



Deep disagreement and deep conflict. Two ways in which a dispute can be deep

*(Desacuerdo profundo y conflicto profundo.
Dos modos en los que una discusión puede ser profunda)*

Manuel ALMAGRO*

University of Valencia

ABSTRACT: Current discussions in the political arena tend to be very unproductive and difficult to resolve. Recent literature suggests that this is the case *because* most of our political discussions are instances of deep disagreement. Against this story, this paper explores an alternative route: deep disagreements don't tend to be more unfruitful than other types of disagreement. But then, why many real-life cases of political deep disagreement seem to be so unproductive and difficult to resolve? To address this question, I first distinguish two senses in which a discussion can be considered "deep", and call them *deep disagreement* and *deep conflict*. Second, I argue that most of our current political discussions are unfruitful not because they are instances of deep disagreement, but of deep conflict.

KEYWORDS: deep disagreement, deep conflict, political disagreement, narratives, affective polarization.

RESUMEN: Buena parte de las discusiones actuales que tienen lugar en el terreno político se caracterizan por ser improductivas y difíciles de resolver. La literatura reciente sugiere que esto es así porque la mayoría de estas discusiones son instancias de desacuerdo profundo. Este artículo explora una explicación diferente a la anterior, según la cual los desacuerdos profundos no tienden a ser más improductivos que otros tipos de desacuerdo. Pero entonces, ¿por qué los desacuerdos políticos profundos parecen ser tan improductivos y peligrosos? En este artículo se distinguen dos sentidos en los que un desacuerdo puede ser "profundo". Para diferenciarlos, los llamo desacuerdo profundo y conflicto profundo. Tras hacer esta distinción, defiendo que la mayor parte de las discusiones políticas contemporáneas son poco fructíferas no porque sean casos de desacuerdo profundo, sino porque son instancias de conflicto profundo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: desacuerdo profundo, conflicto profundo, desacuerdo político, narrativas, polarización afectiva.

* **Correspondence to:** Manuel Almagro. Department of Philosophy, University of Valencia. Av. Blasco Ibáñez, 30 (46010 Valencia-Spain) – manuel.almagro@uv.es – <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1647-9995>

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1. Introduction

It is difficult for the parties involved in current political disagreements to have a productive and fruitful discussion that allows them to better understand each other and reach agreement. Instead, the parties tend to become entrenched in their positions and fail to find ways to coordinate (Iyengar *et al.*, 2019; Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018). Take, for example, current public disagreements on the safety of vaccines, free speech, the meaning of Black Lives Matter, Barack Obama's citizenship, abortion, the causes and effects of climate change, racism, sexism, etc.

There is a common explanation for this fact that is gaining momentum in the literature. Some authors argue that current political discussions are unfruitful and difficult to resolve *because* they are instances of deep disagreement —i.e., situations where the parties disagree not only about the truth-value of a given proposition, but also about their relatively fundamental underlying principles on which their judgments are based (De Ridder, 2021; Lynch, 2021a, 2021b; Lavorerio, 2023). According to them, the occurrence of deep political disagreements in contemporary democracies erodes an essential assumption of democracy itself: it removes the necessary common ground for reasonable and fruitful deliberation. The lack of a shared method or standard to approach reality makes the parties in a disagreement differ on the “basic facts,” which in turn prevents them from reaching agreement and coordination, and as a result they end up seeing each other as epistemically defective.

As an example of it, imagine two people disagreeing on the safety of a certain vaccine due to relying on different, contradictory evidence. Suppose that one of them relies on natural medicine in general and trusts anecdotal evidence from their friends, while the other relies on systematic scientific evidence (see De Ridder, 2021, p. 232 for a more detailed version of this case). In this scenario, the difference in the epistemic standard from which they evaluate the evidence they encounter leads them to a deep disagreement: their disagreement is not only about the safety of the vaccine, but the appropriate epistemic standard to assess the relevant evidence.¹ The relevant facts are different for the parties in disagreement, the argument follows, so they are likely to support different policies, and as a result end up seeing the other side with epistemic disdain. As Lynch puts it, “when debates devolve to the point that they are about epistemic principles —about the very standards for assessing what is and isn't a fact, there is little hope for resolving what policy to enact in light of the facts” (Lynch, 2021a, p. 149).

One may object that deep disagreements are not irresolvable nor pernicious *per se* (Ranalli, 2021). It is true that deep disagreements may be more persistent than factual ones because, in contrast to what happens in factual disagreements, the parties don't share their standards (moral, epistemic, etc.) from which they make their judgments. But deep disagreements can still be fruitful and productive, and can even be resolved. For instance, imagine that, after a long discussion, one of the parties in the aforementioned case is able to convince their interlocutor regarding the epistemic standard that should be upheld, and they eventually agree on a policy to support. Or imagine that, due to exposure to the arguments of the other side, each party improves their own standard, which in turn allows them to sharpen

¹ Note that deep disagreements can concern factual issues; the relevant point to count as a deep disagreement is that they also involve fundamental epistemic or moral normative principles.

their arguments and contribute to the quality of the debate surrounding the policy in question. These scenarios are not inconceivable. It is indeed the way science makes progress: in scientific discussions, different epistemic standards are usually in contention. And this is not unique to science. There are numerous realistic cases of deep disagreement on political, ethical, philosophical, and aesthetic issues wherein the parties learn from each other, or where the disagreement is eventually resolved. So there seems to be nothing essential to the phenomenon of deep disagreement that necessarily makes it pernicious or intractable. As Kusch (2021) puts it, peer deep disagreements are possible. But the upshot is not only that: deep disagreement can be beneficial even if the parties are not peers.

Yet, this is not necessarily a strong objection against the previous explanation. The fact that deep disagreements are not necessarily pernicious does not entail that they don't have certain features that make them more likely to foster animosity (see Lavorerio, 2023 for a recent discussion). Deep disagreements can be characterized by exhibiting a *tendency towards animosity and fruitlessness*. Of course, this is not a necessary condition for a disagreement to count as deep, but it is still a feature of deep disagreements insofar as they *usually tend* to be so. Sometimes deep disagreements are pernicious and seemingly intractable. And they tend to be so because they remove the necessary common ground for reasonable and fruitful deliberation. That's why many current political disagreements are so unproductive and irresolvable. Let's say it again. When disagreements over facts go up the epistemic ladder and turn into disagreements over whose standards are reliable, they pose a serious problem for democracy, because they foster epistemic disdain between the parties.²

In this paper, however, I'd like to explore a different route. This alternative story starts with the hypothesis that deep disagreements do not have certain features that make them more likely to foster animosity. Instead, this story emphasizes some potentially positive features of deep disagreements: they could facilitate situations of self-estrangement (Medina, 2016) and genealogical anxiety (Srinivasan, 2019), scenarios that provide us with the opportunity to shape our mindset and learn from others through questioning our own perspective and, sometimes, recognizing that our views are based on contingent matters. To do so, it will be crucial to emphasize the fact that our own perspective, our worldview, is shaped and formed through situated judgments (Kinzel & Kusch, 2018).

But then, why do many current political deep disagreements appear so unproductive and lead to the development of epistemic contempt towards the other side? To address this question, I introduce a distinction. A disagreement can be called "deep" for two very different reasons. The first is that the disagreement is rooted in differences in the parties' standards or worldviews, resulting in a disagreement about which standard or worldview should be adopted. In such a case, the disagreement is deep due to the divergence in how each party perceives and assesses the pertinent matters under discussion, thus transforming the dispute into a debate on a deeper question: how the world should be known and evaluated.

But a dispute can also be called "deep" not just because it evolves into a discussion about the standard to uphold, but also because there is a *deep story* (Hochschild, 2016) underlying the disagreement that the parties adhere to in the abstract, thus preventing them from *judging together*. In other words, the discussion can be deeply rooted in a pre-existing or promoted rivalry, to the extent that the concrete disagreement is a manifestation of

² I thank an anonymous reviewer of this journal for pressing me to be as clear as possible on this point.

that deeper conflict or confrontation between activated identities. This is not to say that in these cases the disagreement is not genuine. It is. But the concrete disagreement is not the entire story, so to speak. To differentiate these situations from cases of mere deep disagreement, I call them instances of “deep conflict” or “deep confrontation”. A deep disagreement can be part of a deep conflict, but deep disagreements are not necessarily involved in deep conflicts, nor do deep conflicts always materialize in deep disagreements.

It is my contention here that many political disagreements are unfruitful and difficult to resolve not because they are deep disagreements, but rather because they are instances of deep conflict. Deep conflicts, as I understand them here, appear easily in affectively polarized contexts, where the parties have a high confidence, in the abstract, in the core ideas of their respective groups, and their identities are activated in terms of “us” versus “them.” In such situations, the parties are strongly predisposed to disagree with whatever the opposite side says. This is so in part because, in a deep conflict, the other side is seen as responsible for one’s suffering, and one wants to punish them for that because one is resentful and worried. When our identities are activated to the point that the other side is regarded as evil — which is an essential symptom of current affective polarization—, we tend to disagree with everything the other side says, but just because we are in a deep conflict with a deep story behind it that we adhere to in the abstract. So my suggestion is that many of our current political disagreements might be so recalcitrant and unfruitful not because they are cases of deep disagreement, but because they are instances of a deep conflict.

Distinguishing deep disagreements from deep conflicts may be also pertinent for intervention: in order to improve the current political situation, we should not attempt to resolve or avoid deep disagreements, but rather deep conflicts, as well as taking care of the phenomena promoting them. It is the underlying narrative of our political discussions that we adhere to in the abstract, together with the parties’ level of polarization, what poses a threat to democracy and hinders our ability to coordinate and judge together, rather than the intrinsic nature or features of the disagreement.

This paper is organized as follows. In section 2, I introduce the phenomenon of deep disagreement and present the pernicious approach to it. In section 3, I sketch an alternative approach to deep disagreements. In section 4, I outline some recent proposals whose diagnosis states that our current political disagreements are so unproductive and harmful because they are instances of deep disagreement, which, in turn, fuels the rise of affective polarization in contemporary democracies. In section 4, I draw a distinction between fruitful and infertile conflicts and introduce the notion of deep conflict as a sort of infertile conflict. In section 5, I argue that many current political deep disagreements are also instances of deep conflict, and suggest that this is precisely the reason why at least some of them appear so unfruitful and difficult to resolve.

2. *Deep disagreement*

Take the following conversation between Royd and Amine, two colleagues from a philosophy department.

ROYD: You have to leave your past behind and start fresh, just like Wittgenstein did.

AMINE: Hang on, isn’t Wittgenstein’s mature work deeply connected to his early thought? I don’t get you.

ROYD: What? Wittgenstein is famously known for dramatically changing his mind and methodology around 1930. He made an extraordinary contribution to philosophy after rejecting his previous work, so maybe you should too!

AMINE: Oh, you think? If I'm anything like Wittgenstein, I should probably keep a significant part of my earlier work then.

ROYD: I'm not sure what you're referring to. Have you looked into any relevant work on Wittgenstein's philosophy? Experts distinguish between early and later Wittgenstein precisely because of his different approach to language in each stage of his philosophy. Even Wittgenstein himself acknowledged this in the preface of *Philosophical Investigations*!

AMINE: Yeah, I've gone through those, but I've read his early and later works carefully too, and I see profound connections between them. I mean, I care about what the "experts" you mentioned say, but I don't think they're entirely right, even if Wittgenstein admitted that there are "grave mistakes" in his *Tractatus*.

ROYD: Fair enough. But even if there are some more or less similar points in Wittgenstein's early and mature thought, that isn't the relevant criterion to determine whether there is a significant rupture in his philosophical work.

AMINE: Oh, it is.

ROYD: Why?

AMINE: Some of Wittgenstein's later arguments about mental state attributions, for instance, seem to me to be rooted in ideas from his early writings. Other experts see this continuity too. Also, Drury said Wittgenstein once confessed that his fundamental ideas came to him very early in life. So, I don't think there is a sharp break between his early and mature work. This is the fundamental criterion.

ROYD: Yeah, but his methodology and approach to language are pretty different in both stages and so are the main ideas suggested in them regarding how language works. I don't think your criterion is really the relevant one.

Chris Ranalli has recently proposed four basic desiderata that a theory of deep disagreement needs to satisfy, which are based on the features that deep disagreement cases *usually* display. The desiderata are the following: *Genuine*, *Reason-taking*, *Systematicity*, and *Persistence* (Ranalli, 2021, p. 985). *Genuine* states that the parties in contention are not in a misunderstanding or talking at cross-purposes; the disagreement must be a genuine one, i.e., the parties must discuss about the same issue. *Reason-taking* says that the parties in a deep disagreement must take themselves to be giving reasons for their positions. *Systematicity* states that the parties must disagree on many other propositions, in particular those propositions related to their different standards or principles upon which they rely to make their judgments. *Persistence*, finally, requires the disagreement to persist after acknowledging the reasons offered by the other side. In other words, one's initial exposure to the other's reasons does not necessarily lead to an immediate change of mind. One reason usually offered to explain this is that accepting the other's view may necessitate restructuring one's worldview or standard, which would involve perceiving and evaluating the world differently, and this usually takes time. It is important to note, however, that this requirement does not imply that the disagreement is unresolvable; a disagreement can be persistent yet still be resolvable, productive, and fruitful. I will elaborate further on this point below.

Returning to Royd's and Amine's disagreement, we can see that it satisfies the requirements. Firstly, it is a genuine disagreement, a dispute on a particular issue —namely, the rupture between Wittgenstein's early and later work. Secondly, the parties offer reasons for their views. Thirdly, the dispute involves other propositions related to their different

standards, and in fact, the discussion devolves into a dispute about the relevant criterion or standard to determine what the relevant facts are—even to determine who the experts on the issue are. Finally, the disagreement is persistent, at least more persistent than a disagreement about whether a t-shirt is white or black would be. Therefore, this is a clear instance of deep disagreement.

As I see deep disagreements, the relevant requirement of these four desiderata is related to Systematicity, understood as the condition according to which deep disagreements are disputes that turn into a discussion about the standard that should be upheld in order to settle the issue, no matter whether the disagreement is about a political, moral, aesthetic, philosophical, religious or epistemic issue.³ The reason is that Genuine, Reason-taking, and Persistence are satisfied by many other kinds of disagreements. Deep disagreement differs from other kinds of disagreements, such as straightforwardly factual (Kappel, 2017), evaluative or non-straightforwardly factual (Field, 2009), metalinguistic negotiations (Plunkett & Sundell, 2019), or crossed disagreements (Osorio & Villanueva, 2019), precisely because the disagreement itself stems from differences in the parties' standards and it devolves into a discussion about the standard or perspective that should be adopted. As Andrew Aberdein has recently put it, "Only disagreements that reach the worldview of at least one of the disputants will count as deep" (Aberdein, 2020, p. 44). In Klemens Kappel's words, "deep disagreement features clashes of perspectives, where a perspective includes views about how we should acquire evidence, assess evidence, argue, form beliefs, or gain knowledge in the domain in question" (Kappel, 2017, p. 1). Thus, this is the hallmark of deep disagreements.

The expression "deep disagreement" comes from Robert Fogelin's famous paper *The Logic of Deep Disagreement* (1985), wherein the author conceived deep disagreements as involving "a clash in underlying principles" or "framework propositions" (1985, p. 5)—which, again, supports the idea that Systematicity is the relevant requirement for deep disagreements. However, there is an ongoing debate regarding the metaphysical nature of these "underlying principles". Two main competing theories are the so-called *Wittgensteinian view* and *fundamental epistemic principles view* (Ranalli, 2021; see also Lavorerio, 2021 for a review and discussion of these theories). According to the latter, deep disagreements are disputes over epistemic principles (Kappel, 2012; Kappel & Jøch-Klausen, 2015; Lynch, 2010, 2016), while the former holds that they are disagreements over hinge commitments (Fogelin, 1985; Hazlett, 2014; Pritchard, 2011).⁴

Beyond the metaphysical question, there is another debate in the literature about a more practical concern: what should we do when facing a deep disagreement? One way to pose this question is as follows: could deep disagreements be resolved by (non-practical) reasons? Could they be instances of fruitful discussions? Most authors are on the negative: reasons are not very helpful to settle these kinds of discussions; but some of them think that reasons can somehow be useful. Scott Aikin divides these authors into *optimists* and

³ In this sense, deep disagreements are not constrained to certain topics, and therefore they are not a kind of disagreement different from a moral or religious ones, against what Ranalli suggests (Ranalli, 2021, p. 983).

⁴ This rich and extensive debate, although highly interesting, will be avoided here; it is not the goal of this paper to tackle the metaphysical question about the nature of the standards we rely on to make our judgments.

pessimists (Aikin, 2019, p. 421). On the pessimist side, some maintain that we shouldn't try to engage in deep disagreements (Campolo, 2005, 2019), while others argue that we should use non-argumentative or different argumentative techniques (Kraus, 2012; Barris, 2015; Duran, 2016). Among optimists, we find a wide range of diverse views. Some say that it is important to keep arguing, because it is the only way to discover whether we actually are in a deep disagreement (Adams, 2005). Others hold that argumentation in deep disagreements can prevent worse developments (Lynch, 2010, 2012; Kappel, 2012; Jøneh-Clausen & Kappel, 2015). There are also optimists defending that deep disagreements can be argumentatively resolved by third parties (Memedi, 2007), that arguments can produce or make explicit certain shared reasons (Davson-Galle, 1992; Goodwin, 2005; Godden & Brenner, 2010), or even that deep disagreements are actually impossible (Feldman, 2005; Phillips, 2008; Siegel, 2014).

The widespread skepticism regarding the rational resolution of deep disagreement—and, consequently, about its fruitfulness—is commonly motivated by the theoretical implications of its defining features of Persistence and Systematicity. Given that deep disagreements involve a clash of standards, which typically causes these discussions to persist over time, it is intuitive to think that reasons will be ineffective in resolving the dispute—and therefore the parties involved will tend to develop contempt for each other. To put it differently, there is no “matter of the fact,” as they say, that can necessarily resolve a discussion about the standard that should be upheld, so reasons will run out. In Wittgenstein's words, our spade will turn on bedrock.

3. *Deep disagreement: An alternative approach sketched*

I am skeptical about deep disagreements tending to be harmful and unproductive from rational discussion, for various reasons. First, no matter how closely we examine the fundamental features of deep disagreements, there seems to be nothing that makes them irresolvable or pernicious. As a matter of fact, deep disagreements get resolved through discussion and, in many cases, prove to be fruitful. Here are two extreme examples. Megan Phelps-Roper (Westboro Baptist Church) and Derek Black (White Nationalism) underwent profound shifts in their worldviews, ultimately disavowing their extremist groups, after engaging in discussions with close friends who held opposing views (see Llanera, 2019). I can think of no clearer and stronger case of deep disagreements being resolved through reasons. Even among Wittgensteinians, one of the most stubborn beings in the world, we can find deep disagreements being resolved. Saul Kripke's famous reading of Ludwig Wittgenstein's work (1982) indeed made many Wittgensteinians change the way they approach Wittgenstein's philosophy.

Of course, as noted before, this is not a knock-down argument, since one could insist that even though deep disagreements are not *necessarily* pernicious nor irresolvable, they tend to be so because they are persistent, and the parties involved don't share a sufficient background (Lavorerio, 2023). Thus, finding cases of deep disagreement being fruitful and getting resolved wouldn't show that deep disagreements can *usually* be settled through reasons. Still, I think this limitation, together with other reasons outlined in the rest of this section, puts us on the track that, maybe, deep disagreements do not tend to be as devastating as it is often assumed.

Second, the tendency toward persistence does not seem to be a unique feature of deep disagreements; other disagreements, at times, also exhibit this feature. For instance, evaluative or non-straightforwardly factual disagreements, situations in which we discuss whether a certain action is morally right, tend to persist even when the standards on which the disagreeing parties rely are made explicit (Field, 2009). In these cases, the disagreement does not disappear when we realize that our evaluations are based upon different standards, it does not become into a discussion about whether the standards we share sanction what we are evaluating or not, nor does it become about what standards should govern our evaluations. But more importantly: from the fact that evaluative disagreements tend to persist over time it does not follow that they are usually harmful or that they do not tend to be resolved. Having these kinds of evaluative discussions is essential for moral progress, and we often reach agreement on what is right and wrong, what we should do, what is aesthetically beautiful, etc. (I will say more about this in section 5). Thus, persistence doesn't equate to a tendency to develop animosity towards the opposing party.

Third, the fact that the tendency towards persistence is not unique to deep disagreements, nor usually detrimental, leads me to think that those who maintain that deep disagreements cannot be resolved through reasons *might* be assuming an idealized conception of what a standard or worldview is.⁵ Since a standard or worldview is understood, roughly put, as the framework from which an individual makes their judgments, a natural tendency might be to conceive standards as if they were clearly established from the outset. According to this picture, we enter into disagreements equipped with our standard. But there's an alternative picture, which is more convincing to me, about how we actually work. It seems more intuitive to think that we are continuously shaping our own perspective. Through our judgments, we "discover" our standards, but also "discover" some inconsistencies in them that force us to reshape our perspective and adjust it. As a result, we are constantly building and shaping our worldview. To put it clearly, our standards are not a pre-established thing. Rather, our standards are forged, so to speak, the moment we make judgments, and they are shaped as we keep making judgments in particular situations. Understood this way, the condition of persistence wouldn't entail a very slow and costly process to adjust and update our worldview.

Katherina Kinzel and Martin Kusch have recently criticized prevalent accounts of disagreement for assuming unreasonably high levels of idealization. They propose to talk about situated judgments, i.e., judgments in specific situations of contestation for specific situations of application, instead of brute or rule-governed judgments (Kinzel & Kusch, 2018). This more dynamic, non-idealized conception of standards and disagreements accounts for one of the benefits of deep disagreements: they allow us to improve our standard and shape it when it is necessary. Friction with the community is crucial to distinguish between when we are right and when we merely think we are right, and that's one of the advantages of

⁵ Note that assuming an idealized conception of standards or worldviews doesn't necessarily imply conceiving them as static. One can maintain that our standards and worldviews are malleable and, therefore, can change over time, while still assuming an idealized conception of them, in the sense that it's assumed that our standards and worldviews are strongly consistent and stable, and they are clearly articulated every time we enter a discussion. I thank an anonymous reviewer of this journal for pressing me to be clearer on this point.

deep disagreements.⁶ A good amount of our highly productive disagreements are precisely those involving people who have completely different stances and standards from our own (Leslie, 2021). Of course, I don't mean to imply that discussions with likeminded people cannot be beneficial. They are. But certain friction with people with different worldviews is necessary for our standards to improve, and for reaching coordination in democracy. Such situations push us to be better people. So persistent disagreements can be fruitful and resolvable.

Fourth, if we take seriously the conception of deep disagreements according to which the lack of common ground between the parties' standards or worldviews makes the discussion persist and become unproductive, then we commit ourselves to the claim that people with different worldviews or backgrounds hardly understand each other, because their hinge propositions, or the standards on which their judgments rely, are radically different. However, this is quite problematic. Intercultural dialogue and agreement are not only possible; they actually take place. In other words, insisting that not sharing a relevant part of the background makes our discussions tend to be harmful commits us to the claim that successful intercultural dialogue is rare and nearly impossible. But this is false. De-idealizing standards and focusing on how our specific situated judgments shape our perspectives is a way to avoid this undesirable consequence (see Carmona & Villanueva, 2023 for a recent discussion along these lines).

To sum up, when we *judge together*, we can end up aligning our standards in particular situations even if they were pretty opposite at the beginning. Or we may continue to have different standards but improve the arguments we offer to support our view and, in turn, improve our own standard. It is even possible that, as Herman Cappelen and John Hawthorne suggest, agreement need not involve shared beliefs (Cappelen & Hawthorne, 2009, pp. 60-61). The tendency to persist, when it does occur, is not necessarily a problem; on many occasions, it provides the necessary conditions to experience genealogical anxiety (Srinivasan, 2019) and reflect on why we believe what we do. According to this approach, deep disagreements don't tend to become unproductive or harmful discussions.

4. *Deep disagreement in contemporary politics*

As we have seen in the last section, deep disagreements could be more persistent over time than factual disagreements, but from this fact it, doesn't follow that deep disagreements cannot be resolved and are pernicious per se, nor that they tend to be so. However, this claim may seem rather naive in light of recent and socially relevant examples of deep disagreement: most of our current instances of political deep disagreement are indeed unfruitful, pernicious, and difficult to resolve.

There is a growing literature connecting deep disagreements with certain socio-political phenomena (Lagewaard, 2021; Viciano, Hannikainen & Gaitán, 2019). In particular, in

⁶ If we reject that deep disagreements have these benefits precisely because they are persistent and the parties involved do not share their standards, then we would have to commit ourselves to the idea that rational and fruitful disagreements are only possible when the parties actually share their basic views or standards, as some authors seem to suggest (De Ridder, 2021, pp. 232-233). But this view is quite contrary to the pivotal idea of democracy, and the way we reach knowledge (Medina, 2013).

this section, I focus on two of these recent approaches, in which the authors point to deep disagreements as one of the elements contributing to the increase in affective polarization. According to them, deep disagreements jeopardize democracy.

Michael Lynch (2021a, 2021b) has recently explored what he takes as two contributing factors to the rise of the cognitive side of affective polarization —the fact that members of distinct political groups regard each other with deep suspicion, as less rational, intelligent, and trustworthy. According to him, these two factors are *deep disagreements over epistemic issues* and *the epistemic vice of group intellectual arrogance*, which can be mutually reinforcing. Lynch’s argument starts by pointing out how pervasive and persistent disagreements over basic facts in contemporary democracies are (Lynch, 2021b, p. 246). Discussions about climate change, the effectiveness of mask-wearing policies, or the nationality of a former U.S. president, for example, turn into discussions about whether the other side’s views are based on reliable epistemic practices, i.e., deep disagreements. According to this approach, this implies devastating practical and epistemic consequences. As Lynch puts it,

It is not difficult to see why epistemic disagreements are problematic for democracies, especially in times of crisis. You cannot determine what to do in the face of the facts if you disagree over what the facts are. And you cannot agree on the facts if you do not agree on which epistemic and social-epistemic practices are reliable. (Lynch, 2021b, p. 247)

If we disagree on which methods are reliable to determine the relevant facts, then we disagree over what the facts are, and therefore we are doomed not to agree on what policies to apply. Lynch makes a similar point: “when debates devolve to the point that they are about epistemic principles —about the very standards for assessing what is and isn’t a fact, there is little hope for resolving what policy to enact in light of the facts” (Lynch, 2021a, p. 149). Note that Lynch does not close the door entirely on the possibility that deep disagreements can be resolved; he just points out that there is *little hope* for that. Because, in fact, our political cases of deep disagreement clearly show that there is not much hope.⁷

The second part of Lynch’s argument holds that our group intellectual arrogance, the epistemic attitude that consists of an inability to consider our group’s worldview as susceptible to improvement based on evidence and the testimony of others, leads us to consider deep political disagreements as a reason to hold our initial position more strongly (Lynch, 2021b, p. 251). These two elements taken together, the presence of deep disagreements in the political arena —or at least the perception of it— and group epistemic arrogance, explain part of the increase in affective polarization according to this diagnosis.

Jeroen de Ridder (2021) has also recently pointed to deep disagreements as one of the causes of contemporary democracies’ breakdown. Ridder’s argument, which is stronger than Lynch’s, starts by pointing out that, while political disagreement is generally taken as presenting opportunities for epistemic self-improvement and as good for democracy, this has been questioned by empirical studies from psychology and political sciences

⁷ One of the problems of our current political situation, Lynch says, is not that it is indeed full of deep disagreements, which is most likely the case, but that it is widely perceived that our political disputes are indeed instances of deep disagreement, regardless of whether they really are or not, and that’s enough (Lynch, 2021b, p. 249). Perceiving that we are in a deep disagreement is just as bad as actually being in it: its consequences are similar.

(Ridder, 2021, p. 226). Ridder's answer to this challenge is that the problem for democracy is not political disagreement itself, but deep disagreement. The occurrence of deep disagreements in democracies, in his words, "undermine a crucial presupposition of epistemic democracy, to wit the availability of common ground for reasonable debate and deliberation" (Ridder, 2021, p. 226).

For Ridder, many of our political disagreements are indeed instances of deep disagreement. Take a contemporary political disagreement on COVID-19 vaccination, where the parties rely on different, contradictory evidence. As Ridder puts it, "If you rely on systematic scientific evidence about the safety of vaccination and I trust anecdotal evidence from my friends and put more stock in natural medicine in general, our disagreement is deep, because our factual disagreement about the safety of vaccines is the results of our reliance on different relatively basic epistemic principles" (Ridder, 2021, p. 232). That's the structural form of many of our political battles, which leads us down to the worst in democracy.

Ridder's argument, roughly sketched, states that deep disagreements lead people to see each other as evil and epistemically defective, which feeds into affective polarization and, in turn, makes political disagreements even more irresolvable. Take the example just mentioned. If you rely on scientific evidence about the safety of vaccination and I rely on what my friends and general medicine say, you will not recognize my reasons and arguments as rational contributions to the discussion. I can try to convince you why my evidence is the relevant one, but I will probably fail, and vice versa, so our own standards will be resistant to rational revision. But not only that, we will start to regard each other as irrational, because our way of reasoning will appear to each other as totally mistaken. And when our discussion or reasoning involves some moral principle or consideration, we will not just see each other as irrational or epistemically defective, but also as evil. And the same goes for political discussions between climate change deniers and climate change advocates, pro-choice and non-pro-choice supporters, and a young earth creationist and a geologist when discussing about the age of the earth. So deep disagreements are pernicious situations that jeopardize democracy.

These analyses seem to somehow clash with the idea that deep disagreements don't tend to be unfruitful or pernicious sketched in the last section. When analyzing many real-life cases of deep disagreements, we find that most of them are indeed intractable and pernicious. The presence of deep disagreement in politics, or at least the perception that our disagreements are deep ones as Lynch has qualified (Lynch, 2021b, p. 249), makes our political disputes so intractable and harmful to democracy. But if the discussion outlined in the previous section makes sense, then why do most real-life examples of deep disagreement, especially in politics, appear as so intractable and pernicious?

5. *Deep conflicts*

Let's suppose that the conversation between Amine and Royd, introduced in section 2, continues as follows:

ROYD: You are wrong. That's not the relevant criterion at all!

AMINE: And why not? Because you "the continental experts" say so?

ROYD: Hey, calm down. God, these new Wittgensteinians analytic philosophers believe they are Wittgenstein themselves. Are you going to threaten me with a blow poke too?

AMINE: Should I? I know you want me to leave my past behind because you don't respect my work, mostly based on a different understanding from yours of Wittgenstein's works. Philosophy is not yours!

ROYD: It is not certainly mine, but you analytic philosophers are ruining philosophy, making far-fetched interpretations just to attract some attention and drive us out of the philosophy department, even if it means being untruthful!

AMINE: Oh dear, there it comes again, the continentals with their drama. Go with your colleagues the experts on Wittgenstein's philosophy to talk about ruptures to somewhere else and leave us to live in peace! We are running out of funds and projects because of you!

ROYD: You don't have enough funds and projects because you don't know philosophy at all. You don't even know that there is a significant rupture in Wittgenstein's philosophy!

AMINE: Sure! You have been influencing the committees to reject our proposals because you can't stand that there are new people in the department finally making relevant contributions to philosophy!

ROYD: Oh, come on! Don't blame us for your own incompetence!

AMINE: God... It's a bummer you old Wittgensteinians aren't all old in age too...

I will use this whole fictitious case to showcase some features of a situation that, besides counting as one of deep disagreement, also counts as an instance of what I will call *deep conflict*. For that, I argue here that a dispute can be called "deep" for two very different reasons: because it is a deep disagreement, in the sense introduced in section 2, or because it is an instance of a *deep conflict*, in the sense it will be introduced in this section. In many cases, both senses of "deep" are present at the same time, so they can be easily confused with each other. But they are not the same phenomenon. Deep conflicts are compatible with many different types of disagreement, precisely because they relate to the conditions under which a disagreement takes place. A deep disagreement can be an instance of a deep conflict, but not all deep conflicts materialize in deep disagreements, and not all deep disagreements are instances of deep conflict.

Before introducing what a deep conflict amounts to, let me introduce a distinction between *fruitful* and *infertile conflicts*, that will be helpful to grasp better the phenomenon of deep conflict. Fruitful conflicts are situations where the parties *judge together*, i.e., they really think together about the issue under discussion, taking truly and honestly the other side's perspective into consideration (Almagro & Villanueva, 2022). In such cases, the discussion can lead the parties to progress and understanding in different ways, even if the disagreement persists. Maybe a discussion was fruitful because the disagreement was resolved, or because coordination was reached despite the fact that the parties still disagree, or because the parties' standards were more aligned at the end, or because it helped the parties to improve their own perspective while remaining different, etc. Certainly, fruitful conflicts can be stressful and heated, but that can be a good thing too (see Leslie, 2021).

In a nutshell, fruitful conflicts allow us to understand each other and to improve ourselves, one way or another. By opposition, a disagreement can be called "infertile" if it prevents the parties from judging together, i.e., if the discussion turns out to be infertile. Unlike fruitful conflicts, infertile ones occur when the disagreement is infertile for every possibility mentioned above, or when the resultant harm is worse than the benefits obtained. In an infertile conflict, then, the disagreement isn't resolved, coordination isn't reached, the parties' standards aren't more aligned, it doesn't help the parties to improve their own standards, etc. Of course, this is not an exhaustive list. The idea is simply that a

discussion counts as an instance of infertile conflict when there is nothing beneficial as a result of it, or when, for a certain goal, the harm caused was bigger than the benefit obtained. Importantly, note that these two categories, fruitful and infertile conflicts, are orthogonal regarding the specific type of disagreement involved in the concrete situation. That is, fruitful and infertile conflicts can be manifested through many different kinds of disagreements, including deep disagreements.

With this distinction at hand, we can now state that deep conflicts tend to be a type of infertile conflict—but, of course, not all infertile conflicts are instances of what I’m calling “deep conflicts”—, which can be manifested through many different sorts of disagreement. Deep conflicts are not just infertile discussions, because a disagreement can be infertile without being deep in any sense. Deep conflicts, as I understand them here, are “deep” because there is a *deep story* behind the disagreement, which is also part of “what’s going on” in the discussion. This deep story, or part of it, can be made explicit through the discussion, but that’s not necessary for a case to count as a deep conflict. In fact, in most deep conflict cases, the deep story remains beneath the concrete disagreement, although the parties somehow feel the pressure exerted by it, so to speak, even when they are unaware of it. This is so because it is the deep story what prevents the parties from judging together and be involved in a fruitful conflict. In Ian Leslie’s words, “Underneath every disagreement a wordless negotiation over a relationship is taking place. If we don’t settle that, the conversation doesn’t stand a chance.” (Leslie, 2021, p. 12). Maybe claiming that every disagreement involves an additional silent negotiation is going too far, but this quote goes directly to the point I’m trying to make here.

But what exactly are the defining features of the deep story behind a deep conflict? Here’s an attempt to set out such features. A deep story is a *two-faced narrative*, one that describes a *preexistent rivalry* in terms of *us versus them*, or in terms of good guys versus bad guys, where each party is *highly convinced of the truth of the narrative’s version according to which they are the good guys*. Given such a deep story, each party sees the others as responsible for their suffering, and then *each side wants to punish them* for that because they are *resentful and worried*. This doesn’t mean that the concrete disagreements in which a deep conflict manifests are only an excuse for each party to beat their enemy, in the sense that they don’t really hold what they say; these concrete disagreements can be genuine ones. Simply, these disagreements are not the whole thing; there is a deep story behind the discussion which is, maybe silently, also at stake in the dispute.

Note that this “deep story” is not equivalent to the underlying principles or worldviews involved in a deep disagreement. Two parties in a deep disagreement may have different moral and epistemic standards while lacking a deep story. In deep disagreements, there isn’t necessarily a preexistent rivalry between the parties, they don’t need to be *highly* convinced of the truth of the narrative’s version according to which they are the good guys, or regard the other side with contempt and be eager to punish them.

Let’s return to Amine’s and Royd’s case. Now we can see that they are not just in a deep disagreement about the rupture between Wittgenstein’s early and later work. Amine and Royd are also in a deep conflict: there is a deep story underneath the disagreement, one in which the parties belong to conflicting groups in a philosophy department (continental versus analytic philosophers), for whom their differences over Wittgenstein’s philosophy are part of their identity as philosophers. That is, both groups see the other as responsible for their discomfort in the department, and both are strongly convinced that their version

of the story is the only true one. So they are resentful of each other, and they want to punish each other. In this context, Amine and Royd are of course involved in a deep disagreement. But the disagreement itself is just a part of the whole conflict. It is the underlying deep story, and not the deep disagreement, that prevents them from having a fruitful discussion. They think that there is nothing they can learn from each other; they just want to beat each other. In this sense, it can be said that there is some kind of stagnation in the discussion: the disagreement is the destination itself.⁸ But if Amine and Royd weren't involved in a deep conflict, their deep disagreement might have been fruitful and productive, and might even have been resolved eventually.

Let's take another example. Consider the following fragment, about a couple getting divorced, from Amanda Ripley's book *High conflict*:

Say a wife makes a demand: "I want four thousand dollars a month for spousal support". The husband recoils: "That's absurd!" he yells. "Never going to happen". *It appears they're fighting about the money, and they are. But the more interesting conflict lies underneath this fight over money.* (Ripley, 2021, p. 33, my emphasis)

In this and many other cases carefully analyzed throughout Ripley's book—which are not all instances of deep disagreement—the parties involved in a discussion are also part of a deep conflict, with a specific deep story. The discussion about money, in this case, is subsumed in a deeper quarrel, in which each party regards the other as responsible for their pain. They see each other as an evil enemy who just wants to make them suffer, and they react to this set of assumptions with contempt and rage because they are afraid, but also because they are convinced of the truth of their narratives. Of course, they disagree over money in this case, and over many other particular issues in other cases. But as Leslie and Ripley point out, there is a conflict that lies underneath the dispute. It is this deep conflict, with its two-sided narrative, that prevents the parties from having a fruitful discussion.

6. *Deep conflicts and affective polarization*

In the last section, I have argued that a concrete disagreement, e.g., a deep disagreement, can appear within a more general context. In particular, I've said that it can appear within a context where the parties involved regard each other as enemies, i.e., they see each other in terms of "us versus them," because there is a deep story of rivalry between them underneath the concrete disagreement. A mundane discussion between two families about how stew should be cooked, for instance, can occur within a more general context of pre-existent and active rivalry. When this happens, the situation also counts as an instance of deep conflict, which, in turn, prevents the parties from judging together, i.e., from having a fruitful discussion. As Ripley puts it, "When conflict escalates past a certain point, the conflict itself takes charge. The original facts and forces that led to the dispute fade into the background. The us-versus-them dynamic takes over" (Ripley, 2021, p. 9). In this sec-

⁸ In the version of Amine's and Royd's case presented in this section, the deep story has been made explicit at the end. But the situation could have been simply as described at the beginning of section 2, with the deep story remaining in the background of the discussion.

tion, I argue that in affectively polarized democracies, deep conflicts are likely to happen, and that's the reason why most current political deep disagreements appear so intractable and pernicious.

Many contemporary democracies across the globe are affectively polarized (Bosco & Varney, 2020; Boxell *et al.*, 2020; Carothers & O'Donohue, 2019; Finkel *et al.*, 2020; Gidron *et al.*, 2020). Affective polarization is characterized by a strong adhesion, in the abstract, to an ideological identity, i.e., an increase in the confidence—an affective attitude—in the core ideas of the ideological group citizens self-identify with, which manifests through the tendency to have negative feelings towards opposing partisans and positive feelings toward co-partisans (Almagro, 2022; Iyengar, Sood & Lelkes, 2012; Iyengar & Westwood, 2015; Iyengar *et al.*, 2019).

The mere identification with a group, even due to trivial or mundane reasons, inclines us to favor the people belonging to our group and to disfavor “the others”. This is called *minimal group paradigm* (Mason, 2018). But, as mentioned before, affective polarization not only involves identities; affectively polarized people are so deeply convinced that they are right, i.e., that the way they see the world, the central position held by their ideological identity, is clearly true, and therefore it is the right one to hold, to the extent that the members of conflicting groups must be irrational or evil to maintain opposing views. This attitude can be called group intellectual arrogance, i.e., the attitude of being unable to consider our group's worldview as susceptible to improvement based on evidence and the testimony of others (Lynch, 2019). But it seems to be a symptom, and not a cause, of affective polarization. Let's see an example of what might be taken as part of the narrative behind Republicans in the US.

In her book *Strangers in their own land*, sociologist Arlie Russell Hochschild describes part of the deep story of some Tea Party members in Louisiana, US. The picture is roughly like this (see Hochschild, 2016, pp. 135-151). Imagine these Republicans as if they were standing in the middle of a long line leading up a hill, where the American Dream is at the top of the hill. “They” are mostly white, heterosexual, older, Christian, and predominantly male. They have been waiting so long in the line, working hard and suffering many calamities of all kinds, but the line is unmoving. Suddenly, they see people cutting in line ahead of them, and they start to complain because it feels unfair. Who are the people cutting in line? African-Americans, women, refugees, etc., all of them supported by the government through leftist affirmative action plans. But it is people like them, they think, who have made the country great. So the situation is not fair. They keep complaining, and then start to get accused of being racists, sexists, homophobes, ignorant, privileged, etc. They feel angry and betrayed by their own government, by Democrats, by liberals. They feel betrayed by a government that they won't consider their government anymore: it cannot be trusted, because its policies work against them, they think. They can't trust the government's policies anymore. So they feel like strangers in their own land.

Regardless of whether this picture is a faithful description of the narrative behind conservatives' worldview in the US or not, the point I want to make here is that within such a context—a highly affectively polarized one—a political discussion between liberals and conservatives about climate change, or the effectiveness of mask-wearing policies, or the nationality of a former U.S. president, etc., will not be reduced to the concrete political disagreement itself. The disagreement will be just a way through which a deep conflict, with a deep story behind, manifests. That is, there is a deep story behind the concrete discussion,

such as the one sketched above, playing a key role in the concrete disagreement. In other words, in an affectively polarized context, deep conflicts are pretty likely to happen.

One may object that the two-sided narrative behind a deep conflict is nothing but a difference in the parties' worldviews or standards and, therefore, deep conflicts are actually nothing but a particular subset of deep disagreements: the set of deep disagreements where there is a long-running narrative of social rivalry in terms of "us" versus "them" at play.⁹ This is certainly a possibility. But let me say two things about it. First, this observation already suggests that the problem is not deep disagreements in general, but a specific set of them, those involving a certain narrative, which suggests that there's a significant distinction to make here. Second, and more importantly: note that in affectively polarized contexts, the adherence to a narrative —the endorsement of certain views— usually occurs just *in the abstract* (see Almagro *et al.*, 2023). In other words, polarized citizens tend to endorse a certain narrative in the abstract, which means that their judgments in concrete situations may remain the same, and their concrete judgments are usually incompatible with the narrative they have endorsed in the abstract. That's why it is relatively common to find little stability in people's political beliefs in affectively polarized contexts —to the extent that we wonder whether polarized people really believe their political statements (see Hannon, 2021, Almagro, 2023)—, and that is why in these situations, our political statements primarily serve an identity signaling function (see, for instance, Williams, 2021).¹⁰ For these reasons, I prefer to understand deep disagreements and deep conflicts as separate phenomena.

Since deep conflicts can be manifested through deep disagreements in affectively polarized democracies, it might lead us to think erroneously that, at least in some cases, political deep disagreements, due to their nature, are partially responsible for the current political situation. But it might be the case that they appear as so intractable and pernicious because they are instances of a deep conflict. The parties involved are deeply convinced, in the abstract, of the truth of a narrative that presents them as the good guys versus the bad and evil ones. So, at least in some of these cases, the problem would not be the presence of deep disagreements in the political arena, but *deep conflicts*, i.e., the broad conflict behind the concrete disagreement. The problem starts when a group of people ends up with a very high confidence in the truth of a narrative such as the one depicted above. Of course, this is not to say that deep disagreements never can be infertile without being accompanied by a deep conflict. They could be infertile *per se* sometimes. My point here is just that, in some relevant cases, we may have overlooked something that could be important to explain why current political disagreements are so unproductive and fruitless.

One reason to suspect that both senses of "deep" are conflated in the contemporary diagnoses introduced in section 4 is that, as we have seen, these authors tend to find a close connection between deep disagreements and intellectual arrogance. As Aberdein puts it,

⁹ I thank an anonymous reviewer of this journal for raising this important point.

¹⁰ This is one of the crucial differences between a deep conflict in a polarized context and a deep disagreement: in polarized contexts, the deep story beneath the deep conflict usually does not fit the standard or worldview on which our specific concrete judgments actually rely. On the contrary, what prevents us from judging together in these cases is a narrative that we endorse in the abstract, which does not permeate many of our concrete judgments.

“any disagreement with an arrogant individual is more than likely to feel like deep disagreement, even in cases where there is an easily accessible resolution” (Aberdein, 2021, p. 47). But, as we have seen in sections 2 and 3, a deep disagreement is not necessarily similar to disagreeing with an arrogant individual in any sense. In other words, deep disagreements can be instances of fruitful conflicts, in different ways. Assuming that there is a close connection between arrogance and deep disagreement is a hint that both senses of “deep”, deep disagreement and deep conflict, are conflated. They usually go together in affectively polarized scenarios, given the defining features of affective polarization, and that’s the reason why most current political deep disagreements appear so pernicious. But, again, here’s the suggestion proposed throughout this paper: many political deep disagreements might not be intractable because they are deep disagreements, but because they are deep conflicts. So, in order to ameliorate our current political situation, our efforts should be focused not on avoiding deep disagreements, but on preventing the rise of deep conflicts, when the level of affective polarization is not so high yet. And for that, there seems to be hope, or that’s the message from Leslie’s book: “The most difficult disagreements can be transformed into productive conversations by paying close attention to this hidden dimension” (Leslie, 2021, p. 12).

7. Conclusion

In this paper, I presented an alternative route to the standard approach to political deep disagreements. According to the standard story, the occurrence of deep disagreements in the political realm seems to jeopardize democracy: since deep disagreements involve a clash of standards or principles, they are intractable and pernicious in democracy, because they prevent us from reaching consensus. According to the alternative route explored in this paper, deep disagreements do not tend to be intractable or pernicious. In fact, deep disagreements can be, and many instances of them actually are, fruitful discussions. But then, why do many real-life cases of political deep disagreements seem to be so harmful and unproductive?

In order to address this question, I introduced two different senses in which a disagreement can count as “deep”: deep disagreement and deep conflict. Deep disagreements are disputes where the parties have different worldviews or standards, and the dispute turns into a discussion about the standard that should be upheld to settle the issue. Deep conflicts, on the other hand, are a preexistent or promoted rivalry, with a deep story that explains the rivalry in terms of us versus them. Deep conflicts are battles of a long-term war, that can be manifested through concrete genuine disagreements, but where part of the matter at stake is the deep story behind the disagreement and the high level of confidence in at least one of its versions. While deep disagreements can be fruitful conflicts, deep conflicts are a type of infertile conflict.

Then, I argued that in affectively polarized scenarios, citizens tend to endorse a certain deep story in the abstract, which prevents them from judging together with those who think differently. Thus, current political deep disagreements should be intractable and unproductive not because they are instances of deep disagreements, but because they are instances of deep conflict.

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MANUEL ALMAGRO is an Associate Professor at the University of Valencia, and works on political epistemology, political philosophy of language, and experimental philosophy.

ADDRESS: Department of Philosophy, University of Valencia (Av. Blasco Ibáñez, 30, CP 46010, Valencia, Spain). E-mail: manuel.almagro@uv.es - ORCID: 0000-0003-1647-9995