

The Problem with Disagreement on Social Media: Moral not Epistemic

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Abstract: Intractable political disagreements threaten to fracture the common ground upon which we can build a political community. The deepening divisions in society are partly fueled by the ways social media has shaped political engagement. Social media allows us to sort ourselves into increasingly likeminded groups, consume information from different sources, and end up in polarized and insular echo chambers. To solve this, many argue for various ways of cultivating more responsible epistemic agency. This chapter argues that this epistemic lens does not reveal the complete picture and therefore misses a form of moral respect required to reestablish cooperation across disagreements in a divided society. The breakdown of discourse online provides renewed reasons to draw out not an epistemic but a *moral* basis for political cooperation among diverse citizens—one inspired by Rawlsian political liberalism. We need ways to cultivate mutual respect for our fellow citizens in order to reestablish common moral ground for political debate.

Contemporary political discourse often feels like a battleground between diametrically opposed worldviews. Today our intractable disagreements have surfaced in nasty ways, persistently threatening to fracture the very ground upon which we build political community. Complicating this broader disagreement on questions of morality are new challenges to agreement on basic facts about our world (Kappel 2017, 2018; Sinnott-Armstrong 2018). Much of this division is fueled by the new ways we access information, namely through digital means increasingly tailored to show us what we want to see. Social media allows us to sort ourselves into increasingly likeminded groups, who consume information from different sources, and end up in polarized and insular echo chambers of our own making.

In response, many have called for new social media literacy campaigns, flagging questionable news sources, increased fact checking, and other ways to correct inaccuracies that spread online (Crowell 2017; Mosseri 2017; Breakstone et al. 2019; Tugend 2020). These approaches attempt to bridge political divides by improving our epistemic capacity to responsibly assess information online. Philosophers have also begun to weigh in on this issue, diagnosing the deeper epistemic failures that underlie intractable political disagreements and suggesting ways to correct them (Lynch 2016 and 2019; Rini 2017; Kappel 2017; Cassam 2019). What these approaches have in common is the idea that both the problem and the solution are grounded in epistemology: political disagreement online is an epistemic failure in need of an epistemic solution. If only we could shore up individuals' epistemic capacities and our collective epistemic resources, we could return to agreeing on the facts, if not the values, relevant to politics.

I will argue that this epistemic approach does not show us the complete picture and thus misses a more basic form of moral respect required for reestablishing a common ground for cooperation across disagreements in a divided society. Efforts rooted in improving

epistemic responsibility cannot solve our polarization problem¹ because they misdiagnose it. To mend our divides and reestablish a common sense of political community, we must find some basis for cooperating with others with whom we disagree. However, cooperation must be grounded in something other than epistemology. Solving our epistemic woes will do little to bridge the divides in our society without a more basic form of moral respect for our fellow citizens. I argue that the breakdown of discourse online provides renewed reasons to draw out not an epistemic but a *moral* basis for political cooperation among diverse citizens—one inspired by Rawlsian political liberalism. Rather than viewing politics as a battleground between factions, we must find ways to cultivate mutual respect for our fellow citizens in order to reestablish common moral ground for political debate.

The argument will proceed in five parts. I first outline the key challenges social media poses for political disagreements (§1). To solve these challenges, many argue for various ways of cultivating more responsible epistemic agency (§2). Yet these epistemic proposals face challenges of their own. I outline three initial problems with proposed solutions grounded in epistemic responsibility (§3) before moving on to show why epistemic solutions are actually secondary to moral concerns (§4). Approaching the problems of political disagreement in primarily epistemic terms takes us off course and offers solutions likely to backfire in our current polarized environment unless they are grounded in a more fundamental moral respect for our fellow citizens. In closing (§5), I argue that we should find ways to restructure social media to facilitate respectful rather than divisive interactions.

1. The Challenge

The intractable disagreements that plague contemporary political discourse *seem* to be driven by a breakdown in shared agreement on basic facts. Social media is a major contributing force to this new epistemic landscape. Consider the warped informational landscape that is our social media newsfeeds. Newsfeeds blend information from a remarkable number of sources: personal updates, journalistic pieces, self-published articles, paid posts presented as news ‘articles,’ intentional disinformation and propaganda campaigns, etc. Once we consider the immense variety of inputs—coupled with no editorial oversight to ensure that information shared is objective, accurate, and well-researched—it is no surprise that individuals are coming to many different conclusions on a host of factual matters.

In a healthy epistemic environment, people can count on others to alert them to new information that brings to light their factual errors. But social media is not a healthy epistemic environment; it produces epistemic bubbles² that repeatedly champion certain

¹ See Rob Talisse’s and Jeroen de Ridder’s chapters in this volume for discussion of many distinct problems of polarization. Different aspects of the problem are likely to call for different remedies.

² According to Nguyen, epistemic bubbles are social epistemic structures in which other relevant voices have been left out. He argues that the term echo chamber should be reserved for cases in which relevant voices have been actively excluded and discredited (Nguyen 2020). Anderson (this volume) uses the term epistemic bubble for a self-segregated network for the circulation of ideas that is resistant to correcting false beliefs.

views while deriding or simply excluding others. Accordingly, social media users are far less likely to confront dissenting challenges to their views. Moreover, the repeated sharing of views itself amplifies a person's likelihood to believe them. Even if we are unsure of the truth of an initial post, once it has spread and gained sufficient likes, comments, and engagement by others who treat it as true, we are much more likely to believe the content (Rini 2017, 48-49). This latter phenomenon plays on our natural tendencies to rely on others for vetting the information we come across. Cass Sunstein explains, "if one person sees that five, ten, a hundred, or a thousand people are inclined to say or do something, there is a tendency to think that each has made an independent decision to say or do it" (Sunstein 2017, 99). And if those posting on our social media newsfeeds are trusted friends or colleagues, we tend to accord more credibility to their independent stamps of content approval. Finally, conformity pressures make us even likelier to believe (or at least express) certain views more than others. Whether or not someone believes a particular story shared on social media, they tend to go along with the crowd signaling their endorsement of the content, suppress their own reservations, and refrain from sharing information that contradicts the dominant position (Sunstein 2017, 100-101; Kuran 1997; Muchnik et al. 2013). Together, these effects can pollute social media's epistemic environment and undercut rational independent evaluation of the information we encounter.

Even those not on social media are not entirely insulated from these effects. Traditional news sources report on 'trending' stories, and public opinion polls incorporate analysis of social media trends and popularity as one proxy for the overall popularity and opinions of certain policies or political figures. Furthermore, in recent elections, a strong social media presence has fueled the popularity and support of political figures across the spectrum, as seen in the Obama, Trump, and Sanders campaigns.

Ironically, then, the platforms touted as tools to bring the world closer together, build community, and give people the power to share information,³ are also driving us farther apart. As Eli Pariser explains, "democracy requires a reliance on shared facts; instead, we're being offered parallel but separate universes" (Pariser 2011, 5). Divisions within our democracy run deep and without common ground, we lack a foundation for bridging these divides.

2. The Epistemic Response

What is a responsible democratic citizenry to do? Underlying the push to improve our ability to spot fake news and vet sources for their accuracy is the common belief that the root of the problem is *epistemic*. Quassim Cassam, for example, argues that political harms are a downstream "consequence" of the epistemic harms rooted in epistemic vice (Cassam 2019, viii), which he views as personal intellectual failings that "systematically obstruct the gaining, keeping, or sharing of knowledge" (Cassam 2019, 23). Relatedly, Regina Rini argues that fake news spreads because of the bent testimonial norms on social media (Rini 2017). And Michael Lynch argues that epistemological explanations are the foundational cause of our current political controversies. He explains, "how we

³ To riff on the mission statements of Facebook and Twitter.

act is the result of how we *think*—what we believe and therefore think we know” (Lynch 2019, 5).

An epistemic diagnosis seems to suggest an epistemic solution: improve individuals’ epistemic capacities, and the epistemic crisis will improve. Various proposals have been offered to improve our ability to discern the truth and form responsible beliefs on the basis of good evidence, including media literacy campaigns, fixing the best testimonial norms on social media by improving accountability, and cultivating intellectual humility to combat tribal arrogance. I briefly elaborate on each below.

The first type of proposal to remedy our epistemic crisis seeks to improve individuals’ capacity to spot ‘fake news’ and encourage more reflective scrutiny of the information we encounter. Social media platforms, political pundits, and educational institutions have all adopted some version of this epistemic response to the current challenges. Facebook’s evolving response to the 2016 U.S. election relies heavily on individual Facebook users and third-party organizations to report false news stories, which may then show up lower on newsfeeds. Facebook hesitates to play the role of arbitrator of truth, a position they have doubled down on recently in controversies over false and misleading claims in political advertisements (Zuckerberg 2019).⁴ Instead, they maintain that it should be up to individuals to evaluate sources to determine their accuracy. To aid in this effort, Facebook has helped sponsor third-party efforts, including the New Integrity Initiative aimed at “helping people make informed judgments about the news they read and share online” (Mosseri 2017).⁵ Likewise, Twitter’s response to the 2016 election touted the importance of their original design for allowing individuals to challenge misleading claims. “Twitter’s open and real-time nature,” is itself “a powerful antidote to the spreading of all types of false information” (Crowell 2017).⁶ Like Facebook, Twitter emphasized the importance of engaged citizens correcting and challenging claims, holding that the company “should not be the arbiter of truth” (Crowell 2017). Individuals should each evaluate the epistemic quality of information they encounter through social media platforms to decide for themselves what they should believe.

Educational institutions have also approached the issue of polarization through an epistemic lens focused on improving students’ epistemic capacities through media literacy training. While media literacy education is not new, it has expanded its reach since the 2016 election (Breakstone et al., 2019; Tugend 2020).⁷ The core idea behind media literacy education is for students to learn how to critically evaluate online content.

⁴ As this chapter was going to press, the covid-19 crisis hit. In response Facebook took an unusual (for them) stance on the truth and have diverged from their hands-off approach by prioritizing information shared by the World Health Organization and Center for Disease Control. However, they continue to affirm their hands-off stance towards political information and campaigns, allowing false and misleading information to spread.

⁵ At the time of this post, Adam Mosseri was the Vice President in charge of Facebook’s News Feed.

⁶ Colin Crowell was Twitter’s VP of Public Policy, Government, and Philanthropy when he posted this clarification of Twitter’s response to misinformation on Twitter’s blog.

⁷ For more information on current educational efforts, Stony Brook University’s Center for News Literacy maintains a list of peer organizations who are involved in media literacy projects in addition to providing their own resources for educators (Stony Brook, 2020).

Lessons involve learning to question information sources, the motivation behind sharing stories, the broader context of the story shared, and whether it is possible for two apparently contradictory claims to be true. These efforts are epistemic in focus, aiming to improve individuals' critical capacities to evaluate information. Following good epistemic hygiene, students learn to take a more reflective and critical stance towards forming their beliefs on the basis of good evidence and learn to seek out sufficient justification before claiming knowledge.

The range of proposals targeting individual epistemic failings may find some philosophical support in Cassam's work on epistemic vice. Cassam argues that individual epistemic vices have important downstream political consequences and "the onus is therefore on us as individuals to minimize the harms done by our epistemic vices" (Cassam 2019, 187). The types of remedies proposed by social media companies and educational institutions that seek to improve individuals' epistemic habits to cultivate more responsible epistemic behavior when seeking information are ultimately encouraging us to try to correct our epistemic vices and cultivate responsible epistemic agency. While these efforts are admirable and can certainly help improve individuals' epistemic capacities, I will argue that they will not do much to bring our divided democracy together.

The matter is more complicated than simply learning to spot and avoid spreading false claims. Partisan politics plays a big role in which false stories individuals believe. People are particularly susceptible to believing false claims presented as true by members of their political party. Philosophers are split on whether this partisanship in testimonial belief is epistemically virtuous (Rini 2017) or vicious (Cassam 2019; Lynch 2019), and thus are also divided on how best to correct the problems partisanship causes.

A second type of proposal for correcting the epistemic problems created by sharing political information on social media, particularly fake news, seeks to improve individual accountability for sharing information in order to correct the bent testimonial norms on social media. Regina Rini convincingly argues that the root of the epistemic problems generated by social media lie in the bent testimonial norms of social media rather than individual epistemic vices. Norms of communication on social media are unstable and disputed, which challenge traditional mechanisms for accessing the veracity of testimony acquired on these platforms (Rini 2017, 46-49). Typically, individuals assess both the content of the statement and the credibility of the speaker to ascertain whether or not to rely on her testimony (Coady 1992; Lackey 2008). Yet social media sharing warps these norms because it is often unclear whether or not someone intends to assert a claim is true when they share, like, or retweet content. In this warped landscape, Rini argues that it can actually be reasonable for individuals to assign greater credibility to their co-partisans—even when this leads to sharing or believing fake news (Rini 2017, 50-54). When forming beliefs on the basis of testimony, we should look for which testifiers we can trust. We rationally assign greater credence to co-partisans because we judge them to have a good track record of getting normative questions right—we see them as our epistemic peers in normative domains (Rini 2017, 51-52). Therefore, to try to fix the epistemic problems generated by social media, we need to ensure that the information shared by all tracks the truth so that we can build common ground on politically relevant facts.

Clarifying the testimonial norms of social media requires more than individuals gaining media literacy (as many social media companies and educational institutions suggest). Instead, we need to correct the bent testimonial norms by establishing broader social accountability mechanisms for sharing information that we reflectively endorse. Rini proposes a solution that pairs individual accountability with institutional mechanisms for tracking the testimonial reputation of social media users in order to foster a broader norm of accountability for epistemically responsible social media testimony (Rini 2017, 57).

Structural changes are needed to support our efforts to hold one another accountable for responsible epistemic practices because it is nearly impossible for individuals to track the sources of information they encounter through social media. After all, an individual's social media 'friends' consist of an expansive list of people linked in networks with vastly many other people. However, social media platforms can readily track individuals' testimonial reputations and Rini argues that doing so could provide the necessary infrastructure that would allow people to evaluate the trustworthiness of their fellow citizens. This would promote more individual epistemic responsibility for evaluating the truth of stories before sharing them with others.

A third type of proposal argues that the root of our problems is "tribal arrogance" that is fueled by social media and therefore in response we should cultivate the epistemic virtue of intellectual humility. Michael Lynch identifies the cause of our uncivil political disagreements and polarization as "tribal arrogance," which is not only an individual but a social epistemic vice (Lynch, this volume and 2019). Tribal arrogance relies on group divisions pitting 'us' against 'them' in hierarchical epistemic relations in which we become convinced of our group's superior knowledge (2019, 6, 25-26). Our partisan identities become bound up with our convictions, setting the background against which we interpret both factual disputes and questions of right and wrong.⁸ Unfortunately, once a factual dispute is transformed into a partisan conviction, we are far more likely to engage in identity-protective reasoning when faced with outside challenges to our beliefs because they also challenge our core values and personal identity (Lynch 2019, 66-71). As we become resistant to challenges, we become increasingly arrogant and confident in our group's superior knowledge. Social media fuels tribal arrogance by reinforcing shared convictions through highly charged emotional content. All of this make us vulnerable to exploitation of our tribal identities to fuel hate and divisions within our democracy, rather than building common ground.

To correct these problems, Lynch argues we must cultivate the epistemic virtue of intellectual humility, which requires an openness to improving one's worldview by incorporating new evidence and the experience of others (Lynch 2019, 149). We should learn to accept the limits of our own knowledge and find ways to secure the types of institutional changes that can support our common pursuit of the truth. We also need to protect the institutional structures that support intellectual humility by providing evidence and the means to exchange our reasons with one another, for example a free press, science education, and peaceful dissent (Lynch 2019, 161-163). However, at bottom, in

⁸ Our convictions express who we are, what we value, and how we want to be seen by others—impacting not just what we do but also what we believe (Lynch 2019, 55-57, 60-62).

order to be able to learn from one another, we need to respect one another as epistemic agents. Lynch argues that “when we own what we don’t know and remain open to what others do” – in short, when we are intellectually humble – “we exemplify a basic respect for our fellow citizens that is demanded by democracy” (Lynch 2019, 170, see also 155-156).

Ultimately, each of these proposals highlights an important facet of the epistemic challenges that impact politics. Often individuals are lax in their evaluation of the information they encounter, social media sharing warps testimonial norms in ways that make it difficult to assess the information we encounter, and the political groups with whom we identify have a significant impact on what and whom we believe. Yet while looking at different aspects of the epistemic landscape, all three responses share a common tactic: they identify the root problem as epistemic and argue for epistemological solutions. It is this tactic, I will argue, that ultimately renders each proposal insufficient to the task at hand.

3. The Inadequacy of Strictly Epistemic Approaches

Media literacy campaigns, improved testimonial norms on social media, and cultivating intellectual humility are all important for mending internet age democracy. But efforts rooted in epistemic responsibility (even if supported by institutional change) approach the problem with too narrow a scope that leads them to miss the broader picture. I will argue that epistemic approaches face three distinct, but related challenges. First, our divisions are not only a result of individually irresponsible epistemic behaviors. Second, solutions grounded in individual epistemic responsibility fail to account for the social and institutional structures in which we form our beliefs. Third, focusing on epistemic elements of our political divisions fails to account for important structural features embedded in the design of social media that contribute to society’s pernicious divisions.

First, what often seems like a failure of individual epistemic responsibility (the target of many popular solutions to our current crisis) may not be. For instance, some polarization in society is not a result of epistemic capacities misfiring,⁹ but rather a product of individual epistemic capacities functioning well.¹⁰ The group dynamics of deliberation amongst like-minded people make it likely that when individuals’ epistemic capacities are functioning well, they end up adopting more extreme views or claim more confidence in their initial position. But this can be a sign of epistemic responsibility. After all, confidence in our beliefs *should* increase as we encounter additional supporting evidence for our views. And in a group of likeminded individuals, we are likely to encounter new evidence that supports our views and may therefore justifiably come away with more confidence in our initial position. On its own, becoming more confident in one’s views is not a pernicious epistemic tendency. It only becomes so when the arguments and

⁹ Sometimes polarization *is* the result of our epistemic capacities functioning poorly, whether due to epistemic vices, cognitive biases (both implicit and explicit), or simply social pressures to conform.

¹⁰ Sunstein argues that reasonable argumentative practices partially explain polarization (Sunstein 2017, 71-72; 2002, 179-180). Recently, some philosophers have begun defending polarization as epistemically reasonable (see, e.g., Singer et. al. 2019) while others have outlined features of group-level rationality (Hedden 2019) that could also be useful in explaining reasons why polarization is actually reasonable.

evidence we encounter are not representative of the range of reasonable positions about the issues at stake or we increase our confidence in our views independent of their evidentiary support.

To put it differently, one of the main problems lies in the *insularity* of our epistemic bubbles, not individual failures to sort truth from falsity. To fix this problem, it matters less that we improve our epistemic capacities themselves and more that we pay attention to the groups within which we deliberate. For instance, knowledge about the impact of public policies is distributed asymmetrically across society (Anderson 2010, 98). To attain a broader view of the information relevant to public policies, we need to explicitly consult people who occupy different social positions and seek out their knowledge and expertise. We can learn from those who have a different view of the social world in order to correct for our blind spots, fill in gaps in our knowledge, and destabilize the tendency to view one's own perspective as authoritative for all.¹¹ Doing so is, in some ways, a call for the kind of intellectual humility Lynch seeks to address our partisan woes (Lynch, this volume and 2019).

This points to the second challenge to individualistic models of epistemic responsibility: the problems with our political disagreements have as much to do with our social structures as they do with individual epistemic vices or failures of responsible testimony. Unlike solutions focused primarily on individual epistemic agents, Rini and Lynch's proposals are both attentive to the social dynamics of belief formation on social media.¹² Expanding our focus from internal belief forming processes to the broader social networks within which we form beliefs is important for understanding the more complex picture of epistemic agency.¹³ Claims are not only evaluated on their merits. As social creatures, we look to cues from those within our community about the plausibility of adopting (or expressing) certain beliefs. Accordingly, proposals that seek to bolster an individual's epistemic abilities only address one piece of the puzzle¹⁴—equally important is attending to the way information spreads across a network of individuals. As Cailin O'Connor and James Weatherall argue, “we cannot understand changes in our political

¹¹ Feminists have called attention to the way in which one's social location provides a unique perspective that influences both what is known and what is recognized as knowledge (see, e.g. Collins 1989; Anderson 1995; Harding 2004; Mills 2007; Fricker 2007; Medina 2013; and Dotson 2014). These insights are politically significant and add epistemic arguments in support of forms of government that leverage the insights of people differently situated in structural relations of power (see, e.g., Young 2000; Anderson 2010).

¹² I do think at the end of the day, both proposals ultimately come back to encouraging individual epistemic responsibility even when they take into account the social process of belief formation.

¹³ To understand the changes in the epistemology of our political culture, Elizabeth Anderson argues that we should expand our focus from individual epistemic agents towards a group cognition model (Anderson, this volume). Notably group cognition involves a shared commitment to expressing the belief together and agreeing to use it as a premise in the group's reasoning. Individuals within the group need not believe the assertion, provided they commit to using it in their group's reasoning. The expression of the group's beliefs can function as identity-expressive speech acts, which can signal party loyalty and identity rather than reporting on individuals' personal beliefs. Similarly, Jason Brennan and Michael Hannon both champion an in-group cheerleading model of political discourse, treating political claims as expressive instances of team sports (Brennan 2016, Hannon, this volume).

¹⁴ Bolstering individuals' epistemic capacities is the solution that is most commonly cited in popular discussions of the problem, including the social media companies and educational institutions (see §2).

situation by focusing only on individuals. We also need to understand how our networks of social interaction have changed, and why those changes have affected our ability, as a group, to form reliable beliefs” (2019, 16).

In what ways have our networks of social interaction changed such that focusing on individual epistemic powers falls short? One major change is the introduction of a new medium of interaction—social media. Whether using social media to follow journalists, public figures, and breaking news stories or to engage in debate on the platform with one’s friends, followers, or the general public—for its users, the platforms helps facilitate public debate. In addition, social media is a major locus of political advertisement and a medium through which politicians connect with their constituents.¹⁵

This brings us to the third challenge facing epistemic responsibility models: solutions grounded in epistemic responsibility fail to address the non-epistemic factors embedded in the design of social media that contribute in pernicious ways to society’s divisions. So many of our political activities are now mediated through algorithms that structure online engagement. Regardless of an individual’s purpose for using social media, they will be impacted by the algorithmic design. How these algorithms are optimized impacts what we see on our newsfeeds, which posts go viral, and who has the most influence on the platforms. The design of the algorithms powering social media impacts individuals’ beliefs; however, the problems created by social media cannot be corrected by encouraging individuals (or groups of people) to be more epistemically responsible when engaging on these platforms. The design of the systems will need to change in ways that target the root causes of the divisions we see, which will require looking beyond a strictly epistemic approach.

Social media is not a neutral medium. The algorithms that power social media sites are optimized for specific tasks: typically, some combination of engagement (measured by views, clicks, reactions, shares, comments, etc.), growth, and time spent on the platform.¹⁶ The best way to keep people engaged is to ensure a personalized experience that shows users content they like. This is done by machine learning models optimized to do just that. As these models learn what we interact with most, they strive to give us more of that content, which results in a splintered information landscape.

To make matters worse, within that already splintered landscape, algorithms continue to select posts that tend towards divisive content. As noted by Facebook’s own internal

¹⁵ Facebook, for example, draws on the vast information it has about its users to help political campaigns effectively target their message (Vaidhyanathan 2018, 161-163).

¹⁶ These metrics are important because the business models underlying social media rely on selling targeted access to the people who use the platform to their customers (e.g. companies, political candidates) who seek to advertise on the platform. The more all of us stay engaged with the platforms, the more ads we see and, more importantly, the more information they can collect about us to refine their models. The better the models know us, the more precise the targeting of personalized ads, which then leads to increased revenue for the social media companies. The data are complex and varied, so machine learning builds mathematical models based on analyzing historical data of past use to predict future engagement, and this model is dynamic, continually updating itself based on how we and those who are like us interact with the platform. For an accessible picture of how algorithms and machine learning works, see Broussard 2018 and Kearns and Roth 2020. For a discussion of their detrimental effects on society, see O’Neill 2016 and Eubanks 2017.

review of its role in polarization, “our algorithms exploit the human brain’s attraction to divisiveness,” promoting divisive content “in an effort to gain user attention and increase time on the platform” (Horwitz and Seetharaman 2020). In their various efforts to combat fake news, polarization, foreign influence, clickbait content, and inauthentic users, Facebook’s teams found that “bad behavior came disproportionately from a small pool of hyperpartisan users” (*ibid*). Yet the engagement-based metrics promote content from its most active users, who both tend to be more partisan and are more likely to behave suspiciously.¹⁷ The problem is not unique to Facebook; all social media platforms are powered by algorithmic recommendations that tend to prioritize highly viewed, engaging content. These algorithms can be exploited by those who seek to garner more attention for their political positions.¹⁸ A simple change to cease promoting the content of the most active users would indirectly reduce divisiveness without impeding freedom of speech, while also significantly reducing the reach of those who seek to manipulate and exploit the system. Key to understanding our polarization problem is not only the breakdown of shared sources of information, bent testimony, or arrogance—as stressed by the epistemic responsibility model—but a targeted fueling of antipathy and extremist content.

In short, no matter what we do, the major platforms mediating our inquiry are not neutral. Understanding how algorithms work to drive engagement on online platforms thus gives us another lens for understanding why there has been so much fuel added to the fire of our social divisions. Understood at the level of algorithmic design, it becomes obvious that the issue extends beyond what individuals can do (e.g. better curated newsfeeds) or what groups can do (e.g. more responsible sharing practices or combatting tribal arrogance). Nor will the problem be solved if individuals delete or avoid social media, as even offline news relies heavily on social media, trends, and stories.¹⁹ We need structural change to address these problems.

Any proposal to redesign the systems through which we communicate should ensure that the changes will address the root of the problems. However, our problems are not strictly epistemic, thus solutions that focus only on features related to epistemic responsibility will be ineffective. Solutions grounded in epistemic responsibility misfire in two ways: they are overly individualist and they view the foundational problem to be epistemic. A number of popular solutions proposed by social media companies, popular media, and educational institutions target *individual* epistemic responsibility. As we have seen, the individualistic focus is too narrow. An effective solution needs to grapple with the

¹⁷ For example, posting for 20 hours a day or engaging in spam-like behavior, suggesting either manipulation by people actively working a single account in shifts or bots (Horowitz and Seetharaman 2020). For more on the weaponization of social media, see Regina Rini’s chapter in this volume.

¹⁸ The targeted advertisement mode of political campaigning tends to highlight the issues that most divide the public along party lines—ignoring the many areas of agreement, consensus, and shared sentiments that bring people together into a community with one another. Politicians frequently emphasize the issues that divide them from their political opponent to strengthen their base. As many have noted, partisan identity is often strengthened by demonizing other groups and encouraging ‘us’/‘them’ mentalities that lean into divisions between groups (see, e.g. Mason 2018).

¹⁹ I am not calling for a return to a time without social media—rather, we should understand the ways the systems work in order figure out the appropriate systemic solutions. These platforms have helped us to connect with each other from afar, and their promise for this use is especially salient as the world fights the coronavirus and is forced to move most of their social interactions online.

broader social influences on belief formation and the ways the structural design of social media platforms impacts individuals' beliefs. Proposals, like Rini's and Lynch's, which take a broader view of the social-epistemic problems and the design of social media still err in their recommendations, which ultimately bottom out at individual epistemic responsibility. For example, Rini proposes institutional changes to track the testimonial reputation of individual users in order to encourage a norm of individual accountability for responsible sharing practices. Likewise, Lynch diagnoses the problem as one of tribal arrogance fueled by social media; however, his proposal to cultivate intellectual humility is ultimately a proposal for what each person can do to become more responsible and virtuous epistemic agents. Finally, even if we were to make our epistemic recommendations even more social, they would still be insufficient since the root of our problems is not strictly epistemic. So long as social media maintains its current algorithmic design, no amount of improved epistemic responsibility (for either individuals or groups of people) will solve our current problems. In what follows, I will argue that the solution is moral, not epistemic. That is, we need to cultivate moral respect for one another and find ways to restructure social media to facilitate morally respectful rather than divisive interactions.

4. Why Epistemic Responsibility is Secondary to Moral Concerns

I have raised several reasons to be skeptical about the epistemic diagnosis of political divisions and the proposed epistemic solutions to repair our divided democracy. In this section, I will show that the epistemic responsibility model will only work if built on a strong foundation of moral respect across differences. Epistemic proposals capture one piece of the puzzle, but they are secondary to the moral concerns that must be addressed first in order for any epistemic solution to be effective. First, without addressing the deeper moral concerns, epistemic solutions may ultimately backfire because epistemic respect is subject to assessments of credibility that is also subject to partisan divisions. Second, epistemic approaches tend to approach the question of disagreement as a problem to be resolved, rather than a persistent feature of our society that we need to learn to manage. Third, focusing on the epistemology of disagreement keeps the focus on what divides us, rather than what unites us.

First, in order to work, epistemic responsibility models require cultivating epistemic respect for those who hold different views. Both Rini's proposal to track the testimonial reputation of individual social media users and Lynch's proposal to cultivate intellectual humility rely on assessing the epistemic standing of ourselves and our fellow citizens. According to these views, we need to regard our fellow citizens as reliable testifiers and to enter the discussion with a basic respect for our interlocutors' standing as epistemic agents. However, since epistemic respect is subject to assessments of the credentials and track record of our fellow citizens, it is not stable enough to serve as the foundational respect needed for democracy.²⁰

²⁰ As I will argue below: appraisal respect is contingent and changing whereas recognition respect for a person's moral status can serve as a stable foundation for building common ground. For more on appraisal respect versus recognition respect see Darwall 1977 and 2006.

Appraising an interlocutor's epistemic credentials is rightly subject to ongoing assessments of their track record and performance, which is likely to backfire in a polarized society. Even if two citizens initially enter a discussion with a mutually respectful epistemic stance, the discussion itself often provides new evidence about whether one's interlocutor is trustworthy, competent, and reliable. If it becomes clear that one interlocutor is untrustworthy, fails to see the force of the evidence, denies logical conclusions, or is otherwise prone to faulty reasoning, the other interlocutor now has *good epistemic reasons* to doubt their testimony.

Unfortunately in our polarized society, the tendency to doubt our interlocutors' testimony is all too common—and all too commonly divided along partisan lines. We trust those who share our beliefs and view others with great skepticism. In contemporary political debates, we often see people claiming the 'other side' is a dupe of media—they follow the wrong sources of evidence, are liable to deception and manipulation, and fail to be responsive to reasons. Even if we hold one another accountable for responsible epistemic practices, we are currently in a situation where the standards for facts, evidence, and expertise are frequently as contested as the particular claims we are trying to evaluate.²¹ If we lack a common standard for adjudicating disagreements, engagement with the other side can backfire and lead to further polarization. In this landscape, the more we learn about their views the more inclined we are “to see the opposition as pathological” (Aikin and Talisse, 2019, 196). In short, trying to assess citizens' epistemic credibility risks further dividing an already fragmented political society.

Second, strictly epistemic approaches are unlikely to bridge our political divisions because they tend to highlight social divisions as opposed to social unity. Since epistemic challenges to our views are prompted by encountering disagreement, it seems the solution should involve adjudicating our disagreements in pursuit of the truth. For this task, it makes sense to focus on why we disagree. Yet focusing on areas of disagreement highlights those issues that most divide us rather than the common values that unite us. Focusing on our differences reinforces an us/them mentality that promotes social divisions (Mason 2018). Rather than viewing our fellow citizens as members of a common community, bound together by a common fate and political project, we encounter those whose views differ from ours as obstacles to achieving our policy goals. We see them as “civic enemies”²² rather than respected civic peers who can be relied on to pursue society's cooperative goals.

²¹ According to a recent Pew Study (2020) trusted sources and standards for epistemically responsible news vary according to political preferences. Pointing to these different standards, some epistemologists have argued that political disagreements are “deep disagreements,” because the disagreement is not only about the content of political statements, but also the standards for adjudicating these disagreements (see de Ridder and Lynch, this volume; for a contrary perspective see Hannon, this volume). Even if political disagreements are not truly deep disagreements, they need only be *perceived* as deep disagreements to drive cognitive polarization (Lynch, this volume). People who think their political opponents are engaged in motivated reasoning in support of a political agenda are likely to distrust both their fellow citizens and the experts on whose testimony their political opponents rely.

²² I borrow this from Jason Brennan (2016) who argues that democracy itself pits citizens against each other as civic enemies. I do not mean to take a stance on democracy itself in this chapter. Rather, I think

To build bridges across the intractable political divisions in society, we need to strengthen the foundation of moral respect for one another in order for any subsequent disagreements to be productively managed in society. But where should we turn for moral respect? Here, our society is less divided than it may seem. Despite the deepening polarization in society, many people nevertheless embrace shared values of equality, freedom, dignity, and respect. Our differences are rooted in how we apply these values to specific policy proposals, like whether or not government regulation of businesses is beneficial or harmful for society. More focus on the core values that unite us can serve as an important leverage point for bringing us closer together. Even the studies that were foundational to establishing the polarization trends in the United States also showed that when groups were brought together by their commonalities rather than their differences, polarization actually decreased (Sunstein 2017, 91-92; Mutz 2006, 76-85).

Finally, focusing on the epistemic roots of our political divisions encourages a stance towards political disagreement that seeks rational resolution.²³ If our disagreements are based on what we do or do not know, we should adjudicate competing claims to figure out what to believe. Which view is correct? What do you know that I don't? What do I know that you don't? If our knowledge divides us, we should trade and dispute claims until we reach an epistemic alliance. Treating political disagreement as rooted in differing knowledge claims suggests that we can bridge partisan divides by correcting misconceptions about an issue, say, by trying to educate each another about the facts at stake.²⁴ In this way, a knowledge-based approach to our disputes tends to seek rational resolution.

However, approaching political disagreements in this way is unlikely to resolve disagreements and bring our divided society together. While it is true that political disagreements can sometimes be solved by correcting misinformation on behalf of one or more parties who believe differing facts, political disagreements are rarely so simple. So often in political disagreements, the disagreement remains intact even after discussion has taken place. As Rawls argues, "citizens' total experiences are disparate enough for their judgments to diverge, at least to some degree, on many if not most cases of significant complexity" (Rawls 2005: 57).²⁵ Each person's life experiences, history, family, community, work, standing in the social order, upbringing, geographic location, and

this situation aptly describes the way highlighting our disagreements without a foundational moral respect for our fellow citizens risks fueling deeper divisions.

²³ I say rational resolution, but that need not mean we come to the same stance. Whether one or more stances towards a particular proposition is rationally justifiable amongst epistemic peers is the subject of much debate. There are key strands of social epistemology (e.g. permissivism or epistemic relativism) that hold that it can be rational to continue to disagree. My point here is that when epistemologists tackle questions of disagreement, the aim is to prove that some position (whether that is remaining steadfast in one's views or conciliating by revising our confidence in light of peer disagreement; or whether there is one uniquely rational position given a body of evidence or not) is rationally appropriate. For a range of different epistemological positions on disagreement, see, e.g. Feldman and Warfield 2010 & Christensen and Lackey 2013.

²⁴ In their chapter for this volume, Ahlstrom-Vij and Steele are optimistic that correcting factual errors will help to resolve political disagreements.

²⁵ Rawlsians will recognize the different factors that cause disagreement as the set of factors he refers to as the "burdens of judgment."

many other factors influence their beliefs, knowledge, and expertise. People are familiar with the portions of the social world they occupy and their social position and life experiences impact what they believe, what new experiences and information they encounter, and shape the ways that they assess new information. These factors lead to predictable differences of opinion that are likely to persist over time.

Unlike epistemologists who seek rational resolution to disagreements, political philosophers seek to manage persistent disagreements without expecting resolution or agreement. For them, disagreement is “the inevitable outcome of free human reason” (Rawls 2005: 37).²⁶ Given the intractable sources of many political disagreements, “we are destined to disagree” but that does not mean we cannot find mutually acceptable terms of cooperation to guide us in politics (Gutmann and Thompson 1996, 361). We need to learn to live with persistent disagreements in a way that fosters mutual respect between citizens and ensures just and fair modes of government—even when citizens disagree with the outcome of political decisions and believe the decisions to be incorrect, irresponsible, immoral, or unjust. Political cooperation does not require *resolution* to our differences—it requires cultivating mutual respect *in spite* of our differences to ensure the legitimacy of political institutions.

Drawing together the lessons from this section, the proposed epistemic solutions require an epistemic landscape very far from our current epistemic reality. As things stand, epistemic solutions are likely to exacerbate the very problems they attempt to solve. When disagreement persists in a discussion trying to bridge our divides through common grounding in facts, the parties may leave with the disagreement intact, but their respect for their fellow citizens’ epistemic standing battered. In so doing, an epistemic approach threatens to chip away at the foundation of mutual respect in each interaction. With enough persistent disagreements, the entire edifice may fall unless there is another support system grounded in something other than epistemic respect.

5. How to Respectfully Disagree

At the root of the approaches considered so far is the idea that our divisions are epistemic and that our best defenses will likewise involve cultivating more epistemically responsible and virtuous behavior. Yet, our ability to trust the testimony of our fellow citizens and to take the evidence they offer as knowledge is predicated on a more basic level of moral respect. While truth continues to be politically important, approaching disagreement through the lens of epistemology leads us off track.

The breakdown of discourse online provides renewed reasons to draw out a moral basis for political cooperation among diverse citizens—one inspired by Rawlsian political liberalism. The key lies in cultivating *moral* respect for citizens that can undergird any epistemic respect built on that basis. We must learn to see one another as well motivated citizens seeking a fair basis for social cooperation. We must see our political opponents’

²⁶ Rawls is particularly interested in “reasonable” disagreement, which he uses as a technical qualification to carve out a set of views that are morally upright and committed to fair cooperation.

motives and proposals as morally decent, even if we deeply disagree or think they are misguided.

Finding a moral basis for mutual respect and understanding amongst otherwise divided citizens must ground any approach to fixing our current political crisis. For this, I turn to Rawls. As he argues, political disagreements are inevitable in any society that protects basic freedoms. Conscientious citizens who reason responsibly can nevertheless come to differing views about morality, religion, philosophy, and how to lead a good life. However, this is not a problem to overcome, but rather a persistent feature of political life that should prompt us to find ways to cooperate on just and fair terms with fellow citizens who disagree. For Rawls (2005), provided they are between people who respect one another as free and equal moral persons, persistent disagreements should be tolerated. Moreover, many of our persistent disagreements are *morally reasonable*—that is, arising between well-motivated citizens who all aim to pursue a good life and cooperate with others on fair terms.

Rawls' understanding of reasonableness involves both a moral and an epistemic component. The moral component is foundational: reasonable people seek fair terms of cooperation among free and equal citizens on the basis of mutual respect (2005, 49-54). The epistemic component is tied to the moral one; it demands we respect our fellow citizens as well-motivated epistemic agents. This means we recognize that conscientious citizens may weigh evidence differently and come to opposing, but equally reasonable, conclusions even after a full and free discussion has taken place (*ibid*, 58).²⁷ Well-motivated citizens can disagree without thereby being moral monsters or incompetent fools. Fair cooperation requires “recognition respect” for fellow citizens—respect owed in virtue of our basic humanity and moral status as persons.²⁸ Recognition respect is independent of any appraisal of our fellow citizens' epistemic merits or flaws.

The broad lesson to draw from Rawls is that when trying to correct the deep and persistent divisions fracturing society, we should first seek to establish a foundation of moral respect for one another that can support any further epistemic work to fight misinformation, intellectual arrogance, or deepening antipathy for our political opponents. When we view the other side as moral monsters or intellectually incompetent fools, we are not likely to listen to their dissenting perspectives. To productively manage our disagreements, we must cultivate mutual respect for one another as moral agents. We can understand debate across different views as engaged in the same project if all are committed to respecting each person within the political system. This is an issue of how we treat one another in political life, not a matter of assessing the relative epistemic capacities of our fellow citizens. Recognition respect for the moral standing of our fellow citizens can serve as a more stable basis for political cooperation than the more contingent appraisals of respecting one another as epistemic agents.

²⁷ He lists a number of sources of disagreement between reasonable citizens, many of which are epistemically controversial. Nevertheless, his core point is generalizable in a way that shows there are many reasons why we disagree that extend beyond epistemic irrationality.

²⁸ Recognition respect can be distinguished from appraisal respect, which is at play when we assess the merits of an individual who has shown excellence at a particular pursuit (Darwall 1977 & 2006).

How might this shift make a tangible difference in productively managing political disagreements on social media? As noted, the structural features of the networks through which we engage as citizens in political disagreement significantly impact what people believe and how they interact. Attempts to rethink how we can more productively and respectfully structure our interactions both on- and offline must pay attention to both the diversity of the groups of people with whom we interact and the design of social media platforms that facilitate so many politically relevant interactions. Structural change needs to target the source of our problems. As I have argued in this chapter the source of our problems is not ultimately a failure of individuals' (or groups') epistemic responsibility.

In closing, I will sketch three core lessons for those who seek to bring our divided society together. First, we should begin by acknowledging the inevitable persistence of political disagreements and find ways to manage them by structuring dialogue that fosters mutual respect even when parties continue to disagree and fail to arrive at a resolution. Political legitimacy does not require everyone to agree with the outcome of a political decision. Instead, we should seek legitimate procedures to arrive at just political decisions that protect human rights, while leaving open productive ways for those who dissent to continue to make their case.

Second, we need to draw out those areas of moral agreement foundational to any fair cooperative endeavor. While fighting false and manipulative claims is certainly important, more foundational divisions now prevent citizens from viewing one another as morally upright, responsible, and reasonable. Studies of polarization on social media show that the “vilification of one’s opponents” lies at the root of contemporary polarization (Horwitz and Seetharaman 2020).²⁹ To repair these divisions, we need to focus on cultivating empathy, mutual understanding, and moral respect for our fellow citizens. We should find ways to explicitly highlight common values (without discounting the differences in how these values are integrated into different worldviews). Highlighting shared values can serve as a foundation upon which we can interrogate our differences. This is done more productively when both sides approach the discussion with respect for one another as responsible, reasonable, and well-motivated moral agents.

The call to develop mutual respect for fellow citizens may seem overly optimistic—especially in a deeply divided society like ours where it is all too common to view those with whom we disagree as moral monsters or intransigent fools. Yet we must not forget that many shared values can form the basis for bridge-building among citizens: freedom, equality, mutual respect, basic human rights. Despite the many conflicts over how these overarching values should be specified, weighted, and applied in specific situations, these values are important parts of just about every moral and religious system. They are also touchpoints for the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights.³⁰ Without a doubt, we

²⁹ Facebook’s Common Ground team who were specifically tasked with combatting polarization found that the core problem is the “vilification of one’s opponents.” In response, the team proposed a range of potential solutions designed to “increase empathy, understanding, and humanization of the ‘other side’.” However, this team was ultimately disbanded, and the newsfeed team was reorganized as the company’s priorities shifted “away from societal good to individual value” (Horwitz and Seetharaman 2020).

³⁰ Unfortunately, there are those who also give only lip service to the shared values or respecting human rights while committing violent atrocities. But the shared values gives a small point of moral leverage from

will continue to disagree about how *best* to respect human rights, freedom, and equality for all. Nevertheless, it is possible to find some overlapping consensus on what qualifies as a plausible conception of our shared values.

Of course, we should not be overly idealistic in trying to design solutions to our current crisis. Emphasizing our common moral ground need not make us blind to how bad actors are likely to try to manipulate our political systems for their benefit. There will continue to be those who fan the flames of division and hate. Any proposal to bridge our divides should seek to build common ground on the basis of what is best in people, without discounting the worse aspects of human nature and the quest for power. However, as a society we will be far more resistant to these provocations when we have cultivated mutual respect for one another and mutual understanding of our common values in spite of our many continued disagreements.

These first two lessons apply broadly to political disagreement on and offline. The third and final lesson from this chapter suggests a method for redesigning social media to help bridge our political divides. The underlying goals powering social media's algorithms need to be rethought if we are to have any hope of repairing our society. Rather than optimizing algorithms for engagement, growth, and time spent on the platform, we should build from a foundation where our agreement about fundamental values like freedom, equality, and mutual respect orient the ways we continue to disagree. Until we start focusing on how to cultivate moral respect for people who deeply disagree—any solutions will be insufficient because they will not be rooted in the moral commonalities that can unite us. Cultivating moral respect for one another and fostering productive ongoing dialogue across disagreements are needed to ground other efforts to improve social media's epistemic landscape and build individuals' epistemic responsibility.

Yet this is not a task for an armchair philosopher (or computer scientist) alone. To effectively redesign social media requires input from a wide variety of people representing different disciplinary perspectives (including philosophy, computer science, law, political science, psychology, history, communications, and science and technology studies) and a wide range of different social perspectives. Including people from many different walks of life will enable us to have a full picture of the challenges and design a better system.

6. Conclusion

When we focus too heavily on the epistemic roots of our political divisions, we miss a more promising moral basis for cooperation grounded in building mutual respect for our fellow citizens across division. It is hard to build bridges across social divisions when we view one another as systematically misguided, dupes of media, pawns of ill-motivated political agents, or perhaps just plain stupid. Placing the responsibility on individuals to cultivate more responsible epistemic practices and virtues likewise continues to treat the

which the international community can condemn the violations and appeal to our shared humanity to respect them.

problem as one of misguided individuals who, if only they were to be more diligent, could come around to see the errors of their ways.

Society cannot bridge the divides in our political system without mutual respect between citizens who nevertheless disagree with one another on many important political questions. When each party thinks their political opponents are either fools or moral monsters, the promise of shared governance is threatened. Instead, cultivating mutual respect for the moral status of our fellow citizens—in spite of our continued disagreements—is crucial for bringing our polarized society together.³¹

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