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## **DISAGREEMENT, CONFLICT, AND WHAT'S WRONG WITH EVERYONE AROUND YOU**

HERE IS A POORLY KEPT AND PERPETUALLY EMBARRASSING SECRET about my academic career—my passion for the science of disagreement did not come from observing the harm that violent conflict sows in the world or studying the academic literature and identifying theoretical gaps that needed filling. My passion for disagreement was primarily fueled by my years as a competitive ballroom dancer, training with, competing with, and regularly fighting with my partner and later husband, Ryan.

I began ballroom dancing as a little girl in Russia. This might seem strange to many American readers, but in Eastern Europe in the eighties, taking ballroom dancing lessons was as common as taking ballet or tap lessons is in the United States. All the little girls wanted to do it, and all the little boys were forced into dancing with their sisters. By the time I had met my husband, I had thousands of hours of training and years of competitive experience under my belt. Ryan, who had never danced a step in his life, wanted to learn to dance because he had grand plans to flirt with a woman he expected to see again at a friend's wedding. I was his teacher.

My husband has an infuriating quality. He is just good at things—not necessarily amazing, but notably above average at almost everything, especially things that require physical coordination and musicality. When it came to dancing, he improved quickly because of his talent and interest—and also because his teacher (soon his girlfriend) had endless time and energy for teaching him. We practiced during every available hour and on every patch of hardwood we could find. I quickly came to realize that I had more fun dancing with this complete beginner than with my competition partner. As weeks turned into months, I decided that I would rather break up the competitive partnership I was involved in and dance with Ryan, even if that meant going back to the basics.

There are several unique aspects to ballroom dancing that make it the perfect microcosm for the study of conflict. First of all, the two partners are in perpetual intimate physical contact. The front of your body is literally plastered to your partner's, meaning that you can feel their most minute movements, down to their breath and their heart rate. Good physical contact improves your ability to lead and follow—to coordinate your movements wordlessly and instantaneously. Indeed, after dancing together for years, I could move my body in response to Ryan's much more quickly than it took my conscious brain to understand what was happening. And when everything worked, when we moved in complete harmony, when we felt in sync with the music and with each other—it felt like telepathy. To this day, few experiences I have had compare to this feeling of “oneness.”

But of course, it didn't always work. One of us would lose our balance, move too slowly, stretch too far or not far enough, and the other person would get annoyed. And the finely honed sense that allowed us to feel each other's every movement also allowed us to feel each other's every mood. I'd get upset with his tightened grip on my back, he'd get upset that I was upset, and the magic

would dissolve in an instant. Left in its place was another couple glaring at each other across several feet of empty dance floor.

Like every dance partnership, when things went badly, we tried to diagnose the cause. Predictably, the cause was the other person. His claim that I had moved too slowly was met with my claim that he had not provided enough momentum. When I said he miscounted the rhythm, he said I was the one who started counting from the wrong measure. When he said I was leaning too far back, I would say that he was not counterbalancing enough with his own weight. In fact, every practice, two hours a day, seven days a week, featured a dozen instances where we were both absolutely sure that the other person caused the problem and was simply failing to acknowledge it.

This state of nearly perpetual conflict on the dance floor was especially baffling since we knew each other and the choreography as well as any two people possibly could. We were in love and rarely fought about anything outside of dancing. We had world-class coaches to help us solve our problems, and we were both highly intelligent and analytical people. So how could he be so sure I was to blame and I be so sure that he was? And why did our different perspectives have to lead to so many ugly spats?

My only consolation was that we weren't the only ones with this problem. Observing other dancing couples, ranging from relative beginners to nationally ranked professionals, I saw the same strange phenomenon: Highly trained people who deeply cared about improving their performance were similarly unable to agree on the basic physical facts of which one of them missed the beat or rotated too far.\*

In my early twenties, I decided to get a PhD in social psychology, not because I had ambitions to bring peace to the Middle

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\* I later learned that a similar dynamic plays out between bridge partners, tennis partners, and, of course, parents.

East or to restore democracy but because I wanted to figure out how to stop fighting with my dance partner.

## PSYCHOLOGICAL CAUSES OF CONFLICT

I applied to graduate school and was fortunate enough to be admitted to Stanford. There, I studied under the legendary psychologist Lee Ross, who at that time was scientifically proving a truth that seems obvious in retrospect: Most conflict stems from the simple fact that everyone thinks they are right. In his work, Lee argued that most people go around the world believing that their perceptions, experiences, and interpretations of events reflect an objective, knowable external reality. Lee called this phenomenon “naïve realism”—a term borrowed from philosophy and intended to highlight that people “naïvely” believe that their perceptions and judgments are “realistic” in some deep, fundamental sense.

Through many clever experiments, Lee and his students demonstrated how this stance then led to conflict across a broad variety of contexts and topics. Because of naïve realism, any time a person had an opinion (which is basically always) and encountered another person (often), they both entered the conversation with a firm conviction that they “got it.” Because both people believed themselves to be fundamentally reasonable and objective, to the extent that their opinions diverged, the seeds of conflict had been sown. As soon as I encountered Lee’s work, I realized that I had found my intellectual home. From that time forward, naïve realism and its logical extensions formed the basis of my research program.

In retrospect, it is likely that Lee, who had spent decades working on the conflicts in Northern Ireland and the Middle East, found my desire to apply his theories to squabbles between ballroom dance partners silly. But as an immensely curious person, who found almost all human behavior fascinating, he also

recognized what was unique about this particular context: If people who were this close and as aligned as Ryan and I were couldn't get past the differences in our perceptions, what hope was there for the rest of the world? Was there some fundamental psychological commonality in conflicts between lovers, colleagues, and nation-states? Indeed, over the years it turned out that competitive ballroom dancing was an excellent laboratory in which to study conflict—a context wherein two parties often saw things fundamentally differently but deeply cared about the outcome and had to reach consensus in order to move forward (or backward, or sideways). I quickly realized that naïve realism was exactly what was causing the issues between Ryan and me.

A unique feature of ballroom dancing is that the partners spend the vast majority of the time facing each other. This means that when Ryan and I passed by a mirror on the wall of the dance studio, I would see my front and his back, but he wouldn't see us at all, because at that moment he would be facing in the opposite direction. As we would move and rotate, our perspectives would shift, but there would literally never be a time when we would both be seeing the world (and ourselves) from the same vantage point. In other words, we would see the same performance, but never at the same time or from the same angle. It turns out that this curious physical arrangement was the perfect metaphor for naïve realism—both partners could grow increasingly certain in their convictions about the quality of their dancing or the source of their mistakes without considering the fact that those convictions might be entirely different if they only saw the world from their partner's point of view.

An important thing to keep in mind is that naïve realism actually serves people quite well, especially in navigating their physical world—a world that even under the simplest circumstances requires humans to make hundreds of tiny judgments every hour. Thanks to this mindset, we quickly assume that when our feet

encounter resistance, they must be on solid ground; when a predator seems very small, it must be very far away; and when green strawberries turn red, they're ready to eat. We thus form the habit of treating our perceptions as accurate reflections of the physical world around us, completely ignoring all the distortion and processing that happens in the split second between sensory contact and the interpretation that our conscious mind imposes on the incoming signal. We do not stop to consider that in a different light, in a different gravity, or with a different set of sensory organs, we would have a completely different experience. Who's got that kind of time? Assuming your views to be basically correct is a pretty effective approach to life—right up until two naïve realists realize that they see the world differently.

Like other cognitive shortcuts—which psychologists often call “cognitive biases”—naïve realism likely persists because it is efficient. Trusting our judgment allows us to make decisions quickly, and the mistakes we make are outweighed by the benefits of this efficiency. The problem is that naïve realism operates largely outside of our awareness and thus shapes our beliefs even in those cases where it might be wise to stop and reconsider. Importantly, just as we don't question our conclusions when it comes to basic sensory experiences, we similarly don't question our conclusions concerning complex and highly disputed social phenomena. In the same way that we mostly forget about the way our sensory organs shape our physical perceptions, we similarly forget about the ways in which our upbringing, our cultural background, our self-interest, our shortsightedness, or our bad mood shape our social judgments. We walk around the world convinced that we are reasonable, objective, sensible people who basically see the world as it is, largely oblivious to the fact that others might see it differently because their views are also being shaped by their backgrounds, personalities, incentives, or moods.

One might argue that all in all, this is not particularly prob-

lematic. Everyone has a unique perspective on the world, and we should all live and let live. “You do you”—as my teenage daughters might say. But one other important feature of human psychology gets in the way of us being able to peacefully coexist. Namely, when encountering disagreements, people quickly and automatically make a set of judgments about the *reason* for the divergence in their views. Psychologists call this process “making an attribution”—we are attributing the behavior to some cause or set of causes that gave rise to it. And like most human judgments, the attribution process is far from perfect.

People make attributions for all sorts of social phenomena, not just disagreement. A fundamental task of living in a highly complex society is understanding why other members of the species do whatever they do so that each person can predict the others’ behavior with some accuracy. Most of the time, these attributional judgments too are fast and automatic, occurring in the back of our minds without ever being questioned.

For example, when I see a person waving at another as they walk toward each other, I might attribute that behavior to the fact that they probably know each other and have a friendly relationship. This inference allows me to predict that when they meet, they will probably stop and chat and are unlikely to get into a fistfight. When I see a person hand a cashier money, I attribute the behavior to the fact that the person has taken a product from the store shelf. I can then predict that the cashier is likely to give the customer a receipt and unlikely to break into song. The stories we effortlessly generate about why a particular behavior is taking place allow us to make sense of the world and predict the next act in the play that is unfolding all around us.

However, most attributions we make are extrapolations based on prior patterns we have observed, not deductions based on our observation of the situation at hand. In the end, attributing somebody’s behavior to a particular cause is an educated guess that is

influenced by the contents of our life experience, our processing capacity, and a variety of cognitive biases. For example, if I see a person angrily kicking their car, I might attribute that behavior to the person's bad temper. What I might not know is that this person is having a very bad day because their dog just died, their partner broke up with them, and they are about to miss a job interview thanks to the broken-down car. In this case (as in many others), I am making a guess based on my previous experience with car-kickers, without knowing all the facts related to this particular instance.

When we encounter disagreement, we follow a similar process. We draw on what we know from our life experience and make an educated guess about why we might be disagreeing. And this is where naïve realism comes into play. If what I have learned from my life experience is that I am a reasonable person who basically “gets it,” the most obvious explanation for why we disagree is that something is wrong with *them*.

As it happens, we rarely struggle to generate hypotheses about the shortcomings that lead other people to disagree with us. An obvious possibility that often springs to mind first is that they are simply not aware of all the relevant information. For example, if your colleague is complaining about unusually high expenses, you might say: “No, the expenses for July are not higher than usual. The conference costs are just making them look higher than they really are.” In fact, many disagreements start with the assumption that the other person simply made a mistake and once you correct them, they will not only get back to being on the right track but will probably thank you for the valuable information you provided.

But often it does not work out that way. Your counterpart does not think they made a mistake. They know all about the conference expenses and again repeat that you need to rein in department spending. Given that correcting them with accurate in-

formation failed to resolve the disagreement, you decide to think a bit harder about why there seems to be a difference of interpretation. Unfortunately, however, you conclude that they simply didn't *understand* the information. Perhaps this individual is not as financially savvy as we had been assuming, or maybe they don't understand the life cycle of a growing business as well as you thought they did. Clearly, you need to explain it again, at greater length and now with data to support your argument.

When this too fails to change your counterpart's mind, you arrive at the final stop in the attribution process. You have provided your partner with all of the relevant information and explained it to them in the simplest terms possible. You are confident that anyone with half a brain ought to see it your way by now. So the fact that they persist in their wrongheaded claims suggests that there is some deeper psychological barrier, some bias, that prevents them from agreeing with you. Maybe they are too risk averse? Maybe they are just stubborn and hate changing their mind? Maybe they are a little sexist and don't like a woman telling them they are wrong? Maybe they are an elitist who looks down on anyone without an MBA? Maybe they wanted your job and are still sore that they didn't get it?

Attributions of bias and self-interest can range from merely condescending ("He is just shortsighted") to bordering on paranoid ("He is saying that because he's always hated my guts"). However, in all cases they leave us comfortably continuing to believe our own interpretation of the situation, having neatly disposed with our counterpart's objections as being either irrational or driven by some character flaw.

Of course, people don't like being told that their perspective is stemming from lack of information, lack of intelligence, or bias. When the other person then counters with their version of what is wrong with our thinking and ultimately what is wrong with us, a disagreement about the department budget becomes a

conflict about the nature of our relationship, our business acumen, and our level of integrity. This attributional process and its natural consequences are the most fundamental and frequent cause of interpersonal conflict.

## **HOW UNDERSTANDING NAÏVE REALISM CHANGES OUR UNDERSTANDING OF CONFLICT**

The naïve realism perspective offers several simple but often underappreciated insights. First, this view contradicts the common view that people fail to seriously engage with opposing perspectives because they are “threatened” by the potential truths contained therein and what those truths might reveal about the flaws in their own belief systems. Rather than portraying people as insecure and easily threatened, research on naïve realism argues that people are doggedly attached to their convictions because they simply can’t see the world any other way. People don’t start shouting at each other because they are afraid of being proven wrong; they start shouting because they are frustrated with the others’ failure to recognize that they are right. The problem isn’t that people need to work on their self-esteem and be less threatened by conflict. The real problem is the opposite: What people need to be working on is a bit of intellectual humility.

Another common myth is that intransigence in conflict comes from a person’s psychological need to feel a certain way. “She always needs to be right” is a common lament of frustrated spouses, annoyed friends, and overshadowed younger sisters. The underlying claim is that the “she” in question knows on some level that she might be wrong but is motivated by a powerful psychological need to pretend otherwise. That need might be the above-mentioned insecurity, or a malicious refusal to let someone else “win,” or a concern with being seen as weak for backing down.

However, the naïve realism perspective suggests that the person stubbornly failing to change their mind is not secretly questioning her beliefs and faking confidence but is simply interpreting the evidence before her and reaching the only seemingly reasonable conclusion. She is convinced of her correctness and does not understand why another reasonable person would not share her beliefs. Gently telling her that she should not be so defensive is more likely to get your head bitten off than result in persuasion.

A few years ago, I conducted a simple study with Charlie Dorison, a professor at Georgetown University. We asked roughly four hundred research participants about their views on several highly controversial social issues and offered them the opportunity to read arguments for the opposing perspective. Importantly, we told them that they could read arguments that other online participants had found to be “strong arguments based on good evidence” or “weak arguments containing little evidence.”

If people are insecure and fail to change their mind because they are afraid of having their fundamental views undermined, they should choose to read the weak arguments. After all, why put yourself through the emotional turmoil of possibly learning that one of your fundamental beliefs is wrong? However, if people are naïve realists who truly believe their views and are constantly confused and annoyed by others’ failure to be “reasonable,” they might instead choose to read the strong arguments. Reading a high-quality articulation of why the other side believes what they do might go some distance toward restoring your faith in the intelligence of other humans and soothe some of your irritation with those who disagree with you.

And that is exactly what we found. Eighty percent of our participants preferred to read the strong arguments over the weak ones. This pattern remained consistent across the multiple topics we tested and irrespective of how important the participant said the topic was to them. People didn’t want to read bad information

that would make it easier for them to continue believing whatever they do because they normally don't have any trouble coming up with arguments for their view in the first place. Instead, they were hoping to read something that would inform them. This pattern of results is inconsistent with the idea that people avoid arguments for opposing views because they are afraid to be challenged. Instead, it aligns with the logic of naïve realism and the idea that people avoid arguments for opposing views because they rarely find them compelling but would be open to deeper consideration if something interesting came their way.

The research on naïve realism also sheds new light on the emotions people are likely to feel when confronted with disagreement. If consideration of opposing perspectives leads people to question their convictions, and if they avoid doing so to protect their egos, they ought to report emotions related to fear and anxiety when forced to consider the other side. By contrast, the theory of naïve realism suggests that rather than feeling fear and anxiety, people are more likely to feel anger and irritation. After all, if you know you are right, and the other side is failing to budge, who wouldn't eventually get annoyed? Charlie and I decided to find out which of these sets of emotions is more common.

In a series of experiments, we asked people to consider the emotions they and their opposing counterparts feel when considering arguments for the opposing view. As you might expect by this point in the chapter, participants reported far more anger and irritation than threat and anxiety when considering their *own* emotions. Interestingly, however, when considering their disagreeing counterparts, participants expected *those other people* to feel threatened and anxious. Whereas our participants did not expect their views to shift at all as a result of considering opposing perspectives, they expected their counterparts to experience feelings of threat, anxiety, and uncertainty as they came to question

their beliefs. In other words, while we see ourselves are in possession of the truth, we seem to think that other people simply can't handle it.

## **DOES NAÏVE REALISM ALWAYS LEAD TO CONFLICT?**

Naïve realism is hard to get around. First, as the saying goes, the fish doesn't know it's in water. The vast majority of the time we don't notice the influence of our culture, upbringing, gender, religion, social position, life history, and recent alcohol intake on our interpretation of the disagreements we are in. Indeed, when people in studies are instructed to carefully consider the biases that influence their own thinking and the thinking of disagreeing others, they consistently conclude that the other person is more subject to bias than they themselves are. This phenomenon is called "the bias blind spot" and has been extensively documented across a variety of disagreements and populations by Princeton professor Emily Pronin and her colleagues. So even when explicitly confronted with opposing perspectives and a list of biases that might lead to distorted reasoning, people point the finger at their counterpart and gamely continue to assert that they themselves are being objective.

Consider a belief you hold and one on which you disagree with somebody in your life. Take a minute to review your reasons for holding that belief. Then take a minute to review your counterpart's reasons. Odds are, no matter how hard you introspect, you are not going to find that you hold your belief because you are too insecure, too biased, or too underinformed to change your mind. However, when you consider your counterpart's view, that is exactly the attribution you are likely to make. It is difficult to unsee the evidence of your senses and life experience. After all, if you thought your belief was incorrect, you would have changed your mind by now!

Adding to the challenge is the fact that people are “cognitive misers.” In other words, people consistently pick the path of least resistance when it comes to exerting mental effort. The late Nobel Prize winner Daniel Kahneman wrote extensively about our tendency to use “fast and frugal” mental strategies for most judgment and decision-making tasks. Assuming that we are fundamentally accurate in our perceptions and that therefore there must be something wrong with those who disagree is faster and takes less work than pausing to question our convictions and deeply interrogate all the evidence.

While naïve realism is almost ever present, people’s need to act on it by asserting the superiority of their beliefs varies with the situation. Remember that situations where disagreeing parties struggle to live and let live usually feature two factors: 1) the outcomes of the disagreement are important, and 2) the people who disagree are in some way interdependent so that their beliefs and decisions impact those of the other person.

Let’s unpack these ideas. First, not surprisingly, trivial topics have a lesser chance of turning into conflict than consequential topics (although some people manage). For example, where we will go to dinner is less important than which house we will buy. While I am willing to occasionally indulge your terrible culinary taste and your resultant desire to eat slimy mollusks, I am not willing to indulge your desire to purchase a house in a flood zone (lovely river views notwithstanding).

Secondly, when people feel that another person’s decisions and attitudes will impact their own lives, they are less likely to go along with what they consider wrongheadedness. If a person on another continent thinks women shouldn’t be allowed to make management decisions, I would disagree, but I’d be far less motivated to try to change their mind than if this person were a countrymate who could vote on policies that affect me and other women I care about. I would be even less tolerant if this person

worked with me and tried to stop me from making decisions in my own workplace. And I would be absolutely furious if they were part of my family where their beliefs would both reflect on me and impact my own life decisions. Ironically, this logic implies that we extend the most tolerance to faraway people we don't know, while reserving our greatest indignation for neighbors, colleagues, and family members.

In sum, the disagreements most likely to lead to conflict involve two people who think they are right (i.e., most of us!) engaged in important decisions on which we feel interdependent. Situations where none of these factors are present (trivial arguments where each person is free to make their own decisions, and everyone realizes that there is no "right way") are the least likely to fuel drama. Situations where naïve realism converges with an important topic and an interdependent relationship often escalate into some of the hardest-fought battles that tear apart families, businesses, and countries.

In retrospect, when Ryan and I were dancing, we were experiencing the perfect storm of the factors that are most likely to lead disagreeing counterparts into trouble. Dancing was extremely important to us—we spent every waking minute and every spare dollar taking lessons, practicing, seeking out sponsors, and looking for ways to get better than the other couples around us. In performing all of these activities we were 100 percent interdependent. Every decision, from which competition to enter to whether a particular step was getting us off beat, had to be made jointly. And being human, we could only see ourselves, our dancing, and each other from our own vantage point. And although ballroom dancing is an unusual hobby, it turns out that a similar analysis can be applied to most parenting fights, professional disagreements, and policy battles. Decisions that literally deal with life and death (abortion, gun rights, environmental policy, vaccine mandates) that affect everyone in the population, and

where both sides believe they have the winning argument because either science or a fundamental moral consideration is on their side, regularly leave people frustrated, angry, and baffled at the folly of their fellow humans.

## WHAT CAN WE DO ABOUT ALL OF THIS?

Although naïve realism is impossible to eliminate (how would you get through life if you stopped believing your own judgment?), there are ways to minimize its negative impact.

The first step is trying to cultivate some minimal awareness of the bias. I am not advocating questioning all of your beliefs all the time—that would leave you paralyzed with indecision. Indeed, most decisions most people make in their daily life are actually just fine and enjoy broad support from fellow humans. However, questioning the evidence behind your own beliefs *when you encounter disagreement* is a much more manageable task. Think of it as a conditioned response: When somebody disagrees with you and you think they are being ridiculous, it may be time to stop and think. The awareness of disagreement and your own (often automatic) judgment about the other person's flaws of logic or character should be like a warning bell in your head to make you consider why their point might have some merit. Could there be information you are overlooking? Do they have different priorities or preferences? Notice that I am not suggesting that you strive to be “more objective”: Most of us feel pretty objective already. Instead, I am suggesting that you consider why a smart, reasonable, kind person would hold the opinion your counterpart is advocating for.

The second clear piece of advice that arises from the naïve realism analysis is to stop trying to persuade people that you are right and they are wrong. This is a hard habit to break since the arguments we make in our own heads sound so incredibly com-

elling. People who disagree on topics that matter to them are usually ready to meet any argument you make with an argument of their own. And unlike in a televised courtroom drama, you are unlikely to get all the way to the end of the speech that sounded great in your mind before you get interrupted. It turns out that thanks to naïve realism, everyone feels that their argument is the one that will clinch the win for their team. Because of this dynamic, most people who attempt to change others' minds end up frustrated and disappointed.

Experiences like these, at home, at work, and in our civic spaces, make many people avoid disagreement altogether, convinced that discussing opposing perspective will never lead to anything good and will often end in bitter conflict. But of course, we pay a cost for retreating to the sidelines and staying out of the fray. Just because you don't voice your disagreement with the nonsense advocated by your family members or your colleagues does not mean that the disagreement is not living rent-free in your mind. And no matter how much you might tell yourself that "it doesn't matter" and "she's just being ridiculous," your unvoiced opposition continues to cause you hours of frustration, annoyance, and disappointment. However, twenty years into my research career, I am convinced that there is a better way to disagree. In the next chapter, we will discuss people who are naturally better at engaging with opposing views and what makes them different. We will then shift to examining the behaviors that all of us can enact to help us function in a world full of naïve realists without compromising our values or losing our minds.

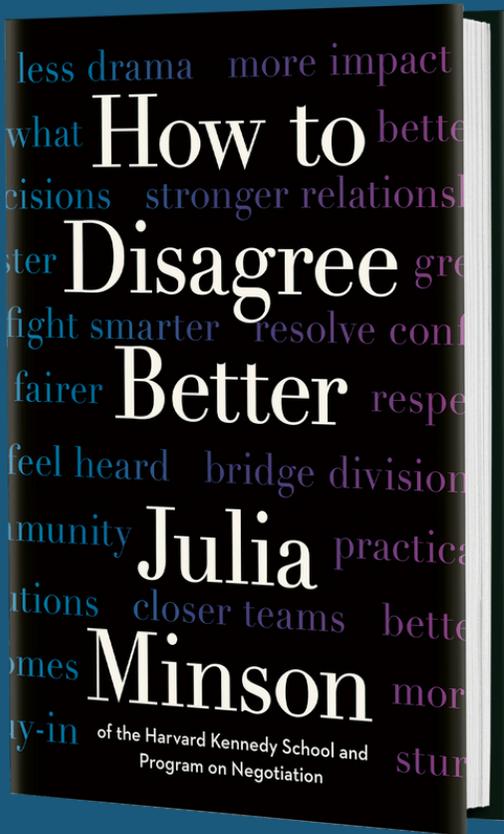
## CHAPTER SUMMARY

- Most people believe that their views of the world around them are accurate and objective. They rarely stop to consider how their environment or their history distorts

their perceptions or conclusions. This is called “naïve realism.”

- Because of naïve realism, people often explain disagreement by assuming that there is something wrong with those who disagree with them. They thus conveniently attribute disagreement to the other side’s lack of information or lack of intelligence. When “informing” the counterpart fails, they often come to believe that the disagreement is caused by bias or bad intentions on the side of their counterpart.
- This analysis suggests that trying to persuade people that they are wrong is a losing battle because they will simply conclude that “you don’t get it.” Instead, consider what information you might be missing and why a smart, reasonable, kind person might see the world differently.

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