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# A guide to prevent explosive & allow constructive debates

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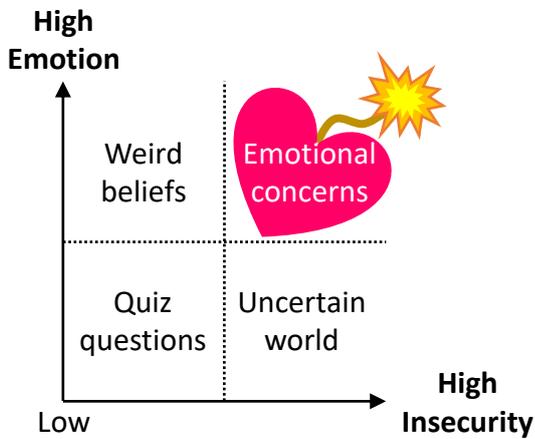
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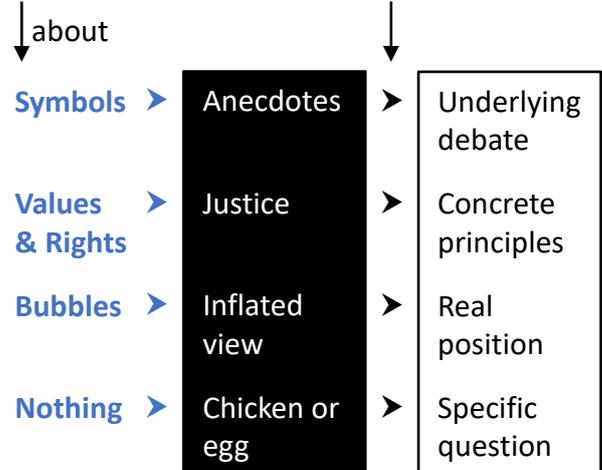
# A guide to prevent explosive & allow constructive debates

## RISK ASSESSMENT: When explosive debates?



Why are such debates so difficult? ◀ 1

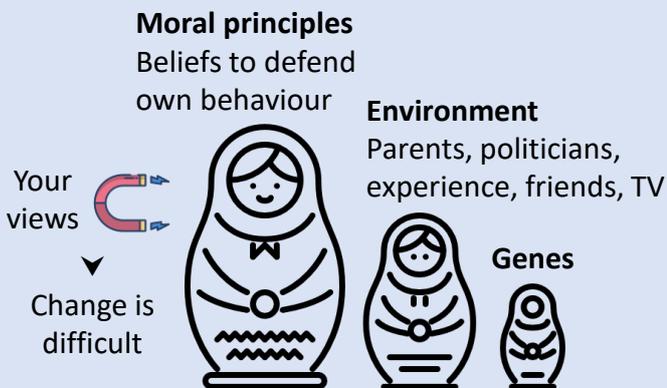
## DEBATES TO AVOID: Towards solutions



How transform explosive debates? ◀ 3

## PREVENTION STRATEGIES: Reflect on feelings & thoughts

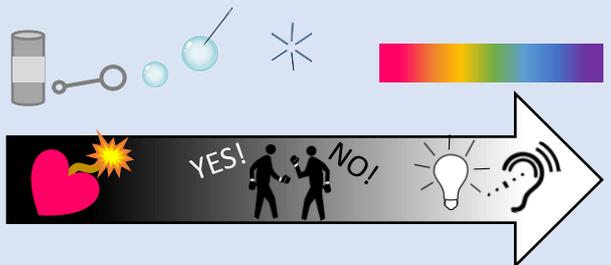
Who am I, who is the other?



## Stimulate the ratio

HOW?

1. Extinguish emotions
2. Pierce the knowledge illusion
3. Break with black-white thinking



Why do we torture the truth, and how do we move to a constructive debate? ◀ 2

By Nele Schmitz

Adapted from:

*Van mening verschillen. Een handleiding.*  
By Ruben Mersch, 2018.

IMAGES: pixabay.com, flaticon.com

## STILL, HAVE DEBATES: Why?

Good ones!

We need arguments,  
and therefore, we need opponents

to justify  
our own  
actions



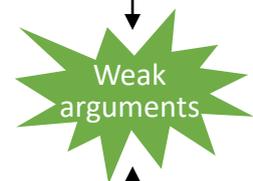
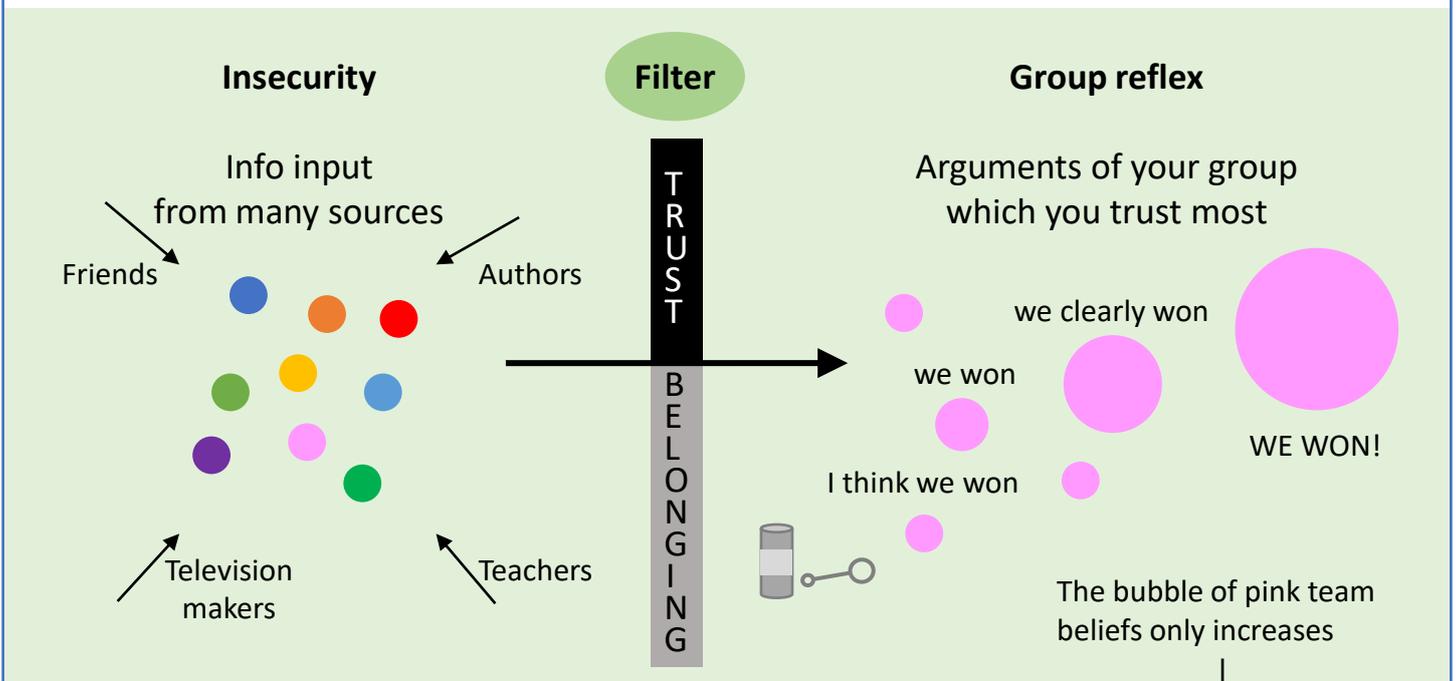
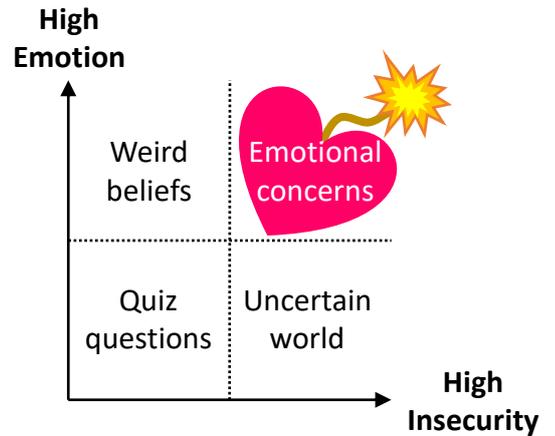
to not  
be guided  
by egoism  
alone

How have good debates? ◀ 4

# 1 Why are explosive debates so difficult?

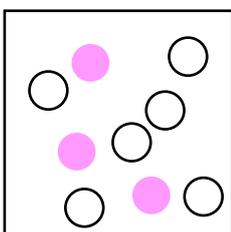
## EMOTIONS, INSECURITY & GROUP REFLEXES

Emotions make you defend yourself and the group (**trust**). Trust makes you believe what the group believes (**belonging**). The brain is a professional in delivering supporting arguments for your beliefs. Therefore, the filter of trust and belonging leads to **weak arguments**.

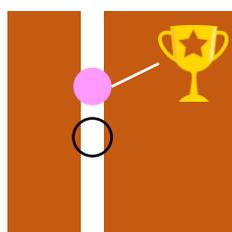


## DEFENCE STRATEGIES OF A BRAIN BELIEVING IN PINK

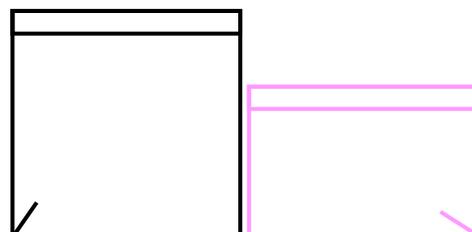
Cherry picking arguments



Exploiting uncertainty



Subjective standard setting for arguments



## Why do we torture the truth? & How do we move to a constructive debate?

### DEFENCE STRATEGIES OF OUR BRAIN

We often **choose** our beliefs to justify our behaviour:

1

- We are less bad (and more good)
- They are also doing it
- They are all the same (and all bad)
- They are not even humans

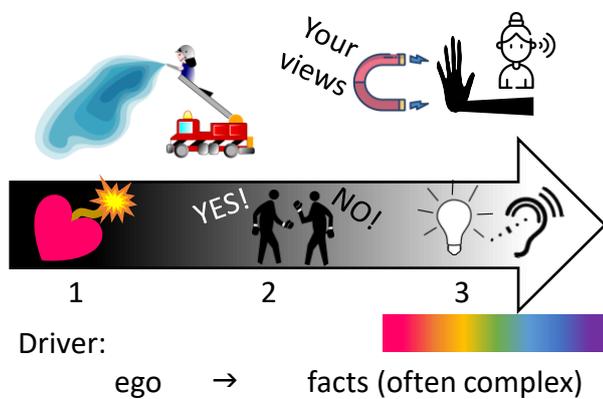


### PREVENTION STRATEGIES FOR EXPLOSIVE DEBATES

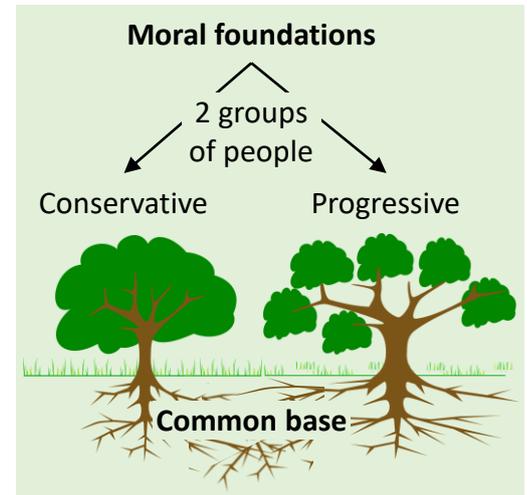
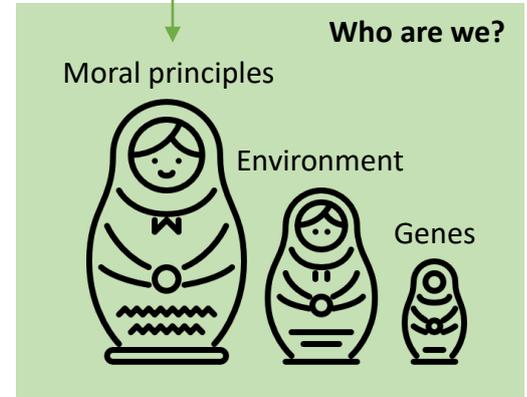
#### ► Change the way you see yourself & the opponent:

- You are both products of your genes, and environment
- You are both defending your **interests**/torturing the truth equally hard
- Your emotions have a common base:
  - Justice
  - Care for others
- The emotions, strongly expressed only in conservatives, progressives can understand/value to a low degree:
  - Group loyalty
  - Respect for hierarchy
  - Purity & holiness

2



Based on



- Pierce the knowledge illusion of yourself and the other

3

HOW?

- Think about the goal of the debate:

4

1. Win moral superiority competition
2. Win right/wrong competition
3. Learn = the ideal debate

- Extinguish emotions to assure listening:

- Emphasize commonalities (human contact)
- Admit mistakes & give compliments
- Listen to your opponent, use neutral words

5

6

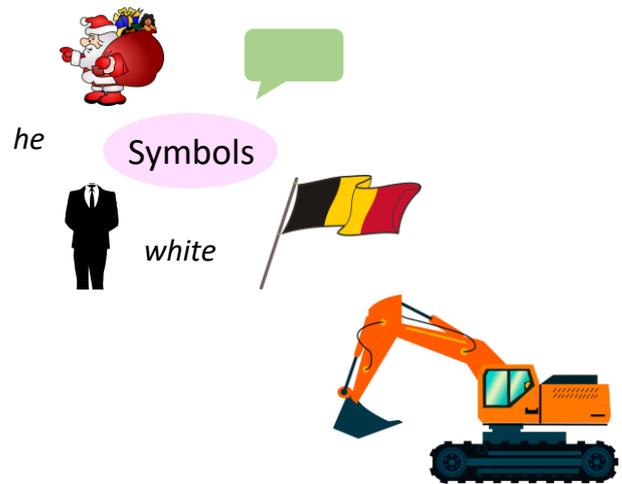
- Promote thinking beyond black & white

Ask questions (instead of giving arguments) to get more nuanced, better supported positions

### 3 How transform explosive debates to lead to solutions?

#### DEBATES ABOUT SYMBOLS

Everything can become a symbol. **Anecdotes** are often used in debates, as stories about real persons provoke feelings, in contrast to dry statistics. However, a debate about an anecdote is irrelevant as it will not solve the **underlying debate**.



#### DEBATES ABOUT VALUES & RIGHTS

**Big words** like *justice, equality, freedom, ...* are often contra-productive in debates. They cover up that there barely are good arguments. Values and rights are not absolute. Make sure that it gets clear **what exactly is meant**.



#### DEBATES ABOUT BUBBLES

Often, we **inflate positions** of opponents to emphasize how evil they are. We don't listen, but think we already know what they mean. **Listen, rephrase**, and only when the other agrees with it, start attacking.



#### DEBATES WITHOUT A MEANINGFUL ANSWER

We like one person, group, or idea to **put on all the blame**. However, often there is a complex mix of factors involved making it impossible to determine who is right/wrong. Instead of questioning who/what is to blame, **look for major causes and solutions, discuss how much not if, discuss as concrete as possible**.



## 4 Why do we need debates? & How do we have good debates?

**We need arguments**, to justify our actions in front of ourselves and others. Debates prevent egoism from being the sole driver of our actions, as we only follow our selfish instincts as far as we can justify them.

**We need opponents**, to help us separate the good from the bad arguments, by increasing our insight. We should be grateful for good opponents, to enable progress from one-sided to comprehensive knowledge.

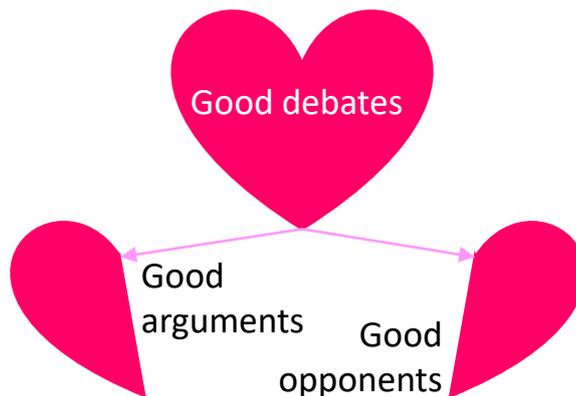
### A GOOD DEBATE

- Is the **hope** that together you can work it out
- Is the ideal way to **gain insight**, tracing each other's blind spots, filling knowledge gaps
- Is searching together for the best possible solutions, **developing better-supported arguments**



#### Set-up for a good debate:

- Participants randomly chosen  
→ no *likes* to win
- Time for chatting  
→ human contact
- Common task is given  
→ enforce new group feeling
- Correct info given by experts  
→ wake up the ratio



### GOOD ARGUMENTS

#### Form

*If this, then that* (points to consequences)

#### Quality

Dependant on correlation between *this* and *that* (all consequences need to be listed)

#### Process

Factual questions: weighing pros & cons

Moral questions:

1. weighing pros & cons
2. pros & cons for who/what
3. what is most important

### GOOD OPPONENTS

- People you disagree with
- Critical people
- People who, just like you, want to go search for the best arguments



Developing a strong argumentation is a complex process. Mostly there are many unknowns, but even when everything is known it remains difficult.

## Notes

1

**Almost everyone thinks he is more objective than the other.** Our behaviour is much more determined by factors we are not aware of (genes, environment, self-interest) than we realise.



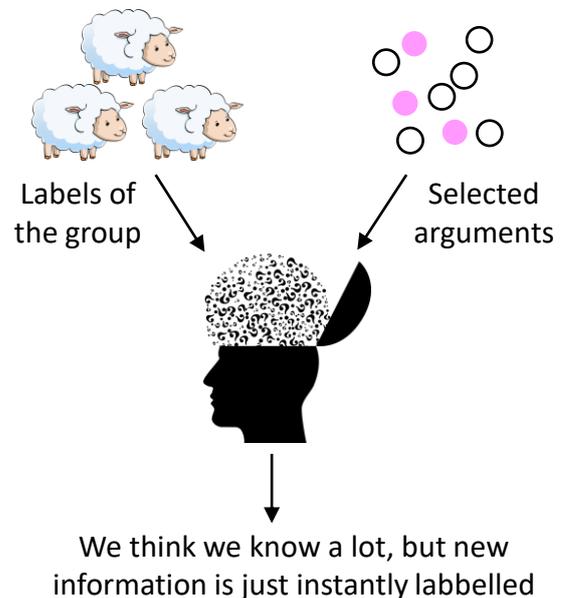
2

Because in a debate both sides search for arguments, justifying their own behaviour, they end up with opposing positions. However, **the border between good and bad often is subtle.** It is even possible that under different conditions, they would have been defending the arguments of the other party!



3

**We are lazy in our thinking.** It is an intuitive reaction to instantly label positions as good (your group's) or bad (the opponent's). Pigeonholing enables fast decision making. However, the labels make us think that we know, although they are not based on sound knowledge. They are simply acquired from the ones we trust. Everything has dis/advantages, but often we can't think of any disadvantages linked to our own positions. In addition, there is the danger of knowing little. Not knowing how much there is to know makes us overestimate our insights. The more you know, the more you realise how little you know.



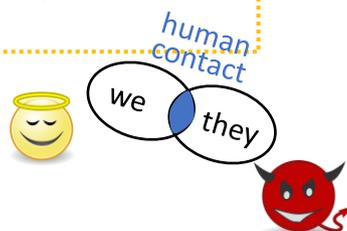
4

**Why do you debate?** Because you are right, and you are working towards a better world? Then realise, also the opponent thinks out of self-defence. Bringing on your arguments will not make him change his views. We debate because we want to be accepted. Debating is self-promotion wrapped in layers of norms and values.



5

**Create a human contact** by emphasizing the commonalities and mentioning them first. In this way you move the debate from shouting in the wilderness to attentive listening to each others' arguments. The human contact can be facts (even admitting ordinary facts increases the chance for constructive debate), values, children, a football team, a music genre, ... .



6

**Listening creates a feeling of safety with one another.** Claim no certainty, people don't like know-it-all and don't want to understand their arguments. Claim no moral monopoly, there are other morals than your group's. Think about the opponent's needs and only give arguments that he (not you) might find convincing. Use words that extinguish, not ignite emotions. The way we wrap the reality determines how we see it.