

How to have difficult conversations?

Roger Jones, 2020-08, k06

Philosophical Precedents

from Aristotle's "On Sophistical Refutations"

*the art of the sophist is the semblance of wisdom without the reality,
and the sophist is one who makes money from an apparent but unreal wisdom*

1. Equivocation - using a word with two different meanings
2. Amphibology - ambiguous sentence structure
3. Composition - assuming a feature of a part is possessed of the whole
4. Division - assuming a feature of the whole is possessed by a part
5. Accent - equivocation by change of accent or stress
6. Figure of speech or form of expression - rhetorical equivocation
7. Accident - destroying the exception
8. Secundum quid - confusing a rule of thumb with an absolute generalisation
9. Irrelevant conclusion - proving the wrong thing
10. Begging the question - assuming the conclusion
11. False cause - use of falsely alleged causal relationship
12. Affirming the consequent - knowing only B if A, infer A from B.
13. Fallacy of many questions - raising a question with doubtful presuppositions

Sources and Purposes

- Book by James Lindsay & Peter Boghossian: “*How to have Impossible Conversations*”
 - Countless conversations with *zealots, criminals, religious fanatics, and extremists* of all stripes.
 - Doctoral research in Prison System conversing with *offenders*.
 - Then thousands of hours of conversations with *religious hardliners*.
 - Conversations with people who hold *radically different views about politics, morality, and religion*.
 - Research and experience in conversing with *people who profess to be unshakable in their beliefs*.

Thirty-six techniques drawn from the best, most effective research on:

- applied epistemology
 - *hostage and professional negotiations*
 - *cult exiting*
 - subdisciplines of psychology, and more.
- Talk by Boghossian: “*The Way Forward*” - from **critical social justice**

Our Special Circumstances and Needs

- Two areas of concern:
 1. Our philosophy discussions
 2. Healthy democratic institutions
- Few of the special considerations which motivated and informed Lindsay and Boghossian are relevant to (1).
- The concern with logical fallacies remains, heightened by the aftermath of postmodernism.
 - Do we need updated analyses focussing on main contemporary fallacies?
- Ground rules of “Rational Discourse” no longer universally accepted,
 - Should these be re-affirmed?

The Way Forward - ten points from Boghossian's talk

1. **Listen** - and be seen to be listening - echo back, re-express
2. **Enquire about grounds** for belief - ask how they know it
3. **Check confidence on scale** - before and after conversation
4. **Disconfirmation** - what evidence would change belief?
5. **Facilitate doubt** - e.g. if gender studies and biology disagree, who would you be likely to believe more?
6. **Don't provoke defensiveness** - don't say "but", say "Yes and ..."
7. **Build bridges** - make golden bridges to save face
8. **Don't apologise** - unless you are actually sorry. Not if someone is offended.
9. **Be sincere** - demonstrate paraheisia, don't equivocate or sugarcoat
10. **Be willing to revise your beliefs** - be willing to say "I don't know"

A Way Forward? - for philosophical discussions

- Make honest attempt to understand topic and convey that understanding.
- That presumes a rational endeavour to find objective truth rather than political narrative?
- Listen and seek understanding of failure to convey, responding to clarify or modify.
- Invite and seek understanding of alternative views.
- Seek to understand and be understood, to compare - not to persuade.
- Avoid “argumentum ad hominem” (fallacious and/or off-topic)

A Way Forward? - for philosophy in the Western, analytic tradition

- Revisit epistemology
 - Examine the rationality of scepticism in a nuanced way
 - Reconsider the scope, limits and degrees of objectivity
 - Re-affirm the logical/empirical/evaluative trichotomy
- Scientific method
 - Address the social and institutional supports and constraints on scientific objectivity
- Ethics and Politics
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