

Discussing Meaningful Topics

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What is a meaningful topic? A meaningful topic is one whose answer or resolution has consequences for other people or for society as a whole. These are the subjects on which reasonable people often disagree, yet the outcome affects more than just the individual making the choice.

For example, one person may prefer chocolate ice cream while another prefers vanilla. Which is best is entirely a matter of personal taste. One person's preference has no meaningful effect on anyone else. This is not a meaningful topic.

By contrast, questions involving laws, public policy, education, economics, religion, or ethics often influence families, communities, or entire nations. These are meaningful topics because the conclusions reached affect many people, not just those participating in the discussion.

With very rare exceptions, usually associated with significant personal events, most people harden their beliefs about fundamental subjects such as religion and politics by their early twenties. After that point, those beliefs often become remarkably resistant to change. Evidence that supports existing views is readily accepted, while contradictory evidence is ignored, misunderstood, or dismissed. This tendency seems to be nearly universal.

Most people consider themselves open-minded. The difficulty is that nearly everyone believes this about themselves. If everyone is convinced they are the exception, then many are almost certainly mistaken.

An open-minded person will:

1. listen carefully and accurately understand another person's position
2. restate that position fairly in different words
3. identify the precise points of disagreement
4. respond to those points one by one

These behaviors are surprisingly uncommon. When confronted with ideas that challenge deeply held beliefs, people often:

1. refuse to discuss the subject
2. refuse to listen
3. allow the other person to speak without genuinely hearing what is being said
4. dismiss the other person's arguments or sources without first understanding them
5. give undue weight to their own opinions or preferred sources
6. reject the opposing view entirely because of some minor point, prejudice, or assumption

This behavior brings to mind a famous observation by the comedian Gallagher: "Did you ever notice when you're driving down the highway, everyone who is going slower than you is an idiot and everyone going faster than you is a lunatic?" We naturally assume that our own position defines what is normal and what is true.

When people approach discussions this way, meaningful conversation and genuine learning become nearly impossible. Instead, they retreat to topics that carry little social consequence, such as recipes, sports, or the weather.

Even more troubling is the tendency to judge those who disagree with us. People frequently conclude that those on the other side are either:

1. uneducated, short-sighted, closed-minded, or ignorant
2. bad, evil, selfish, greedy, or otherwise to be avoided

These are fundamentally different judgments. The first attributes disagreement to a lack of knowledge, education, or reasoning ability. This is forgivable. The second attributes it to moral failure or malicious intent—that the other person is fundamentally bad. This is not forgivable.

Unfortunately, schools, the media, and politicians often reinforce both kinds of thinking. As a result, relationships are too often damaged or ended simply because people discover they belong to different ideological camps. Once someone is labeled "bad," the possibility of meaningful dialogue largely disappears. The relationship ends, and minds become closed.

The result is that people increasingly avoid those who disagree with them while surrounding themselves with those who already share their views. This is unfortunate for two reasons:

1. valuable opportunities for learning are lost
2. divisions grow within families, neighborhoods, and the broader community

These divisions do not remain confined to individual relationships. As distrust grows and meaningful dialogue disappears, conflict becomes increasingly likely. Ultimately, this is the root cause of most wars and much of the human-caused strife throughout history.¹

¹As a follow-up to this article, I recommend *Critical Thinking* by Blake McBride (2024). This is available at <https://blakemcbride.us/essays/CriticalThinking.pdf>