

Losing Common Ground: The Pragmatics of Political Disagreement

Abstract:

We live in a world pervaded by political disagreement, and it doesn't seem to be going away anytime soon—in fact, it seems to be getting worse. This calls for an investigation: why is political disagreement so persistent, and what threats can this pose to political deliberation? In this paper, I argue that while there are important epistemological aspects to political disagreement, the key to understanding (and perhaps resolving) it lay in the pragmatics of political disagreement. Drawing on Robert Stalnaker's work on assertion and common ground, I argue that there is a practical paradox which can arise from political disagreement.

The paradox is this: the purpose of group deliberation, especially democratic deliberation, is to explore disagreements and, in the ideal case, resolve those disagreements or at least come to a compromise. So disagreement is essential to group deliberation. However, disagreement can also threaten group deliberation, the resolution of those disagreements, and even the possibility of future disagreements. Because successful communication relies on a common ground between speaker and hearer—a set of common assumptions which can be used as a resource for interpretation and communication—severe disagreement can hamper the possibility of successful communication. This sort of communicative breakdown can take a number of forms. There is uptake failure, in which a speech act fails to have its intended force. An assertion, for instance, is supposed to update the common ground. If assertions are consistently denied their updating power, because of its disagreeable content or speaker, then a conversation will make no progress. Another kind of communicative breakdown is content failure, where one's assertion fails to convey its intended content. This could be because a hearer interprets in light of a presupposition which the speaker denies, or because a hearer does not have enough common ground with the speaker to consider the utterance as anything more than nonsense. Both uptake failure and content failure have the potential to undermine group deliberation, including the resolution of old disagreements and the formation of new ones. I call this potential for disagreement to produce communicative breakdown the Paradox of Group Deliberation, and it is not just a problem for politics. It is not a logical paradox like most philosophical paradoxes, but a practical one, arising from contingent actions: severe disagreement can undermine the ways we introduce and resolve disagreements.

With this paradox in hand, I look to its resolution. After arguing that the main challenge of political disagreement is not epistemic but pragmatic, I propose a handful of norms which may, if implemented by participants in a discourse, can minimize the harmful effects of severe disagreement while preserving the central importance of disagreement in group deliberation. I take this to show that there is reason for hope, but minimizing the harmful effects of severe disagreement requires a great deal of diligence from participants in political conversations.