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How to Have Impossible Conversations: A Practical Review

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Abstract

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Ratio Christi at Liberty University

Amidst what has arguably been some of the most socially and politically divisive years in American history, wherein attempts made to engage in respectful and meaningful conversations between people with radically different beliefs and ideologies has become increasingly difficult, Peter Boghossian and James Lindsay have proposed a path toward countering this cultural devolution of dialogue. In their book, *How to Have Impossible Conversations: A Very Practical Guide,* they provide an accessible, step by step, guide on how to develop strategies for engaging in effective conversations with people that disagree about deeply held beliefs on religion, politics, and morality. Boghossian and Lindsay do not just desire to offer practical strategies, but through these, they also seek to guide their readers into navigating some philosophical, epistemological, and moral foundations to belief so that they are equipped to approach a seemingly impossible conversation with sensitivity, respect, and openness toward various perspectives.

In what could be considered the first "section" of the book, consisting of chapters one and two, Boghossian and Lindsay clarify what is meant by an "impossible conversation" and provide an outline of seven guiding principles for the reader to practice when conversing with someone, especially about difficult topics. They propose that a conversation should be viewed as a *partnership* and, therefore, it is the duty of each conversation partner to establish and maintain mutual goals. To aid in this practice, they recommend abandoning adversarial thinking and adopting collaborative thinking by making "*understanding* your conversation partner's reasoning your (initial) goal" (Boghossian & Lindsay 2019, 12). Once a conversation has commenced, one should actively seek to build rapport with their conversation partner, listen, avoid "shooting the messenger," and grant their partner the benefit of the doubt. Boghossian and Lindsay encourage the reader to avoid shooting the messenger because this is counter-productive to dialogue. Many "messengers" may not realize that they are actually relaying a message instead of being a collaborative conversation partner. Aside from proactively "*taking aim at your own messenger,*" they recommend a Socratic approach of asking questions and entering a "listening and learning" mode to help defuse a conversation partner's descent into messenger mode (24). This builds a foundation of trust and mutual respect as the conversation carries on. Lastly, knowing when to walk away to avoid possibly damaging a friendship is an essential part of this skill set.

In the proceeding chapters, there is a progression of the various levels of tactics that should be used in conversations. The levels are beginner, intermediate, advanced, and master level. At the beginner level (chapter three), Boghossian and Lindsay lay out the significance of defining terms in conversation and modeling the behavior that one desires to see their conversation partner engage in. At the same time, one should cautiously consider ways to identify and avoid many of the

common bad habits of conversation, such as posting controversial religious, political, or philosophical content on one's Facebook page. They claim that those posting in this manner usually only desire for their view to be *confirmed* (52-53). While there may yet be some redeeming qualities that can be demonstrated in contrast to this view, Boghossian and Lindsay make an essential contribution to understanding why the common view regarding social media "debate" is often frowned upon and may lead easily to the cheapening of authentic dialogue. In addition to these concerns, one should focus on asking questions while humbly interacting with the points being made by their conversation partner. For instance, to help display authenticity and engage in some level of agreement, one should "point out how extremists *on your side* go too far" (47).

Furthermore, at this level, a focus on how certain factors regarding the discussion topics have been contributed to should be practiced rather than blaming the conversation partner or political group that they identify with. And lastly, this section outlines the significance of epistemological foundations which underscores many themes in the book. How one comes to knowledge is meaningful for conversation partners to understand why they believe what they believe and the level of confidence or doubt that they should hold in their assertions.

The intermediate level (chapter four) consists of skillsets that aid in helping to change minds in conversation. For instance, disagreeing is "okay." Many conversations can quickly devolve because disagreements cannot be moved past by the conversation partners. Boghossian and Lindsay advocate for the reader to amend their language to the third person, using terms such as "us" and "we" to help create a sense of collaboration. Furthermore, they argue for "building a golden bridge" to enable a conversation partner to feel welcome to continue the dialogue or relationship even when they are wrong and then willing for the reader to change their mind "on the spot" (76, 85). In addition to the shock value that would come with someone admitting, "I just realized my belief might be wrong. I've changed my mind," this would help to display the above "virtues of revising and modeling, and thus becomes an invitation for others to do the same" (particularly in today's political climate) (85). They also introduce the strategy of using scales (e.g., a rating of one's level of confidence out of ten with ten being almost certain) to help measure and evaluate the levels of one's belief during and after the conversation. Furthermore, they address the effective use of the tool of outsourcing evidence and the importance of one being willing to accept evidence and that "If no evidence would change one's mind," then their beliefs are not being formed on evidence (91).

In the next section (chapter five), Boghossian and Lindsay introduce their advanced level of tactics. Here they re-emphasize the importance of keeping "Rapoport's Rules" by restating points of agreement and emphasizing what has

been learned in the conversation thus far. They also mention the importance of recognizing anger, both in oneself and their conversation partner, and avoiding and de-escalating it. Furthermore, this section introduces two significant principles into the argument: avoiding facts and seeking disconfirmation. In a fair critique, they use the example of the response of the Biblical Creationist, Ken Ham, in a debate with Bill Nye in 2014 when he and Nye were asked what would change their minds, to which Nye responded, "Evidence," while Ham said, "Nothing" (99). Due to instances like this, they believe that it is more important for the conversation partners to seek an understanding of their *epistemology*—how they arrive at knowledge—rather than introducing facts since people arrive at an understanding of "facts" differently. In an effort to help introduce the possibility of doubt, they advocate for asking someone a similar question, as Ham and Nye were, about what *evidence* would be required to change their mind. This strategy is employed to see if one's belief is based on some form of evidence, is a *moral* belief, and whether they are open to being wrong based on their openness to the possible disconfirmation of a held belief. Boghossian and Lindsay identify moral beliefs throughout the work as beliefs that can be chalked up to issues of personal identity, community, and cultural factors, which nearly always come with epistemological blind spots and a lack of good reasons for believing them, rather than being based on actual evidence (134, 161, 177).

In the following section (chapter 6) Boghossian and Lindsay take the reader through their expert-level strategies. At this stage, if the reader can learn to synthesize information with their conversation partner by summarizing what has been discovered about the positions that have been advocated, then they can demonstrate that they have gained a clear understanding of the views that are being expressed and thus, rapport is built as the conversation progresses. They also explain the somewhat controversial tactic of altercasting one's conversation partner into a different role. For example, they note to "altercast your partner into a knowledgeable, creative role… but one which his preferred solution is not on the table. Have your partner brainstorm alternative solutions" (144). The section concludes by overviewing ways to de-escalate very heightened and threatening conversation partners, methods to unmask disingenuous beliefs, and ways to counter someone attempting to intervene in one's beliefs.

Lastly, Boghossian and Lindsay conclude with their master level strategies (chapter seven) which largely deal with how to converse with idealogues. Their definition of an ideologue is "one who is unwilling to revise their (moral) beliefs" (157). A repeated goal of engaging in these difficult conversations throughout the book is to intervene in one's "cognitions and instill doubt," which is a measure for success in dealing with an idealogue (157). Through this kind of dialogue, a conversation partner will succeed by figuring out how their interlocutor's "sense of morality relates to their personal identity" (157). Interestingly, here they

identify that morality has an interconnectedness with one's identity that is filtered through emotion rather than reason. Thus, great care should be given to moral engagements since these beliefs can trigger "the same brain responses as putting someone in physical danger" (158). Therefore, their objective in this section is to help the reader learn to both engage with the underlying moral epistemology that a conversation partner holds to and become proficient in various moral languages.

While seeking to understand the foundations of one's moral epistemology is important for having these difficult conversations, especially when engaging "idealogues," it is rather interesting that in this final section, they note that idealogues have well-versed responses "to defend the process that they use to arrive at their beliefs" (164). In a statement immediately following this they make a comment identifying that Christian apologists are examples of how idealogues operate. They write that they have "sophisticated defenses of their conclusions, e.g., Jesus's resurrection from the dead, but flimsy defenses for leveraging faith as a process to arrive at those conclusions" (164).

Throughout the book, it becomes more and more evident that, among the various examples of epistemologies that Boghossian and Lindsay lay out, they grant more value to the evidentialist approach, albeit an evidentialist approach that is not compatible with religion. This is evident in their interpretation of how moral epistemology generally operates. They write that religious reasons for a belief are "almost always primary if they are present; that is, if someone comes to a conclusion based on a religious belief, religion is the underlying reason why the belief is held" (61). Even though they admit that some apologists will refer to evidence in defense of their beliefs, they still note that they are "downplaying" the role of religion in arriving at those beliefs. Religious beliefs, especially those held by Christian apologists, are often much more than a mere presentation of rehearsed arguments but involve a rather extensive amount of evidence. While the presentation of arguments may be rehearsed, this does not necessitate that the evidence for said arguments is not both substantial and sound. While some Christian apologists and other religious thinkers or advocates, who are ideologues in the sense of being "uncompromising," it is somewhat unfair to lump all Christian apologists into that same category. Furthermore, this seems to reveal a somewhat generalized presumption of fideism on the part of Christian apologists, which would be a more appropriate association on a case-by-case basis after having undertaken the strategies for discussion that they employ in this book with a particular apologist. Furthermore, the root of this issue can be partially contributed to the fact there is a clear difference in how they would define the term "faith" and how a Christian would (as they note is a difference between atheists and Christians discussed in Boghossian's book *A Manual for Creating Atheists*) (41).

One final note on the tension between Boghossian and Lindsay's approach to conversations and that of Christians is the significant difference in their understanding of evangelism. After advising the reader not to evangelize, they define this method as an "unethical abuse of the vulnerability that accompanies doubt to use it in an attempt to sway your partner" (31). Although, at several points in the book, they noted that part of the goal in dialogue is to instill doubt in one's beliefs and use questions, and even some evidence (such as outside sources), to help them reconsider the foundations for their beliefs. These methods are geared toward helping someone arrive or at least be willing to arrive at new beliefs. Thus, while they would likely disagree, the goal of their methodology and that of evangelism is not too different. Perhaps their understanding of evangelism, similar to faith, tends to picture a closed-minded "messenger" preaching at their conversation partner instead of collaborating with them. While some evangelistic approaches may operate in such a way, this does not necessitate that this is "unethical," nor does it mean that all evangelistic approaches operate in such a way.

Nevertheless, the strengths of this book are numerous, but of the greatest is its proposed stratagem contributing to improving dialogue amidst a very timely cultural discussion centered on defending the value of freely sharing ideas, even when the conversations that need to be had are difficult. The methodology of this book is constructive in that it builds on its more foundational principles in the introductory chapters that are easier to apply and practice. Therefore, the reader is better equipped to develop the more advanced skills and, quite frankly, involve more risk of derailing a conversation or harming a friendship if not practiced with care. Their ultimate goals for the reader to understand their own beliefs and help their conversation partner understand their beliefs all lead to one learning to identify what epistemologies are present at the foundations of various beliefs. And furthermore, this has the potential to enable both parties to clearly and humbly reason through their ideas.

Furthermore, to his credit, much of what Boghossian has written in this book is found in his own life. Well-known as both liberal and atheistic, he has traveled to universities speaking with Christian philosopher Corey Miller. Miller is currently the President/CEO of Ratio Christi, a campus ministry for Christian apologetics. These two disagree heavily on many subjects, yet they can maintain a friendship and discuss sensitive topics. Much of their strange partnership can be contributed to the lived-out principles found in this book and the direction of today's culture. For example, freedom of speech and intellectual diversity are beginning to become more restricted across the country, particularly at many universities. Professors no longer teach how to think but what to think, and all who object are subject to being canceled. Simply expressing a differing viewpoint can even be seen as "violence" against an individual. This attack on free speech

has led Boghossian and Miller to form an unlikely alliance. By speaking at universities and conversing with one another along the way, they put into action the principles in *How to Have Impossible Conversations.* Furthermore, they also model how powerful mutual respect and agreement can be in a shared cause, such as their fight for the freedom of intellectual diversity and critical thinking over and against critical theory and cancel culture at the university.

One would be wise to utilize the principles found in this book when having conversations with those who hold vastly differing views, especially those who do hold to strong religious, political, and moral beliefs as they seek to engage with others about their own beliefs and understand the beliefs of their conversation partners. While some of Boghossian and Lindsay's presuppositions may run contrary to the concept of the Christian's mission to share the gospel of Jesus Christ with others and make disciples, this book is a timely guide that can contribute to the effectiveness of Christian methodologies in their cultural dialogue, apologetic, and evangelistic approaches as they communicate their beliefs in an ever-changing and increasingly intellectually diverse culture. Overall, this book is an incredibly helpful and needed guide for making seemingly "impossible" conversations much more plausible for people from a variety of backgrounds.

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