

In Most Conflicts of Ideas, Socratic Dialogue Beats Research

There are so many controversial issues in our world right now, and so many people who want to change the way we think, see, speak, feel, and live because of them.

I'm not an expert on COVID, not an expert on climate change, not an expert on China, not an expert on interracial and intersex relations, etc. I have my ideas and strong beliefs, sure. And yes, I should try to learn as much as is practicable about the issues that matter. But I must also realize that it would take a lifetime to gain the full data picture on any of these issues. And I also realize that any attempts at data gathering are especially colored now by strong bias, censorship (political or otherwise), hatred, and fear.

What's a thinker to do? Maybe a cautious agnosticism is justified, but the vehement ideologies now held by most people won't really allow for aloofness, particularly on issues with consequences for political freedom. If you wish to check anti-freedom ideologies,, you're going to have to do some challenging.

But if it's not realistic to expect the average person to dig into history and scientific studies in a rigorous way, what is the right approach?

In my experience, a Socratic dialogue style works best. Ask good questions, See what facts (or evidence thereof) your opponent puts forward. Unless you have opposing evidence, don't worry so much about hurriedly Googling some confirmation of your own side. Accept their evidence. But question their premises or conclusions.

It is far more efficient to deal with identifying the errors in logic than the errors in fact (though correcting all kinds of errors are important). Logic works by a series of first principles that everyone can learn and no one can evade. Contradictions, fallacies, false equivalencies, and other errors in thinking are much easier to dislodge than disputes over evidence (often evidence can be ambiguous).

The other benefit to accepting your opponent's evidence – conditionally, at least – is to make the truth-seeking process a bit less combative. Combative discussions rarely lead to a change in shared understanding. Try to listen and look for truth in the other person's statements, then dismantle the bad connections of logic. If there are errors of fact, those can be fixed next.

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