

The Distinction between Constructive Disagreement and Dogmatic Disagreement: A Bulwark against Totalitarianism and the Annihilation of Political Freedoms

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Agreement and Disagreement Beyond Ethics and Epistemology

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According to the Cambridge Dictionary a disagreement is “an argument or a situation in which people do not have the same opinion”. As such, disagreement is neither good nor bad. What makes it relevant or not to public debate really depends on the posture that the parties who disagree adopt, whether it is open to listening and relies on sound rational arguments, or whether it is based on dogmatic and sometimes irrational positions.

Disagreement is at the root of philosophy. It enables thinkers to confront arguments, and to try and come down with the most rational analysis of a certain problem or concept. As such, it is at the core of the dialectical method since the times of Plato or Confucius, and necessary to the advancement of science and thought.

Refusal of disagreement, or constant calls to comprise and consensus are not necessarily the signs of sane debates in societies that pretend to guarantee freedom of thought¹, and most importantly who want to make progress.

All major philosophers, from Plato² or Confucius³ to Augustine⁴, fundamentally disagreed with the way in which the societies of their times functioned. As a consequence, they worked endlessly to develop and promote philosophies that would improve them. While doing so they had one major characteristic though: a constant will to study, research and improve themselves which combined with an open-minded and respectful attitude toward those who thought differently from them. In other words, they were questioning the public ethics and leadership of their times, but through the constant use of reason and dialogue. They were major promoters of freedom of opinion and thought, as well as of education⁵ rather than coercion or manipulation⁶ as a remedy to ignorance.

¹ Arendt H. - *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, New York: USA, 1973, 527 p.

² Platon.- *The Republic*, https://www.gutenberg.org/files/1497/1497-h/1497-h.htm#link2H_4_0005

³ Confucius.- *The Analects*, <https://ctext.org/analects>

⁴ Augustine.- *The Confessions*, <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/3296/3296-h/3296-h.htm>

⁵ Confucius, *Op. Cit.*

⁶ Shang Yang.- *Le livre du Prince Shang*, présentation et traduction de Jean Lévi, Paris : France, Flammarion, 2005

That parts their positions strongly from the inflexible disagreements that regularly emerge in human history and that are characterized by an inability to listen to alternative positions. Those types of disagreements lead to wars and tyrannical if not totalitarian regimes⁷.

We live in a time where the distinction between these two major categories of disagreement are increasingly and potentially purposely being blurred, where public debate is increasingly being confiscated under the argument that disagreement would always be a sign of dogmatism, if not fanaticism, and a lack of ability to comprise. Such a position is rather problematic, not to say dangerous, because it puts at risk the foundations of what makes sane social and political dialogues possible.

For this reason, it is urgent that philosophers and political scientists conduct in-depth reflections on what defines sane versus insane disagreements. Failure to do so could lead to an inability to conduct constructive debates in our societies, which are necessary not only to our political freedom but also to our ability to come up with novel ideas that will make our societies more ethical and livable places⁸. In fact, as Karl Popper⁹ put it, the sane competition of rival and opposed ideas is what makes scientific progress possible.

Consequently, in this presentation, we shall first clearly define what sets apart constructive disagreements from dogmatic ones. We shall then demonstrate how tyrannical and totalitarian regimes try to annihilate constructive disagreements and the consequences that this annihilation process might have on human spontaneity and freedom. Finally, relying on those bases, we shall suggest how we, as social scientists, can work at ensuring that public debates remain open, constructive and sane, hence using intellectual courage as a bulwark against totalitarianism and the annihilation of political freedoms.

⁷ Arendt, *Op. Cit.*

⁸ Strauss L.- *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie politique?*, Paris : Presses universitaires de France, 2010, c1992, 296 p.

⁹ Popper K.- *The Poverty of Historicism*, Boston: USA, The Beacon Press, 1957, 166 p.