How to Handle Disagreements Constructively

By Steven Yates

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8 Principles

[*Author's note: obviously this is not a contribution to my "Is Liberalism Dead?" series. This article was done for Medium — link — where my readership is minimal. Since I'd like to think more readers can benefit from these suggestions, I'm offering it here and wherever else it might reach others and help them. Comments or private emails are welcome as always.*]

Years ago, when I was still in academia, a senior-level professor and I got into a disagreement via snail-mail (this was the early 1990s), later by email. He began the exchange with a private response to a letter-to-the-editor I'd gotten published. Back in the day, I sent out quite a few of those. I'd guesstimate that around three quarters of them were published.

I responded, standing my ground. He replied. One thing led to another, then to another. Fortunately, the fellow wasn't at my university. Because what ensued didn't go well. I'll spare you the details.

For some strange reason (maybe I'm just a packrat), I saved the correspondence in a single fat folder (maybe two inches thick!). I recently found myself thumbing through it, rereading some of his contributions and some of mine and

considering what *I* could have said and done better. Or at least differently – more constructively.

You see, the guy had gotten some things right; and I had some things wrong. I was too pigheaded to see it. These things happen. I'd like to think I'm a bit more knowledgeable and even a bit wiser now, but who knows? There are still a few things about which my opinions are pretty strong, and when that happens, there's always the danger of overlooking something important.

The Internet era has made disagreements more ubiquitous, and often more hostile because there is so much online space for anonymous interactions where people will spout things they'd never say to anyone's face. I don't think there's any doubt that social media has divided us and made us more hostile. It's a design flaw. Social media algorithms show users what they've indicated (with their 'likes,' etc.) they want to see. So, what they see are posts from people whose views reflect their own.

We end up in echo chambers. Views, conservative or progressive, get more extreme. Those across the political aisle don't even seem legitimate anymore. *Everyone* is at risk from this.

Over the past decade or so I've received emails, some quite lengthy, from someone who disagrees with me about nearly everything I write (apparently he's also emailed others whose material also appears on NewsWithViews.com, and it hasn't gone especially well).

I've also had extended conversations and exchanges over Zoom with a fellow whose worldview is very different from mine. I've tried to pay attention to the dynamics of our exchanges. Keeping the conversation going despite frustration at times has helped me realize a few things I might not have gained clarity about otherwise.

To give credit where it is due, I got the idea for this article here. My printout of that 2021 article turned up as I went through some old papers and folders, looking for stuff I could toss as I'd not looked at it in years. This piece stuck in my mind. I found myself returning to it and taking notes on it.

The author outlined ways of managing disagreements that made sense.

Like many other things in life, having a few principles in mind before you go into sticky situations might be useful in navigating such situations effectively and constructively. It's more than agreeing to disagree, although sometimes it is that. But what can we learn from disagreements if we listen, and try to use them creatively?

That article I linked to isolated seven principles. I've reordered and expanded the list to eight.

Principle (1): Remember, you don't know everything.

Obvious, right? But a lot of people, when they put pen to paper, or fingers to email, or mouth to microphone, act like they're omniscient.

Or when they want to disagree, it's from that perspective.

Maybe you've fallen into this trap.

Start by acknowledging that you're not omniscient. No one is.

This means there are always things to be learned from the experiences of others, and from whatever thoughts they are willing to share. If someone disagrees with you, maybe it's because their experiences are different from yours. Maybe they have information you don't have.

Quoting economist and prolific author Thomas Sowell: "It takes considerable knowledge just to realize the extent of your own

ignorance."

Self-awareness helps. Think about just how limited any one person's experience of the world really is. Unless we're famous and in a position of great influence which brings hopefully reliable information our way, *our* world is probably very, very limited, next to *the* world. Even the most traveled among us have still traversed small paths, inhabited small corners, as opposed to what's out there. The paths we've walked, moreover, may be very different from one another.

See also this for added perspective.

People bringing different experiences to the same issue or problem may reach very different conclusions about it. When you say (or write) something, they'll disagree if it doesn't fit their experience, and this is entirely natural. It's not a sign the person is evil or stupid or even necessarily uninformed. It's a sign that they're human.

Principle (2): Listen actively without interrupting.

The ancient Stoic philosopher Epictetus left us sage advice: *the reason we have two ears and one mouth is so we can listen twice as much as we speak*.

Active listening takes practice. It means focusing on what the other person is saying, without interrupting, letting your mind wander, or doing private mental gymnastics readying your rebuttal.

Most people don't do this, of course. It's not natural. Our default setting is to want to "be right." This boosts our ego and self-image.

If someone disagrees with you, listen to them. Hear them.

Because sometimes we're not "right."

I've gotten a few things right over the years but also gotten

a few things dead wrong. (One of the latter cost me almost $20,000, years ago!)

I've also had close calls that would have been *really* bad news had I not listened to the opinions of others who had information I didn't have … or had picked up on red flags I'd missed, which others tried to warn me about and I wouldn't listen.

Principle (3): Distinguish essentials from inessentials.

People disagree on all sorts of things, of various levels of importance. Coke or Pepsi (or neither)? Do cats or dogs make better pets? Are liberals "smarter than" conservatives? Were JFK and RFK killed by a conspiracy? Did we really go to the moon? Is this the best time in human history to be alive because of all the new technology, or are things falling apart? Etc.

Some will engage some readers. Others will elicit a shrug and a silent (or audible), "Who cares?"

Not every hill is worth dying on. Especially in light of Principle (1).

If someone disagrees with me over something I consider minor league, I might let the disagreement stand.

Even if it *isn't* minor league, none of us has the time to research everything we might disagree about.

Decide if a given issue is worth pursuing. What is *essential*?

I receive inessentials all the time. I can't begin to read them all, much less take a position on all that's being said.

Note that *nothing* – *no one* – compels us to have an opinion on everything, or even on most things. Of course, I think some ideas ought to be defended in the public square, but others might disagree with my list.

I wouldn't be surprised if the overall number of essential ideas worth defending isn't as large as most people think. We're often riding our own hobby horses and don't always stop to realize, we're not the center of the universe.

So it's worthwhile to stop and decide what's essential. Is every disagreement worth a response? Is it worth squabbling over? What is worth defending – or disagreeing with?

Deciding this in advance may help minimize unnecessary conflict.

Principle (4): Too much agreement *isn't* a "good thing."

Also obvious if you give it a little thought. There's a saying: *if two people agree on everything, only one of them is thinking*.

Again in light of (1), given the likely differences between our backgrounds, experiences, and what has come to comprise *our* world, two thinking people may approach the same issue, look at what are arguably the same facts, but reach quite different conclusions about them.

Others disagreeing with us shouldn't surprise us. Treat it as a sign that *thinking* is going on – yours and the other person's – reflecting differences in experience.

In this light, I think we should do more to *solicit* disagreement. It's a test for *our* ideas, which reflect *our* experience. When others disagree with us, it might be to point out something wrong with *our* thinking, or conclusion, because of what was outside *our* world. We learn, and we get better.

So be on guard for too much *agreement*. If everyone is simply following the leader, you don't have a knowledge community, you have a cult. And if everyone agrees with everyone else, it might be a sign that "everyone" has been brainwashed or hypnotized by a few choice phrases.

Bland agreement and blind conformity are not desirable.

Principle (5): Find points or areas of agreement and build on them.

If someone disagrees with you and you've listened and heard them out, you might hear something that will enable you and the person to find some common ground. You will build rapport even if your initial disagreement isn't resolved. Rapport is always better than enmity.

One of the two folks I mentioned above is a retired professional musician who has played in orchestras. I found this out because despite his disagreements with me, I was able to do a little creative probing. I learned he was in a nursing facility, and since I knew such facilities from helping my aging parents in declining health (now long deceased), I could express sincere interest in his condition.

The music came next. Since I've been an avid listener with an avocational interest in the history of music my whole life, that gave us something else to discuss and share information. He shared details of his professional life as well as some of his knowledge about the history of music and conducting. None of this has anything to do with our political disagreements, but they built the rapport I was after.

We had areas about which we could agree: classical composers, opera, etc., are valuable and lasting contributions to Western civilization.

The other person I've dialogued with realized from the start that we want the same thing: a more peaceful world in which we can all use our superpowers. His description of this draws on Maslow's well-known hierarchy with self-actualization at its top.

We disagree on how to get there from where we are now, and on our basic worldviews.

The point is, finding areas of agreement, or topics about which you can exchange neutral information, keeps the doors of dialogue open.

The important thing is to always see past disagreement and see the *humanity* of the other.

Then we might each be less inclined to suspect the worst of the disagreeing other, or consider him stupid or uninformed. If someone disagrees with you, he/she isn't necessarily stupid. Nor is he/she evil. He or she is just *different*. But not *completely* different, as can be seen from a little discovery. After such, you're positioned to begin constructive engagement where you disagree.

Principle (6): Don't confuse disagreement with a personal attack, or with hate.

Because someone disagrees with you doesn't mean he/she is attacking you personally, or that he/she "hates" you.

Both conservatives and liberals need to heed this, since both make this mistake. I tend to think those on the left make it more than conservatives, but obviously they will disagree and that's fine.

Again, this is almost instinctive, because when someone says something we disagree with – especially about something we've decided is essential – we want to fire back.

And if someone disagrees with you, it's like they're challenging your ego.

Not controlling the emotions that arise is nearly always bad news.

In logic, arguing *ad hominem* is considered fallacious. That's to attack a person instead of trying to evaluate their conclusion or their reasoning.

Unfortunately, *ad hominems* are often effective! I think that's why they're so common!

A closely related mistake is to misrepresent someone's position to make it easier to attack (logicians call this a *strawman*). Usually, the misrepresentation oversimplifies. Example: when Archbishop Wilberforce supposedly asked Thomas Henry Huxley whether it was on his mother's or his father's side that he claimed descent from an ape. This, of course, improperly caricatures Darwin's theory.

On the other hand: not everyone skeptical of Darwinism or its more recent descendants is a "religious fanatic" who thinks the world was created in six, literal 24-hour days, although this, too, is a common caricature.

A problem with *all* such gestures is that, being fundamentally emotional themselves, they tend to enflame the emotions of their target. Making matters worse is the threat to one's worldview and one's sense of *place* in the world. The possibility of constructive disagreement goes out the window.

The path to constructive disagreement is to control our emotions instead of letting them control us. *Anger* is particularly destructive. There are online courses on how to handle anger. Seneca, another Stoic philosopher, penned the essential essay *On Anger* where he shares his strategies which, given the environment he had to work in (counsel to the psychopathic Nero), might be worth consulting. I don't think many of us today have to worry about that kind of an environment even if we have tough, critical bosses.

Principle (7). Ask for more information.

Three simple words often work like magic. At least, they work for me:

"*Tell me more.*"

You've said something and the other person takes issue with it. To ask for more information is to validate them as a person without necessarily validating their opinion (I hope everyone here gets the difference).

My guess is, they'll be *happy* to share their further thoughts and feelings, because you've just made them feel important. You've communicated that their opinion *matters*!

You haven't even said you'll change your stance, but who knows? Again, given that none of us is omniscient, maybe in whatever ensues, something will come to light that will have you reevaluating where you stand.

Don't be so attached to your own opinion that you can't do this!

Especially if by changing it, you get smarter and better!

The more basic principle here is that everyone wants to feel like they've been listened to, heard, understood. If you've made someone feel important despite their not seeing eye-to-eye with you, they're a bit more likely to listen and hear what you have to say, so there's reciprocity here.

And as the conversation continues, you *both* have an opportunity to grow.

Principle (8). Prioritize the association or relationship above "being right."

We have enough under our belts to grasp the need to separate the person from what he/she just said (or emailed). To not make this separation is to devalue them.

Is "being right" more important than rapport, or a work relationship, or God help us, a marriage?

How important are these? Well, someone might persist in disagreeing, continuing to bring a subject up long after

you've tried to make peace over the matter. I've had this happen to me a couple of times, in which someone who made a show of their atheism or agnosticism tried to turn *every conversation* into an argument over religion until I was motivated to ask what they were so afraid of.

If this happens, you have a choice. If the other person can't agree to disagree so you can move on, or the disagreement becomes increasingly acrimonious, it might be time to walk away. Not every association or friendship is salvageable if two people just aren't "wired" the same.

If it's the other person who walks away, let them go. Clearly the issue was more important than the friendship, and that was outside your control. Move on. Life's too short.

Let's come full circle.

In the last analysis, what do we have?

Opinions.

That's all.

That's not to say all opinions are created equal or are equally valid. That's not it at all. There's another saying: we're entitled to our own opinions but not to our own facts.

This is true.

But the world is a complex place, and if you state your opinion and call it "fact based," sooner or later someone will disagree over what the facts are, or possibly over which facts are relevant.

I'll say it again: we've all walked different paths through this world, of which our actual personal experience, in comparison to what's out there, is microscopic.

Different things end up on different people's personal radar.

Seen in this light, maybe it’s surprising that we agree as often as we do!

Disagreements: they happen. I’ve tried to put forth a few principles that might help us better navigate them, in the hope that taking them seriously might lead to a somewhat less divided world even as disagreements continue. Final cliché: we can disagree without being disagreeable.

E-Mail Steven Yates: freeyourmindinsc@yahoo.com

Have you been victimized by phishing? Find out how to avoid such scams on Steven Yates’s Substack publication Navigating the New Normal. Consider subscribing to receive content not available here.

Steven Yates is a (recovering) ex-academic with a PhD in Philosophy. He taught for more than 15 years total at several universities in the Southeastern U.S. He authored three books, more than 20 articles, numerous book reviews, and review essays in academic journals and anthologies. Refused tenure and unable to obtain full-time academic employment (and with an increasing number of very fundamental philosophical essays refused publication in journals), he turned to alternative platforms and heretical notions, including about academia itself.

In 2012 he moved to Chile. He married a Chilean national in 2014. Among his discoveries in South America: the problems of the U.S. are problems everywhere, because human nature is the same everywhere. The problems are problems of Western civilization as a whole.

As to whether he’ll *stay* in Chile … stay tuned!

He has a Patreon.com page. Donate here and become a Patron if

you benefit from his work and believe it merits being sustained financially.

Steven Yates's book *Four Cardinal Errors: Reasons for the Decline of the American Republic* (2011) can be ordered here.

His philosophical work *What Should Philosophy Do? A Theory* (2021) can be obtained here or here.

His paranormal horror novel *The Shadow Over Sarnath* (2023) can be gotten here.

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