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OBSERVATIONS ON ARROGANCE AND MEANING: FINDING TRUTH IN AN ERA OF MISINFORMATION

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“... men love abstract reasoning and neat systematization so much that they think nothing of distorting the truth, closing their eyes and ears to contrary evidence to preserve their illusions.” Fyodor Dostoevsky in Notes from Underground. 1864. Epoch.

ABSTRACT

The paper discusses various factors contributing to disagreements, such as differing experiences, perspectives, and historical narratives, leading to disagreements within families and societies. It explores how beliefs, values, and biases feed into disagreements, with confirmation bias affecting decision-making and the media. Cultural values also play a role, showcasing conflicts between meritocracy and inclusivity in ethical decision-making. Haidt's Moral Foundations Theory highlights differences in value priorities between Western and Eastern societies. The impact of Western values like rationalism, freedom, and tolerance, under threat from Marxist illiberalism on campuses, is discussed. The text also delves into disinformation, emotions in warfare, and the use of fake information and images for propaganda purposes. The need for diligent reporting to avoid spreading disinformation is emphasized, given its potential to create misconceptions and harm diplomatic relations.

Keywords. informing, values, disinformation, soft power, fake images

INTRODUCTION

Misinformation and disinformation play a significant role in hindering the ability to reach consensus. By distorting facts and spreading false narratives, they create confusion and foster ignorance among individuals, leading to a breakdown in shared understanding. This lack of accurate information and shared knowledge further fuels disagreements and prevents productive dialogue and collaboration.

Using descriptive research methods, this paper examines factors that contribute to disagreements. Previously, Cohen (2021) provided a model to describe how misinformation (and disinformation)

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contribute to the inability to reach shared understanding. Salient elements were shown to be each person's selective attention and how the message was packaged. This paper extends that contribution. This paper notes that high-value words, like freedom, have lost a meaning shared by all by gaining an alternative meaning, resulting in a lack of shared understanding. As a result, the loss of shared understanding leads to ignorance. The arrogance of the ignorant occurs when those holding one view refuse to consider the countervailing views of others. Apart from individual viewpoints, there may also be a lack of shared values. Civilizations can and do clash in their values. The paper concludes by relating this to how governments use soft power to advance their cause.

These points are discussed one by one, beginning with disagreements that do not necessarily involve arrogance.

DISAGREEMENTS ARE PART OF LIFE

Disagreements are a part of life. Even within families, people disagree at times. Cohen (2021) showed the role played by self-selection of differing information sources as one cause of disagreements. This paper expands on the question of how disagreements come about.

People's experiences, perspectives, and realities can be fundamentally different. While they may breathe the same air and occupy the same physical environment, their inner worlds and life circumstances vary greatly. People carry their own history, that is, unique thoughts, beliefs, emotions, and experiences that shape their perception of the world.

PEOPLE MAY UNDERSTAND THE PAST DIFFERENTLY

But just as people often remember the past differently, historians, as scholars tasked with unraveling the complexities of historical events, often disagree over various aspects of the past, e.g., Kaufman (2024.) Their conflicting viewpoints extend beyond mere factual disparities to encompass debates about what should be emphasized, remembered, and other essential aspects of historical understanding.

One's narrative influences one's understanding of events

Just as historians approach history through differing theoretical frameworks or prioritize certain aspects of the past over others, resulting in contrasting narratives, we all do. Merriam-Webster Dictionary (Merriam-Webster, n.d.) defines narrative, as used here, as "a way of presenting or understanding a situation or series of events that reflects and promotes a particular point of view or set of values." This is important because people, even historians, form their understanding through their narratives. For example, while most historians view history via empirical historiography, Marx viewed history through the lens of class struggle.

Conflicting narratives lead to disputes over the significance of specific events, the motivations of historical figures, or the societal, cultural, and economic forces that shaped the course of history.

Professors make deliberate choices about what should be remembered and taught. Gibbon (2017) notes that these choices are influenced by factors such as cultural perspectives, political ideologies, and societal values, leading to divergent narratives and conflicting accounts of the past. Alternative narratives can and perhaps should be used constructively to understand the sides of reality, as we see in the next section.

Conflicting narratives can be based on disinformation

But narratives can also be used destructively. For example, history can be fabricated to meet political needs. The hundred-year-old forgery *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is an antisemitic example of disinformation, likely written at the behest of Russia's Czar to focus discontent away from him. (Britannica, 2024; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, 2019)

Let us explore how different narratives can lead to constructive and destructive disagreements.

TYPES OF DISAGREEMENTS

A recent publication by Bernstein (2024) provides a simplistic view of how to respectfully (constructively) resolve disagreements. However the history of arguments and how to resolve them spans centuries. Below shows how this is handled in the Talmud (Dolgopolski, 2009).

Constructive disagreements

Adherents of Constructive Disagreement follow these rules in their search for truth:

1. They debate the issues without ad hominem attacking people or aiming to harm relationships.
2. They are motivated to learn from the other, not to win the argument.
3. They respectfully listen to the other side and are open to understanding their viewpoint.
4. They recognize that, despite holding conflicting narratives, both positions can have elements of truth.

Arrogance: Destructive disagreements

Unlike Constructive Disagreements, which are civil and are formed after hearing and acknowledging the other point of view, Destructive Disagreements have one or more of these elements:

1. Viewing arguments as a zero-sum game and so attempting to win the disagreement without regard to the other side,
2. Attacking the opponent with ad hominem statements.
3. Having no interest in learning from different viewpoints, typically by failing to listen.
4. Acting to impede or prevent others from hearing other viewpoints.

We currently see destructive disagreements played out on college campuses.

VALUES: CONFLICTING VALUES CAN LEAD TO ARROGANCE

BELIEFS, VALUES, AND TRUTH

Both constructive and destructive arguments draw from beliefs. Figà Talamanca and Arfini (2022) explored the echo chamber and the epistemic filter bubble effects. Filter bubbles occur when relevant sources of information are omitted. In these cases, those in the bubble are unaware of significant information and reasoning. The echo chamber effect involves choosing to be exposed only to information sources reinforcing one's beliefs.

Plus, confirmatory bias

Confirmation bias is people's tendency to process information by looking for or interpreting information consistent with their beliefs. People are especially likely to process information that supports their own beliefs when an issue is highly important or self-relevant (Casad & Luebering, 2024). This biased approach to decision-making may be unintentional, resulting in a person ignoring or forgetting information inconsistent with their beliefs.

What may be worse than an individual's confirmatory bias is confirmatory bias in mainstream media. It can create an epistemic filter bubble by involving one or more of the following biases:

- Reporter bias (Weidmann, 2016),
- Editor bias (the one who decides what to print and what to emphasize, that is, how to slant a story) (Friedman, 2014, 2015, 2017),
- Headline editor bias (University of Washington Libraries, 2017) and
- Placement, such as by the layout editor who decides where to place the report, which photos to show and their size, and what parts of the story to cut to meet limitations (University of Washington Libraries, 2017).

Social media lacks even the mainstream media's attempt at journalistic honesty. Its principal goal is to dominate the users' attention for profit using the users' emotions.

“There is very little training on how to use emotions more subtly, in a way that opens minds to possibilities constructively but is not designed to persuade” (Freeman, 2018).

EFFECT OF CULTURE AND VALUES

One reason why there are disagreements is conflicting cultural values. The impact of culture and values within that culture complicates the search for truth in ethical decision-making. Such cases are not right versus wrong but one person's sense of right versus the other person's sense of right.

For example, political conflicts are common worldwide. Figure 1 illustrates major ethno-territorial conflicts around Asia, Africa, and Europe. And there are conflicts of rights vs rights within countries.



Figure 1. Political conflicts, from Major Ethno-territorial conflicts around Asia, Africa, and Europe. Personal Communications. Used with permission.

For example, consider the disagreements around whom to hire or which students to admit to a college. Those who value meritocracy over inclusivity might advocate for hiring or admitting the best and the brightest. Others who value inclusivity over meritocracy would prefer hiring or welcoming some from the disadvantaged group. Such right vs right creates tension among ethical decision-makers seeking truth.

Constructive decision-making stresses the importance of leaving room for others' perspectives and values, even when one is confident about one's decision-making process. Values clarification, a popular notion in the 1970s, was summarized in Kirschenbaum et al. (1977). It involves having individuals understand what they value and understand what others value. The examples in the previous paragraphs focused on clashes within a culture. The situation is even more complex when it involves clashes across cultures.

Values vary even more between cultures: Weird Worlds

Morris (1956) examines how the East and West differ, including the impact of value Haidt (2012) builds on Morris's pioneering work by exploring East/West impacts on values in greater depth and across various cultures. Haidt argues that people share concepts of moral values universally but prioritize these moral values differently, leading to disagreements. What is new is his showing how values vary from individual to individual and across cultures. For example, Haidt shares his experience living in India, where he discovered a hierarchical society prioritizing authority over liberty and fairness. People's values underpin their beliefs and conduct.

Haidt suggests that morality across cultures shares common themes: care vs. harm, fairness vs. cheating, loyalty vs. betrayal, authority vs. subversion, sanctity vs. degradation, and liberty vs. oppression. For example, what do you value more if you see your sister cheating: loyalty to her or fairness?

Haidt posits that these six themes are shared by all or most civilizations. However, their relative valence differs across cultures, particularly between the West and the East. That is, Western relative value patterns differ from Eastern ones.

Haidt uses the term WEIRD to denote Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic (hence the acronym WEIRD) societies.

WEIRD arrogance explains some disagreements

In general, thinking patterns in the West descended from the Greek tradition. However, this is not the case in Africa, India, Asia, and even Eastern Europe (Henrich et al., 2010; Stewart, n.d.; Upp, 2021). Some moral value patterns in play today by some cultures are derived from those of 15th-century Arabia (Terminińska, 2009).

Henrich et al. (2010) write cultures “build virtues, narratives, and institutions upon these foundational [ethical] systems, resulting in the diverse moral beliefs we observe globally and even conflicts within nations.”

“Broadly speaking, Western society strives to find and prove ‘the truth,’ while Eastern society accepts the truth as given and is more interested in finding the balance. Westerners put more stock in individual rights; Easterners put more stock in social responsibility,” writes Bukhbat (2016).

Researchers, beware. These different value weightings have a significant impact on research generalizability. Henrich et al. (2010, p.6) point out that most Western researchers take their sample data from WEIRD cultures and then inappropriately generalize their findings to represent the world’s population. His study suggests “that members of WEIRD societies, including young children, are among the least representative populations one could find for generalizing about humans.”

Assault on Western Civilization: Critical reasoning vs Marxist illiberal assertions

Western countries benefit from the legacy of European culture and have championed liberty, charity, scholarship, and human rights much more than other countries.

Liberal values include Rationalism, that is, the exercise of human reason and critical inquiry; Freedom, that is, the ability to think or act as one wishes under self-determination; and, most notably for this paper, Tolerance, that is, a willingness to accept views or actions that one disagrees or of which one disapproves. In this sense, critical thinking is a liberal value in line with constructive disagreements. In his prescient book *Developing Critical Thinkers*, Brookfield (2010) writes that critical thinking is a productive and positive activity.

However, these positive values are under attack on campuses that enable and even promote Marxist illiberalism, that is, restricting freedom of thought, debate, acquisition of information, or behavior. Here are two examples.

Tafarella (2024) writes that the college president of his campus asked for an endorsement of a 12-page glossary of terms published by the California Community College system. He notes that this glossary will be used in faculty evaluation, hiring, policy formation, and even course outlines. The glossary defines merit as “a concept that ... is embedded in the ideology of Whiteness and upholds race-based structural inequality.” The glossary states that Colorblindness “perpetuates existing racial inequality and denies systemic racism.” He writes that faculty are expected to go along with this dogma or possibly be culled from their job.

Shay (2021) writes of similar experiences at his university where those using bullhorns prevented the presentation of alternative views. Students are fed the Marxist approach that they are either the oppressed or the oppressor. Brown (2019) writes, “In contrast to the Rational and Context-based approaches, the Critical Approach rejects the idea that citizens owe any obligation to the State. Instead, regarding the State as a tool used by one dominant group—be it economic class or gender—to suppress the majority...” By Critical Approach, Brown does not mean critical thinking, but rather the

Marxist ideology of Critical Theory that seeks to liberate people from all forms of oppression. All people are either oppressors or the oppressed with no shades in between.

University students used to be taught how to think, not what to think.

Disinformation as a source of disagreement

Disagreement can arise from disinformation. Marx established the ideas of false consciousness and ideology, which he defined as the interests of one group of people disguising themselves as those of the entire community (Márkus, 1983). Combining false consciousness and ideology can lead to psychological warfare in Post-Truth Times. The term “post-truth” is employed by some to denote “a situation in society and politics, in which the boundary between truth and untruth is erased, facts and related narratives are purposefully produced, emotions are more important than knowledge, and the actors of social or political life do not care for truth, proof and evidence” (Vacura, 2020). A central element of such relies on the fact that emotions significantly impact people’s perception more than facts (Hyvärinen & Beck, 2018; Yang et al., 2023).

Disinformation and emotion. Earlier, we saw how Russia produced a fabricated document, The Protocols, to advance its political purposes. Russia pioneered a model of disinformation to gain political influence that is now being replicated by other actors (Africa Center for Strategic Studies, 2022).

Fake information is commonly used in warfare to encourage one’s forces, discourage the opponent’s forces, and gain support from the uninformed masses worldwide. In addition to fake information, emotions are employed as tools of war. In this way, war occurs not only on the physical battlefield but also on the psychological battlefield of public perception. This is called soft power (Murray, 2022; Nye, 1990; “Unpacking the connection”, 2023; “What is soft power?”, 2023)

For example, recently Hamas, through its health ministry, issued fake casualty figures. See, for example, Bennett (2024), Bermudez (2023, 2024), “Hamas casualty numbers” (2024), Herman (2024), Pletka (2024), Simpson et al. (2024), and Wyner (n.d.).

The importance of this is that the first news story picked up by the news outlets is the one people remember, and news outlets are reluctant to contradict their own stories later (R. Stern, personal communication, May 19, 2024).

Fake Images create disinformation. Today, AI and social media technology enable the rapid dissemination of falsehoods through various channels and the effortless creation of untrue documents and fake images. In the past it took substantial resources to create fake images (Landes, 2023). Now all it takes is a child with a social media account (Mims, 2023)

For example, see the fake pictures shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2. Fake images created via artificial intelligence are promulgated in the media.

REDEFINING WORDS

Disagreements can occur when words take on new, even contrary meanings. Mark Twain is attributed with saying “the difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter – it’s the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.”

Over centuries, words can naturally evolve and change meaning. This is known as semantic shift, semantic progression, semantic development, or semantic drift. For example, the original meaning of “awful” was “inspiring wonder (or fear),” but now it means “extremely bad”.

In modern times we find that word-meanings have been deliberately changed for political purposes. This misdirection of meaning was predicted by George Orwell (1949) who wrote in his book *1984*, that the leaders changed the meaning of words, made everyone question what was true, continuously rewrote history, and punished people who disagreed.

In the book *1984*, Syme says to Winston, “Don’t you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought?” (Orwell, 1949, p. 48) In recent times, some words have been redefined to advance political purposes. Genocide, ethnic cleansing, occupation, refugee, proportionality, colonialism, apartheid, Nakba, and racism are examples of today’s Newspeak. See, for example, Herf (2023), Mor (2024), Rivkin and Casey (2024), and Sawwan (2024).

MAJOR PLAYERS IN SOWING DISINFORMATION

Various actors have been named as sowing disinformation for the purpose of de-unifying those advancing Western values. They are Russia, China, and Islamists. The term Islamist was created to differentiate followers of Islam from the parties within Islam who reject Western values and aim to create a global caliphate.

CHINA

China has been accused by various countries and organizations of engaging in disinformation campaigns to shape public opinion and advance its interests. These campaigns often involve spreading false or misleading information through social media platforms and other online channels. For example, according to reports published in the Wall Street Journal, “The Chinese government is pouring billions of dollars annually into a global campaign of disinformation, using investments abroad and an array of tactics to promote Beijing’s geopolitical aims and squelch criticism of its policies, according to a new State Department assessment” (Volz & Gordon, 2023).

China uses fake authors, bot armies and lawsuits as some of its tactics. Microsoft discovered that China was among the first to use generative AI for its state-sponsored online influence operation against foreign voters. (Volz, 2024; Volz & Gordon, 2023). It has been alleged that “the CCP [Chinese Communist Party] is remotely infiltrating U.S. society through pro-communist organizations in the West to achieve its insidious intent of disrupting American society” (Su, 2024; See also Network Contagion Research Institute, n.d.).

RUSSIA

As mentioned above, Russia has used disinformation for more than a century for its political advantage. Bugayova et al. (2024) provides details on its methods and strategy. In addition to use its disinformation channels to interfere in elections, it uses it against the West to promote a crisis in Israel and Gaza (Cohen & Boyd, 2019; Shamrai, 2023).

HAMAS

Kaplan (2024) explores the techniques used by Hamas for their successful media campaign that “has turned mainstream media, policymakers ... into spokespeople and campaigners for an Islamist terror agenda.” In a post-truth world that they create, for example on campuses, they use simple and simplistic slogans. They master control of the media and its 24-hour news cycle to get its message out first. For example, even before any facts were known, news outlets quoted their assertions as facts that an Israeli missile hit a hospital and killed 500. Since the hospital has only 300 beds, this should have been immediately suspect. It turns out that a terror group’s missile misfired, killing 50 on the hospitals parking lot.

Common truths are a lie can travel halfway around the world while the truth is still putting on its shoes, and once fake news rings its bell, it cannot be unrung (Vosoughi et al., 2018). In this context, the first incident report of an event is the one remembered, and Hamas's strategy of providing reporters with fake news reports has proven to be highly effective. See, for example, an Honest Reporting article by Lax (2024). R. Stern (personal communication, May 19, 2024) also made this observation.

SUMMARY

We saw above how values and biases affect one's understanding of situations and the lack of general agreement. Disagreements can arise due to differences in people's experiences, perspectives, and realities. But values cannot explain disagreements based on false beliefs.

Disagreements are a part of life. Even historians often have conflicting viewpoints about historical events, leading to debates about what should be remembered and taught. These differences can lead to constructive or destructive disagreements.

Constructive disagreements are characterized by respectful debate, a desire to learn from the other side, and openness to understanding different viewpoints. In contrast, destructive disagreements involve ad hominem attacks, a lack of interest in learning from others, and a failure to listen to different perspectives.

Beliefs, values, and biases contribute to disagreements. Confirmatory Bias, the tendency to process information in a way that supports existing beliefs, can lead to the exclusion of relevant sources of information and the reinforcement of one's beliefs. This bias can be exacerbated when it affects mainstream media, creating an epistemic filter bubble by involving various biases, such as reporter bias, editor bias, headline editor bias, and image size and placement.

Cultural values can also lead to disagreements, particularly in ethical decision-making. For example, the value of meritocracy may conflict with the value of inclusivity, leading to tension among ethical decision-makers seeking truth. Constructive decision-making involves leaving room for others' perspectives and values, even when one is confident about one's decision-making process.

Haidt's Moral Foundations Theory suggests that people share common themes of morality across cultures, but their relative value differs. Western societies tend to prioritize individual rights, while Eastern societies prioritize social responsibility.

Researchers must be aware of the impact of different value weightings on research generalizability. Most Western researchers take their sample data from WEIRD cultures and inappropriately generalize their findings as representative of the world's population.

Western countries have championed liberty, charity, scholarship, and human rights more than other countries. Liberal values like rationalism, freedom, and tolerance align with constructive disagreements. However, these positive values are under attack on campuses that enable and promote Marxist illiberalism, which restricts freedom of thought, debate, acquisition of information, or behavior.

Values cannot explain disagreements based on false beliefs. Marx established the ideas of false consciousness and ideology, which can be used to impose false beliefs on others. Disinformation and emotions are commonly used in warfare to gain political influence and demoralize opponents. Fake images, documents, and news can be easily created and disseminated through various channels, leading to misconceptions and stereotypes about foreign countries.

The media possess soft power and should be diligent in their reporting to avoid spreading disinformation and contributing to negative stereotypes about foreign countries. Falsehoods in the news diffuse farther, faster, deeper, and more broadly than the truth, leading to misconceptions and potential economic or diplomatic consequences.

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