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Deep Disagreements and Political Polarization

Jeroen de Ridder

1. Introduction: Happy Thoughts about Disagreement

Is disagreement good news? Yes, say a choir of voices in the sciences and humanities.[1] Disagreement presents opportunities for epistemic self-improvement. It presents us with opportunities to weed out false beliefs, to acquire true beliefs, to better proportion our beliefs to the evidence, and to recalibrate the reasons we have for our beliefs. Under certain conditions, diverse groups are better at solving problems and reaching true beliefs than even the most expert individuals (Hong and Page's (2004) "diversity trumps ability" theorem).

For the context of liberal democratic politics, in particular, some philosophers have sung the praises of disagreement as well.[2] In fostering freedom of speech and inquiry, inclusiveness, equality, and reasonable deliberation, liberal democracy is supposed to be particularly good at harnessing the epistemic power of disagreement among citizens.

There are dissonants, however. The idea that deliberation among disagreeing citizens leads to epistemically superior decisionmaking—or at least guards against false or unjustified outcomes—has been criticized by a host of empirical work in psychology and political science.[3] It is also unclear that other means of harvesting the "wisdom of crowds," such as belief aggregation, Condorcet's jury theorem, or the "diversity trumps ability" theorem, have much application in political reality.[4]

In this chapter, I want to add a distinctly epistemological objection to the epistemic ideal of liberal democracy. It stems from the occurrence of *deep disagreements* in liberal democracies. Such disagreements undermine a crucial presupposition of epistemic democracy, to wit the availability of common ground for reasonable debate and deliberation. Moreover, they lead citizens to see each other as less than fully

[1] Surowiecki 2004; Hong and Page 2004; Sunstein 2006; Christensen 2007; Page 2007; Landemore and Elster 2012.

[2] Popper 1945; Mill 1977; Cohen 1986; Habermas 1990; Anderson 2006; Estlund 2008; Ober 2010; Ahlstrom-Vij 2012; Landemore 2013, 2017; Goodin and Spiekermann 2018.

[3] See Mendelberg 2002; Ryfe 2005; Achen and Bartels 2016 for elaborate reviews. Brennan 2016, ch. 3 gives a particularly pessimistic reading of the findings. I will review some relevant literature in Section 4 below.

[4] Brennan 2014; Houlou-Garcia 2017; Ahlstrom-Vij 2019.

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rational, as morally subpar, or worse. This, in turn, feeds into polarization, which makes reasonable debate harder still.

This objection is not supposed to be independent of the empirical worries mentioned above. In fact, some of the empirical findings readily lend themselves to an interpretation along epistemological lines and my purpose is to bring this to the fore. In doing so, I hope to draw attention to the unnoticed normative-epistemological dimensions of polarization. This can help us understand the empirical findings better and can contribute to thinking about solutions.

The plan is as follows. Section 2 explains what deep disagreements are. Section 3 outlines conceptual relations between deep disagreement and our evaluation of each other's rationality and moral standing. This shows how deep disagreements threaten the epistemic benefits of democracy. In Section 4, I connect deep disagreement with empirical literature from psychology and political science and argue that deep disagreements are implicated in political polarization. Deep disagreement is not just a theoretical problem, but creates real trouble in society. Section 5 addresses some worries and adds further texture and qualifications to my proposed account of the relation between deep disagreement and polarization. Section 6 wraps things up.

2. Disagreement: Ordinary and Deep

People disagree on lots of things: from the mundane and insignificant to the profound and life-changing. Many of these disagreements are what I will call *ordinary*. They concern things like everyone's share of a restaurant check, whether your friend was at last week's meeting or not, or what the most effective measure is to do something about your department's deficit.

Ordinary disagreements have a number of characteristics. First of all, they are *localized*. Parties disagree about a single proposition or a few closely related ones, but they agree on lots of issues surrounding the disputed question.

Second, they tend to be *rationally resolvable*. Typically, there are mutually agreed upon courses of action the parties can undertake to settle who is right: redo the calculations, check the minutes of the meeting, investigate further, etc. Doing so typically leads to a resolution that is acceptable to both parties. This is not to say that ordinary disagreements are always easily resolvable. Resolutions can be cumbersome and time-consuming, for instance when a complex scientific issue is at stake. But even in such cases, there is a reasonable expectation that the disagreement will be rationally resolved sooner or later.

Third, ordinary disagreements take place within a *shared normative framework*. Both parties agree on core moral or political values, on what counts as evidence or as a good argument, how evidence ought to be weighed or arguments evaluated, etc. This is why they both recognize and accept that checking calculations or consulting minutes is the way forward. The methods for resolving their dispute are uncontroversial.

Sometimes, however, disagreements are *deep*. Deep disagreements are typically long-standing, intractable, and entrenched. Examples include traditional political divides between left and right, progressive and conservative, or secular and liberal.

Often, these divides play out around more specific issues: the role of government, economic inequality, taxation, abortion, physician-assisted suicide, immigration, racism, etc. Different schools in scientific disciplines can also exemplify deep disagreements: classical, Marxian, Keynesian economics; methodological individualism versus holism in social science; empiricism versus rationalism in philosophy. John Rawls (1996) famously assumed that reasonable pluralism and the deep disagreements accompanying it are a fact of life in liberal societies.

As a first approximation, deep disagreements are disagreements that lack the three characteristics of ordinary disagreements listed above. First, they are not just local, but involve clusters of related issues. People who disagree about immigration policies tend to also disagree on the causes and effects of racism, on welfare programs, and economic inequality. Second, deep disagreements are very difficult if not impossible to resolve, because the parties involved do not agree on how to resolve them. If they need to cooperate anyway, they might "agree to disagree" and work out a practical compromise without conciliating on the substance of their disagreement. Third, the reason for this is that parties do not share a common normative framework. They have different underlying views and commitments about what good evidence is, how different sources ought to be weighed, who the experts are, etc. As a result, they cannot agree on how to resolve their dispute: one party might take the issue to be clearly settled by, say, the available scientific evidence, whereas the other might question the force of this evidence, pointing to counterevidence provided by other scientists or (perceived or genuine) experts.

Some deep disagreements involve conflicting underlying *epistemic* norms and principles, but deep disagreements—especially in politics and morality—can also involve conflicting underlying *moral* commitments.[5] Disagreeing parties might hold different fundamental moral values or they might rank the same values differently. Religious believers will value obedience to a deity, while this makes no sense to nonbelievers. Part of what is at stake between libertarians and communitarians is that they give different weight to the value of individual freedom. Similarly, the disagreement between the pro-choice and the pro-life positions may involve a different view on the value of human life.[6]

To summarize this in a succinct formulation, we can characterize deep disagreements as follows:

> (DD) Deep disagreements are those disagreements in which parties disagree about (or are committed to disagreeing about) relatively fundamental epistemic or moral values and principles even after full disclosure.

[5] Depending on one's views about the nature of morality, one might worry that moral disagreements are too different from factual disagreements to be treated in the same way. I will address this concern briefly in the following discussion by indicating what assumptions are involved in broadening the characterization of deep disagreement in this way.

[6] To be clear, I'm not suggesting that this is all that is at stake in these disputes. Fundamental political and moral disputes typically also involve significant factual disagreement about, say, human psychology, the nature of personhood, etc. (cf. Fogelin, 1985).

A few clarifications are in order. Deep disagreements can concern factual issues, but must always also involve relatively fundamental epistemic or moral normative principles. This is why DD contains the parenthetical clause. A physician and an antivaxxer might disagree about the factual question whether vaccines can cause autism, but their disagreement is deep because they also disagree about underlying epistemic principles concerning the weight of different sources of evidence.[7]

The depth of disagreements is a gradual phenomenon on DD. Epistemic and moral norms and principles come in different levels of abstractness and generality. Some principles are fundamental and broad: under relevantly normal conditions, sense perception is reliable; pain is bad. Others are derived and specific: randomized clinical trials give stronger evidence than explorative studies with small sample size; don't break promises. This means that not all disagreements which involve disagreements about underlying epistemic or normative principles are deep—or at least that they are not all equally deep. When parties disagree about which specific experts to trust, they disagree about an epistemic principle or an application thereof. But as long as they agree about more basic principles stipulating the qualities of genuinely trustworthy experts, they may still be able to resolve their dispute relatively easily by talking through the correct way of applying these more basic principles to the situation at hand. Deep disagreements thus come in degrees. They are *deeper* to the extent that they involve more fundamental normative commitments. This also means that there will be borderline cases between ordinary and deep disagreements. The deepest disagreements are those in which one party outright rejects a fundamental epistemic or moral principle that the other party accepts.

The epistemological literature on disagreement has given prominence to *peer* disagreement: situations in which the two disagreeing parties are roughly equal in terms of cognitive virtues, freedom from distorting influences, and familiarity with the relevant evidence.[8] The reason DD does not include peerhood as a condition is that the very nature of deep disagreements makes it difficult to say whether or not disputants are epistemic peers. In the absence of a shared normative framework of underlying epistemic or moral principles, each party will easily—and with some justification, at least by their own lights—think the other less cognitively virtuous, fundamentally misguided, or badly informed. Deep disagreements can even prevent one party from recognizing the other as an epistemic superior when this is in fact the case according to objectively correct epistemic or moral standards. A creationist might write off an evolutionary biologist and (wrongly) disregard her opinions altogether. A racist might lend no credence to empirical findings establishing unequal treatment of people of color, because he takes most social scientists to be biased. This raises hard questions: If parties in a deep disagreement have a hard time judging each other's epistemic credentials, are they rationally off the hook in ignoring each other's opinions? Are deep disagreements inevitably deadlocks where neither

[7] Another way of describing the situation would be to say that the factual disagreement as such is not deep, but the one about the underlying epistemic principles is. I have no serious objections to this, except that it strikes me as artificial to divide what appears to be one disagreement into two separate ones.

[8] The literature has grown vast, but some landmark contributions include Kelly (2005), Feldman (2006), Christensen (2007), Feldman and Warfield (2010), and Christensen and Lackey (2013).

party is in a position to learn from the other? I will not attempt to address these questions here.[9] My concern is different: I want to look at how deep disagreements are implicated in polarization in society.

DD stipulates that the disagreement must remain even after full disclosure. This is to prevent those disagreements from counting as deep in which one party has simply never considered some epistemic or moral principles held by the other party, but, were she to do so, would readily accept them. Someone who was raised a Kantian and has never heard of utilitarianism might immediately be converted once she learns of it. Someone with a poor grasp of scientific methods might readily come to accept scientific expertise once she acquires a better understanding of science.

Whether a given disagreement is deep depends not just on the disputed issue, but on the underlying normative commitments of the disagreeing parties. Not any disagreement about, say, open borders is automatically deep, although it certainly can be. Disputants may well share a moral and epistemic framework, but have conflicting beliefs about the economic effects of immigration, how easily immigrants blend into a new culture, crime rates among immigrants and non-immigrants, etc. For others, a dispute about the same issue can be deep because it arises from different underlying moral principles about the importance of nation-states, national cultures, or even ethnic purity. Another consequence is that disagreements may become more or less deep over time as a result of disputants changing their moral or epistemic commitments.

My characterization of deep disagreements differs from similar proposals by Michael Lynch (2010, and Chapter 10 this volume) and Klemens Kappel (2012, 2018).[10] Both limit their account to disagreements involving fundamental *epistemic* principles, whereas I have included disagreements about relatively fundamental *moral* principles. My reason for doing so is that many real-life deep disagreements do not involve (only) factual issues but (also) moral values and principles. Broadening the characterization of deep disagreements in this way does introduce complications, since whether or not disagreements about normative moral principles can be treated in the same way as disagreements about normative epistemic principles depends partly on meta-ethics. For error-theoretical, relativist, or non-cognitivist views in meta-ethics, this is not the case because moral principles are not objectively true or false, or not even the sort of thing that can be true or false, or correct or incorrect.[11] For simplicity's sake, I will assume that there are objective normative facts in both the moral and epistemic domain.[12]

Another difference with Lynch and Kappel is that both of them narrow the class of deep disagreements to those involving *fundamental* epistemic principles, which they understand as epistemic principles that can only be defended by epistemically

[9] See Lynch (2010), Kappel (2012, 2018), Ranalli (2018a) for discussion and proposed answers.

[10] It also differs from the Wittgensteinian theory of deep disagreements, according to which deep disagreements involve commitments to different hinge propositions. For a comparison of these views, see Ranalli (2018b).

[11] Unless one subscribes to fully general versions of these views and also takes them to apply to the epistemic domain. These views are relatively rare in mainstream analytic epistemology, however.

[12] It remains to be seen whether what I say below about deep disagreement and polarization holds without this assumption, but investigating this in detail would take us too far afield.

circular arguments.[13] I agree that disagreements involving such principles are deep, but this characterization rules out many realistic cases of seemingly deep disagreements. Nobody (save the imaginary radical skeptic) really rejects *fundamental* principles specifying our justified reliance on basic sources of knowledge such as sense perception, memory, induction, deduction, testimony, etc. Real-life deep disagreements concern derived but still relatively fundamental epistemic principles. Take the example of the creationist and the evolutionary theorist, which both Lynch and Kappel use to illustrate deep disagreement. This does not involve wholesale acceptance or rejection of sense perception, inductive reasoning, or testimony, but derived principles about sense perception and reasoning that are applied to certain topics, to textual interpretation of historical sources, and to testimony (or the relative weights of these principles). The exclusive focus on fundamental epistemic principles in Lynch's and Kappel's proposals detracts from an important issue. Relatively fundamental derived epistemic or moral principles sometimes *function as* fundamental for individuals, in the sense that they are unwilling to give them up, yet cannot defend them by independent reasons. This need not be a matter of irrational stubbornness. Applying fundamental principles to the real world often involves judgment calls and sometimes there may be more than one way of making these calls reasonably.

3. Epistemic and Moral Frameworks

Epistemic rationality (or reasonableness) is a normative notion with positive valence. Saying that someone's belief is epistemically rational, is to say that this belief is good, acceptable, responsible, or legitimate; that it conforms to standards of epistemic goodness for beliefs.[14] In order to avoid having to delve into the extensive literature on epistemic rationality, I will rely on an abstract characterization of the notion, which should be widely acceptable regardless of people's more specific views.

Following Alvin Goldman (2010), we can think of epistemic rationality as characterizable by a set of norms and principles about how to think; about how to form, maintain, or abandon beliefs.[15] Such norms link an agent's evidential situation and broader cognitive position and context to what doxastic attitudes are epistemically appropriate for her. For instance, for a subject in typical circumstances, hearing the sound of an approaching car makes it appropriate for her to believe a car is approaching. For a radiologist with relevant experience and background knowledge to see certain patterns in a patient's X-ray photograph makes it appropriate to draw conclusions about the patient's condition. We implicitly rely on such norms when we

[13] Cf. Alston (1993) for discussion of the inevitable epistemic circularity of arguments defending sense perception and other basic sources of knowledge.

[14] As Richard Feldman (2006, p. 221) points out, "reasonable" is sometimes used in a minimal sense as a synonym for "not crazy." On this use, saying that someone is reasonable just means that she is not doing very badly from an epistemic point of view. The notion of rationality that I am interested in here is more demanding. Being rational is not just steering clear of the worst; it requires doing well.

[15] Depending on one's views about the nature of rationality, these norms might be norms that express or codify what epistemic justification, epistemic responsibility, proper cognitive functioning, etc. amounts to.

evaluate our own or someone else's cognitive conduct. We can call a complete set of such norms and principles an *epistemic framework*, or *e-framework* for short.[16]

We can say something analogous about morality. To say that someone behaves morally is to pay her a compliment; it is to say that she is doing well from the moral point of view. Morality can also be thought of as describable by a system of norms and principles linking the morally relevant features of situations and agents to what the appropriate (morally permissible, right) actions are for the agent.[17] Together, these norms and principles form a *moral framework*, or *m-framework*. This characterization, too, is intentionally neutral between different substantive moral views and theories.

A question for both the epistemic and moral domain is whether there is one objectively correct framework. For my purposes, however, it is enough to observe that people in fact adhere to different e/m-frameworks and that they can be rational in doing so. Given people's upbringing, education, and social environment, it makes perfect sense that different people will trust different experts, attach different weight to scientific evidence, or trust common sense to differing degrees; and that they hold different basic moral values, rank them differently, derive different moral norms from them, or apply norms in different ways. Even if some of these frameworks are in fact objectively wrong, people do employ them and can be fully rational in doing so.[18]

There is a straightforward connection between deep disagreements and e/m-frameworks. As DD stipulated, deep disagreements involve disagreement about relatively basic epistemic or moral values and principles. In other words, they involve disagreements about (parts of) e-frameworks or m-frameworks. When parties employ frameworks that differ in relatively basic principles and hold conflicting beliefs as a result, their disagreement will be deep. If you rely on systematic scientific evidence about the safety of vaccination and I trust anecdotal evidence from my friends and put more stock in natural medicine in general, our disagreement is deep, because our factual disagreement about the safety of vaccines is the results of our reliance on different relatively basic epistemic principles, that is, our reliance on different e-frameworks.

People with different e/m-frameworks do not necessarily disagree about everything, nor will every disagreement between them be deep. It all depends on how their frameworks bear on the issue at hand. Climate change sceptics and IPCC-members might agree on basic statistical data about temperatures, even though they

[16] This characterization intentionally leaves a lot unspecified so as to accommodate different views of rationality: whether or not rationality is permissive, whether or not it can be specified through a formal framework such as Bayesianism, whether (and how) contextual factors or practical stakes make a difference to what is rational, etc.

[17] One might worry that this is false for virtue ethics and particularism, since both of these views hold that morality cannot be captured in universal and context-independent norms and principles. In reply, note that we can think of moral norms and principles as being very narrow in scope, applying only to one or a few particular circumstances, and dependent on lots of contextual particularities.

[18] See Goldman (2010) for an argument to this effect about e-frameworks. His argument is easily adaptable to apply to m-frameworks, too. John Rawls offers a similar explanation for pluralism, which appeals to the "burdens of judgement," i.e., the intractable difficulties that even reasonable people of good will face in answering the deepest questions about how to live (Rawls, 1996, pp. 54–8).

disagree deeply on the explanation of the data. This is because different e/m-frameworks typically have considerable overlap. Where a particular belief relies only on principles that are common to different frameworks, we should not expect disagreement, or only ordinary, easily resolvable disagreement.

Because deep disagreements involve differing e/m-frameworks, rationally resolving them is difficult or impossible. When disputants rely on different epistemic or moral principles in giving reasons for their beliefs, they will have trouble recognizing each other's reasons as rational contributions to the debate. When a young earth creationist appeals the authority of the bible or principles of biblical exegesis in arguing for her belief about the age of the earth, this will carry no weight whatsoever for the scientifically minded geologist. The latter will not even see the former's argument as a rationally acceptable contribution to the discussion. Similarly, the pro-lifer's insistence on the sanctity of the life of an early-stage fetus might strike the pro-choicer as a clear misapplication of a moral value.

In so far as deep disagreements involve incompatible derived e/m-principles, parties can try to resolve their disagreement rationally by appealing to more fundamental principles. But when the disagreement is entrenched and involves relatively fundamental e/m-principles, this is likely to fail. Disputants will be as committed to what they take to be correctly derived principles as they are to fundamental principles themselves. That is to say, they will treat relatively fundamental e/m-principles as just as fixed and resistant to rational revision as absolutely fundamental ones. When a geologist proposes that the fundamental principle of trust in testimony leads to a derived principle saying that scientific experts ought to be trusted more than ancient scriptures, the creationist will disagree with that specification and maintain that divinely inspired infallible biblical reports take precedence.

Let us consider the effect of deep disagreements on how disagreeing parties evaluate each other. Obviously, people who disagree see each other as mistaken. So do people who disagree deeply. However, the connection between deep disagreement and e/m-frameworks adds a further layer to how the disputants evaluate each other. Not only will they see each other as having made a mistake about an issue, they will also see each other's *way of thinking* or *reasoning* about the issue as mistaken. They will consider each other as less than fully rational or moral. Depending on factors such as how different their e/m-frameworks are, how important or central to their identity they take their non-shared e/m-principles to be, and how confident they are about their own e/m-framework, this mutual evaluation can go from less than fully rational to irrational to stupid, and from morally subpar to immoral to downright evil.

The upshot is that deep disagreements challenge any optimistic take on the effects of disagreement. The broadly Millian ideal in which disagreement leads to productive intellectual engagement, correction of error, and mutual learning presupposes that disagreeing parties recognize each other's utterances as reasonable, valid contributions to the debate. This may be fine for ordinary disagreement, but deep disagreements undermine this presupposition. When parties don't share an e/m-framework, they will fail to recognize some of each other's reasons as epistemically reasonable or morally acceptable ones. Depending on how important they deem their non-shared e/m-principles and how confident they are about their own frameworks, they will come to see each other as irrational, immoral, or even stupid

or evil. This, in turn, will make them even less inclined to take each other seriously and learn from each other. Rather than produce mutual learning, then, deep disagreements can easily lead to mutual rejection and animosity.

4. Polarization

My argument about the trouble with deep disagreement so far has been a priori. Investigating the nature of deep disagreements showed that they pose an obstacle to reaping the benefits of disagreement. In this section, however, I want to make the case that deep disagreement is implicated in real troubles in society by connecting what I have said so far with empirical literature from psychology and political science on political polarization. For ease of exposition, I will first sketch a simplified picture of how deep disagreement can contribute to different kinds of polarization. In Section 5, I will qualify this picture and explain more carefully how it relates to the empirical findings.

As Robert Talisse's Chapter 11 in this volume makes clear, there are different kinds of polarization. Here, I want to draw a further distinction between what I will call *cognitive polarization* and *practical polarization*. The former has to do with how individuals *think* about each other, the latter with how they *treat* each other. The more cognitively polarized people are, the less they think of each other's rationality, intelligence, moral decency, trustworthiness, etc. The more practically polarized they are, the worse they tend to treat each other.[19] As people act on the basis of their beliefs, these two forms of polarization are related.

Consider the relation between deep disagreement and cognitive polarization first. People in a deep disagreement will easily come to see each other as irrational, immoral, or worse. Naturally, you don't give much weight to the opinions of someone you regard as such. You will discredit their opinions or, in the case of protracted disagreement, decide it is not worth listening to them at all anymore. Not only is this a natural response; it is arguably an epistemically justifiable and rational response, too.[20] Just as we take ourselves to have excellent reason for not taking horoscopes seriously, we will take ourselves to have good reasons to ignore those with whom we disagree deeply. Moreover, this effect spreads out. Deep disagreements tend to be clustered because e/m-principles typically affect belief formation on a number of more or less related issues. As a result, we will disregard our opponents' opinions on not just a single issue, but a cluster of issues.

This situation sets us up for a host of well-documented psychological effects. This first is *myside bias* (or *confirmation bias*, cf. Nickerson (1998) and Baron (2008, pp. 203ff) for details and references). This stands for a set of tendencies that humans

[19] Note that my distinction cross-cuts Talisse's distinction between political polarization and belief polarization to some extent: my cognitive polarization involves both what he calls affective political polarization and belief polarization, whereas he doesn't talk explicitly about practical polarization.

[20] See Kelly (2008), Rini (2017), and Fantl (2018) for arguments to the effect that such "partisan epistemology" can be justified and rational. Whether a partisan response is justified and rational will depend on other factors, such as the number and kinds of people with whom you agree and disagree; see Lackey (2013) for discussion.

have when they think about issues and process evidence. People tend to pay more attention to evidence that confirms what they already think, even in cases where their beliefs have very little support to begin with. They treat new evidence asymmetrically: evidence that sits well with their prior beliefs is accepted uncritically, whereas disconfirming evidence is subjected to more critical scrutiny. In so far as available evidence is ambiguous or open-ended, people interpret it in such a way that it confirms, rather than calls into question, their prior beliefs. They also actively look for evidence that confirms what they already believe and avoid disconfirming evidence. These tendencies are even stronger when the issue at stake is emotionally charged: something that people feel strongly about. Needless to say, this often happens with moral or political issues, which tend to form part of people's social identities.

An experiment by Dan Kahan and collaborators illustrates these tendencies very strikingly (Kahan et al., 2017). People were presented with numbers about the effectiveness of a skin cream for treating a rash. Arriving at a correct answer about the cream's effectiveness required some mathematical ability: the required computations were really a version of an exercise often used in social science to test people's aptitude for slow, reflective (system 2) thinking. Predictably, people who were better at math tended to get the right answer more often. So far so good. Next, however, people were presented with a politicized version of what was mathematically the same problem. The numbers were now presented as being about whether gun control laws are effective in decreasing crime. Startlingly, people's general math aptitude was no longer the best predictor of whether they would get the answer right. Instead, it was people's political identity that predicted best whether they would solve the puzzle correctly. Liberals tended to solve the problem correctly when the numbers showed gun laws were effective and did not when they showed the opposite. Conservatives' performance was the mirror image: they did well when the numbers supported their prior beliefs and badly when they did not. Most disturbingly, perhaps, the better people were at math, the worse they did when the numbers did not support their prior convictions. Apparently, people "successfully" use their sophisticated reasoning skills to wriggle their way out of evidence that disconfirms their political views. Similar results were found in other experiments (Kahan et al., 2011; Kahan, 2013).

The connection with deep disagreement is straightforward. If people evaluate those with whom they disagree deeply as irrational or immoral, this plays directly into myside bias. It is already tempting to discard information that does not fit with your prior belief anyway, let alone if it comes from sources you take to be irrational or immoral.

Things become even worse when group dynamics are brought into the picture. As Robert Talisse's chapter details, it is a widely confirmed finding in social psychology that various sorts of groups tend to polarize.[21] Groups of likeminded people move towards more extreme versions of their views, to higher degrees of conviction, and to greater confidence in their overall perspective on the issues. This happens not only

[21] Sunstein (2017, ch. 3) provides an even more elaborate treatment of the phenomenon with reference to the psychology literature.

when they deliberate and process new evidence, but already when they merely talk about old evidence. If Talisse's proposed account of the mechanisms driving polarization is right, it can even happen in the absence of any talk or deliberation. It is enough if group members' sense of being right is corroborated one way or another through explicit or implicit signals from the physical or social environment.

The connection between group polarization and deep disagreement is again fairly straightforward. When we disagree deeply with others, we think their e/m-framework is misguided and thus we easily see them as less than fully rational or not morally upstanding. As a result, we pay less attention to their views. Since this effect is asymmetrical—we do not downgrade the opinions of those who agree with us and share our e/m-frameworks—we are left with more confirmation for our beliefs and our e/m-framework.[22] In other words, we move to a situation where the textbook conditions for group polarization are satisfied. As a result, your prior beliefs are bolstered, you might accept more extreme versions of your beliefs, and your confidence in your own framework increases. This, in turn, makes it seem even more justifiable to write off the opinions of others who do not share your framework and to see them as irrational or immoral, leaving you with even more self-corroboration. Vicious circle completed.

Let us turn to *practical polarization* next. An optimist might still feel things are not so bad. As long as people only *think* poorly of each other, but continue to *treat* each other well, no real harm is done. But this would be rather remarkable. Even though thinking less of our fellow human beings does not necessarily lead to treating them worse, it is very easy to treat "*those* people" a bit worse, at least in some respects and some of the time.

This is familiar enough from everyday experience. We would rather not invite that uncle who makes inappropriate racist jokes to our birthday party. If at all possible, we avoid giving the floor to the department's retired Wittgensteinian who inevitably scorns speakers for failing to see that they were speaking about a pseudo-problem. Isn't it fun to laugh at those rednecks with their conspiracy beliefs or, in Europe, small-town nationalistic populists with their narrow-minded beliefs about immigrants, traditional values, or the EU? And vice versa, Republicans were looking forward to "making liberals cry again" in 2020.

Besides anecdotal evidence, there is scientific research which establishes connections between thinking poorly of each other's epistemic or moral standing and treating each other worse.[23] I will limit myself to the literature on intergroup bias and conflict here (Hewstone et al., 2002). As we saw above, cognitive polarization divides people into "us" and "them" and increases contrasts between the two. This then leads to stereotyping or caricaturing outgroup members, ingroup favoritism, prejudice against the outgroup, and discrimination or other forms of unfair and poor treatment of outgroup members, especially—but not exclusively—in situations

[22] This is not to say there cannot be sustained and polarization-inducing disagreement among people with the same e/m-framework. But this is less likely than disagreement with people who have different e/m-frameworks and, importantly, there is no similarly strong basis for discarding those with whom you disagree as irrational or immoral.

[23] Section 2 of Talisse's Chapter 11 gives further references.

where groups perceive each other (correctly or incorrectly) as being in competition for goals or limited resources.[24] Various mechanisms have been proposed for when, why, and how exactly all this happens, but for my purposes it is enough that intergroup bias breeds adversarial intergroup behavior.

A widely-cited study by Shanto Iyengar and Sean Westwood (2015) provides striking evidence in a politically polarized context. In the experiment, over 1000 participants with different self-ascribed political identities (Democrat, Lean Democrat, Independent, Lean Republican, or Republican) were asked to evaluate résumés of recent male high-school graduates with an eye to awarding a $30,000 scholarship for apolitical purposes. They created different versions of the résumés which varied on two variables: candidates' academic achievement, expressed by their GPA (either 3.5 or 4.0), and their political identity, signaled by extracurricular activities (president of either the Young Republicans or the Young Democrats).

The results clearly show ingroup favoritism at work. Democrats ended up selecting Democratic candidates in about 80 per cent of the cases; Republicans selected the Republican candidate in about 70 per cent of the cases. But most tellingly, academic achievement mattered less than co-partisanship. While, arguably, GPA should be the crucial determinant in awarding a scholarship, it turned out that political identity mattered more. Even when the Republican candidate had a higher GPA than the Democrat, the probability of a Democrat selecting the Republican candidate was only 0.3. When the Democratic candidate had a higher GPA, the odds of Republicans choosing the Democratic candidate were only 0.15.[25] The same study also showed that people tend to give less money to members of the opposing party in trust and dictator games.

Although the literature on intergroup conflict does not talk about deep disagreement explicitly, the connections are easy to spot. Deep disagreements tend to occur between groups and they lead people to see those with whom they disagree as irrational or immoral (or worse). This creates a sense of us versus them and this affects intergroup behavior. Deep disagreement, then, is not merely a conceptual-theoretical problem for a lofty philosophical ideal, but is implicated in actual social processes and conflicts.

There is an influential view in political science that fits very well with what we have found about polarization here. It is called *political realism* and Jason Brennan's Chapter 8 in this volume contains a good introduction to it. According to political realism, politics is chiefly about group alliances, political identities, and partisanship, rather than informed and thoughtful deliberation, preference-formation, and voting. Although the view is not without critics, it makes sense of a wealth of empirical evidence about voter ignorance, voter behavior, and political participation. As Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels write:

[24] See Hogg (2013) and Brown and Gaertner (2003) for overviews and pointers to the original studies.

[25] The study employed a similar design to test for racial bias and favoritism. The results were broadly similar, but *less pronounced* for race. This suggests that political identity forges stronger ties than racial identity. This was confirmed by a more recent transnational study on the relative strengths of political partisanship versus other social identities (Westwood et al., 2018).

> voters choose political parties, first and foremost, in order to align themselves with the appropriate coalition of social groups. Most citizens support a party not because they have carefully calculated that its policy positions are closest to their own, but rather because "their kind" of person belongs to that party.
>
> (Achen and Bartels, 2016, p. 307)

If politics is all about us versus them, polarization is to be expected. Commenting on the same large body of evidence that Achen and Bartels draw on, Ilya Somin likens voter behavior to that of sports fans:

> "political fans" derive enjoyment from rooting for their preferred parties, candidates, ideologies, and interest groups, while deriding the opposition. They may also derive satisfaction from having their preexisting views validated, and from a sense of affiliation with a group of like-minded people.
>
> (Somin, 2013, pp. 78–9)[26]

On this view, then, politically relevant deep disagreements are bound up with sociopolitical identities and partisanship, which in turn feed both cognitive and practical polarization.[27]

5. Qualifications and Clarifications

So far, I have presented the connections between deep disagreement and polarization as if they form a simple linear and mono-causal story. People disagree deeply, which leads them to see each other as irrational and/or immoral, which, in turn, causes cognitive and practical polarization. This is a simplification. Complex social phenomena such as political polarization do not have a single cause, but are always part of a nexus of influences and feedback loops. The basic picture sketched above must be qualified and complicated.

First, the relations between deep disagreement, cognitive polarization, and practical polarization go both ways and can be mutually reinforcing. We saw how cognitive polarization reinforces itself by making people more confident about their perspectives. This entrenches and deepens their disagreement. Practical polarization can also strengthen cognitive polarization. People tend to justify and rationalize their actions, so as to preserve a positive self-image. When we treat other people badly, we come up with reasons why this was justified. If we did not hire someone, she must have been unqualified or otherwise undeserving.

Second, deep disagreement is not the sole or even most important driver of polarization. Polarization is a complex social phenomenon and, as such, is affected and

[26] Jason Brennan even compares voters to hooligans:

Hooligans are the rabid sports fans of politics. . . . They have strong and largely fixed worldviews. . . . are overconfident in themselves and what they know. Their political opinions form part of their identity . . . They tend to despise people who disagree with them, holding that people with alternative worldviews are stupid, evil, selfish, or, at best, deeply misguided. (Brennan, 2016, p. 5)

[27] Mason (2018) and Klein (2020) also detail how contemporary American politics has become extremely polarized and identity-driven.

moderated by a variety of individual, social, and historical factors and processes. If deep disagreement were the key factor behind polarization, the increased polarization over the past decades should reflect a corresponding increase in the number or depth of disagreements. There is no clear evidence to support this. It is not as if people have found new topics to disagree deeply over or adopted more starkly different epistemic or moral principles.

Third, deep disagreement is neither sufficient nor necessary for polarization. As to the former, there are deep disagreements in science and the humanities, but we typically do not see anything like the degree of polarization there that we find around political divides. Philosophers are in deep disagreement about consequentialism and deontologism in ethics or about whether philosophy requires naturalized methodology, but they do not (typically) think less of each other or treat each other worse as a result. Only certain kinds of deep disagreements lead to polarization, such as those concerning emotionally charged issues that are central to people's personal or social identity. Deep disagreement is not necessary for polarization either. People with the same e/m-frameworks might still polarize, based on other factors that make up their social identities. Lifestyle preferences or allegiance to sports teams come to mind. Note that saying that deep disagreement is neither sufficient nor necessary for polarization is not to deny that deep disagreement is causally relevant to polarization. Rather, my proposal is that deep disagreement is one element of a complex whole of factors that together form an important (if perhaps not the only possible) cause of polarization.[28]

Fourth, some might take issue with the causal language I have been using. Robust support for causal claims, one might insist, can only come from empirical work that targets the connection between deep disagreement and polarization directly. Such work has not been done and I, as a philosopher, am not qualified to do it. In response, I would say my causal claims nonetheless have considerable plausibility, because much of the empirical work on polarization that has been done lends itself very naturally to an interpretation in which deep disagreements are implicated. To repeat the key connections: disagreeing deeply with others means that you take their e/m-frameworks to be (partially) wrong. This means you will evaluate them as not fully rational, not quite morally upstanding, or worse. This, in turn, puts you in a situation where the conditions for cognitive and practical polarization are satisfied.

Taking these qualifications into account, let me paint a more realistic picture of how deep disagreement is causally relevant to polarization. Most people do not spend lots of their time thinking long and hard about politics and morality, let alone epistemology. Instead, they go to work or school, socialize with neighbors, colleagues, and friends, watch TV, talk about the news, play sports, go to church, do volunteer work, etc. All of these things shape, and are shaped by, people's social identities—their sense of belonging to a certain group, of being a certain kind of person. Much of the work in social psychology and political science discussed above suggests that people's political beliefs, attitudes, and behavior are not supported by extensive

[28] For those cognizant of the literature on causality, the idea here is supposed to be reminiscent of Mackie's (1965) analysis of causes as, minimally, INUS conditions. See Strevens (2008, ch. 3) for an up-to-date analysis of causal relevance along these lines.

thinking and reasoning, but by their social identities. As Achen and Bartels write: "Citizens tend to adopt the views of the parties and groups they favor" (2016, p. 310).

But if people's social identities—and not deep disagreements—cause polarization, does that not speak against what I have been arguing? No, social identities and deep disagreements should not be opposed like this. They are not in competition. Rather, deep disagreements are a part of social identities, because social identities involve commitments to e/m-principles. Not in the sense that they always come with fully developed e/m-frameworks, but they typically involve prioritizations of moral values or epistemic principles determining how to think about issues and which experts or branches of science to trust.[29] In many cases, then, having sharply different social identities entails disagreeing deeply over some issues.

When people identify with a social group, they implicitly commit to certain e/m-principles. Deep disagreements can thus emerge indirectly: not because people work out their own e/m-frameworks and carefully think through the issues on their own accord, but because they adopt the e/m-principles that are characteristic of their social identities, which lead them to disagree deeply with others. By way of example: the average Democrat will trust the broad consensus among climate scientists, because that is what Democrats do. The average European populist voter distrusts what "elite politicians" claim about the European Union, because that is what nationalists do. As a result, they will see those who disagree with them not just as mistaken, but as relying on misguided "experts" or as prioritizing the wrong moral values or, in other words, as employing incorrect e/m-principles. Their opponents are not quite rational and do not have their moral priorities straight. The average Democrat comes to see the average Republican as irrational or dumb, as morally confused or malignant. The European populist sees social-democrats or liberals in a similarly negative light. No need to take what they say very seriously or to engage respectfully. The result is increasing cognitive and practical polarization, which leads to even stronger and more extreme social identities. So we end up with a feedback loop in which social identities imply deep disagreements, deep disagreements lead to increased polarization, and increased polarization to even more entrenched and radically opposing social identities.

6. Conclusion: Sad News about Deep Disagreement

I began this chapter by pointing out that there are extensive literatures in science and the humanities singing the praises of disagreement. By now, it should be clear that an exception must be made for deep disagreements. I have argued that, rather than promote self-correction, mutual learning, and other epistemic goods, deep disagreements are more likely bad news. When people are in a deep disagreement because they have different and conflicting epistemic or moral frameworks, they will have trouble recognizing (some of) each other's reasons as valid or good ones. This undermines the possibilities for rational, truth-seeking deliberation. Deep

[29] Of course, social identities are not themselves active agents who come up with principles and frameworks. They ultimately come from individuals and groups who shape the characteristic attitudes and commitments that make up social identities.

disagreement is not merely a theoretical problem. The empirical evidence shows that deep disagreements are implicated in a polarization feedback loop. Social identities often come with attachments to conflicting e/m-principles. As a result, people with different social identities will end up disagreeing deeply over clusters of issues. This leads to cognitive and practical polarization, because people in a deep disagreement about issues that are central to their identity will tend to see each other as less than fully rational, morally subpar, or worse. This, in turn, reinforces their social identities and entrenches their disagreements further.[30]

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