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Commentary on Vesel Memedi: “Resolving Deep Disagreement”

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Memedi’s illuminating paper raises lots of interesting questions, and we should get right to them, so my remarks will be brief. I’ll start with just a few notes on the idea of deep disagreement, and then I’ll gesture toward some aspects of the paper which we may want to visit in our discussion.

We can distinguish theoretical questions about the notion of deep disagreement from practical questions about it. The theoretical questions about deep disagreement are about whether or not it exists, and about how to define it if it does. For example, is irresolvability by rational means (in principle) essential? These are tricky questions, since our experience with actual disagreements never seems to be decisive. It won’t do to point to famously stubborn disagreements, since nothing about a particular disagreement’s intensity or duration can prove that it is “deep.” A disagreement’s stubbornness might just be a mark of the parties’ lack of trust and good will, their incompetence in argument, bad luck, or all of the above. But usually when we encounter stubborn disagreements, we are not thinking about them theoretically, we are thinking practically. The practical question is: how can we get to a resolution? Sure, the rational resolution of a stubborn disagreement probably reveals that the disagreement was not “deep” in the theoretical sense (insert here much head scratching about what counts as “rational” and what counts as “resolution”), but let’s not exercise *that* point too much—let’s celebrate genuine resolutions whenever we can get them!

On my reading of Fogelin, the idea is that there is a kind of disagreement which will always turn our spade. So it isn’t that this kind of disagreement is humanly impossible to get past *somehow*, and it isn’t that our spade is useless, *it’s that the one is not an effective approach to the other*. Admitting that does not commit us to hopelessness, but it does make it harder to see where we can place our hopes. Surely we do a great service when we show either that our meager spade is not the only tool available, or that any particular disagreement isn’t really the sort of thing that Fogelin had in mind. Vesel Memedi’s very thoughtful and timely paper does both.

Memedi points out that some disagreements appear to be utterly intractable until we have a more complete picture of the argumentative context. Perhaps the disagreeing parties intend their arguments not for each other, but for an unacknowledged third party. And perhaps once we reconstruct the scenario in that way, we see that while the parties’ arguments have no purchase on each other, they fit squarely within what the third party counts as reasonable. If that’s what is going on, then perhaps we need not despair for a resolution. The third party, now understood to be internal to the argument, can treat the arguments in a rational way, as if they are resolvable.

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I want to say three things about Memedi's reconstruction strategy. First, and least importantly, I don't really view this as incompatible with Fogelin's point. Memedi offers us a *new* tool, and its use shows that the dispute between the Albanian and Macedonian medias was perhaps more tractable than it seemed. That is very good and important, worth celebrating. But I still believe that our *spade* does get turned, *must* be turned, by some sorts of disagreements, and that that's important to worry about at other times.

Secondly, and this may be something we could talk about, I have questions about the extent to which Memedi's reconstruction of this dispute can be generalized or shaped into a resolution strategy. In Memedi's example, the third party is revealed to be the intended audience of both disputing parties. In a way, that is extremely good luck. But does a third party reconstruction of a dispute depend upon what the disagreeing parties *intend*, or can we take it upon ourselves to go looking for an appropriate third party, perhaps one that the disagreeing parties do not have in mind? The former can be very helpful where there the parties *do* have another audience in mind, but in that case we haven't used a resolution strategy, we've come to understand the dispute better—it's more tractable than we thought. If the latter is a possibility, then we ought to develop it as fully as we can, right away. To get far along that route, though, we will need to overcome some obstacles which have long puzzled argumentation theorists.

Thirdly, it does seem to me that Memedi has his finger on an important and very often overlooked feature of some of our most intractable social and political issues. We tend to fixate on apparent audiences, and this effectively blinds us. Other audiences may have something, a great deal, to do with the way our opponent talks to us. If we do not seriously consider this possibility, then it is very likely that misunderstandings will multiply and trust will further evaporate. Indeed, this happens all the time. Memedi shows us a more formal way to ask questions like this, and we should learn how to use this tool without delay.

[link to paper](#)