As Musa al-Gharbi pointed out, despite assumptions to the contrary, people are not fundamentally rational. Research shows that when disagreements arise, appeals to rational standards, facts, or statistics can often polarize people more. When people feel threatened or cornered by the evidence, rather than conceding, they often kick debates into the moral sphere, where claims become much more difficult to falsify. In these instances, empirical evidence not only loses most of its force, but even arguments appealing to rivals' own perceived interests can backfire.

The strategies below summarize how to approach moral disagreements in constructive ways. HxA members and other heterodox enthusiasts who wish to help their students engage in open inquiry and constructive disagreement can use these strategies to build mutual understanding and have better conversations on difficult issues.

## Lower the perceived state of the disagreement or conflict

The more people see as "riding on" their being right, the less they will be willing to change. The first thing to do if you want to avoid having a conflict escalate into the moral sphere is to lower the costs of your opponent admitting that they may be wrong or that you might be right. There are a few aspects to this:

### Don't sling pejorative labels or assign bad motives

Someone need not be a bad, sexist, racist, ignorant, stupid, brainwashed, or crazy person to disagree with you. Given how complicated and uncertain many issues are, there is room for reasonable disagreement on virtually any topic. When the insinuation or allegation that the source of the dispute is some negative attribute the *other* person has, the conversation is unlikely to be productive.

When people sling labels, they are also setting a high reputational cost for agreement. When the disagreement is not about the facts, it's about the other person, how they see themselves, and how they are seen by others. To elevate the conversation, criticize *positions* rather than people.

### Agree upon facts first

Often, we lump facts together with implications and applications; for example, "*because* climate change is real, we have to have strict regulations." It is unwise to argue in this way; if the extent to which people contribute to climate change was *already* controversial to the person you are arguing with, and then they think accepting climate change is real also means they also have to accept massive government interventions – that's going to be a much tougher sell.

To stick with this example: first, work towards an agreement about factual details (like the reality of climate change, the extent to which people are driving it, etc.). *Then* talk about what to do about it or how best to address it. Start small and build out.

### Lower a disagreement's visibility

In public environments, including digital forums, there is much more pressure to conform to one's group and to virtue signal. It is also far more embarrassing to admit you were wrong to the whole world than to a single person. People are generally much more reasonable in more intimate settings. Therefore, one way to lower the stakes of a debate is to decrease its visibility. This can also help reduce the possibility of mob effects (and prevent derailments by others jumping into the conversation).

### Don't demand too much from the conversation

People often go into conversations with unrealistic expectations of what can or will be achieved. There is an expectation that one side will be converted to the other's way of thinking, or that they'll both be swayed and meet somewhere in the middle. This creates needless pressure.

In cases of deep disagreement, the initial and primary goal should be simply to clearly understand where the other is coming from and to be well-understood oneself. It is often a major accomplishment just to walk away from a conversation knowing concretely those on the 'other side' of an issue are not necessarily stupid, crazy, ignorant, or evil and there can be morally and intellectually defensible disagreement on the matter.

## Appeal to identity, values, narratives, and frames of reference

### Speak to people in their own language

Research shows that people become much more willing to reconsider or even change their views and to accept controversial facts when presented to them in terms of their own values, commitments, and frames of reference. If you want someone to consider your empirical claims, it's a lot easier to be convincing if you cede the "home court" advantage. Otherwise, one thing you may be arguing about, besides the facts, is the framing.

For example, if you are a progressive talking to a conservative, try to explain why, *as a conservative*, they might find your position compelling. Additional research is likely required: If you want to engage conservatives' frames, you must learn conservative views about the matter. What are the arguments they deploy against your position? Is there anything you can find to agree with, or things you hadn't considered that now seem pretty important? These can be great starting points for building zones of agreement.

### Understand that it's worth the effort

The steps outlined here may sound demanding and intimidating — but the challenge is worth it. If you do a deep dive into a radically alternative worldview with an open mind – that mind will be blown. The exploration might, at times, be disorienting, frustrating, or triggering – but you will learn a lot. You might not abandon your own commitments, but you'll definitely come to see things in a dramatically different way. At the very least, you will discover that your rivals have legitimate reasons for holding the positions they hold on many issues. That in itself – really *internalizing* that – can be huge.

## Lead by Example: Model Civility, Flexibility, Intellectual Humility, and Good Faith

### Follow the Golden Rule to engage in good faith

*Both parties* should be alive to the possibility they may be wrong – in part or even in full – and *both parties* should enter prepared to change their minds. It is unreasonable for you to expect or demand they change their mind in response to arguments if you are not sincerely prepared to do the same.

A good exercise to ask yourself sometimes is, "why do I believe this? What would cause me to change my view on this? What don't I know about this topic that might be important?" If you don't think there is anything that can cause you to change your position on a topic, this is a sign you might not be engaging in good faith.

### Don't let your emotions get the best of you

Although emotions often *do* convey important information, they frequently mislead as well. Sometimes our initial emotional reaction is *not* the right one — as becomes clear with a little time and distance. Often our reactions result from us hearing what we want to hear, or otherwise misperceiving or misinterpreting a claim. Remember this when in a difficult conversation.

In the heat of the moment, people can also use clumsy language that could (and otherwise would) be more careful or precise — but which need not derail a conversation. Asking "what do you mean by that?" or "why do you say that?" can often go a long way towards clearing up misunderstandings or defusing an initial threat response.

If people are intentionally *trying* to get 'under someone's skin' or put them off balance, it is especially important to be attentive to — and in control of — your emotions. Don't take the bait! Keep focused on what matters and try to steer the conversation in a more productive direction. If this is not possible and the other person seems committed to engaging in bad faith, consider disengaging.

**Source:** This guide was adapted from a Heterodox Academy blog post with the same name, written by Musa al-Gharbi. Click here to access the article.