On Fundamental Philosophical Disagreements and How to Resolve Them

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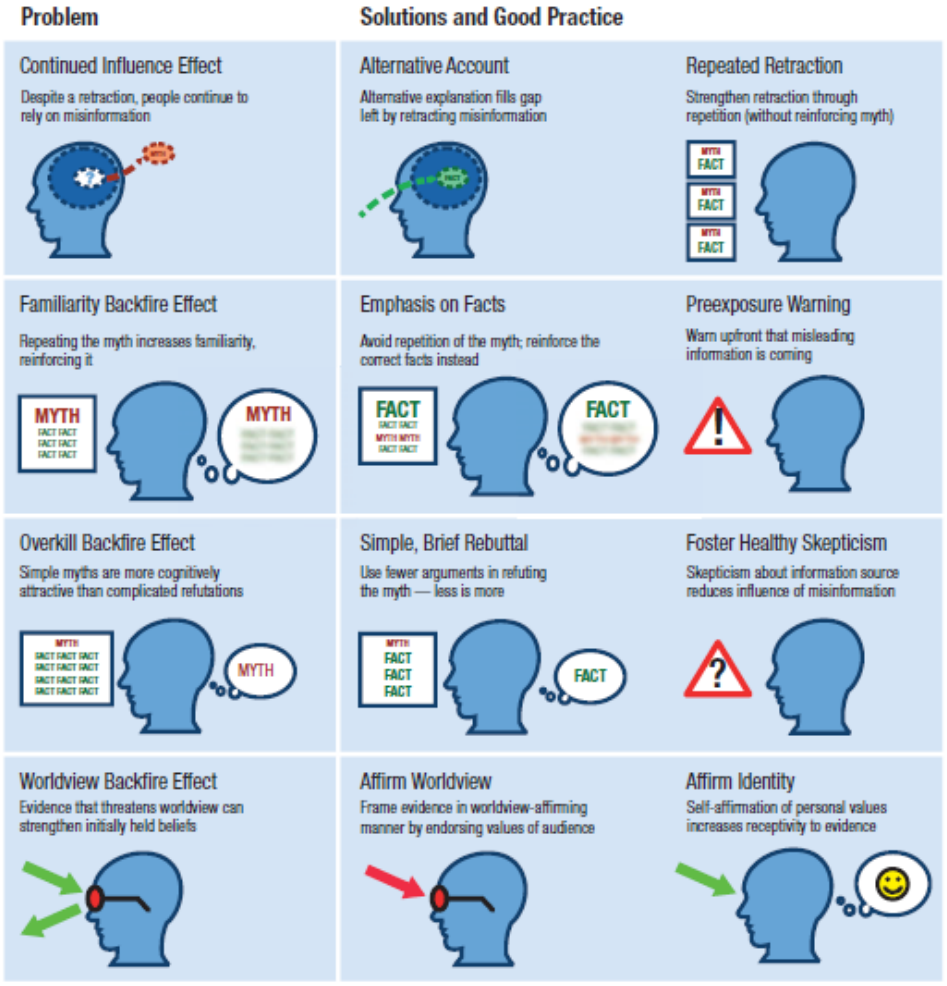

Fig. 1. A graphical summary of findings from the misinformation literature relevant to communication practitioners. The left-hand column summarizes the cognitive problems associated with misinformation, and the right-hand column summarizes the solutions reviewed in this article.

(Lewandowsky et al., 2012: p. 122)

> Philosophy seeks to correct partial views and complete fragmentary experience by some vision of the whole. This ancient aim has always constituted the readiest apology and the highest honor of philosophy. But only whole [people] sense the whole. [Humankind] becomes whole, as Goethe suggested, only by joining one. (Smith and Wright, 1929)

For the purposes of this essay, let's call people who wholeheartedly pursue and practice philosophy as a full-time, lifetime calling and who grapple with fundamental philosophical issues and problems, whether successfully or not, *real philosophers*.

It has been my experience over the course of roughly 45 years of philosophizing, that real philosophers, in addition to their daily philosophical reading, thinking, and writing—and if they're also working inside the professional academy, in addition to their weekly teaching during term-time—also correspond regularly, semi-regularly, or at least irregularly, by means of e-mail, texting, or other digital messaging, and perhaps also even by means of old-school hard-copy letters, about strictly philosophical matters, with a number of other philosophers or philosophically-minded people. Let's call this *philosophical correspondence*. It has also been my experience over the same 45 years, that real philosophers, again in addition to their daily or weekly philosophical activities, also have regular, semi-regular, or at least irregular chats, meet-ups, or unstructured conversations, about strictly philosophical matters, either in person or via Zoom (or Google Meet, Skype, etc.) with a number of other philosophers or philosophically-minded people. Let's call this *philosophical conversation*. Moreover, in addition to philosophical correspondence and philosophical conversation, there is also what I'll call *philosophical debate*, which is a structured written or spoken philosophical encounter or interaction, usually organized inside the professional academy—although occasionally it's also organized by other non-professional-academic social institutions—between philosophers or philosophically-minded people, in various more or less public venues, including in-person or online conferences, in-person or online workshops, in-person or online moderated debates, blogs, journals, and books.

On the whole, philosophical correspondence and philosophical conversation alike are often interesting and productive, and sometimes profoundly significant. Indeed, sometimes philosophical correspondence and philosophical conversation are mind-changing or life-changing, and even—in accordance with Marx's famous dictum that thus far philosophers have only ever *interpreted* the world in different ways, but the point is to *change* it (Marx, 1964: p. 69)—*world-changing*. By contrast, philosophical debate is only very rarely, if ever interesting and productive, never profoundly significant, never mind-changing, life-changing, or world-changing, and generally combative, rhetorical, superficial, and unproductive. And especially when it's exclusively between male philosophers, it's usually nothing but an intellectual pissing contest.

All that being so, I now want to focus on a stubborn and troubling phenomenon that arises very frequently in philosophical correspondence, philosophical conversation, and especially philosophical debate, alike: *fundamental philosophical disagreement*.

For the sake of clarity and simplicity, let's say that two people X and Y have a *philosophical disagreement* if and only if, for some explicit philosophical claim C, or some explicit philosophical theory T, X believes that C or T is true, but Y believes that C or T is either false or nonsensical, or conversely. Then by a *fundamental philosophical disagreement*,

I mean a philosophical disagreement between X and Y not only in terms of explicit philosophical claims or theories, but also, and above all, in terms of (i) the worldview that's presupposed by X's or Y's explicit claims or theories, and (ii) the set of what Otto Paans and I call *thought-shapers* that's characteristically associated with that worldview (see Hanna and Paans, 2021; Maiese et al, 2023).

These worldviews and thought-shapers are almost always *implicit*, not explicit, and not only that, they're also very often logically, semantically, and cognitively operative in philosophical claims and philosophical theories in such a way that the people who believe and assert those claims and theories, whose thinking is thereby committed to those worldviews and shaped by those thought-shapers, are self-consciously unaware of those very commitments and shapings. For example, there is a fundamental philosophical disagreement of precisely this kind between those philosophers or philosophically-minded people who are committed to and thought-shaped by *the mechanistic worldview*, and those who are committed to and thought-shaped by *the organicist worldview* (see, e.g., Hanna and Paans, 2020, 2021, 2022; Torday, Miller Jr, and Hanna, 2020; Hanna, 2024a).

Now, if X and Y have a philosophical disagreement, but either (i) they both share essentially the same worldview and corresponding set of thought-shapers or (ii) at least one of them is agnostic about and uncommitted to any particular worldview and corresponding set of thought-shapers, then it's a *non-fundamental* philosophical disagreement. Correspondingly, it seems to me that in cases of non-fundamental philosophical disagreement, then philosophical correspondence and philosophical conversation could be interesting and productive, perhaps profoundly significant, and perhaps even mind-changing, life-changing, or world-changing. Such philosophical interlocutors could at the very least learn something interesting, productive, or even profoundly significant from one another, and perhaps even change each other's minds, each other's lives, or the world.

By sharp and indeed diametric contrast, however, precisely because worldviews and their corresponding sets of thought-shapers are (i) presupposed by and hence ubiquitously present and deeply rooted in the semantic and cognitive background of all other beliefs and thoughts, whether philosophical or non-philosophical (see, e.g., Pepper, 1942/1970), (ii) almost always implicit, and also (iii) almost always logically, semantically, and cognitively operative in ways such that people are self-consciously unaware of their commitments to those worldviews and of precisely how their thinking is shaped by those worldviews' characteristic thought-shapers, then it seems to me obvious that in cases of fundamental philosophical disagreement, philosophical correspondence, philosophical conversation, and especially philosophical debate, will be not only philosophically

uninteresting, unproductive, and un-significant,[1] but also annoying, counterproductive, and enervating. No matter how much and no matter how vigorously such interlocutors talk or write to one another—or more precisely talk or write at one another—they will always be doing so at cross purposes. They will never, ever learn anything substantive from one another, and they will never, ever rationally change each other's minds, their lives, or the world.

Indeed, this cognitive and social phenomenon has been well-confirmed empirically by cognitive and social psychologists, under the rubric of *the backfire effect* (Nyhan and Reifler, 2010; Lewandowsky et al., 2012). According to the backfire effect, when people hold political beliefs based on false or misleading information, then contradicting them, presenting them with strong counter-evidence, or even outright refuting their false beliefs, far from rationally compelling them to change their minds, actually leads them to become anxious and angry, to retrench in the holding of those false beliefs, and even more stubbornly to resist true and reliable information or sound reasoning. Now, if the backfire effect holds with respect to false empirical political beliefs, whose objective falsity can be easily demonstrated, then necessarily it will hold all the more powerfully in philosophy, in which, even though empirical beliefs and evidence do play a non-trivial role, nevertheless non-empirical or a priori beliefs and rational intuitions are basic, and the objective truth or falsity of these a priori beliefs cannot be either easily or empirically demonstrated (Chapman et al., 2013; Hanna, 2015: chs. 6-8).

Moreover, although it has been shown in the empirical studies on the backfire effect that it's in fact really possible—although only with much effort, patience, and time—to make some progress towards rationally correcting people's false political beliefs, nevertheless, whenever worldviews are principally involved in the backfire effect, the correction process actually requires, as a necessary preliminary to the effective operation of that process, validating the false believers' worldviews, as the diagram displayed at the top of this essay clearly shows in its bottom row. In other words, in order for a rational correction process to work at all, the worldviews of the false believers must be affirmed and never challenged or criticized.

In fact, changing or revolutionizing one's own philosophical worldview is strictly a critically self-conscious and self-reflective creative process, and more generally, strictly a rationally autonomous process—it can't be brought about by any external philosophical means or on the basis of any other philosopher's or philosophers' say-so or brow-beating. For example, according to Thomas Hertog, Stephen Hawking's scientific collaborator,

[1] That is, it's *contra-significant*, as opposed to its being merely *insignificant*.

Hawking radically revised his cosmological worldview during the last 20 years of his life, and came to believe in what he called *top-down cosmology*:

> In this book I have argued that a genuine quantum outlook on the universe counters the relentless alienating forces of modern science and lets one build cosmology anew from an interior viewpoint—the essence of Hawking's final theory. In a quantum universe, a tangible past and future emerge out of a haze of possibilties by means of a continual process of questioning and observing. This observership, the interactive process at the heart of quantum theory that transforms what might be into what does happen, constantly draws the universe more firmly into existence. Observers—in this quantum sense—acquire a sort of creative role in cosmic affairs that imbues cosmology with a delicate subjective touch. Observership also introduces a subtle backward-in-time element into cosmological theory, for it is as if the act of observation today retroactively fixes the outcome of the big bang "back then." This is why Stephen referred to his final theory as top-down cosmology; we read the fundamentals of the history of the universe backward—from the top down…. Top-down cosmology turns the riddle of the universe's apparent design in a sense upside down. It embodies the view that own at the quantum level, the universe bioengineers its own biofriendliness. Life and the universe are in some way a mutual fit, according to the theory, because, in a deeper sense, they come into existence together. In effect, I venture to claim that this view captures the true spirit of the Copernican Revolution. When Copernicus put the sun at the center, he realized all too well that from then on one would need to take the motion of the Earth around the sun into account in order to interpret astronomical observations correctly. The Copernican Revolution did not pretend that our position in the universe is irrelevant, only that it isn't privileged. Five centuries on, top-down cosmology returns to these roots. (Hertog, 2023: pp. 254-255)

Nevertheless, at the same time, as per the "worldview backfire effect," Hawking strongly resisted all external philosophical input and contemporary philosophers' opinions and theories. Indeed, in his 2010 book, *The Grand Design*, Hawking asserted with characteristic boldness and self-assurance, that "philosophy is dead," by which he meant that contemporary philosophy is irrelevant to contemporary physics (Hawking and Mlodinow, 2010: p. 5). But as Hertog rightly points out, "for someone who had renounced philosophy, Stephen used it liberally—and creatively—in his work" (Hertog, 2023: p. xiv). In other words, Hawking's creation of his final theory, his "Copernican Revolution" in worldview, was strictly a rationally autonomous philosophical and scientific act.

So, when two people philosophically encounter one another and experience a fundamental philosophical disagreement, what should they do? As an expression of respect for one another as human real persons possessing dignity, they can and should politely and respectfully mutually agree to disagree. But any further philosophical encounters between them *should also be avoided like the plague*. Indeed, once a fundamental

philosophical disagreement has been experienced between two interlocutors, then (i) anyone who inquisitively requests further philosophical encounters with that interlocutor is seriously deluded and misguided about the possible positive philosophical value of such encounters—the backfire effect proves that, and (ii) anyone who aggressively and importunately demands further encounters with that interlocutor is in fact nothing but an asshole: they're only trying to brow-beat, gaslight, or otherwise manipulate the other interlocutor into verbally agreeing with them, or at least into dialectically capitulating by verbally conceding intellectual victory to the aggressive and importunate interlocutor.

The upshot of my argument, so far, is threefold.

First, real philosophers should always wholeheartedly strive to become as critically self-conscious of and self-reflective about their own worldviews and their own corresponding set of thought-shapers, as humanly possible. If they don't already have a worldview, or if they have doubts about their own worldview, then they should critically self-consciously and self-reflectively explore different actual or possible worldviews with an eye to explicitly creating, presenting, defending, and recommending one of their own, or a new one of their own, in a strictly rationally autonomous way.

Second, real philosophers should engage in philosophical correspondence, philosophical conversation, and especially philosophical debate with another philosopher or philosophically-minded person *only if any disagreements they have are strictly non-fundamental*, because either (i) both people share essentially the same worldview and corresponding set of thought-shapers, hence they're like-minded, or (ii) at least one of the people is agnostic about and uncommitted to any particular worldview and corresponding set of thought-shapers, hence they're open-minded. Philosophical correspondence or philosophical conversation with like-minded or open-minded people can be interesting, productive, profoundly significant, mind-changing, life-changing, or world-changing.

Third and finally, if a real philosopher experiences fundamental philosophical disagreement with an interlocutor, they should politely and respectfully propose mutually agreeing to disagree, and *then get the hell out of there*—because no philosophical good will ever come of further encounters with a highly unreflectively thought-shaped, unlike-minded, closed-minded interlocutor.

Now, obviously, this is a highly skeptical view of resolving philosophical disagreements that are grounded in synoptic differences in worldviews. But could there be some workable way around this rational impasse?

As per the epigraph of this essay (Smith and Wright, 1929), one possible workable way around it might be to treat a worldview not as a monolithic unit, but instead as a complex holistic structure built up out of constituent specific synoptic insights or reflections about some or another domain of information about the rational human condition, each of which could be individually identified, and then compared or contrasted with differing insights or reflections about that domain. Then, philosophers who have encountered a fundamental philosophical disagreement might come to synoptic agreement on some individual parts of a Big Picture, and then go on to construct a holistic shared worldview piece-by-piece, like a team working together on an enormous puzzle. If a given insight or reflection doesn't fit into the current shared Big Picture, then it can be temporarily put aside for later discussion and possible inclusion. If fundamental agreement between philosophical interlocutors can be reached on a partially-assembled worldview, then that would constitute genuine philosophical progress, even if they do not ultimately share one comprehensive and complete worldview. Let's call this *the puzzle-building-teamwork method of shared synoptic reflection*. If this proposal is correct, then philosophical interlocutors who have encountered a fundamental philosophical disagreement might be able to work around it by engaging in the puzzle-building teamwork method of shared synoptic reflection. This wouldn't bring about complete agreement, but it would resolve the deadlock of mutually uncomprehending fundamental disagreement.

For example, an organicist philosopher and a mechanistic philosopher might come to agreement about the meaning and anti-mechanistic implications of Kurt Gödel's famous incompleteness results (Gödel, 1931/1967), and thereby share a specific synoptic insight about the scope and limits of digital technology and the research program of artificial intelligence (Chomsky, Roberts, and Watamull, 2023; Keller, 2023; Hanna, 2024a), even if they continued to disagree about whether the natural universe as a whole is fundamentally organic or fundamentally mechanical. Then, by generalizing this partial synoptic agreement, they might discover significant common ground in other parts of philosophy—for example, in the philosophy of physics (see, e.g., Hanna, 2024b: ch. 4).

Constructing part of an enormous puzzle together is categorically better than constructing nothing together; correspondingly, sharing part of a worldview is categorically better than utter disagreement. So when this puzzle-building teamwork method of shared synoptic reflection is combined with healthy pragmatistic fallibilism and rationally hopeful team spirit, then genuine philosophical progress is possible.[2]

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[2] I'm grateful to Matt Andersson for drawing my attention to (Smith and Wright, 1929), and for thought-provoking correspondence on and around the main topics of this essay, and also to Martha Hanna for suggesting the puzzle-constructing metaphor.

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