

SOOTHING THE SORE OF SUPPRESSED DISSENT: SOME ASPECTS OF ASYMMETRY IN DISAGREEMENT

ABSTRACT: Recent discourse on disagreement has distinguished between disagreement and dissent. According to the account, dissent is a way in which disagreement is voiced, an avenue for making it public, and thus it always requires a communicative act although it can be insincere. Disagreement, on the other hand, is always sincere and does not need to be voiced (Johnson 2018). I look at disagreement from another perspective, that of asymmetric relationships. Here I have in mind asymmetry at social and intellectual levels, and I suggest that the consequences are different for both levels. At the social level I consider (1) disagreement at an intergenerational level such as that between a parent and their child (and here I suggest that there is a cultural tweak to the extent of disagreement that is possible); and (2) disagreement between an employer and an employee or between an obvious political (or economic) superior and an inferior. At the intellectual level, I consider disagreement between a guru in Sperber's sense and a student or 'sub-guru.' I examine the sentiments of the inferior in the asymmetric relationship and diagnose deep pain in the event of suppressing one's disagreement for fear of being 'rejected' or 'fired' - and this obtains at the social level. At the intellectual level, the sub-guru remains dazed but not traumatised. The experience is one of epistemic conundrum since the sub-guru, though now doubtful of the guru's position, is unsure because of the confidence reposed in the guru. In the light of this exposition, I provide an account of dissent and disagreement which introduces another perspective in two senses: (1) I argue that disagreement can be 'voiced' or made public in a different way, albeit indirectly, for example, refusing to carry out a massacre under a brutal regime as in the case of the holocaust (Henry 2007) or the Hebrew midwives (Ex.1:15-17). Here, the dissenter does not directly voice out their disagreement since this may attract unpleasant consequences, but the dissent could become public anyway because it is discoverable. (2) I explore other possible outlets for suppressed dissent like writing (for publication, blogging, etc), granting an interview, film making, and music. I conclude that while some of the avenues for expressing dissent can apply to both social and intellectual dissent, dissenting is a much slower phenomenon in cases of intellectual asymmetry.

I will proceed in four sections. In the first, I will provide an overview of dissent and disagreement in the literature. In Section 2, I will focus on disagreement in asymmetric social relationships. Here I will discuss both intergenerational and hierarchical expressions of disagreement. That of asymmetric intellectual relationship will be taken up in Section 3, where I will discuss guru effect and the difficulty itself of disagreement. In Section 4, I will explore ways of soothing the sore of disagreement. Finally, in Section 5, I will provide my conclusion.

KEYWORDS: Dissent, disagreement asymmetry, guru effect, epistemic conundrum.

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