LIMITS OF MY WORLD

I find the case of Socrate's dream particularly interesting, which makes me think about a similar case I would like to evoke. Jeremy Narby, a Canadian anthropologist, publishes a book titled *The cosmic serpent, DNA and the origin of knowledge* in 1998, where he relates long years of observation of shamanic tribes in South America. In this book, he develops the following theory:

In their visions, where their consciousness is somehow reduced to the molecular level, shamans access information from DNA, which they call "animated essences" or "spirits", through different techniques; thus, shamanic or "animist" cultures have known for millennia that the vital principle is unique for all forms of life and looks like two intertwined snakes [...] This way of knowledge is only revealed in states of unfocused and "non-rational" consciousness, but its results

are empirically verifiable [...] The metaphorical explanations of shamans correspond quite precisely to descriptions that Western science is beginning to provide.”¹ [translation my own] (Narby, 1998, p. 117)

As in Socrate’s dream, the mode of knowledge of shamans explained here is somehow like the “kisceral mode of the multi-modal account on argumentation” (Tindale, 2019, p. 10), since their visions come from dreams and trances. The parallel established by Narby between the vision of the intertwined snakes and DNA has been challenged, but this is not what I want to underline here.

What I want to underline is that shamans see a cosmic snake and believe in a cosmic snake because they see this snake in their visions. They never talk about DNA. Within their cultural framework, DNA simply does not exist, but the cosmic snake does. Therefore, in a certain sense, by bringing together the concepts of cosmic snake and DNA, Jeremy Narby closes the limit of his world, of his cultural framework. Since he cannot truly believe in the existence of a cosmic snake, he interprets it as DNA and this way, damages the objectivity of his anthropological inquiry. In other words, he accepts dreams and trances as sources of knowledge, but does not accept the content of this knowledge, and describes it as a metaphor of DNA and not as the reality of the shamanic tribes systems of beliefs: he interprets rather than he reports, like the commentators on Socrate’s dreams.

3. OPEN THE LIMITS OF OUR WORLDS

Additionally, I would like to discuss some of Tindale's assumptions: “Lives are partial to certain values at certain times, they change and grow, and the systems that support them need to support this. So, they are always open to revision, to alternatives.” (Tindale, 2019, p. 15) and “The roots of disagreement are not frameworks or causal series, but human agents and their diverse commitments” (Tindale, 2019, p. 17).

¹ "Dans leurs visions, où leur conscience est en quelque sorte réduite au niveau moléculaire, les chamanes accèdent par différentes techniques à de l'information en provenance de l'ADN, qu'ils appellent "essences animées" ou "esprits"; ainsi, les cultures chamaniques, ou "animistes", savent depuis des millénaires que le principe vital est unique pour toutes les formes de vie et ressemble à deux serpents entrelacés. [...]. Cette voie de connaissance ne se révèle que dans des états de conscience défocalisée et "non-rationnelle", mais ses résultats sont vérifiables empiriquement. [...] Les explications métaphoriques des chamanes correspondent assez précisément à des descriptions que la science occidentale commence à fournir."

I think that this view is in line with evolutionary theories in meta-ethics (see, e.g., Clavien, 2015), which literally see human agents as “forms of life” moved by a biological necessity for survival. Within this framework, it is difficult to identify or set universal values, except the driving force of life itself.

However, the supporters of some form of universality of values (see e.g. Huemer, 2007) oppose this view with examples of moral judgments, which would be intuitively true, such as, “It is wrong to torture a child for pleasure”. I do not think that, about such a judgment, a Christian, for example, would invoke God as the source of the truth of the judgment – the evil of torturing a child is beyond God. I do not think neither that a liberal would sincerely be ready to discuss this truth – the evil of torturing a child is beyond democratic discussion of values. It seems thus that the sentence and its source are something common to all cultural framework, to all lives, to all systems, and maybe something foundational, which could connect all systems, all lives and all frameworks together. If this “something” exists, there is a root for universal agreement about values and a possible key of resolution of any deep disagreement.

4. CONCLUSION

To conclude this commentary, I would say that there are “one-size-fits-all sets of standards” (Tindale, 2019, p. 17), but that these standards are difficult to describe. What is it that makes true the sentence “it is bad to torture a child for pleasure”? Maybe exactly what we call “humanity”, or “forms of life”, or “human agents”. In this sense, there is an optimistic perspective: because disagreement emerges between human agents, there is no disagreement so deep that it cannot be resolved. There is also a pessimistic perspective: because disagreement emerges between human agents, disagreement is unsolvable by nature.

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